

Status Report on Hunger

2012 PROJECT BREAD

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THIS REPORT :

- Families in Massachusetts continue to experience the impact of the recession. This is illuminated by the fact that the rate of food insecurity in 2011 (the latest study for which data are available) is 11.9 percent — a 43 percent increase since the recession began in 2008.¹
- The increase in food insecurity also reflects the widening gap between high- and low-wage earners — a gap that is particularly pronounced in the Commonwealth and signals an increasing distance and absence of dialogue between the “haves” and “have-nots.”
- During a year-long investigation into food insecurity in the state of Massachusetts, Project Bread listened to hundreds of families struggling to put food on the table. We heard stories of struggle, challenge, and resilience.
- We were also struck by a recurrent theme: that *how* we help is as important as the help itself — and that low-income people want to be actors in the solution and not simply recipients.



Courtesy of New Lands Farm

Report Overview

We took a journey...

Over the past year, Project Bread prepared for our next five-year strategic plan by traveling across the state conducting an investigation into the state of hunger in the Commonwealth. We reached out to hundreds of people and asked them the same set of questions: Who are the people behind the statistics? How do families manage through episodes of food insecurity? Are current solutions working? And finally, as the rate of food insecurity trends upward, does conventional wisdom still apply to solving this problem or is it time to rethink our solutions?

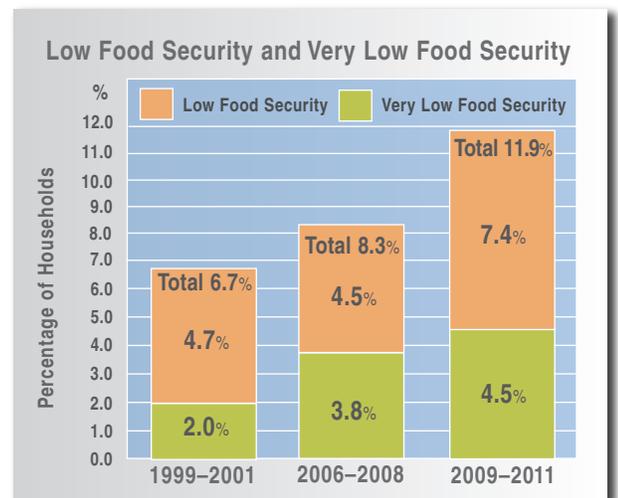
The most useful information about hunger is revealed in a rich mix of real-life stories, expert opinion, and population data. Among those three sources, the most elusive is the voice and insight of people with direct experience of food insecurity. In light of that fact, we set a high priority on following a process that would reach beyond the anonymity of statistics and invite real people to step forward and share their experiences.

We cast the net wide. In groups and individually, we interviewed community leaders, parents, teenagers, seniors, free-clinic patients, young single mothers, union members, retail grocery workers, antihunger leaders, pioneers from the emerging system of local and sustainable agriculture, economists, doctors, public health experts, school nutrition directors, donors, and government workers. Their perspectives were different, yet common themes emerged.

We learned that although there are multiple ways to solve the problem of hunger, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. We also found that people had definite ideas about what they needed, and that the best solutions have a triple bottom line — first, they provide help in the short term to alleviate hunger; second, they invest in and strengthen the community; and third, they provide solutions that are sustainable over the long term. The insight and knowledge we gained over the course of our inquiry will be used to shape Project Bread's work over the next five years, and shape the future of hunger relief across the nation. This report is a look into that future.

Food insecurity and hunger

Each year, as part of the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) collects information on food access and adequacy or food security. Households identified as being *food insecure* (or having low food security) have reduced the quality and quantity of their diet because they do not have enough money to make ends meet. Those described as having *very low food security* are more seriously affected and are forced to frequently skip meals and experience hunger.



The food insecurity rate in Massachusetts has grown by over 43 percent since the start of the recession in 2008.² This is the highest rate recorded in the Commonwealth since this data was first collected in 1995.

The View from the Road

Over the past year, Project Bread walked into the lives of over 300 people to ask them about hunger solutions that were so local that they couldn't readily be seen and if the two big solutions, SNAP and emergency food, were working well. These are their stories.

Sliding backwards

Across the Commonwealth, families told Project Bread that, although they feel like they are working harder, their paychecks cover fewer bills each month. Some are working full-time at minimum wage — \$8 an hour. Others stated that they are underemployed — unable to find a job in their area that fully utilizes their skills — or that they are working several part-time jobs without benefits.

Over time, low-wage workers have seen very little growth in their earnings. As the cost of living in Massachusetts rises, it is harder for them to make ends meet, and they are more vulnerable in times of recession. In 1984, a low-wage worker earned 41 cents for every dollar earned by a high-wage worker. By 2011, this wage had decreased 20 percent — to just 32 cents.³

Comparison of Wages in Massachusetts



Massachusetts has one of the widest income gaps of any state in the nation.⁴ The incomes of affluent families have increased considerably, making the average income, statewide, relatively high. This high average masks the high rates of poverty and food insecurity faced by low-income communities, such as Springfield, Holyoke, Lowell, Lawrence, Fall River, Brockton, New Bedford, Worcester, and rural areas.



Voices behind the statistics

"I have been working full time here for five years, and I earn more than minimum wage, but I still can't afford to buy enough food for my family. I feel ashamed to be seen waiting in line at the church up the street. There's got to be another answer."

— Grocery store employee, Roxbury

"My friends and I do pot lucks. We trade coupons and swap foods that our kids like to eat. I want to learn how to cook low-cost meals — I'm nervous about doing something new that doesn't work because I can't bear to throw food away."

— Mother of three, western Massachusetts focus group

"I wish I had a chance to buy food at a discount, or even trade some volunteer time at a food co-op. I appreciate the help, but I feel that I also have something to give."

— Immigrant father, East Boston

"If you want to really address issues of hunger, you need to address the differences between a poor, single mother struggling in Mattapan and a poor, single mother struggling in Gloucester. There are structural issues of race and of community resources. One is virtually invisible to the public."

— Educator, family life expert, Boston

"What about co-operative enterprises? Let's create business models within communities that build people's skills and give them opportunities to work toward successful business ownership. For example, use community kitchen projects as culinary training centers to teach basic skills and produce healthy prepared food."

— Small business entrepreneur, Roxbury

"I believe that our role as antihunger activists is to look at solutions within the larger food system. One opportunity I see is to create meaningful jobs in food production that provide people with skills and an opportunity to earn livable wages — at the same time that it can help connect low-income communities to fresh, healthy food."

— Hunger advocate, regional stakeholder meeting, Worcester

Envisioning the Future of Hunger Relief



Choose to be sustainable

Food is our common ground

Sustainable Relationship

Invest in food, people, and economy

Empowerment

Support community meals programs

Create space for people to both give and receive

Support the expansion of New England agricultural economy

Urban agriculture

Food rescue

Resilience

Know your farmer

Build local food hubs

Green sustainable

Farm to school

Build social capital

End hunger in Massachusetts

Build community resilience

Healthy food at affordable prices

Teach a man to fish

Support community food pantries

Local

Mutual Help

Delicious food

Community food security

Mutuality

Manage home finances

Learn to cook

Independence

Serve children healthy school meals

Healthy

Strong local economy

Case study 1

Becoming Self-Sustaining

The saying goes, “If you feed a man a fish, he eats for a day. If you teach a man to fish, he will eat for a lifetime.” Across Massachusetts, Project Bread heard from people who were less interested in a handout and more interested in a “hand up” and in the tools to help themselves and their family.

In 2012, Project Bread provided funding for Lutheran Social Services’ New Lands Farm program to connect refugees (living in central and western Massachusetts) who have expressed an interest in gardening or farming. New Lands Farm teaches its clients how to grow food in the New England climate and how to start micro-businesses in Massachusetts.

This program provides one of the most vulnerable populations in the Commonwealth — immigrants — not only with resources to grow their own food, which is culturally familiar to them, but also with much needed economic opportunities (for example, employment and a chance to start to their own business).

Case study 2

Skills for a Lifetime

When children are hungry, they are more susceptible to many illnesses — ear infections, iron deficiency, asthma, cardiovascular disease, among others — that prevent them from fully realizing their physical and academic potential.⁵ Project Bread knows that meals in schools and preschool programs, such as Head Start, are the single most effective way to protect them from hunger. These meals can provide over 50 percent of a child’s daily nutrient needs and are available to children in a seamless, almost invisible, way, right in their own community. Schools and Head Start programs also provide opportunities to teach parents how to provide healthy meals at home on a limited budget.

Project Bread’s Chefs in Head Start program is based in Lynn. Chef Vanessa LaBranche is training preschool staff to prepare healthy, fresh food that the children like to eat and that the program can afford. Every week, Chef Vanessa visits classrooms to teach the children about the foods they are eating and basic nutrition. And once a month, she offers a nutrition workshop for their parents — showing them how to prepare budget-friendly and healthy meals and then sending them home with bags of fresh and healthy ingredients and recipes.



“ Our year-long investigation into hunger in the Commonwealth showed us that low-income people want to become active participants in securing healthy food. ”

— Ellen Parker, executive director of Project Bread



Summary

Project Bread's year-long inquiry taught us simple, but important lessons. First, we are in this together: the food system is our common ground. Food insecurity and hunger are a part of, not separate from, the complex interconnected system that we all rely on to eat every day. The investments we make, and the strategies we use, to address food insecurity have an impact on our environment, our schools, our public health, and our state's emerging agricultural economy.

Second, it's important to connect the dots and choose the solutions that are multiple wins for the Commonwealth. We need a bigger frame for the work of hunger relief — one that incorporates the strength and assets of low-income communities and consciously selects sustainable options.

Recommendations

- Broaden the focus of philanthropic support for antihunger work to include systemic solutions, such as universal access to healthy school food, and high-impact local solutions like community gardens, food co-ops, urban agriculture, and food hubs.
- Develop a systems perspective on the investments we make to end hunger, grounded in the strength, creativity, and resiliency of individuals and communities. Continue to build the case for investments that help individuals, that build community, and that create value for the local economy.
- Involve residents and local leaders in prioritizing the allocation of resources within food-insecure communities.
- Advocate vigorously to retain SNAP (food stamps) as an entitlement program, recognizing it as an irreplaceable source of assistance to food-insecure people and an important source of revenue for grocery stores across Massachusetts.
- Provide leadership, technical assistance, and resources to support the capacity of schools across the state to serve healthy meals that children like to eat. Promote the purchase of locally grown products as a direct investment in our regional economy.
- Maintain locally based emergency food programs, and explore options that provide the opportunity for participants to give back in return for help.
- Support and expand food rescue — reclaiming healthy food as a sustainable and environmentally positive way to provide no- and low-cost nutritious community meals.
- Explore new opportunities for citizens of the Commonwealth to work together on the interconnected challenge of ending hunger and building a more robust and sustainable food system in the state and across New England.

PROJECTBREAD[®].ORG

145 Border Street, East Boston, MA 02128-1903
Tel 617-723-5000 | Fax 617-248-8877
www.projectbread.org | info@projectbread.org

© 2012 Project Bread — The Walk for Hunger

Made in Massachusetts



Photo © David Leifer

Project Bread's Chef Vanessa LaBranche preps for lunch at the Head Start program offered by Lynn Economic Opportunity, Inc., where she and the staff feed nearly four hundred low-income children, teaching them and their families how to make healthy meals and snacks on a limited income.

Notes

- ¹ Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, **American Community Survey**, 2011, and Coleman-Jensen, A., Nord, M., Andrews, M., and Carlson, S., **Household Food Security in the United States, 2011**, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Report, No. 058, September 2012. *Note:* The food insecurity rate in 2008 was 8.3 percent. This is calculated by the USDA as a three-year weighted average, 2006–2008, and represents the food-insecurity rate before the recession began in late 2008. For 2011, the food-insecurity rate (a three-year weighted average of 2009–2011) is 11.9 percent. The difference between the 2008 and 2011 food-insecurity rates is a 43 percent increase.
- ² U.S. Census Bureau, op. cit. (See note 1.)
- ³ “Wages and Inequality in Massachusetts: A Labor Day Slide Show.” Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, September 2012.
- ⁴ *Note:* Massachusetts is tied with Arizona for the widest income gap in the nation. Sacchetti, M., “Mass. Buoyed in recession, data indicate poverty stable, but facts may mask trouble,” *The Boston Globe*, September 29, 2010.
- ⁵ Alaimo, K., Olson, C.M., Frongillo, E.A., and Briefel, R.B., **Food Insufficiency, Family Income, and Health in U.S. Preschool and School-Aged Children**, *American Journal of Public Health*, 2001. See also: Wehler, C.A., Scott, R.I., and Anderson, J.J., **Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project**, Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), 1995; Freedman, D.S., Dietz, W.H., Srinivasan, S.R., and Berenson, G.S., **The Relation of Overweight to Cardiovascular Risk Factors Among Children and Adolescents: The Bogalusa Heart Study**, *Pediatrics*, 1999; Weinreb, L., Wehler, C., Perloff, J., Scott, R., Hosmer, D., Sagor, L., and Gunderson, C., **Hunger: Its Impact on Children's Health and Mental Health**, *Pediatrics*, 2002; and Skalicky, A., Meyers, A.F., Adams, W.G., Yang, Z., Cook, J.T., and Frank, D.A., **Child Food Insecurity and Iron Deficiency Anemia in Low-Income Infants and Toddlers**, *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 2006.

About Project Bread

As the state's leading antihunger organization, Project Bread's mission is to alleviate, prevent, and ultimately end hunger in Massachusetts.

