

**A WORKING HYPOTHESIS ON CHILD HUNGER IN MONTANA**  
**Food Security Council, Montana Food Bank Network**  
**September 19, 2011**

**CHILD HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY IN MONTANA**

Child hunger and food insecurity is due to family food insecurity. Food Insecurity is defined as families not having a consistent, sustainable source of food that meets their nutritional needs. Parents cut the size of their own meals first to feed the children and buy cheaper food with poor nutrition to stretch their food dollars. Eventually parents have to reduce the quality and quantity of food for the children.

Hunger and food insecurity also means going to food banks for emergency food, which does not last more than a few days, and may not meet the nutritional needs of the family.

**CAUSES OF CHILD HUNGER**

**1. Family Economic Insecurity**

- low wages, no wages, job loss, disability, poor or no benefits, lack of health care, lack of job security, lack of money to buy food after paying other urgent expenses

**2. Poor participation in public food assistance programs.** Public programs provide a sustainable source of healthy food to poor families and children if they are income eligible. Lack of participation by families that are eligible increases food insecurity.

**3. Inadequate ability to access food:** a) Food Deserts and distances to full service grocery stores, b) Lack of access to local food due to cost, c) The rising cost of food.

**1. Family Economic Insecurity:**

- Poverty in Montana has increased from 14.8% in 2008 to 15.1% in 2009<sup>1</sup>
- Child Poverty in Montana has increased from 20.6% in 2008 to 21.4% in 2009.
- Unemployment in Montana varies in each county and averages about 7.5%<sup>2</sup>
- Unemployment on the Reservations ranges from 9.3% to 18.3%.
- The Northwest Job Gap report shows that a family of two adults and two children would need an annual income of \$57,364/year to earn a livable wage with an earning of \$27.58/hour<sup>3</sup>
- More than 51% of jobs in Montana pay less than \$13.54/hour.

**1.a Family Economic Insecurity leads to Food Insecurity:**

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<sup>1</sup> US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2009 report

<sup>2</sup> Montana Department of Labor & Industry.

<sup>3</sup> The Northwest Job Gap Study. [http://nwfco.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/2010-1209\\_2010-Job-Gap.pdf](http://nwfco.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/2010-1209_2010-Job-Gap.pdf)

- One in 3 households in Montana are at risk of Food Insecurity – which means the family is not sure if all members will be able to have enough food to eat<sup>4</sup>

- Households that are at risk of Food Insecurity include over 92,578 children. This means that one in three children in Montana are at risk of hunger.

- Montana Food Bank Network (MFBN) studies show that children and families in urban and reservations sites are at the greatest risk of hunger<sup>5</sup>

- MFBN studies also show that families have to pay for rent, utilities, transportation, child care and medical bills first, often leaving little or no money for food.

- MFBN saw an increase in child visits to food banks around the state during a 6 month period between 2009 and 2010 by 43%.

- Clients can go to Food Banks around the state on an average of one time a month. The food they receive lasts between 5 – 8 days. Food banks give what they have and are not able to meet the nutritional needs of the family.

- MFBN studies show that in an average of three studies, adults skipped meals 47.4% of the time and children skipped meals 10.9% of the time. At least half of them skipped meals about once a week.

- Food banks around the state are struggling to meet the demand for food from their clients.

### **2. Participation in the public food programs is not maximized in the state.**

Many children and families who are eligible for the public food programs do not participate in the program due to multiple reasons, including: lack of information about the program, not knowing where to apply, difficulty with application forms depending on their literacy levels, fear of their applications being rejected, stigma of seeking public assistance, difficulty in accessing the program offices in the state due to distance or inability to get there during working hours.

The public programs assure food assistance each month and provide good nutrition. However, the programs are individually designed and function independently to a large extent. Programs also have varying rules and requirements that create a challenge for clients.

### **3. Inadequate ability to access food..**

A. Distance to full service retail food stores lead to major transportation costs for poor families. In many parts of the state, families have a choice between travelling between 40 – 80 miles one-way to a larger store where there is better fresh food, healthier choices, and lower prices, or saving on the fuel costs and shopping at convenience stores that can be up to 20 miles away, but offer very limited food choices, poorer quality food, minimal supply of fresh fruits & vegetables, and much higher prices. These are families that live in Food Deserts in Montana and there are a large number of these areas in this rural state.

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<sup>4</sup> USDA Household Food Security Measures, 2009

<sup>5</sup> Montana Food Bank Network, 2010 *Hungry in Montana report*. [www.mfbn.org](http://www.mfbn.org)

B. Access by Montana Families to healthy, locally grown food: Access to food grown by small and large Montana farmers by Montana families can provide excellent nutrition and support local farmers. However, several limitations exist on accessing these services:

- The cost of locally grown food – as sold at Farmer’s markets or some grocery stores is higher, and families cannot afford it.
- Many towns in Montana do not have a Farmer’s Market
- Families have to make a special trip to the markets to buy a few foods and prefer to do one-stop shopping at a grocery store.

For families that have access to community gardens, participation is often low because:

- working parents cannot take time to take care of a garden.
- The fruits and vegetables are beneficial, but cannot meet all the food needs of the family.

C. The Rising Cost of food.

The cost of food has been rising steadily since mid-2006 and has not come down. According to the Official USDA Food Plans – the US average for June 2011 showed that it would take \$156.60/week for a family of four, with two adults and two children under age 5, to buy foods based on a Low-cost meal plan. The Low-cost meal plan assumes that all foods are cooked at home<sup>6</sup>

The poverty level for a family of four living at 100% of poverty is \$1,838/month or \$22,050/year. Of the \$1,838/month, families spend an average of \$660 for rent, \$850 for child care and \$388 for medical costs. This leaves no money for food or other essential expenses<sup>7</sup>

#### **IMPACT OF CHILD HUNGER ON CHILDREN’S HEALTH, ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, WORKFORCE, JOB READINESS AND LIFETIME EARNINGS.**

Normal growth and development from the pre-natal stage through childhood should be a seamless process without frequent interruptions in vital needs like nutrition. Hungry children incur developmental impairments that limit their physical, intellectual and emotional development.

A: Impact on Health: Food insecure children suffer from:

- Slow growth, poor stature, deficiency diseases, early onset of chronic diseases like Type II Diabetes, reduced immune function, increased absenteeism due to the cycle of malnutrition/infection/illness, and are at greater risk for childhood obesity. These factors also impact Medicaid expenses for the state<sup>8</sup>
- Childhood Obesity: Children with inconsistent access to adequate food and food that provides poor nutrition are 1 X 7 times more likely to be obese than children who are food secure. These children are overfed and undernourished. Childhood obesity leads to greater risk of chronic diseases, problems of the joints, inability to participate in various school activities and seriously impacts the child’s social interactions in school<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Official USDA Food Plans: Cost of food at Home at Four Levels, US Average, June 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Inside Hunger in Montana, MFBN. Mfbn.org

<sup>8</sup> Breakfast Habits, Nutritional Status, Body Weight, and Academic Performance in Children and Adolescents, G. Rampersaud, et al., *Journal of The American Dietetic Assoc.* 2005.

<sup>9</sup> F as in Fat: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, July 2009 [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org)

B. Impact on Academic Performance:

- Malnutrition in early infancy through age 3 leads to lowered learning and poor cognitive development due to lack of nutrition in this critical time of brain and central nervous system development<sup>10</sup>
- During the school years, children have problems learning if they have come to school hungry, have lower math and reading scores, reduced ability to comprehend and are more likely to experience grade repetition.
- Poor nutrition and hunger also leads to behavior problems in the classroom, more disciplinary actions, greater need for the school nurse services, and inability to have normal interactions with other students. All this leads to lowered success in the school years and increased risk of school dropouts.
- Hunger and obesity among poor children in the high school years can lead to reduced performance at graduation.

C. Impact on Workforce, Job Readiness and Lifetime Earnings.

- Poor academic outcomes in high school reduce potential for children to seek higher education or to learn a trade or skill that will lead them to well-paying jobs and self-sufficiency in adult life. Children who are not ready to learn are not ready to earn. These future adults end up depending on public assistance including Medicaid and other human services programs, instead of becoming tax payers who contribute to society.
- Workers who experienced hunger as children are not as well prepared physically, mentally or socially to perform effectively in the contemporary workforce. Thus they create a workforce that is less competitive, has lower skill levels and seriously constrained human capital.

- 2006 Median Income levels for people over 25 by Level of Educational Achievement

Education Attainment	Median Annual Income
Less than 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	\$18,868
High School Graduate	\$27,384
Bachelor's Degree	\$46,435
Doctorate Degree	\$78,212
Professional Degree	\$85,857

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<sup>10</sup> Child Food Insecurity: The Economic Impact on our Nation, Feeding America report.