The number of households in Massachusetts facing hunger continues to climb. In 2010 (the latest study for which data are available), 10.8 percent of households were food insecure.\(^1\) This is the highest rate recorded in the Commonwealth since this data was first collected in 1995.

There are two states of Massachusetts: one in which the median income for wealthy residents continues to rise; and the other where thousands of families slide backward.

Families on the wrong side of the income gap tend to be isolated in communities that are food deserts, lack the resources to serve healthy school food, and struggle to offer comprehensive emergency food programs.

The new thinking in hunger relief shows that no one response adequately fits all situations. Focusing on solutions that help the individual and strengthen the community is the best way to have a sustainable impact.

Major findings of the report include the following:

- The number of households in Massachusetts facing hunger continues to climb. In 2010 (the latest study for which data are available), 10.8 percent of households were food insecure.\(^1\) This is the highest rate recorded in the Commonwealth since this data was first collected in 1995.
- There are two states of Massachusetts: one in which the median income for wealthy residents continues to rise; and the other where thousands of families slide backward.
- Families on the wrong side of the income gap tend to be isolated in communities that are food deserts, lack the resources to serve healthy school food, and struggle to offer comprehensive emergency food programs.
- The new thinking in hunger relief shows that no one response adequately fits all situations. Focusing on solutions that help the individual and strengthen the community is the best way to have a sustainable impact.

### Impact of the Growing Income Gap

Escalating income inequality has led to growing segregation of the wealthiest and poorest families, where one-third of American families now live in either an affluent or poor neighborhood. Only 44 percent of families live in middle-class neighborhoods, down from 65 percent in 1970.\(^3\)

In Massachusetts, we see these segregated communities when comparing the poverty rates of different towns and cities.\(^4\)

### Comparison of Lowest and Highest Median Family Income in Massachusetts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lowest Median Income</th>
<th>Highest Median Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>$22,452</td>
<td>$136,099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>$22,688</td>
<td>$194,899</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comparison of Poverty Rates in Massachusetts**

- Duxbury: 2.8%
- Marblehead: 4.5%
- Newton: 5.6%
- Statewide: 11.4%
- New Bedford: 22.2%
- Lawrence: 27.3%
- Holyoke: 28.4%

Massachusetts has one of the widest income gaps of any state in the nation.\(^2\) Because the incomes of affluent families have increased considerably, statewide averages mask the high rates of poverty and food insecurity faced by people in low-income communities.
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 have reduced the quality and quantity of their diet because they do not have enough money to make ends meet. Those described as being food insecure with hunger are more seriously affected and are forced to frequently skip meals and experience hunger.6

**The official language used to describe these two categories of hunger was changed in 2006 to “low food security” and “very low food security.” For purposes of clarity in this report, we continue to use “food insecurity” and “food insecurity with hunger” because these terms are more widely known.**

As the income gap becomes increasingly wider, more families find themselves in communities that are isolated either by or from poverty. Geographical areas — urban or rural — that are economically depressed can lack the capacity, resources, and hope to build a better future for their children. From the perspective of food insecurity, the differences between living in an affluent versus a low-income community can be startling.

The Community’s Food Strength

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In 2010, Massachusetts experienced its highest rate of food insecurity since the USDA started collecting this data in 1995.6

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The numbers are surprising, but the impact is even more profound when considering the long-term prospects for the children in these families. In 2009, 18 percent of all Massachusetts children lived in food-insecure households.8 And in high poverty areas, we know that children are nearly twice as likely to struggle with hunger.9

**In high-poverty areas, children are twice as likely to struggle with food insecurity.**

When children are hungry, they are more susceptible to a range of illnesses — ear infections, iron deficiency, asthma, cardiovascular disease, among others — that prevent them from fully realizing their physical and academic potential.10 Their families need consistent, reliable sources of nutritious food to help maintain their health and build a way out of poverty.

**The Poverty Hunger Cycle**

Young Families with Children Hardest Hit

A recent report from the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University revealed that nationally, 37 percent of young families with children (where the parents are younger than 30) lived in poverty in 2010 — the highest level on record.7 These families not only are struggling more than others, but also have fewer resources available to them. The report also showed that, primarily because of welfare reform, federal aid to single-parent families living on less than half of the poverty-level income dropped by about 38 percent between 1984 and 2004.

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**The Poverty Hunger Cycle**
Tailoring Hunger Relief

Project Bread’s FoodSource Hotline answers nearly 50,000 calls a year from people seeking food. Hotline counselors recognize that callers require different solutions. The new thinking about hunger focuses on the needs of the individual with a simultaneous view that hunger relief should strengthen the community.

Case Study 1

Struggling in Isolation

Michael and Anna often feel overwhelmed by their daily struggle. Many of their neighbors are unemployed, undereducated, and have lost hope. Their own situation often feels bleak. Michael is on long-term disability and Anna’s full-time job at a local discount store rarely carries their family through the month. More than once, Michael and Anna have skipped meals so that their two children could eat. The local food pantry would be helpful, but it’s only open while Anna is at work and the two bags of groceries last but a few days. Hoping that there were other options, Anna called the FoodSource Hotline.

Solutions

The Hotline counselor helped Anna apply for SNAP benefits (food stamps) over the phone, which will bring in an additional $238 per month for food. Next, she encouraged Anna to sign up her children for free school meals, which Anna did not realize she was eligible for, offsetting the family’s budget an additional $154 per month for the children’s breakfast and lunch. The counselor also told Anna that her community offered “market bucks” during the summer at the local farmers’ market, giving Anna an extra $10 to spend on fresh produce when she used her SNAP card at the market.

Case Study 2

Wrong Side of the Income Gap

Jenna understands the income gap all too well. She is proud of her job as an office manager at a local nonprofit organization, but her $40,000 salary is not enough to cover the expenses for herself and her twin six-year-old boys. Summers and winters are the most difficult. When school is out, Jenna has to pay for childcare for her boys, and in the winter, she finds herself choosing between grocery shopping and heating her apartment. When Jenna called Project Bread’s Hotline, she was frustrated by working so hard, yet still being unable to make ends meet.

Solutions

The hotline counselor pre-screened Jenna for SNAP, and discovered that, even for a household of three, Jenna earns too much to qualify for the benefits. Discouraged, but not defeated, the pair talked about other options. The summer camp program in Jenna’s community utilizes the federal summer meals program, so her boys could have access to a safe place to play and have free, healthy breakfasts and lunches. The counselor also referred Jenna to a local fuel assistance program and a food pantry that Jenna could use when money became tight at the end of month in the summer and winter.

Using All Available Solutions

The new thinking in hunger relief recognizes that no one solution is perfect but that people who are struggling need to use all available resources to stay healthy during these hard times.

Tailoring Solutions

One of the new trends that Project Bread’s Hotline sees is that individuals and families in need of food will struggle silently and alone for too long. They often wait until all of their other resources are depleted to ask for help.

Michael and Anna did not know what resources were available to them. Like many people in crisis, they were actually eligible for a number of services. Getting practical help not only strengthened the health and hopefulness of the family, but lifted the community around them. Every SNAP dollar generates $1.84 in the local economy. And children who participate regularly in the school breakfast program perform better in school — benefitting all children involved.

Families like Jenna’s who find themselves just over the income limit for SNAP or school meals can still face food insecurity. Summer meals programs, food pantries, community gardens, community meals, and even nonfood programs, such as fuel assistance, can help someone like Jenna by freeing up funds for food.

“For a decade, Project Bread has spearheaded community-based solutions that allow people access to healthy food within their own neighborhood.”

— Ellen Parker, executive director of Project Bread
Summary

With help from family and the community, many people who experience a period of food insecurity can recover from it. Yet income disparity strongly influences the quality and quantity of community help available to them. Over time, in Massachusetts and across the country, as mixed-income communities are less common, affluent and low-income communities are on the rise. An affluent community usually enjoys a stronger tax base, better educated citizens, more political power, a greater sense of community trust, and a deeper capacity for philanthropy. It can choose to make deeper and more sustained investments in institutions that are shared in common. In contrast, being on the wrong side of the income gap means that your community has fewer resources to support you in a sudden downturn.

Take school food, for example, which affects more than 300,000 low-income children in Massachusetts: despite a strong interest across the state in improving the quality of school food, the quality of meals in low-income communities has not kept pace with improvements in wealthier districts. A child living in a community of concentrated poverty will most likely attend a school that does not have the budget, manpower, or skills to serve healthy school meals. School districts with more resources face less daunting obstacles in providing their children with healthier food and in teaching them better lifelong eating habits.

The income gap teaches us that it is not enough to provide food for the individual, but that our solutions must be reviewed for how they also strengthen the low-income neighborhood. Solutions that partner with traditional community resources — the schools, summer camps, recreation clubs, daycare organizations, home-care organizations, community health programs, local farmers, community gardens, and local businesses, to name but a few — provide help that nourishes the community. Establishing programs that feed low-income people using local resources does more than provide a meal for a day, it strengthens the social fabric and improves the quality of life of the entire community. This is the new thinking about hunger.

Recommendations

• Ensure that all public and private investments in antihunger work have a measurable impact on improving lives and strengthening the community.

• Ensure that every low-income child in Massachusetts has access to a healthy and tasty school breakfast and lunch each school day.

• Bring more solutions for food insecurity into the mix, including market-based solutions, community dinners, cooking classes, nutrition education, and urban agriculture.

• Develop a better understanding of the diversity of experiences facing families who are food insecure — the unemployed, the newly arrived, children, the elderly — and how to address their food insecurity through community-strengthening solutions.

• Ensure that federal funding for SNAP and child nutrition programs are sustained at current levels.

Notes


6 U.S. Census Bureau, op. cit. (See note 1.)

7 Sum, A. and Ishkwar, K., Deteriorating Employment Rates and Incomes Threaten the Futures of Young Workers and Young Families: Black Young People and Young Families Fare the Worst. Report prepared by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University for the Children’s Defense Fund, 2010.

8 Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap: Child Food Insecurity 2011, ConAgra Foods, 2011.


12 Note: The federal reimbursement for school breakfast for a child who qualifies for free school meals is $1.51. The federal reimbursement for a free school lunch is $2.77. A benefit of $154.08 is based on two school-age children receiving 18 free breakfasts and 18 free lunches in a month of school.
