

# Status Report on Hunger in Massachusetts



## Hunger in America

*Economic factors are the root cause of hunger in America.*

*Low-income families are at risk of hunger even during strong economic times. When the economy weakens, as it has since March 2001, there is an increased demand for emergency food assistance at food pantries and soup kitchens.*

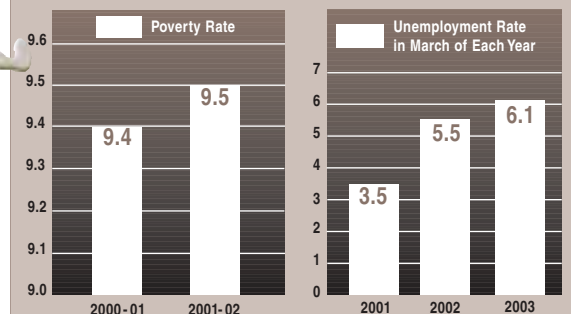
## Poverty, Unemployment, and the Cost of Living in Massachusetts

The poverty rate rose between 2000 and 2002 in Massachusetts as the unemployment rate continued to climb.<sup>1,2</sup>

**P**roject Bread – The Walk for Hunger produced this status report on hunger in Massachusetts. The report documents the extent of food insecurity and hunger in the Commonwealth and examines the use of government-sponsored nutrition programs that are designed to protect low-income families from hunger.

### Some of the major findings of the report include:

- Hunger is present in communities throughout Massachusetts, affecting thousands of individuals and families.
- The prevalence of hunger in low-income communities in Massachusetts is unacceptably high.
- In these communities, families with children are at greatest risk with one child in three being affected.
- The demand for emergency food has grown dramatically as the economy has declined, but most recipients only turn to emergency food as a last resort.
- Hunger is a problem that can be solved . . . and the key is to broaden our support of a range of solutions. An important component is to overcome barriers to federally-funded nutrition programs that provide reliable access to healthy food for low-income families.

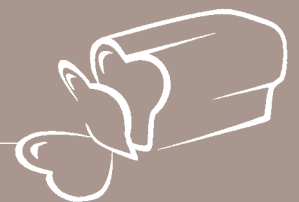


600,000 people lived below the poverty level in 2002—9.5% of the population of Massachusetts.

### 2003 Poverty Guidelines

Size of Family Unit	Annual Income
1	\$ 8,980
2	\$12,120
3	\$15,260
4	\$18,400
5	\$21,540

A single parent who has two children and works full-time at the Massachusetts minimum wage (\$6.75 per hour) lives in poverty.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Massachusetts is the most expensive state in the nation to rent an apartment. A full-time worker, paying no more than 30% of his or her income in rent, must earn \$22.40 per hour to afford rent for a two-bedroom apartment.<sup>4</sup>



## Families Facing Hunger

Rising unemployment, cuts in state services, and the high cost of living have taken a toll on Massachusetts families. The story of the Street family (names have been changed) is all too familiar.

John and Rebecca Street have two children, Tom (age 10) and Grace (age 6). Since John lost his job at a textile company last year, he has not been able to find work. Recently, his unemployment benefits ran out. Rebecca continues to work as a home care attendant, earning \$8 an hour, but the monthly bills have become harder and harder to pay. By the last week of the month, the family cannot afford to buy food.

Rebecca called Project Bread's FoodSource Hotline and found out about a local emergency food pantry where she and her family could go once a month to receive three days' worth of groceries. The hotline counselor also told Rebecca that the family was eligible for food stamps and that the children could receive free meals at their elementary school. John and Rebecca never thought that they would need this type of assistance. They hope that John will find another job soon so they won't have to worry about feeding their children.

## Defining Terms: Food Insecurity and Hunger

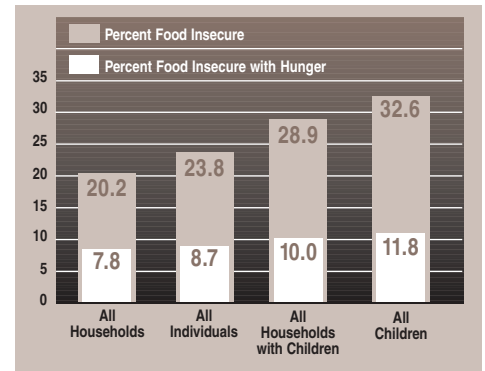
*Food insecurity* is a measure of the lack of access to adequate food. The term *food insecurity* is used by researchers to describe families (or members of families) who are on the brink of hunger. It means that, due to financial constraints, mothers, fathers, and children are cutting the size of their meals, skipping meals, and running out of food altogether.

Each year, the USDA and the United States Census Bureau conduct a national survey of food insecurity and hunger. Households considered food insecure by the survey are those that cannot buy enough food to meet the basic food needs of household members. Households are classified as hungry if they must decrease the quality and quantity of food they consume, due to lack of money, to the point where household members go without eating and are frequently hungry.

Based on national survey results from 1999 through 2001, the Economic Research Service estimated that 425,000 people (6.7%) were food insecure in Massachusetts with almost one-third of these individuals experiencing hunger.<sup>5</sup>

## Food Insecurity and Hunger in Low-Income Communities in Massachusetts

This year, the Center for Survey Research at the University of Massachusetts Boston conducted a study of food insecurity and hunger in low-income communities in Massachusetts called the *Massachusetts Hunger Assessment*. The study, which was sponsored by Project Bread, sampled households in 183 census tracts with high rates of poverty in 34 cities and towns.



Among all households surveyed in these low-income communities, 20% were food insecure. This is three times the statewide average. Additionally, the study found that one child in three lives in a household that struggles to put food on the table.<sup>6</sup>

In most such households, parents go without food to shield their children from hunger, but once the household runs out of food, even the children cannot be protected.

## Highest Concentrations of Hunger in Massachusetts

All cities and towns on this map include areas where food insecurity and hunger are prevalent.



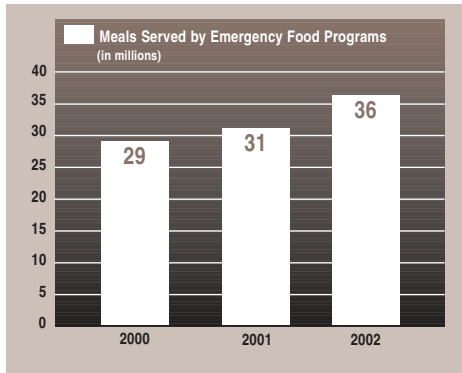
### IN THESE AREAS:

- One child in three lives in a family unable to meet its basic need for food.
- The prevalence of hunger is nearly 4 times greater than the statewide average.

Statewide statistics combine data from affluent communities with that of low-income communities. In Massachusetts, hunger is highly concentrated in pockets of poverty throughout the state.

## Growth in the Emergency Food System

Another indicator of food insecurity and hunger is the use of emergency food pantries and soup kitchens. The demand for emergency food has increased in Massachusetts since the beginning of the economic recession in March 2001.



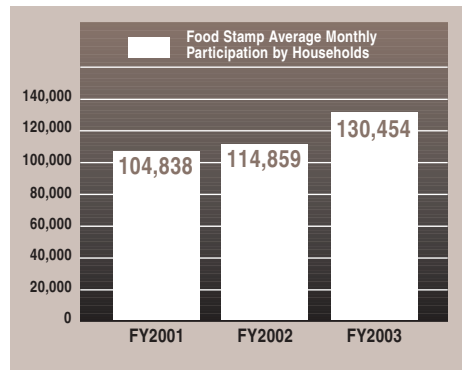
Meals served by emergency food programs funded by Project Bread reached 36 million in 2002.

Eighty percent of these emergency food programs reported serving more people in 2002 than in 2001.<sup>7</sup> The results of the *Massachusetts Hunger Assessment* suggest that families turn to emergency food programs as a last resort. Less than 10% of all households surveyed reported receiving food at an emergency food pantry or soup kitchen. Among those households receiving emergency food, 75% reported significant food shortages in their homes. Unless faced with a dire crisis, families avoid the disgrace and embarrassment of admitting that they cannot afford to buy food.



## Access to Key Federal Food Programs

Government-sponsored nutrition programs include the Food Stamp Program, WIC (Women, Infants, and Children Supplemental Nutrition Program), School Meals, and the Summer Food Service Program. These programs are funded by the federal government but are administered by different state agencies: Food Stamps by the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), WIC by the Department of Public Health (DPH), and both School Meals and the Summer Food Service Program by the Department of Education (DOE).

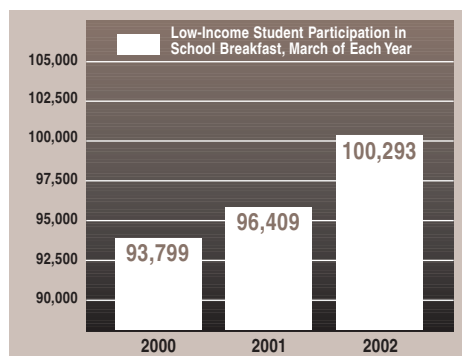


In Massachusetts, families with children are eligible for the **Food Stamp Program** when household income is at or below 200% of poverty. With the increase in families living in poverty, more households are now eligible for food stamp benefits.

Participation in the Food Stamp Program in Massachusetts grew to 140,000 households (approximately 300,000 people) in June 2003.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, many eligible families in Massachusetts are still not enrolled in the Food Stamp Program. According to the DTA, only 53% of eligible individuals receive food stamp benefits,<sup>9</sup> whereas in Maine, participation is 78%.<sup>10</sup>

WIC is a health, education, and prevention program serving pregnant women and parents with children up to age five. WIC participants receive supplemental foods, nutrition education, and referrals to health care. The average monthly food benefit is \$32 per participant. There were 115,644 WIC participants in Massachusetts in May 2003. According to DPH estimates, WIC reaches the vast majority of eligible adults and children—more than 80%.

**School Meals** include the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. Based on household income, families with school-age children can apply for free or reduced-price school meals. Approximately 220,000 children receive free or reduced-price lunch in Massachusetts. Currently, 65% of schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program also offer School Breakfast.



Participation in School Breakfast among low-income students has steadily increased in Massachusetts. Even though participation has improved, for each 100 students served free or reduced-price lunch, only 45 are served free or reduced-price breakfast.<sup>11</sup>

Federal reimbursement was \$87 million for the National School Lunch Program and \$22 million for School Breakfast in Massachusetts during the 2001–2002 school year. Massachusetts supplemented these federal reimbursements with state funding for **universal school breakfast** that provides breakfast to all students in low-income schools without charge, regardless of family income.

Offering breakfast to all students decreases the stigma that the program is for poor kids only. Research shows that universal breakfast programs not only increase breakfast participation and decrease hunger but also lead to improved grades, behavior, and attendance.<sup>12</sup>

**Summer Meals** ensure that low-income children receive nutritious food when school is not in session. The USDA provides funding to reimburse eligible sponsors for meals and snacks served to children at summer programs. In July 2002, the program served 56,000 children at 700 sites across Massachusetts. At this level, summer meals only reach 25% of children receiving free or reduced-price lunch during the school year.<sup>13</sup>

## New Initiatives

In 2002, a settlement was reached between Ellis and Rapacki, LLP and several pharmaceutical companies in which the defendants agreed to distribute over \$20 million in one-time grants to nonprofit organizations providing food and nutrition services in Massachusetts. More than 400 organizations received funding through this settlement. Many hunger-relief organizations used these funds for capital improvements and to increase capacity.

Project Bread received a grant of \$2.4 million from the settlement to work intensively in 18 low-income communities and increase participation in food stamps, WIC, school meals, after-school snacks, and summer meals. As part of this effort, Project Bread's Massachusetts Child Hunger Initiative is building local partnerships dedicated to ending hunger, finding innovative ways to reach hungry families, and improving a child's access to these essential nutrition programs.



## Project Bread – The Walk for Hunger

As the leading statewide anti-hunger organization, Project Bread's mission is to alleviate, prevent, and ultimately end hunger in Massachusetts. Project Bread strives to make emergency food accessible to people who would otherwise go hungry; to educate, mobilize, and empower people through The Walk for Hunger and other avenues of action; to research and develop innovative solutions to hunger; and, in partnership with others, to advocate freedom from hunger across the Commonwealth. Project Bread grew out of The Walk for Hunger, its signature event, which today raises \$3 million yearly to fund 400 emergency food programs throughout Massachusetts.

Project Bread is improving access for eligible individuals to meals funded through government-sponsored nutrition programs. Under the auspices of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), state agencies are working together with Project Bread to enhance coordination between agencies, streamline the application process, and increase enrollment in these programs.

### Summary

Thousands of families in Massachusetts, like the Street family, experience food insecurity and hunger because they cannot afford adequate food. For the most part, these families live in pockets of poverty and hunger, out of the sight of most Massachusetts residents. In these communities, one-third of the children lack adequate nutrition. This alarming level of childhood hunger threatens our state's investment in health and education.

While emergency food programs offer critical hunger relief and are supported by Project Bread, these programs were never intended to make up for chronic food shortages in low-income households. No amount of growth (as evidenced in the consistent and dramatic increase over the years) will enable the emergency food system to adequately eliminate hunger in our state. The key to addressing hunger is to pair emergency relief with prevention. In the same way that a medical emergency room cannot take the place of a pediatrician's office, eliminating hunger requires both emergency food and prevention programs. By expanding our definition of the solution, and by acting to boost participation in federally-funded nutrition programs, we can take a major step toward ending hunger in Massachusetts.



By expanding our range of solutions, we have a better chance of preserving the emergency food network for its lifesaving work and of actually meeting the basic food needs of thousands of Massachusetts families.

### Recommendations

Project Bread has initiated demonstration projects in each of the following areas and recommends that they be brought to scale:

- Create a statewide system of *one-stop shopping* for government-sponsored nutrition programs and a single point of entry for accessing school meals, food stamps, and WIC.
- Establish Internet-based technologies to improve access to nutrition programs for low-income people.
- Involve health care providers in connecting at-risk families with nutrition programs.
- Make universal breakfast a part of the school day at schools in low-income communities.
- Add summer meal sites where low-income children can play safely and receive nutritious food.
- Increase food stamp participation to 75% to bring an additional \$90 million in federal benefits into Massachusetts each year.
- Direct prevention activities to low-income communities and involve community leaders and citizens in implementing local solutions.
- Increase participation in nutritious after-school snack programs.
- Improve the quality of school meals and summer meals, and increase the availability of fresh produce in low-income communities.
- Conduct research to study the impact of food insecurity and hunger on nutrition and health in low-income households.

### SOURCES

- <sup>1</sup> Proctor, B. D. and Dalaker, J., *Poverty in the United States: 2002*, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-222, Washington, D.C., 2003.
- <sup>2</sup> *Massachusetts Civilian Labor Force Statistics*, Massachusetts Division of Employment and Training, 2003.
- <sup>3</sup> *2003 Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines*, Federal Register, Vol. 68, No. 26, 2003.
- <sup>4</sup> *Out of Reach 2003: America's Growing Wage-Rent Disparity*, National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> Nord, M., Andrews, M. and Carlson, S., *Household Food Security in the United States, 2001*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 29, 2002.
- <sup>6</sup> *Massachusetts Hunger Assessment*, Center for Survey Research, University of Massachusetts Boston, 2003.
- <sup>7</sup> *2003 Allocations Report*, Project Bread – The Walk for Hunger, 2003.
- <sup>8</sup> *Food Stamp Program: Average Monthly Participation*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2003.
- <sup>9</sup> *Transitions*, Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, July 2003.
- <sup>10</sup> Schirm, A. L. and Castner, L. A., *Reaching Those in Need: State Food Stamp Participation Rates in 2000*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2002.
- <sup>11</sup> Hess, D., Woo, N., Phelps, A., Parker, L. and Weill, J., *School Breakfast Scorecard: 2002*, Food Research and Action Center, 2002.
- <sup>12</sup> Kleinman, R., Hall, S., Green, H., Korzec-Ramirez, D., Patton, K., Pagano, M. and Murphy, J., *Diet, Breakfast, and Academic Performance in Children*, *Annals of Nutrition and Metabolism*, 2002.
- <sup>13</sup> Hess, D., Woo, N., FitzSimons, C. W., Parker, L. and Weill, J., *Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report*, Food Research and Action Center, 2003.

Project Bread<sup>SM</sup>



The Walk for Hunger

For more information visit:

[www.projectbread.org](http://www.projectbread.org)

© Project Bread–The Walk for Hunger, 2003.