

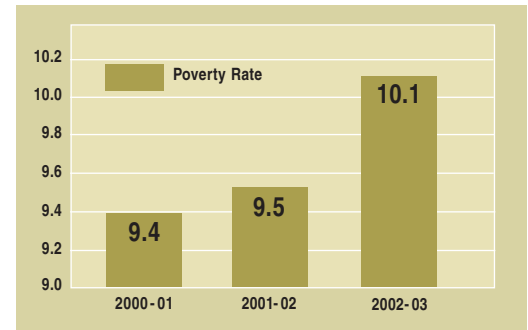
Status Report on Hunger in Massachusetts

Project Bread

2004

The Economic Roots of Hunger

Hunger persists as a problem in Massachusetts, especially among people living in poverty. Since the economic recession that began in 2001, the poverty rate has increased dramatically.¹



650,000 people have income below the poverty line — 10.1 percent of the population of Massachusetts.

Photo Paul Shioul

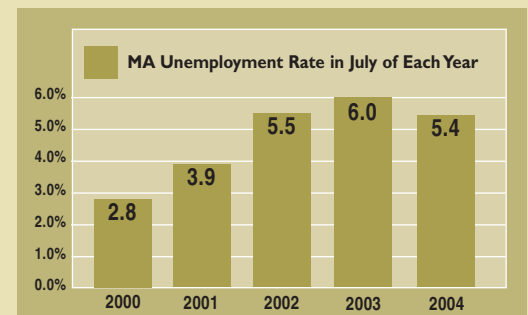


This is the second annual status report on hunger in Massachusetts produced by Project Bread – The Walk for Hunger. The report documents the extent of food insecurity and hunger in the Commonwealth, examines the surge in demand for emergency food, and reviews the importance of government-sponsored nutrition programs in solving the problem of hunger.

Some of the major findings of the report . . .

- With the rise in poverty in Massachusetts, more people than ever are relying on emergency food pantries and soup kitchens.
- The highest rates of hunger and food insecurity occur among low-income families with children.
- Children are overrepresented among those receiving emergency meals.
- The demand for emergency food has increased by 38 percent in the last four years.
- To solve the problem of hunger and preserve the emergency food system, we must expand our range of solutions to include government-sponsored programs that were designed to help families stretch their food budgets and gain access to better nutrition.
- Universal breakfast programs target child hunger and are part of a comprehensive hunger-prevention strategy.
- By boosting participation in federal nutrition programs, Massachusetts can help its low-income residents battle hunger and food insecurity.

Over the last three years, Massachusetts lost jobs faster than any other state. The Commonwealth suffered a 6.2 percent decline in jobs between January 2001 and January 2004, the highest rate in the nation.² As a result, unemployment has remained high in our state with a rate of 5.4 percent in July 2004. Job losses and lower earnings have left many with inadequate resources to feed their families.



Since unemployment peaked in 2003, economic recovery has come slowly to Massachusetts.³



Families Facing Hunger

The high cost of living in Massachusetts places a tremendous burden on families with children. The story of the Sharp family (names have been changed) illustrates this struggle.

Lois Sharp is a single parent with two children, Sarah (age 8) and Jeremy (age 3). She was “just getting by” financially until June 2003 when her hours at work were cut. She moved the family to an apartment with lower rent to make up the difference; however, the new apartment did not include heat or utilities.

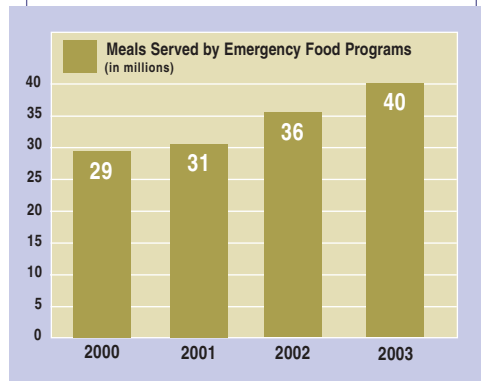
In January 2004, Lois called Project Bread’s FoodSource Hotline when it became impossible for her to keep up with her heating bills and still have enough money to buy groceries. The hotline counselor referred her to a local emergency food pantry. Over the telephone, the counselor also determined that the family was eligible for food stamps, free school meals, and WIC (Women, Infants, and Children Supplemental Nutrition Program). The support that she received from Project Bread’s referrals enabled her to put more food on the table for her children.

Many families called the FoodSource Hotline in the winter of 2004 because they faced a similar dilemma: food or fuel. The hotline received over 6,000 calls between January 1 and March 31 — 50 percent more than the previous year.

Growing Demand for Emergency Food

As our economy declined, the demand at emergency food pantries and soup kitchens increased. Through the annual Walk for Hunger, Project Bread raises money to support 400 emergency food programs in 132 cities and towns. Eighty percent of these programs reported serving more people in 2003 than 2002.⁴

In 2003, emergency food pantries and soup kitchens funded by Project Bread served 40 million meals. Even though children make up just 24 percent of the state population, more than one-third of these meals were served to children.



Emergency meals have increased by 38 percent in just four years.

The Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger

Food insecurity is a measure of the lack of access to adequate food. To describe households that are on the brink of hunger, researchers use the term food insecurity. It means that, due to financial constraints, adults and children are cutting the size of their meals, skipping meals, and running out of food altogether.

Each year, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the United States Census Bureau conduct a national survey of food insecurity and hunger. Families 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 or are frequently hungry.

Based on national survey results from 2000 through 2002, the Economic Research Service estimated that 412,000 people (6.4 percent) were food insecure in Massachusetts with almost one-third of these individuals regularly experiencing hunger.⁵

Hunger is highly concentrated in pockets of poverty in Massachusetts. In a 2003 study, Project Bread and the Center for Survey Research at the University of Massachusetts found an unprecedented level of hunger in low-income communities: 20 percent of all households lacked adequate food. In these low-income areas, the highest rate of food insecurity, 29 percent, was found among families with children.⁶

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.

Project Bread's Solution: Massachusetts Child Hunger Initiative

The Massachusetts Child Hunger Initiative (MCHI) is Project Bread's response to the state's child hunger crisis. MCHI is working intensively in 20 low-income communities with existing coalitions and local leaders to end child hunger. The goal of MCHI is to build a seamless child nutrition safety net in each community that takes children out of food pantry lines and feeds them in everyday environments where they live, learn, and play.

In the target communities, MCHI is implementing hunger prevention practices that increase participation in the key federal nutrition programs including School Meals, the Food Stamp Program, the Summer Food Service Program, and WIC, a program for parents and young children. These nutrition programs protect low-income families from hunger and bring millions in federal dollars into the state. In the past year, MCHI has completed the following:



- Facilitated the enrollment of thousands of students in free school meals;
- Joined with school superintendents, principals, and food service directors to improve access for students to school breakfast;
- Helped thousands of families enroll in the Food Stamp Program by training community-based organizations to offer application assistance and to use web-based technology;
- Provided start-up grants for summer meal sites and after-school nutrition programs;
- Piloted a rural model for feeding children in the summer;
- Created a public education campaign tailored to each community; and
- Collaborated with researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital to identify hungry families at community health centers and study the impact of hunger on health.

Families struggling with underemployment are stabilized by gaining access to federal nutrition programs such as free school meals and summer food sites for children.

While none of these accomplishments would have been possible without the strong support of our community partners, Project Bread has taken a leadership role in demonstrating the importance of hunger prevention in solving the problem of hunger.



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.

School Breakfast: An Antidote to Child Hunger

In response to research demonstrating that a good breakfast eaten at school prevents hunger, improves student achievement, and reduces absenteeism, Project Bread has made increasing participation in school breakfast a priority for our state. Today, 115,000 children in Massachusetts — 84 percent from low-income families — receive a healthy school breakfast.⁷

Academic studies and Project Bread's own experience with schools have shown that two steps are most successful in increasing school breakfast participation: implementing universal breakfast programs and incorporating breakfast into the school day.

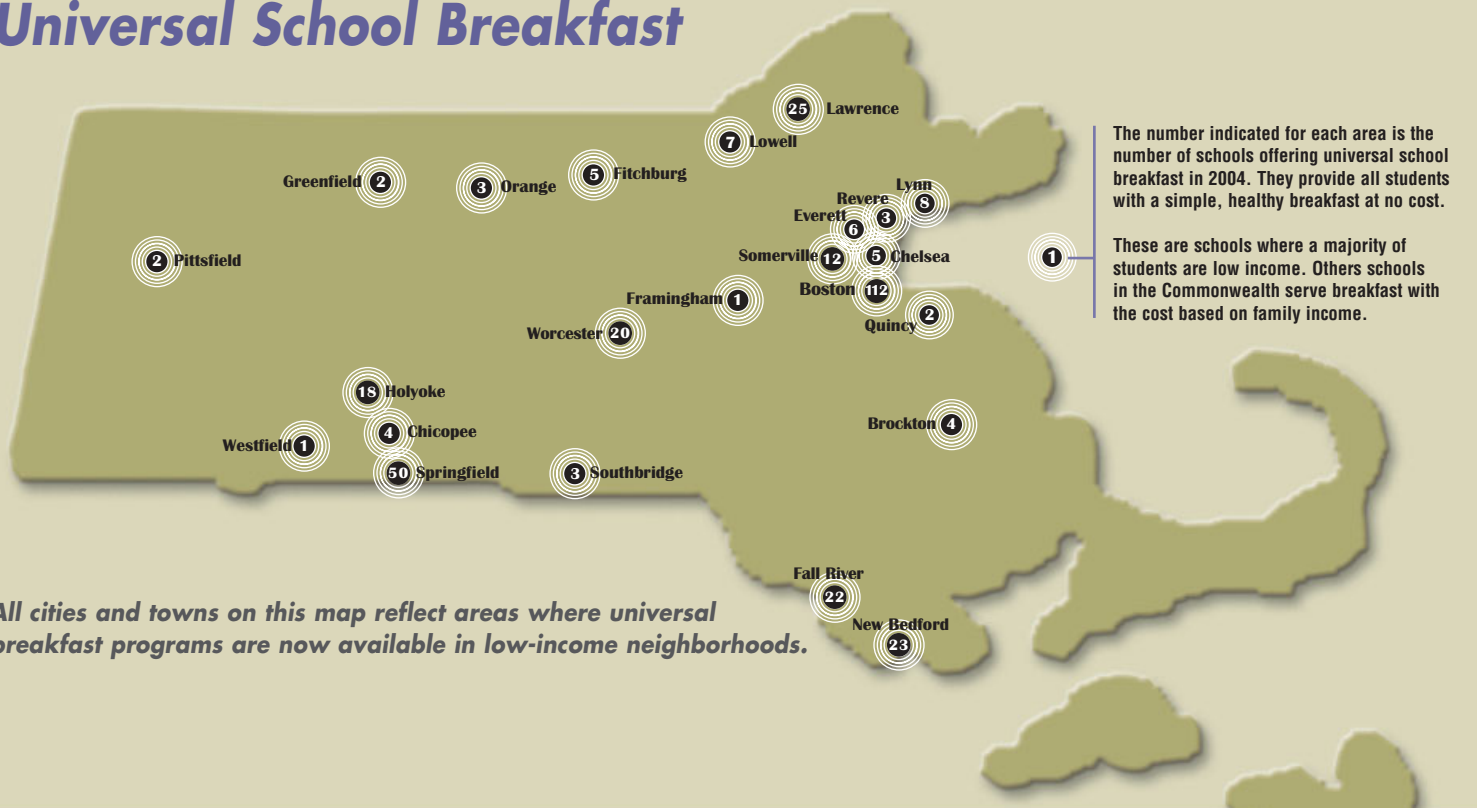
Universal breakfast programs provide school breakfast to all students without charge, regardless of family income. This decreases the stigma that the program is only for poor kids and makes the program more attractive to all children. Currently, 338 universal breakfast programs are active at schools in low-income communities in Massachusetts.

Incorporating the meal into the opening minutes of the school day can also make the program accessible to more students. Traditionally, school breakfast is served before the start of the school day. However, including the meal as part of the day enables the many students who arrive just before the morning bell rings to participate as well.

Project Bread offers School Breakfast Excellence Awards to elementary schools in low-income communities that make breakfast a regular part of the school day and boost student participation to 80 percent. In the past year, 50 elementary schools (one-quarter of those eligible) have achieved this exceptional level of student participation and have received Project Bread's \$1,000 award.



Targeting Hunger with Universal School Breakfast



All cities and towns on this map reflect areas where universal breakfast programs are now available in low-income neighborhoods.

Stabilizing Families: Improving Access to Food Stamps

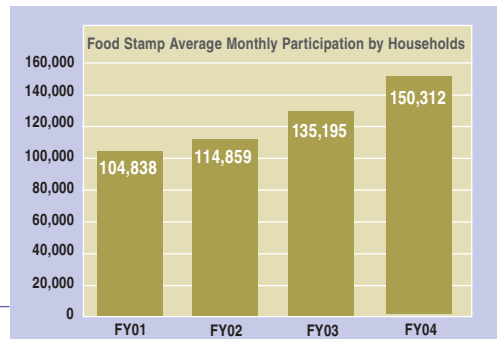
Recognizing the power of the Food Stamp Program to prevent or reduce hunger in many Massachusetts families, Project Bread is collaborating with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and local organizations across the state to improve access to this valuable program. Funded with federal dollars, food stamps are restricted to food purchases and provide eligible families with an average of \$156 per month,⁸ an amount that can significantly improve the health and nutrition of all family members. Families with children may be eligible for food stamps in Massachusetts with income up to 200 percent of the poverty level.



Through Project Bread's advocacy, 100,000 low-income children receive a healthy school breakfast and start the day ready to learn.

the calculator. These results show that thousands of people are interested in learning about the Food Stamp Program. While most low-income households do not own computers, visitors to the website report using computers at libraries, computer technology centers, and job-training programs to access the Internet and the website.

The next step, developing ways for people to apply for food stamps online, is already underway. The Executive Office of Health and Human Services released the Online Virtual Gateway that permits registered human service providers, on behalf of their clients, to submit a single application for multiple benefits, including food stamps and WIC. Similarly, this year, Project Bread created a consumer-friendly Internet application that allows people to complete a food stamp application themselves and submit it directly to the state. If these online tools are made widely available at sites where low-income individuals seek services, then this new technology should significantly increase the number of eligible families applying for food stamp benefits. By raising food stamp participation rates to 75 percent, we would bring an additional \$90 million in federal benefits into Massachusetts each year.



Since 2001, there has been a steady gain in the number of people getting food stamps — a factor that reflects both an increase in poverty and an increase in the effort made by government organizations to make the program more accessible.



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 millions 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 USDA, Project Bread is working with state agencies to streamline the application process for school meals, WIC, and food stamps with the goal of increasing enrollment in these federal nutrition programs.

Summary

With the downturn in the economy, thousands of families in the Commonwealth have plunged into poverty. These families are caught in a vise between low wages and the high cost of living in Massachusetts. Every parent wants their children to be well fed, but financial constraints keep many low-income families from being able to maintain a balanced diet with regular, nutritious meals. Ironically, these financial constraints also place these families at risk for obesity (see also Project Bread's *The Link between Hunger and Obesity, 2004*).

By increasing access to healthy food, the federal nutrition programs help low-income households avoid hunger and obesity. These nutrition programs remain underutilized in Massachusetts, at a time when emergency food programs are stretched beyond their capacity. In the same way that people who lack medical insurance rely on emergency rooms for their regular health care, low-income families who are not enrolled in the federal nutrition programs increasingly depend upon emergency food to make up for chronic food shortages in their homes. Massachusetts has made every effort to extend medical insurance coverage to all of its residents. If we intend to end hunger in the Commonwealth, a similar commitment must be made to boost enrollment and participation in the federal nutrition programs.

Recommendations

Project Bread has demonstrated that the following steps have the potential to reduce the prevalence of hunger:

- Make universal breakfast a part of the school day to increase participation to 80 percent at all elementary schools in low-income communities.
- Expand summer meal sites and add high-quality recreational activities to ensure that children receive healthy meals and exercise when schools are not in session.
- Increase the number of after-school programs offering nutritious meals and snacks.
- Focus hunger prevention efforts in low-income neighborhoods and implement best practices with the help of local leaders and community coalitions.
- Reach out to families with children that are eligible for food stamps via schools, health centers, community action programs, emergency food providers, and faith-based organizations.
- Increase food stamp participation to 75 percent to bring an additional \$90 million in federal benefits into Massachusetts each year.

SOURCES

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Project BreadSM

 Feeding people, nourishing hope

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