

Overview of Hunger-Related Studies  
& Recommendations  
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Food Security: Having access to sufficient, safe, affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods at all times, & having the knowledge of how to prepare these *foods*.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, families living on an income of up to 185% of the poverty level are at risk of food insecurity. This estimate indicates that about one third of the population in Montana—or about 318,896 people, over 92,000 of which are children—is at risk of hunger (Hungry in Montana). According to City-Data.com, in 2009, 12.9% of Billings residents were living on an income below the poverty level, while 5.3% of residents in the community were receiving an income below 50% of the poverty level.

<http://www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-Billings-Montana.html#ixzz1Gc9TsZQ0>

The Billings Area Food Policy Council, which represents a wide range of community stakeholders, was established in the fall of 2010 in order to collectively address issues of food security in Billings. In an effort to most effectively increase year-round access of nutritious, safe and affordable foods in the Billings community, the Council is committed to identifying the needs of the community to best determine their short- and long-term goals and initiatives.

The BAFPC has reviewed the findings from several recent hunger-related studies, an overview of which is provided below.

- Hungry in Montana: Factors Contributing to Emergency Food Needs: an extensive study on factors leading to food insecurity and access to emergency food services conducted by the Montana Food Bank Network at 11 agencies across the state (including Family Services, Inc. in Billings) in June, July, and September 2010.
- Barriers to Food Assistance Program Participation and Food Security in Montana: This resource summarizes the Masters of Public Health research conducted by Katie Kirkpatrick while interning at RiverStone Health (summer—fall 2010). As part of her research, she interviewed 20 parents of families participating in the Backpack Meals Program to understand what barriers prevent families from accessing food assistance programs.
- Statistics Specific to Children
  - School District 2 Statistics: data prepared by Susan Plath, the Billings Public School Grant Writer, in November 2010.
  - Backpack Meals Program Data: information presented by Ginny Mermel regarding the Backpack Program, which provides nutritious, ready-to-eat, nonperishable foods to low-income children during the school year who otherwise may not eat meals on weekends and holidays.
  - “Children in Montana”: data compiled by the Children’s Defense Fund in January 2011, including statistics on poverty, health, hunger, and at-risk youth.
- “Food Access Resources” Brochure: a compilation of all the food resources available to low- to moderate-income individuals and families in Billings and Yellowstone County.

Resources listed include community food resource agencies, federal food assistance programs, food/services for seniors, food/services for children, food/services for teenagers, and community gardens.

- Food Access Map: an interactive map highlighting food access and availability in different regions of the city. A layered map best viewed in Adobe Reader allows anyone to view locations of grocery stores, convenience stores, restaurants, and fast food establishments across the city. The map also provides a layered display of sidewalk access, bus routes, and low- to moderate-income neighborhoods for analysis.

Following the overview is a series of recommendations identifying needs unmet and ways that a more comprehensive community needs assessment can fill these identified gaps.

## Overview

### Hungry in Montana: Factors Contributing to Emergency Food Needs

Hungry in Montana is an extensive study of hunger-related issues that was conducted by the Montana Food Bank Network in June, July, and September 2010 to understand the needs of those who are food insecure across the state. The final report provides an overview of results from the Client Hunger Survey that was distributed at 11 different agencies in urban sites (Billings and Great Falls), reservations (Browning, Hardin, and Havre), and rural sites (Libby, Troy, Dillon, Glendive, and Miles City). At Family Services, Inc., the participating agency in Billings, 120 clients representing 398 household members were interviewed. The report explores difficulties that families and individuals in Montana face that may lead to food insecurity (housing, employment, income, medical, etc.), as well as impact access to emergency food assistance, prioritization of other necessities over food at the expense of meals and proper nutrition, and nutritional intake. The data gathered is presented in a clear and effective way in the final Hungry in Montana report, and specific responses to those surveyed in Billings are included in the preliminary "Client Hunger Survey" report released at the end of September 2010.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that families earning an income at or below 185% of the poverty line are at risk of food insecurity; this means that 33.7% of Montanans are at risk of being food insecure. The number of people living below 50% of the poverty line increased from 27% in 2008 to 35% in 2010. Clients surveyed for Hungry in Montana cited a wide range of obstacles that made it difficult to access food, including: high heating bills in the winter months, parents having to provide more meals to children when they are out of school during the summer, running out of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly Food Stamps) benefits before the end of the month, and having to prioritize other necessities such as rent, utilities, medical bills, and child care over food expenses. Limited access to transportation also made it difficult to take children to the Summer Lunch in the Park Program (a USDA funded program providing free lunch to all children in areas where 51% of students qualify for free or reduced meals), go to the store for groceries, pick up food boxes, etc. Those surveyed also cited deaths in the family, job loss, and illness as other challenges.

Summer Lunch in the Park Program (SLP): Of those clients surveyed only 23.7% of those with school-aged children participate in SLP; among those who have not participated in this

program, 53.7% responded that they were unaware of it. In Billings, while there was a greater participation in SLP (37% of clients surveyed with school-aged children), there was less knowledge of the program overall among clients who had never before participated in the program (65.5% of these clients did not participate because they were unaware SLP).

Though it is possible to eat healthy foods on a limited budget, this generally requires the knowledge of what healthy food is and how to prepare these foods. When you consider busy schedules, inconvenient work hours or working multiple jobs, limited access to transportation, and limited access to cooking/storage facilities, it becomes even more difficult to eat a healthy diet. Clients reported that they would prefer healthier food options—vegetables, fruits, and food high in protein—over cheaper options high in calories, fats, sugar, and/or sodium; however, many feel this is not possible due to the higher cost of healthy foods, and the inaccessibility of these foods.

### Barriers to Food Assistance Program Participation and Food Security in Montana

During summer—fall 2010, Katie Kirkpatrick (MPH, RD of Family Health Services at RiverStone Health) conducted interviews for her MPH research as an intern at RiverStone Health. Kirkpatrick interviewed 20 parents whose children participated in Billings' School District 2 Backpack Program. The Backpack program provides a free full backpack of food over weekends and holidays for students who otherwise might not have access to regular meals. The research focused on answering two primary questions:

- From the perspective of the Backpack parents, what are the barriers to participating in local and national food assistance programs?
- What other barriers are the Backpack program families facing that prevent them from being food secure?

Her research and interviews delve into identifying barriers to participation in the Backpack Program, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants & Children (WIC), Free & Reduced meals program, Summer Lunch in the Park, and local food pantries. Her findings demonstrated that most of the respondents knew about food assistance programs and food pantries, and even had the means to access them. Factors that deterred interviewed parents from accessing food pantries and food assistance programs included:

- Lack of proper identification, which was a prevalent difficulty for homeless families who did not have proof of address or an ID.
- Inconvenient hours of operation at food pantries that do not accommodate working parents.
- Long wait time to receive food at pantries.
- SNAP application is time-consuming—even for those with proper documents and identification—due to its complexity and the extensive paperwork required.
- Inconsistent access to transportation makes it difficult for parents to go to WIC appointments and to get their children to the parks for lunch in the summer.
- Some cited the stigma associated with assistance programs as a deterrent.
- Some refrained from participating, despite being eligible for certain programs, because they thought that others were more in need of assistance than their families.

- Inefficient SNAP budgeting resulted in all food money being spent at the beginning of the month, requiring them to depend on food boxes for the rest of the month. Family Nutrition Education Program (FNEP) classes were cited as being helpful for learning to budget resources like SNAP.
- Seven families were just barely above the qualification limit based on income and were not eligible for benefits (e.g. one mother working full time at Arby's made too much money to qualify). These families were really struggling, unable to eat healthy foods, and had difficulty accessing food pantries.

### Statistics Specific to Children

School District 2 (SD2) Statistics: Susan Plath, the grant writer for Billings Public Schools compiled data specific to School District 2. Data includes:

- Demographics at all Title 1 schools for the 2010-2011 school year;
- Fruit and vegetable consumption through the school breakfast and lunch programs (243,088 lbs of fresh fruits and vegetables), as reported by Sodexo, the Billings Public Schools food service provider; and
- Backpack Meals distributed during the 2009-2010 school year and during the 2010-2011 school year, up until October 2010.

According to Sue Runkle, School District 2's homeless education liaison, as of March 10, 2011, 398 students in SD2 (grades K-12) had been identified as homeless.

BackPack Program Data: Ginny Mermel, co-coordinator of the Backpack Program and chair of the School Health Advisory Council (SHAC), presented the following information on the Backpack Program via email as well as during a Food Policy Council meeting. The Backpack Program provides nutritious, ready-to-eat, nonperishable foods to low-income children who otherwise may not eat meals on weekends and holidays during the school year. From fall 2009—spring 2010, 520 students in eight Title 1 elementary schools benefited from the Backpack Program. The Backpack Program has budgeted for 400 students for fall 2010—spring 2011, and participation has ranged from 357—404 students per week with an average participation number of 376. The goal of the Backpack Program for the 2011—2012 school year is to reduce the number of students participating in Backpack Meals in Title 1 elementary schools to 350 or less, while also working to increase food security for hungry children in non-title 1 schools.

Childhood hunger data pulls from a variety of databases but looking at School District 2's (SD2) Free and Reduced (F&R) meals is a good way to get a quick handle on kids who are hungry because of the current nature of the database.

- On average 5,400—5,500 kids qualify for F&R meals
- For the last 2 years, qualifying families must be living at 185% or less of the federal poverty limit. However, alternative opinions suggest that food security cannot be reached at an income below 200% of the poverty level.
- More than 33% of kids in SD2 qualify for F&R; most of these children who qualify for F&R receive free meals, which requires an income of 125% or less of the poverty line
- Title I elementary teachers estimate that 8-10% of students who get F&R don't eat at night; this is where programs like Backpack meals and The Salvation Army's Community Table (a mobile emergency feeding unit that delivers hot meals, five nights a week, to designated locations around the city and outlying areas) fill in the gaps.

These statistics don't accurately represent all of the kids who are hungry, as families may not fill out paperwork due to a wide range of factors (many of which are explored in Kirkpatrick's research study) including embarrassment, lack of appropriate ID to sign up, or the stigma associated with eating in the lunchroom since schools have an open campus during lunch. This stigma contributes to the dramatic drop-off in numbers for F&R meals between grades 8—9 as students enter high school, even though younger siblings may receive F&R meals. SD2 has done a good job of trying to tease away at those socially constructed issues so that students feel more comfortable eating on campus. For example, the school's food service provider, Sodexo, now does breakfast and lunch with popular healthy choices (e.g. omelet bar).

Fifty-three percent of children (age 18 or younger) live in poverty in Yellowstone County.

Children in Montana: The Children's Defense Fund compiled data in January 2011 that gives a snapshot of children in Montana, including demographics, poverty, health, and hunger, as well as early childhood development, education, child welfare, and youth at risk.

## Recommendations

Hungry in Montana provides recommendations for actions at the federal, state, and community level, in addition to actions aimed at the health community, businesses, and individuals. The community directed recommendations include:

- Increase public awareness of the impact of hunger on health, family structure, and the ability of children to achieve academic success.
- Increase public awareness about the complexities of problems, including hunger, that result from poverty, low wages, and rising costs.
- Advocate for policies that bring sustainable, long-term solutions to hunger.
- Work with state agencies to support and promote access to public programs at the local level.
- Seek opportunities to educate low-income, hungry people about the benefits of public food programs for the children and adults in their families.
- Work with local government and other nonprofit groups to start and expand community gardens, food co-ops, and CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) that benefit hungry people through increased access to healthy, locally grown food.
- Strengthen charitable food distribution through local and faith-based food banks and pantries.
- Make sure information about food programs is available at grocery stores.
- Identify "out-of-school" food needs in your community and work with local schools and non-profit organizations to increase access to food when school is out.
- Pursue options to increase access to healthy, affordable foods.
- Provide incentives to convenience stores to carry healthy food at affordable prices.
- Organize transportation to larger stores for lower income people.

Barriers to Food Assistance Program Participation & Food Security in Montana by Katie Kirkpatrick provides recommendations to assist families using the Backpack Program and other food insecure households in becoming more food secure:

- Advocate for SNAP changes on the state level. The hunger coalition alone may not be able to change the problems with the SNAP program as recommended by the participants. However, the coalition could advocate for some changes on the state level. Changing the income guidelines or giving more assistance to people who are working would be beneficial to the food insecure population in Yellowstone County.
- Increase awareness about food assistance programs through advertising. Specifically the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and WIC. Television and radio commercials as well as postings in public areas and newspapers may be beneficial.
- Improve access to the food pantries. All of the recommendations for improving the food pantries listed in the results section could be addressed by the Billings hunger coalition. The wait time could be decreased by enlisting more volunteers, separating the line for those seeking rent or utility assistance and those seeking food, or decreasing the paperwork required. Also, hours of operation could be changed or extended to accommodate for working families.
- Promote food budgeting classes in the community. Budgeting classes sponsored through the extension services could be supported by the Hunger Coalition, or perhaps, the various organizations that are represented in the coalition could develop a budgeting class to be offered to the public.
- Help the schools identify at-risk families. For example, families with a single-father or grandparent as the primary care taker may be at higher risk for food insecurity. Also, the “new poor,” or families without a social support network may also be at higher risk for food insecurity and hunger. Conveying this information to schools may help teachers and administrators better identify needy children.

The Billings Area Food Policy Council (BAFPC) has identified priority gaps in the community food systems through extensive discussions amongst stakeholders in attendance at meetings. Though many of these suggestions overlap with the recommendations from the Montana Food Bank Network study and Katie Kirkpatrick’s research, they have been discussed in the context of implementation within the Billings community. These needs are also seen as attainable in the short-term. The priorities are as follows:

- Tweak hours of operation for food pantry and food box access. By bringing together leaders from the main emergency food service agencies, hours of operation could be altered slightly (half hour differences in open and close times, opening on weekend days) to allow full-time working clients or clients with alternative work schedules to access food in their available time.
- Increase low-income access to farmers markets. WIC vouchers are currently accepted at the Billings Farmers’ Market and their 50% redemption rate is currently being investigated. Increasing the number of farmers markets in the city (specifically including them in low-income neighborhoods), the length of the market season, and offering more hours will help get fresh, nutritious food to those who need it most. Accepting SNAP benefits at the farmers market is also something the BAFPC has taken on as an action item.
- Increase participation in Summer Lunch in the Park (SLP). Creating a better understanding of what SLP is and advertising about it to parents with school-aged children will encourage more participation in the program. In Billings, SLP participation records

show that activities offered in the park during lunch (e.g. Reading Rocks! Program) result in a higher attendance for meals as well. Garnering more volunteers to offer programming options more often will also attract more students to the park for SLP. Finally, increasing the number of SLP sites will also make transportation and access easier for both students and parents during the summer months.

A long-term initiative that is being pursued by the Billings Area Food Policy Council is to advocate for and support an increase in local food production. Taking into account available research, community observation, and dialogue from people working in the food sector, the Billings area has a severe lack of producers. Most farmers in the area raise commodity crops that are not readily available for human consumption. Increasing community gardens and growing spaces, encouraging backyard gardeners and farmers to participate in gleaning programs or “grow and extra row” for donation, and making land accessible to new farmers will all help to bolster local food production. The BAFPC recognizes local food production as a fundamental factor in food security for the entire community (not just those at risk of immediate hunger due to financial circumstances).

The studies noted above are primarily centered on the causes and effects of food insecurity. Identifying all facets of food insecurity is an essential component to filling much needed gaps within the community food system. Gaps to be addressed in a more comprehensive needs assessment include:

- Local Food Production- Inventory of community gardens, public growing spaces (those with potential for development), local farmers, gleaning programs, markets, restaurants and retailers featuring local produce.
- Food Price Differentials- Inventory of major grocers in different neighborhoods and average food prices throughout the year (fresh produce, canned produce, frozen produce, staple food items like milk and bread). Inventory of convenience store food pricing vs. conventional grocery store prices.
- Transportation Barriers- Inventory of transportation systems in relation to major food centers to highlight accessibility differences between regions of the city. (An Interactive Food Access Map was created by AmeriCorps\*VISTA Hanna Noel that shows major grocers/convenience stores in addition to paved walking and bus routes, but a more comprehensive analysis of the map could be done.
- Food Distribution Systems- Investigation of how food is getting to Billings, Montana: where food is coming from and how far it has to be transported. Assessment of risks associated with food insecurity in case of natural disasters and food shortages. Identifying food distribution once it is in the city (who does it go to, how promptly is it being distributed, and how much is wasted).