Childhood Hunger in Montana

Hunger among American children doesn’t take the form of mass starvation, as it does in some developing countries. Instead, the signs of food deprivation appear in children (with the exception of infants) over a period of time. The consequences of childhood hunger are significant and include physical and/or mental health problems and lower academic achievement.

As of 2013, the No Kid Hungry Campaign reported 22% of Montana kids struggle with hunger. Increasingly, researchers place childhood hunger within the broader context of food insecurity, which refers to limited or uncertain access to nutritionally-adequate food due to lack of money and other resources. A strong economy tends to lower the overall rate of food insecurity, while a weaker economy increases it. Therefore, it’s not surprising the Great Recession catapulted food insecurity levels to all-time highs, especially for households with children.

Feeding America reports Montana’s overall food insecurity rate is 14.6%. The Montana counties containing American Indian reservations have some of the highest food insecurity levels in the state, with the rate being up to 5% higher than the state average. A recent report about food systems on Montana reservations reinforced this. On a scale of one to five, with five being the “most important,” reservation communities rated the issue of hunger in the four to five range, with an overall average of 4.5 (see inset box for individual reservation numbers).

For Native students, the hunger issue isn’t relegated just to reservations. Native high school students experience a higher rate of hunger than other students in schools both on and off reservations.

More than three decades of research shows that food insecurity and hunger have a greater impact on children. Food insecurity and hunger can lead to poor health, reduced social and psychological well-being, increased behavioral problems, and lower academic achievement.
obesity can occur in the same populations and in the same families.” Nationally, over 83% of households with children that experienced food insecurity bought inexpensive, unhealthy food as a coping strategy. One factor contributing to this is lacking access to healthy, affordable foods. MFBN documented the challenges its clients had in eating a healthy diet, with lack of money for food and the expense of healthy food topping the list. Beyond money, Montana’s geographical size can impede access to healthy food. Thirty of Montana’s 56 counties are considered food deserts (see inset box for definition). Montana No Kid Hungry found that transportation was a major problem for accessing food, especially in tribal communities where families often lacked their own vehicles and had to rely on other people to get them into town to find food. Montana No Kid Hungry also found many instances where families had to travel 40 or 50 miles to access a grocery store. These geographic difficulties impact thousands of Montana families and their children.

Many Montana and national organizations working on the issues of food insecurity and hunger stress the importance of nutrition and food assistance programs. As economic insecurity grew during the Great Recession, the number of households receiving SNAP increased approximately 50% between 2009 and 2013. However, SNAP households with children still frequently report they do not have enough money for needed food. Unfortunately, many families that could benefit from SNAP and other assistance programs are not enrolled.

Montana No Kid Hungry found numerous reasons for this, including families trying to avoid the stigma of “taking government handouts.” This perception is passed down to children. “Kids learn that it is shameful to ask for help,” explained Montana No Kid Hungry, “Many hungry kids are reluctant to participate in school food programs, especially as they get older.” Not knowing the eligibility requirements for assistance programs is also a problem. MFBN found that 40% of food bank clients that hadn’t applied for SNAP didn’t know they might be eligible.

As mentioned earlier, one of the numerous challenges related to food insecurity is access to healthy foods. A national report found that fresh produce was the most desired item to obtain by food insecure households. NCAT is currently partnering in numerous projects that seek to help those using food assistance programs access more local healthy foods. NCAT staff has worked extensively on efforts to allow low-income households to use their SNAP benefits to purchase locally-grown fruits and vegetables at farmers markets. Since all SNAP benefit purchases are now made with an Electronic Benefit Transfer card, farmers markets can use a swipe machine to give low-income families easy access to healthy foods.

How Important of an Issue is Hunger in Your Community?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reservation</th>
<th>Important Rating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blackfeet Reservation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crow Reservation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flathead Reservation</td>
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<td>4.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rocky Boy’s Reservation</td>
<td>5.0</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Montana Department of Agriculture, Moving Toward Sovereignty: Assessing Food Systems on Montana’s Indian Reservations
access to locally-grown produce. Following a pilot by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, NCAT helped create an instruction manual on how to set up this practice with farmers markets, and NCAT staff continues to be a resource for this process.

As the Montana organization hosting FoodCorps, NCAT is helping to create healthier school food environments. Montana FoodCorps members work in schools and teach hands-on lessons about food and nutrition; build and tend school gardens; and help get locally-grown food served in schools. Montana FoodCorps participates in the Montana Partnership to End Childhood Hunger (MT-PECH). In creating its “10 Steps to End Childhood Hunger in Montana,” MT-PECH identified two goals related to increasing participation in Farm to School programs and garden education. Montana FoodCorps and NCAT’s Farm to Cafeteria are leaders in those areas and report back to MT-PECH on progress towards those goals.

Montana FoodCorps has also partnered with Montana No Kid Hungry. FoodCorps has provided mentorship, resources, and training opportunities to No Kid Hungry members. At three service sites in 2014-2015, FoodCorps and No Kid Hungry members collaborated on specific school food-related projects.

NCAT also continues to partner with the Butte Emergency Food Bank on a garden plot that grows fresh vegetables for the Butte community. The plot is part of NCAT’s SIFT Project. The partnership between NCAT and the Butte Food Bank started in 2013.

Other resources about childhood hunger and food insecurity in Montana:
- Montana No Kid Hungry
- Montana Partnership to End Childhood Hunger
- Montana Food Bank Network
- Feeding America’s “Map the Meal Gap”

Source: RTI, Current and Prospective Scope of Hunger and Food Security, July 2014
1 The Future of Children, “Child Indicators: Childhood Hunger,” Spring 1997; UPS Foundation and Congressional Hunger Center, Hunger in America, 2014
2 No Kid Hungry in Montana Campaign
4 RTI, Current and Prospective Scope of Hunger and Food Security, July 2014
5 Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap
6 Ibid
9 UPS Foundation and Congressional Hunger Center, Hunger in America, 2014
10 Ibid
11 RTI, Current and Prospective Scope of Hunger and Food Security, July 2014
12 Ibid
13 Ibid
15 Feeding America, Hunger in America 2014, August 2014
18 Montana Food Bank Network, “Hunger in Montana”
19 Montana No Kid Hungry, Connecting Kids to Healthy Food in Montana, April 2013
20 Ibid
21 Feeding America, Hunger in America 2014, August 2014
22 RTI, Current and Prospective Scope of Hunger and Food Security, July 2014
23 Montana No Kid Hungry, Connecting Kids to Healthy Food in Montana, April 2013
24 Ibid
26 Ibid
27 Feeding America, Hunger in America 2014, August 2014
28 Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, “SNAP at Farmers Markets”
29 NCAT and AERO, How to Accept SNAP Benefits at Your Farmers Market; Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, “SNAP at Farmers Markets”

The Montana Healthy Food and Communities Initiative is a project of NCAT

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