



Hunger Pains

Widespread food insecurity threatens Maine's future

Executive Summary

Roughly 203,000 Mainers struggle with hunger, more than the total number of people living in Portland, Lewiston, Bangor, South Portland, Auburn, and Biddeford combined.¹ Since the Great Recession officially ended in 2009, much of the nation has experienced recovery and relief, but Maine is moving against the national trend, and high rates of poverty and hunger continue to harm our state.

"If I'm working as hard as I do, I want to have the right to survive and live instead of going hungry."
—Senior man in Hancock County

One in six Mainers is food insecure, while the rate among Maine children is even higher: nearly one in four children in Maine experiences food insecurity.²

Very low incomes for roughly one-third of the Maine workforce are an important factor underlying food insecurity; Maine's employment structure provides a livable wage for only about two-thirds of its roughly 620,000 workers.³

Nevertheless, over the last two years, Maine instituted both a time limit and an asset test for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which reduced the number of households eligible for the federally funded food assistance benefits.⁴ In November 2016, the state's Department of Health and Human Services reported 188,425 Mainers were participating in SNAP, a substantial decline from 2013 when 249,119 Mainers were receiving benefits.⁵

Preble Street Maine Hunger Initiative and Good Shepherd Food Bank sought to look beyond the numbers to gain a clearer understanding of who is struggling with hunger in Maine and what challenges they face in their attempts to attain food security. The research team surveyed 2,053 food pantry users across all 16 Maine counties, held focus groups, and conducted interviews in an effort to gather both qualitative and quantitative information.

Defining Terms

What we commonly refer to as "hunger" is termed "food insecurity" by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and divided into two categories: low food security is characterized by a reduction in the quality and variety of diet, and very low food security by "disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake."

Survey respondents ranged in age from 15 to 95, with an average age of 52. The average household size was 2.7 people. Eighty-seven (87) percent of households contain a child, a senior, or a person with a disability.

What Did the Study Find?

➤ **Emergency Food System Has Become Everyday Means of Survival**

Food pantries were conceived as a source of emergency food assistance. Instead, they have become a regular source of food for many low-income Americans, including thousands of Mainers. Most survey respondents (86 percent) report using the food pantry at least once a month, with 29 percent visiting a pantry every week and 15 percent visiting a pantry every two weeks.

Fifty-nine (59) percent of respondents report that they are using the food pantry more this year than they did last year.

➤ **SNAP Benefits Offer Limited Assistance**

Fifty-seven (57) percent of survey respondents indicated that they receive monthly SNAP benefits. Of these respondents, 83 percent report that benefits last two weeks or less, and 49 percent reported that benefits last just one week or less.

The SNAP benefit received each month depends on the size of the household. The vast majority of survey respondents who received SNAP benefits reported receiving between \$16 and \$200 a month.

➤ **SNAP Policy Changes Have Increased Reliance on Food Pantries**

One in four respondents (486 people) reported they had lost SNAP benefits in the past year. Nearly one-third of this group said they were removed from the program because of the time limit (24 percent) or the asset test (7 percent). The remaining two-thirds were dropped from the program for reasons including increased earnings, marriage, lost application paperwork, and being unable to schedule a required interview with a DHHS caseworker.

Of the respondents who lost benefits because of the time limit,

- 13 percent reported health and caregiving barriers that likely should have made them exempt from the time limit
- 59 percent reported being unable to find work or not having transportation to get to work
- 79 percent report using the food pantry more this year than they did last year.

Of the respondents who lost SNAP benefits as a result of the asset test, 63 percent have a household member over 60 years old, and 44 percent have a household member with a disability. Fifty-eight (58) percent report using the food pantry more this year than last.

“The pantry helps us out a whole lot. We’re getting some food stamps, but they cut them back, so we never know from month to month what they’re going to do. They don’t give you much, that’s for sure.”

— Senior man in Aroostook County

“When they are establishing the amounts for the food stamps, they need to check the regular grocery stores, because those prices are going up, and it may take years to get an increase in food stamps.”

— Middle-aged man in Cumberland County

“The whole point of these benefits, after you have served your country, is to be able to rely on them. Then I find myself having to jump through hurdles to achieve them and it doesn’t work.” — U.S. Navy veteran in Knox County

➤ **Low-Wage Jobs with Limited or No Benefits Keep Maine Families in Poverty**

When asked about the highest hourly wage at their last job, the median response was \$10 per hour—below the federal poverty level for a family of four. A very small portion of respondents reported receiving employee benefits. For example,

- only 15 percent have had access to health insurance through their current or most recent employer
- 13 percent currently have or previously had sick days.

With the collapse of manufacturing in many rural areas, Mainers struggle to find work. Of those respondents who were looking for work but having a hard time finding it, fully half faced significant barriers, such as mental or physical health problems, lack of transportation to get to work, or lack of needed schooling or training to qualify for a job.

➤ **Paying for Food Means Making Trade-offs**

When asked whether they have to sacrifice other necessities in order to be able to afford food, 73 percent of respondents said yes. The trade-offs that were reported most often were between buying food and paying utilities and other bills, paying for medication and health care, and paying for transportation.

Trade-offs are even more acute for those who lost SNAP benefits because of the recent policy changes, of whom 86 percent report making difficult choices between getting food on the table and paying for rent, heat, health care, and transportation.

“The work is all fast food and jobs that don’t pay them enough.”

— Senior man in Aroostook County

“My biggest concern is insurance. Elderly people are dropping their medicines, to keep money for them to survive...It’s either the medication or they don’t buy food.”

— Senior man in Kennebec County

State Policies Should Help Rather Than Hurt Mainers in Need

When Mainers have access to nutritious food, our communities thrive and grow. When our neighbors struggle with hunger, the impacts on our state are dire and wide-reaching.

Our results show that while SNAP is a critical safety net, it is not catching enough people and now fewer than ever. SNAP policy changes have forced many Mainers to rely more heavily on charitable food assistance programs to meet their basic food needs. Just like clean water, public safety, and education, making sure everyone has enough to eat is an obligation of a just society, not something that should be done only when individuals and private donors feel generous.

“People have this image of what a person on assistance looks like. It’s affecting people who are working...it’s your neighbor, coworker, lady in line at the grocery store...it’s everyone around you, and people just don’t talk about it.”

— Middle-aged woman from Lakes Region

We offer the following set of urgent policy recommendations (see full report for more details):

- Preserve and protect the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Restore and bolster access to SNAP in Maine by pursuing waivers and eliminating the asset test
- Bolster childhood nutrition programs in schools and invest in more summer meals sites
- Support Maine workers and families with adequate benefit policies and job training programs
- Invest in public transit statewide and increased access to affordable transportation options
- Accept federal funds to expand MaineCare to more low-income people
- Invest in affordable housing and fund Housing First initiatives to end homelessness.

In addition to ensuring these policies are in place, Maine should support the charitable food assistance network to serve as an effective emergency food system.

Preble Street is a social work organization founded on the principles of access for everyone and unconditional positive regard. Since 1975, Preble Street has served some of the most vulnerable people in Maine, working to turn hunger and homelessness into opportunity and hope through 14 low-barrier programs throughout the state. As the hub of services in northern New England's largest urban area, Preble Street provides round-the-clock services 365 days a year to not only meet urgent needs, but to empower people to move beyond the crises in their lives, and to build and advocate for solutions to homelessness, hunger, and poverty. Contact: (207) 775-0026; www.preblestreet.org; www.facebook.com/preblestreet; www.twitter.com/PrebleStreet.

As the largest hunger relief organization in Maine, Good Shepherd Food Bank provides for Mainers facing hunger by distributing nutritious food to more than 400 partner agencies across the state, including food pantries, meal sites, schools, and senior programs. Together with its network, the Food Bank helps combat the root causes of hunger by engaging in advocacy, nutrition education, and strategic partnerships. In 2016, the Food Bank distributed more than 21 million meals to families, children, and seniors in need throughout Maine. Contact: (207) 782-3554; www.feedingmaine.org; www.facebook.com/feedingmaine; www.twitter.com/feedingmaine.

The research team for this project consisted of staff people from Good Shepherd Food Bank and Preble Street Maine Hunger Initiative, AmeriCorps VISTA members serving at the Maine Hunger Initiative, graduate students at the University of Southern Maine overseen by Dr. Michael Hillard, and Jean Bessette, doctoral student at the University of New Hampshire.

¹ *Population and Housing Unit Estimates*, U.S. Census Bureau. www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/data/data-sets.html.

² Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory & Anita Singh, *Household Food Security in the United States in 2015*, USDA, September 2016, p. 7. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/err215/err-215.pdf?v=42636>; *Map the Meal Gap 2016*, Feeding America, 2016. http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/map-the-meal-gap/2014/ME_AllCounties_CDs_MMG_2014.pdf.

³ MIT Livable Wage Calculator. <http://livingwage.mit.edu/states/23/locations>; Maine Center for Economic Policy, "Restoring the Value of Work," August 2016. http://www.mcecp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Minimum-wage-brief_final_08-17-16.pdf.

⁴ Childless adults aged 18 to 49 lose benefits after three months unless they can find work, job training, or volunteer opportunities. Assets of more than \$5,000 disqualify adults without children, including seniors and those with disabilities.

⁵ *Geographic Distribution of Programs and Benefits for November 2016*, Maine Department of Health and Human Services, p. 25. http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ofi/reports/2016/GeoDistrib_Nov.pdf; *Profile of SNAP Households*, USDA, March 2015. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/ops/Maine.pdf>.