

Background

This atlas assesses the extent of food insecurity in the state of Missouri. It also begins to gauge how well public programs are doing in meeting the needs of those of our fellow citizens who have difficulty acquiring sufficient amounts and qualities of food. The concept of food security, as the Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Program within the United States Department of Agriculture defines it, refers to “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” Food insecurity in this country is normally due to insufficient resources for food purchases, and the majority of food insecure households avoid hunger by relying on a more narrow range of foods or acquiring food through private and public assistance programs. The USDA reported that 17.1 million households in the US (14.6 percent of households), or more than 49 million Americans, experienced “low food security” in 2008. Of these, 6.7 million households, comprising more than 17 million citizens had “very low food security,” meaning the food intake of some household members was reduced and their normal eating patterns were disrupted because of the lack of money and other resources.¹

According to the USDA, food insecurity in Missouri from 2006 to 2008 averaged 14.0 percent. This rate is nearly 20

¹ Prior to 2005, the USDA described households with “very low food security” as “food insecure with hunger” and those with “low food security” as “food insecure”. The labels changed at the recommendation of the Committee on National Statistics (National Research Council, 2006). The criteria by which the USDA classified households remained unchanged, however, and in this atlas we use the older phrases of “food insecure” and “food insecure with hunger”.

percent higher than the figure for 2003-2005 and 39 percent higher than the average (10.1 percent) one decade ago (1996-1998). Among children, the percentage is even greater. The USDA estimates that food insecurity affected 23.4 percent of all households in the state with children in 2008, which would mean more than 160,000 households including roughly 360,000 children worry about meeting basic food needs. In the more severe case of food insecurity with hunger, state levels averaged 4.0 percent over the 2006-2008 period but stood at 5.8 percent in December 2008. Missouri is one of 17 states with rising rates of food insecurity with hunger, and the increase over the first decade of the 21st century is among the highest five in the country.

The costs of food insecurity are economic, social, physical and psychological. For example, the economic costs of food insecurity among adults include income loss, work absenteeism, higher demand for public benefits and social services and increased health care expenditures. Food insecurity and poverty are clearly connected—poverty is the best single predictor of food insecurity, and hunger strongly correlates with lower educational achievement, unemployment and impaired work performance. Recent studies of children show food insecurity and hunger are significant predictors of chronic illness, low birth weight, lower school performance and developmental problems.

To help Missourians gain a greater understanding of the extent and depth of food insecurity and hunger in the state, researchers at the University of Missouri’s Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security compiled county-level data to provide (1) a snapshot of the extent and depth of food insecurity and hunger (*which we refer to as “need” in this*

atlas) and (2) an assessment of participation in programs intended to mediate food insecurity and hunger needs (*labeled as “performance” in this atlas*). With the cooperation of many public and private sector agencies and organizations, we identified appropriate variables or indicators that we could use to measure hunger “need” and “performance” for each of Missouri’s 114 counties and St. Louis City. The largest part of this report is the county pages that include the need and performance indicators for each of these 115 units. We also provide maps of selected indicators to show the distribution of data across the state.

We hope this atlas will:

- Raise Missourians’ awareness of the extent and depth of food insecurity and hunger needs in their own locations and in other regions of the state;
- Increase Missourians’ knowledge of the extent of the work of public programs and food banks in their regions and the success of these programs in reaching food insecure populations;
- Reveal geographic patterns, including regional and county-level differences, in hunger need and performance in our state;
- Provide measures of need and performance that can be updated on a periodic basis and compared to assess trends in need and performance variables; and,
- Help public and private decision-makers assess food insecurity need and program performance as a means

for improving the delivery of human, technical, and fiscal resources to residents and regions requiring assistance.

This publication is consistently a “work in progress” in two senses. First, it is our plan to update the atlas every two years with the latest available information and increasingly validated measures of need and performance. Second, we welcome comments and suggestions from readers and users of this atlas. Readers might identify different sets of indicators than those described here, for example, or might have creative ideas for more effective presentations of the findings. As our goal is to have this atlas used by diverse groups in Missouri and outside our state, we sincerely hope that dialogue about both our methods and results become part of wider discussions among all citizens, from those professionally involved in hunger programs to concerned residents of our state.