

Concluding remarks

Food insecurity and hunger are facts of life for far too many Missourians. The USDA's assessment that 15.8 percent of Missourians were food insecure in 2008 applied to the mid-year estimated population of 5,911,605 suggests that 934,034 residents faced uncertainty in acquiring sufficient food for their household. Further, of people who were food insecure in 2008, the USDA estimates that roughly 37 percent had "very low food security" (prior to 2007 labeled as "food insecure with hunger"), or 5.8 percent of the total population. This translates into roughly 343,000 Missourians experiencing hunger. Regretfully, trends in food insecurity and hunger are not positive ones for our state, as current averages for both reflect a trend that has continuously increased over the first decade of this century.

The best predictor of food insecurity and hunger in Missouri, and throughout the United States, is poverty. Further, income level is typically the primary eligibility criteria for participation in all public food assistance programs. Thus economic, labor and income trends are most significant in the spatial distribution of need and program entitlement. The deterioration of the state (and national) economic picture over the past three years parallels our findings and suggests that the situation in 2010 is most likely worse than the levels documented in this atlas. Reports for food banks and pantries reveal continued increases in numbers of clients (at a time when USDA contributions through commodity and other programs are flat or decreasing). Participation in WIC, Food Stamps and other programs also continues to grow. For example, trends in Food Stamp Program numbers almost always rise and fall following changes in unemployment

rates, and US and Missouri levels of participation are both the highest in the history of the program. It follows from this that the most direct route to alleviating hunger is to develop successful strategies for raising the income of the poor. Reversing poverty is more difficult, however, if not impossible, for individuals and households in which adult members are elderly or disabled or who, for various reasons, are unable to seek salaries and wages for food purchases.

The establishment of public and private programs and activities is a necessary "safety net" response to meeting the short-term needs of the food insecure and hungry citizens who inhabit every county and corner of our state. These programs do not provide a long-term solution to the factors that lead to hunger, but they are critical to ameliorating the day-to-day struggles of hundreds of thousands of Missourians. Well over 1.4 billion dollars was spent in this state in 2008 to help people have enough to eat, and hopefully enough nutritious food to lead healthy and active lives.

It is not our goal to editorialize on whether or not public and private support for food assistance programs is too high or too low. Certainly we know that the 1.4 billion dollar figure underestimates the costs of this social problem in at least three important ways.

- The programs included in this atlas are not comprehensive of the financial and human resources being brought to bear on hunger and food insecurity. It is especially difficult to comprehensively document contributions from the private sector. While food banks, for example, contribute over 55 million pounds a year to food pantries and other facilities, many of these locations rely on food banks for only a minor

portion of the food they provide to clients. And certainly there are hundreds, if not thousands, of faith-based organizations, civic groups, and other organizations that provide food for residents who need help without using food banks at all.

- The financial numbers presented here do not include the administrative and organizational costs of operating these programs. We document the amount of benefits provided through the Food Stamp Program and the reimbursements given to schools for free and reduced lunches; however, we do not include the hundreds of positions at state agencies and in county governments that are necessary to operate these efforts, monitor participation, solicit and evaluate perspective participants, and to conduct the dozens of other tasks necessary for their operation.
- Most significantly, the costs of food insecurity and hunger are critically underestimated if these are understood solely as the costs of providing assistance directly related to the acquisition of sufficient amounts of food. The cost of hunger extends far beyond the cost of having food. The costs of hunger should properly include the health care costs incurred because children and adults are more susceptible to, and recover more slowly from, disease and illness. It should include the healthcare costs for the management of chronic diseases, such as diabetes and hypertension, which are brought on in part by the reliance on high calorie, high fat and low nutrient-dense foods. The costs of hunger extend to the costs of lower work productivity and missed days of work. And the costs of hunger include the social and psychological angst of not having sufficient and nutritious foods and the mental stress and discord that results for individuals and households. As

much as poverty is a leading cause of food insecurity, so too are food insecurity and hunger leading causes of continued poverty.

Importantly, the figures on food insecurity and hunger in Missouri remain high, and are not declining in spite of the myriad of mostly federally-originated public programs and locally-initiated private programs. Food insecurity and hunger continue to affect all regions of the state. Generally, one can point to larger proportions of counties with high need in the southern half of the state, but needs are also high in counties near the Iowa border in north central and northeast regions, and in St. Louis City. In general, the clustering of high need quintiles is similar to the grouping of counties with high and persistent poverty levels. County-level performance is more variable and high and low performance counties are more dispersed throughout the state. On a positive note, a majority of counties characterized as “high need” are also “high performance” in contrast to a much lower number of high need/low performance, in terms of participation measures and other indicators of successful interventions. This result suggests that programs are effectively targeting high need areas. On the other hand, there is general “low performance” in all metro and suburban areas, with the notable exception of St. Louis City.

The data reported in this atlas suggests the following future needs:

- Targeted assessments of program implementation in counties characterized by high need and low performance, with particular attention to the southwest corner of Missouri.

- Increased recognition of the importance of the public and private programs that provide food assistance – they are the barrier between hunger and non-hunger for probably hundreds of thousands of Missourians.
- Focus on improving understanding of patterns of low performance in all metro areas (except St. Louis City) and most suburban counties. Greater knowledge of reasons for lower program participation rates in these regions should result in the implementation of new program and outreach strategies.
- Greater emphasis on the nutritional and health impacts of food choices among staff and clients of all public and private programs. Research has demonstrated that poverty is positively correlated both with food insecurity and with chronic diseases such as diabetes, obesity and hypertension. Foods that tend to be cheaper and more widely available are also typically high in calories and low in nutrition and this contributes to levels of health vulnerabilities. Many of the counties that have the highest food insecurity and hunger in Missouri also have the highest levels of residents with these

poor health conditions. While educational activities exist as part of most public and private programs, these need to be strengthened and invigorated with innovative designs and implementation. Recent changes in school meal programs in some districts towards more nutritious menus is an example of a positive trend that needs to be broadened both in this program and throughout the public sector. For the same reasons, we highly encourage state participation in the WIC and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition program.

- Strengthened linkages between private sector temporary food assistance programs (e.g., food pantries) and local food systems. The demand for the goods and services provided by private programs continues to grow. Creative efforts can link local food systems (e.g., community gardens) with these programs
- Assessments of community food security as a core local need, alongside such social concerns as education and health. In addition, technical support should be given to communities committed to developing action plans to address the results of community food security assessments.