



STATUS REPORT ON HUNGER IN RHODE ISLAND 2008

The Rhode Island Community Food Bank researches and produces this Status Report each year to document the extent of hunger and food insecurity in the state. We define “food insecurity” as a household’s inadequate income or resources to put food on the table. This Status Report examines the impact of the recent downturn in the economy, the rising cost of food and the growing demand for food assistance. The Report not only contains statistics about the urgency of the problem but describes the steps Rhode Island must take to respond with a more effective safety net to help everyone in need.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE REPORT

- More families live in poverty and are at risk for hunger.
- One in six Rhode Island children currently grows up in a home where their parents struggle to put food on the table.
- The price of groceries increased six percent in Rhode Island, making it more difficult for low-income families to purchase enough food. A Food Bank study conducted in September 2008 reveals most low-income families cannot afford the balanced diet recommended by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) without some type of food assistance.
- Emergency food programs served 10 million meals last year, straining the resources of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank and its network of 285 Member Agencies, even as the Rhode Island General Assembly cut funding for the Food Bank.
- More Rhode Islanders are taking advantage of government-sponsored nutrition assistance but these programs remain under-enrolled. The revamped Farm Bill, recently passed by Congress, includes new provisions to increase aid for low-income people.
- There is an immediate need to mobilize public and private resources to help the hungry by expanding emergency food supplies and improving access to government programs.



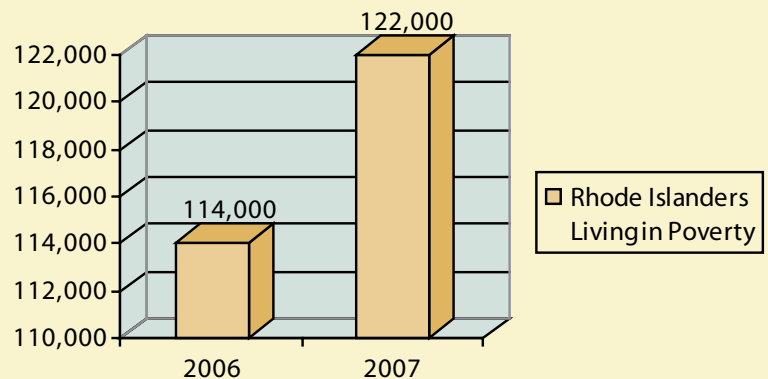
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The Economic Roots of Hunger

Hunger is a serious problem in Rhode Island, particularly for families living in poverty. The federal government sets poverty guidelines based upon income and family size. An annual income of \$17,600 is the current poverty level for a family of three.¹ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of people living in poverty in Rhode Island is growing.²

In September 2008, the unemployment rate in Rhode Island reached 8.8 percent, the highest in 16 years. Jobs declined by 3.7 percent between September 2007 and September 2008, the largest rate increase in unemployment in the nation.³ Job losses have left many adults with inadequate resources to feed their families. For example, a laid-off worker with two children who earned \$53,568 per year – the median household income in Rhode Island in 2007 – receives only \$15,106 annually in unemployment benefits, which is below the poverty level for a family of three.⁴



122,000 people in Rhode Island have income below the poverty line, 12 percent of the state population.

In addition to lower earnings brought about by the weak economy, Rhode Islanders are suffering from a dramatic increase in the cost of living with higher prices for both fuel and food (see page 3, The Rising Cost of Food in Rhode Island). Everyone copes with these increases, but the impact is greatest on low-income families. Researchers have found that young children in low-income families not receiving fuel-assistance are at high risk for under-nutrition and hospitalization.⁵

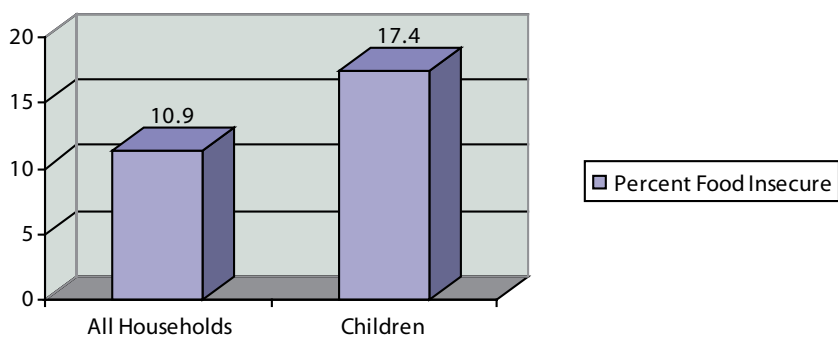
The Prevalence of Food Insecurity & Hunger in Rhode Island

Families are considered food insecure when they are unable to meet their basic need for food. Each year, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Census Bureau conduct a survey to determine the number of food insecure households in each state. Food insecure families who cannot afford adequate food cut the size of meals, skip meals, or run out of food entirely. If family members significantly decrease the amount they consume, they go without eating and experience hunger and the household is classified as having "very low food security."



In 2007, the last year research data are available to reflect food insecurity in Rhode Island, there were 47,000 food insecure households (10.9 percent of all households).⁶ These survey results show one-third of these households had very low food security.

No doubt the prevalence of hunger has grown as the economy has declined in recent months.

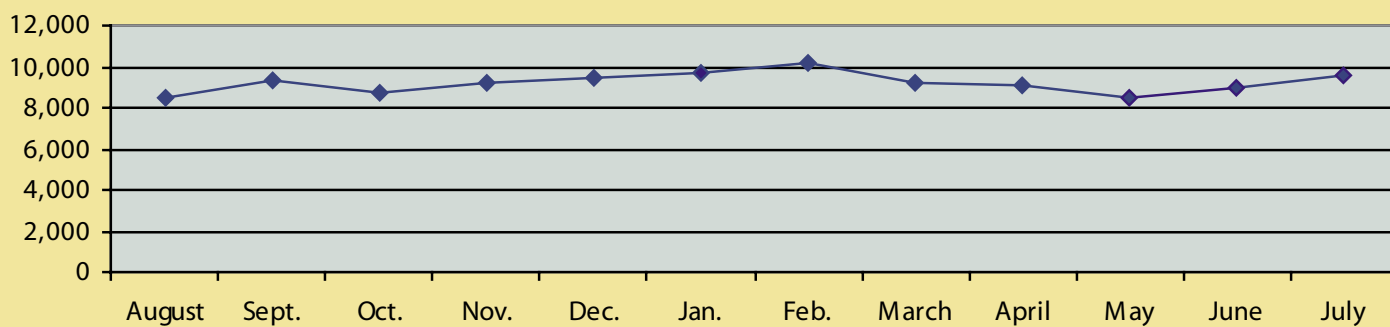


Children are at high risk for hunger in Rhode Island.

Food insecurity affects one in six children in Rhode Island, with the rate among children reaching 17.4 percent.⁷ The consequences of child hunger are severe. Researchers have found that food insecure children score lower on tests and miss school more often than their classmates.⁸ Pre-school aged children in food insecure families are more likely than their peers to be at developmental risk and in poor health.^{9,10} **Inadequate nutrition threatens children's health, growth, and learning.**

Calling for Help

Rhode Island's 2-1-1 hotline provides information and referral for people in need. Professional counselors staff the hotline and refer callers to critical services and programs. In the past year (August 2007 – July 2008), the hotline received 110,392 calls and counselors referred over 17,000 people to emergency food programs, the Food Stamp Program, and Meals on Wheels.



◆ Monthly 2-1-1 Calls in Rhode Island, August 2007 through July 2008

Calls to Rhode Island's 2-1-1 Hotline peaked during the winter months.

The Rising Cost of Food in Rhode Island: A Food Bank Study

In a study of local food costs, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank found that the weekly cost of groceries increased by six percent in the past year. According to the USDA, food prices will continue to rise in the coming year, with projected increases of another five to six percent, placing an even greater burden on low-income families.¹¹



The Methodology of the Food Bank Study

A shopping list for a family of four was developed based on sample menus provided by the USDA, which averaged over a week of menus, provides all the recommended amounts of nutrients and food from each food group.¹² The shopping list used in our study contained the ingredients necessary to prepare the USDA menus at home for one week for two adults and two school-aged children. The price of each item on the shopping list was recorded in September 2007 and again in September 2008 at the same supermarket in Rhode Island. No attempt was made to alter the shopping list based on cost, except that store brand items were purchased whenever available.

The Results

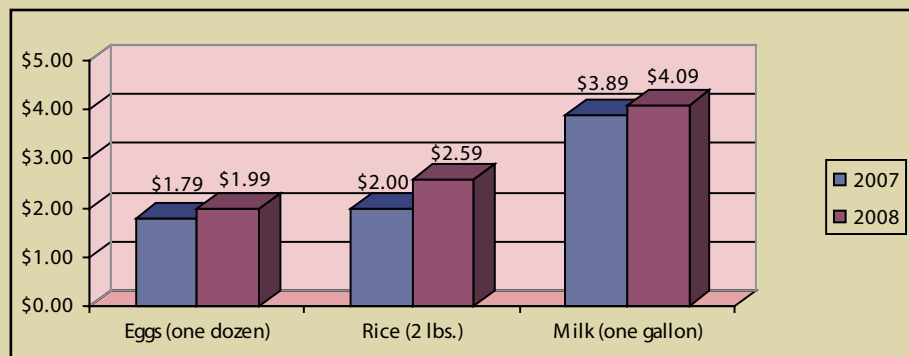
The weekly cost of groceries increased from \$244.91 to \$259.43 during the twelve month period of the study. **Of the 66 items on the grocery list, 30 escalated in price.**

For a median income family in Rhode Island earning \$53,568 per year, the annual cost of groceries based on this study would be \$13,468, equal to 25 percent of their income. For a family of four at the poverty level (\$21,200), the same grocery list takes up over half of the family budget. Therefore, most low-income families cannot afford the balanced diet recommended by the USDA without some type of food assistance.

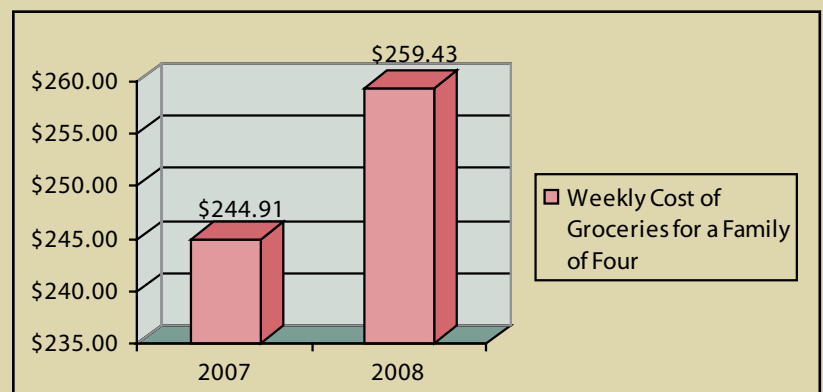
Each year, the USDA calculates the cost of food to set food stamp benefits.¹³ In 2008, the USDA's official cost of food for a family of four is just \$138 per week, whereas a week of groceries costs \$259 in the Rhode Island study. These results suggest that the USDA significantly underestimates the real cost of food and consequently food stamp benefits are set too low for recipients to afford a healthy diet.¹⁴

Fortunately, within the recently enacted federal Farm Bill, Congress voted to improve the Food Stamp Program. **Food stamp benefits will now be tied to inflation and participating Rhode Islanders will see an increase in their benefit amounts in the next year.** Participants will also be allowed to deduct from the calculation of their gross income the full amount of dependent care costs that they incur to work, thereby directing more food assistance to working families with children.

Full results of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank study, including prices of each item purchased, are available at www.rifoodbank.org. The shopping list consists of food only, and does not include any health and beauty aids, home cleaning products or other kitchen supplies.



During the 12-month study, many basic food items – including eggs, rice and milk – went up in price.



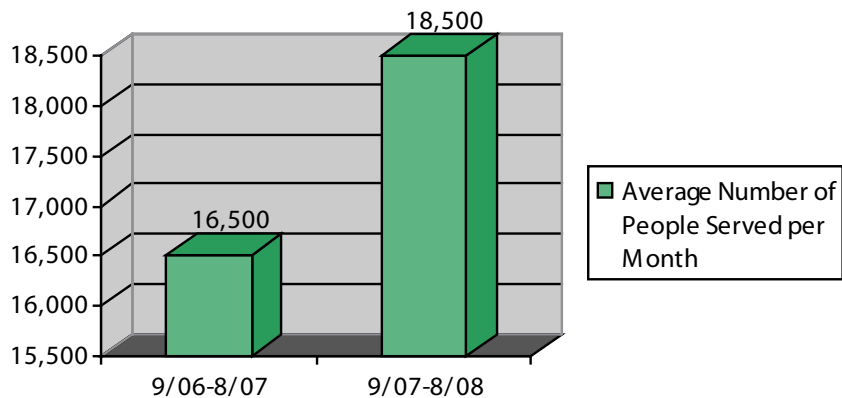
Food prices in Rhode Island increased by 6 percent in the past year.

Emergency Food Distribution

From September 2007 through August 2008, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank distributed seven million pounds of food to 167 emergency food programs, including food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters. These programs, with sites in 28 of Rhode Island's 39 cities and towns, provided 10 million meals to people in need.

As the economy declined over the past year, the demand for food assistance increased. The 20 largest emergency food pantries served on average 18,500 people each month, 12 percent more than the previous year. Even though children make up just 22 percent of the state population, 31 percent of emergency food program clients are children.¹⁵

The Rhode Island General Assembly has cut grant funding to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank by 50 percent. The allotment dropped to \$192,000 in 2008 from \$384,000 in 2007. We use the state money for food procurement and to ship in food donated by companies through the national organization, Feeding America™. Due to this cut in funding, the Food Bank lost the ability to acquire 1.5 million pounds of food. In addition to this cut in funding, local supermarkets, wholesalers and producers are donating less surplus food to the Food Bank due to more efficient food production and inventory control.



Demand at the twenty largest food pantries increased by 12 percent in the last year.



State	Total Funding	Per Capita
New York	\$28,000,000	\$1.47
Massachusetts	\$12,000,000	\$1.86
Connecticut	\$400,000	\$0.11
Rhode Island	\$192,000	\$0.18

Comparison of State Funding for Food Banks

The Food Bank's Network of 285 Member Agencies

Massachusetts

- 1 Fall River
- 1 Seekonk
- 2 S. Attleboro
- 1 Webster



The number indicated for each city or town is the total number of member agencies of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank in that location, including both emergency and non-emergency providers.

Federal Nutrition Programs

Federal food assistance programs include the Food Stamp Program, WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), Meals on Wheels, National School Lunch, School Breakfast, the Summer Food Service Program, and CACFP (Child and Adult Care Food Program). While funded by the federal government, these programs are administered by the state: Food Stamps by the Department of Human Services; WIC by the Department of Health; Meals On Wheels by the Department of Elderly Affairs; School Meals, the Summer Food Service Program and CACFP by the Department of Education.

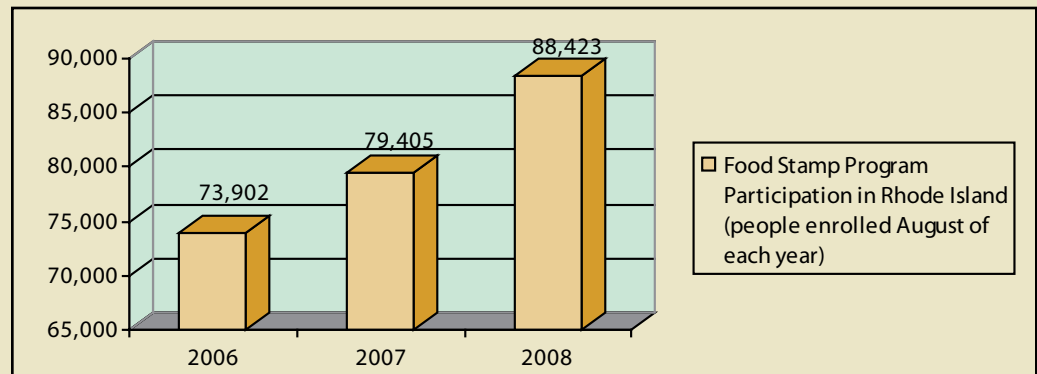
Food Stamps

There has been a surge in food stamp enrollment in Rhode Island in the past year. As of August 2008, 88,423 people were enrolled as compared to 79,405 just one year ago, an increase of over 9,000 people.¹⁶ Higher enrollment reflects the success of outreach efforts and marketing by the Food Stamp Outreach Project through the University of Rhode Island's Feinstein Center for a Hunger Free America. More people may also be eligible for food stamps now due to job loss and long-term unemployment.

The federal government provides Rhode Island households that participate in the Food Stamp Program, on average, \$203 per month for food purchases.¹⁷

Food stamp usage helps the local economy because government dollars are spent at local supermarkets and grocery stores. Overall, this is a modest amount of money given the cost of groceries, but food stamp benefits, even at this low level, improve nutrition and health, particularly in young children.¹⁸

Remarkably, researchers have also reported better academic performance in children when their families participate in the Food Stamp Program.¹⁹



Food Stamp Program enrollment has increased by 20 percent in two years.

Although food stamp participation has increased in Rhode Island, many eligible families are not enrolled. In 2005 (the latest year for which statistics are available), only 56 percent of those who were eligible actually received food stamp benefits.²⁰ The major barrier is the enrollment process. Applications are accepted at state offices during regular business hours, forcing working people to take time off from their jobs to apply. For many potential applicants, there is an intimidation factor about filling out forms that require proof of income, expenses and other information for the entire household.

If Rhode Island made it easier for eligible working families to enroll in the Food Stamp Program, the state would benefit from millions of additional dollars in federal aid. Food stamp benefits are spent in supermarkets and grocery stores, so higher levels of participation would result in increased sales, stimulating the local economy. **In fact, Rhode Island would have already received more than \$35 million from Washington if the Food Stamp Program reached 80 percent of those who were eligible.**

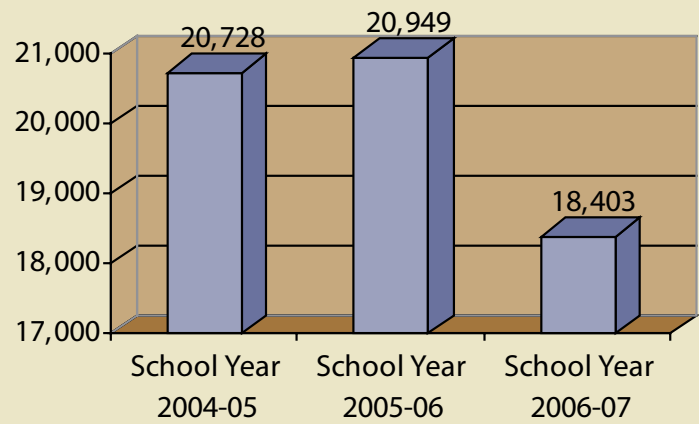


WIC

WIC is a health education and nutrition program serving pregnant women and parents with children up to age five. There were 24,220 WIC participants in the federal fiscal year 2007 in Rhode Island, seven percent more than the previous year.²¹ WIC reaches approximately 71 percent of those who are eligible in the state, providing nutrition education, referrals to health care providers and checks to purchase food at approved stores.²² In December 2007, the USDA released new regulations to improve the quality of the food provided to WIC recipients.²³ Rhode Island will implement these changes to the WIC food packages in 2009.

School Meals

School meals include the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. Based on household income, families with school-aged children can apply for free or reduced-price school meals. During the 2006-2007 school year, Rhode Island schools provided over 14 million lunches, serving approximately 85,000 students every school day.²⁴ Over half received free or reduced-price lunches, with schools reimbursed by the USDA for the cost of these meals. **The Rhode Island Department of Education recently established new criteria for school food service programs requiring school meals to include more whole grains, fruits and vegetables.**²⁵



Average Daily Participation in School Breakfast among Low-Income Students



For every 100 students that receive free or reduced-price lunches, only 40 participate in the School Breakfast Program in Rhode Island.²⁶ This low level of student participation occurs despite the state mandate that all public schools provide breakfast. To improve access, some schools offer breakfast free-of-charge to all students, known as Universal School Breakfast. Research shows that Universal School Breakfast significantly boosts student participation.²⁷ In the past, the Rhode Island General Assembly allocated \$600,000 annually to support Universal School Breakfast and leverage greater federal reimbursements. However, this funding was reduced by half in the current state budget and is likely to further the trend of fewer children receiving these critical meals.

After-School Meals

CACFP provides federal reimbursement for meals provided to children in after-school programs, young children in day care, and seniors in adult day programs. **The Rhode Island Community Food Bank annually prepares and distributes over 93,000 meals at 11 after-school programs in Providence and Newport.** Known as Kids Cafe, the goal of this program is to provide healthy meals and nutrition education to children at sites that offer high quality activities and supervision. The cost of providing Kids Cafe meals increased by 22 percent over the past three years due to rising food prices.

Summer Meals

When school lets out for summer, free and reduced-price school meals end. The Summer Food Service Program fills the gap for children in low-income communities by providing meals at summer programs. In 2007, summer meals were served to 12,500 children at 157 sites in Rhode Island, representing an increase of 6 percent over the previous year.²⁸

Meals on Wheels

The elderly poor are at high risk for hunger. Nationally, 19 percent of elderly people living alone with income below 130 percent of the poverty line are food insecure.²⁹ Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island provides home delivered meals, Monday through Friday each week, to approximately 3,500 homebound individuals. Of these clients, 41 percent are over age 85. In the past year (September 2007 through August 2008), the agency delivered 484,600 meals.



Summary

The downturn in the economy causes higher rates of unemployment, poverty and hunger. **As many as 115,000 Rhode Islanders, 40,000 of them children, do not have enough to eat.** Every parent wants their children to be well fed, but the soaring cost of food keeps more and more families from being able to provide their children with a balanced diet and regular meals. Poor nutrition threatens children's health, learning and development. Child hunger undercuts Rhode Island's investment in healthcare and education.

Everyone feels the crunch of the rising food costs documented in this report. What is a budget buster for many has created a catastrophe for low-income families. Thousands of "new" clients – people who never before needed food assistance – have flocked to emergency food programs in the past year. The Food Bank and its Member Agencies strain to keep up with the growing demand. In response to this crisis, the federal government has allocated more emergency food to Rhode Island. At the same time, the State has cut funding for the Food Bank.

Unlike many other social problems, solutions to the problem of hunger exist and have been proven effective. The federal nutrition programs are like a vaccine that when properly administered actually prevent hunger and improve health. Although participation in some federal nutrition programs increased in the past year, these programs remain underutilized in Rhode Island.

Encouraging more families to enroll in food stamps, WIC and school meals is wise public policy and good economics. If the thousands of families who are eligible for these programs actually enrolled, Rhode Island would capture millions of additional dollars in aid from Washington and local communities would benefit from the dollars spent.

An effective nutrition safety net should be in place to help everyone who faces hunger in Rhode Island, including adequate emergency food supplies and rapid access to government assistance. By implementing the following recommendations, we can make critical food resources available to those who are most in need.

Recommendations

- Boost participation in all federal nutrition programs to 80 percent of those who are eligible in Rhode Island and bring millions of dollars in additional aid from Washington.
- Restore state funding to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank to avoid food shortages at emergency food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters.
- Streamline the food stamp application process in Rhode Island to expand enrollment. Make the process more consumer-friendly and decrease the stigma by accepting applications at community action programs, health centers and supermarkets.
- Encourage food pantry clients and food stamp users to cook healthy, low-cost meals through hands-on nutrition education.
- Provide breakfast free-of-charge to all children at schools where the majority of students receive free school lunch.
- Increase federal reimbursement for school meals, WIC, and meals served at after-school programs to keep pace with the rising cost of food and ensure that these meals meet the highest standards of nutritional quality.

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