

Going Beyond Hunger



Food Insecurity in America

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Executive Summary

This issue brief seeks to understand the role that food insecurity plays in low-income communities and examines how the State administered Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) network implements strategies to address the issue. The food security research is based on *Healthy Food, Healthy Communities*, a study by PolicyLink. Information on Community Action Agency projects comes from statistical data gathered by NASCS.

The Challenge of Food Insecurity

Everyone from First Lady Michelle Obama to TV chef Jamie Oliver has been in the news recently promoting healthy eating habits to Americans, an increasing number of whom are obese and who are eating foods that are less healthy than ever before. “Eat better and exercise more” is the accepted cure that will reverse this trend, but often that simple prescription is difficult to follow. For low-income Americans, especially those living in communities of color and in the most rural areas of the nation, it is extremely difficult just to find the ingredients for a healthy diet. Full-service grocery stores and farmer’s markets are scarce in these communities, while convenience stores are often the only neighborhood food resource — and the foods they sell are likely to be highly processed and high in fat and sugar. These areas where access to affordable, healthy foods is severely limited or just not available have been described as “food deserts.” The challenge of creating access and options for healthy choices in these neighborhoods is difficult but action is necessary. “Policy-makers at the local, state and national level have begun recognizing the role that access to healthy food plays in promoting healthy local economies, healthy neighborhoods and healthy people.”¹

When low-income families have access to a variety of affordable food sources, such as larger grocery stores, supermarkets, and farmers’ markets, they have access to more and healthier food choices. The challenge of accessing fresh, healthy, high quality foods in nearby food stores is especially acute in low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, and in rural America. One example is Albany, New York, where a remarkable “80 percent of nonwhite residents cannot find low-fat milk or high-fiber bread in their neighborhoods.”² A survey of neighborhood stores in low-income communities of color in Detroit, Michigan and New Haven, Connecticut revealed that the produce that was available was of discernibly poorer quality than that in other areas of these cities. A California study showed that “rates of obesity and diabetes are 20 percent higher for those living in the least healthy ‘food environments,’ controlling for household income, race/ethnicity, age, gender, and physical activity levels.”³

It is clear that obesity is directly related to poor health outcomes. The U.S. Surgeon General has identified the consequences of obesity for both children and adults:

“Risk factors for heart disease, such as high cholesterol and high blood pressure, occur with increased frequency in overweight children and adolescents compared to children with a healthy weight. Type 2 diabetes, previously considered an adult disease, has increased dramatically in children and adolescents. Overweight and obesity are closely linked to type 2 diabetes... Overweight or obese adults are at risk for a number of health problems including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and some forms of cancer.”

A number of researchers have studied the question of whether *access* to healthy food equates to *consumption* of healthy food, and it appears that it does. According to research published by the American Journal of Public Health, African Americans living in neighborhoods with at least one supermarket were more likely to meet U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) dietary guidelines for fruit and vegetable consumption and fat intake than African Americans living in neighborhoods without supermarkets. Having more supermarkets in the neighborhood resulted in even greater fruit and vegetable consumption.

1 PolicyLink, 2011, *Healthy Food, Healthy Communities*

2 *ibid*

3 *ibid*

The most frequently cited and thorough study of the relationship between access to healthy foods and healthy eating in low-income communities, *Larson et al*, concludes:

“Research suggests that neighborhood residents who have better access to supermarkets and limited access to convenience stores tend to have healthier diets and lower levels of obesity.... National and local studies across the U.S. suggest that residents of low-income, minority, and rural neighborhoods are most often affected by poor access to supermarkets and healthful food. In contrast, the availability of fast-food restaurants and energy-dense foods has been found to be greater in lower-income and minority neighborhoods.”⁴

The return of grocery stores to underserved communities also contributes to the overall economic health of neighborhoods and provides a de facto community center where the neighborhood identity can be fostered. One example of a successful program that brings both healthy food and employment into underserved communities is Pennsylvania’s Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI), which brings public and private financing together to support retail efforts that improve food access. In the first five years of operation, FFFI has “created or retained 5,023 jobs throughout the state. A recent case study of selected supermarkets in the Philadelphia region suggests that the vast majority (75%) of part-time jobs, which constitute 84% of all positions, were filled by local residents (living within three miles of their workplace). A new store that is a part of the regional ShopRite chain that located in southwest Philadelphia created 258 jobs, over half of which went to local residents.”⁵

Food Insecurity and Community Action Agencies

While “food insecurity” is a new concern for some, this has been a long-time concern of Community Action Agencies (CAAs), the national network of 1,060 local agencies helping low-income people to achieve economic security. Over the past decade, staff at these agencies have watched the need for food assistance grow, and access to the wide variety of foods needed for a healthy diet disappear in low-income communities. This is not the anecdotal experience of a few providers — CAAs maintain a national system of reporting on the services they provide, and on the outcomes of their assistance efforts, that includes information on a variety of nutrition-related services. The National Association for State Community Services Programs (NASCSPP) is the membership organization of State administrators of the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) who manage State anti-poverty efforts through CAAs. NASCSPP collects, organizes and interprets program data to provide measureable information on what CAAs (representing 99% of counties in the nation) are doing to move more low-income Americans out of poverty, including moving them towards food security. The data show increasing needs for nutrition supports and reflect the variety of ways that CAAs are addressing nutrition issues through initiatives they have tailored to their local community.

CSBG is a federally funded block grant that supports local anti-poverty efforts through the State-administered network of local CAAs that work to eliminate poverty, revitalize low-income communities, and empower low-income families to become self-sufficient and economically secure. While many CAAs

⁴ Nicole I. Larson, PhD, Mary T. Story, PhD, Melissa C. Nelson, PhD, Division of Epidemiology and Community Health, School of Public Health, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, published online 2008, *Neighborhood Environments: Disparities in Access to Healthy Foods in the US*

⁵ The Reinvestment Fund, 2011, Healthy Food Retail Financing at Work: Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative

may offer similar types of services, like emergency assistance, weatherization, employment training, and self-sufficiency programs, local decision-making can generate different approaches to these activities. This is the case with the programs and services CAAs are delivering right now to improve access to healthy, nutritious food in the communities they serve. Each project is defined by local people and local conditions, but they all involve community residents creating change on their own behalf to alleviate food insecurity. Food insecurity encompasses more than today's need for emergency food assistance; with the flexible nature of CSBG, CAAs are also able to create innovative programs that address the *causes* of food insecurity — at the individual level and throughout the community. Many CAAs use CSBG funds to provide the administrative and coordinating support that creates partnerships among local businesses, schools, health care providers, and non-profit and service organizations to develop and sustain these innovative programs.

In 2010, the Community Action network invested \$39,142,796 in CSBG funds for nutrition programs that benefited low-income communities and families. These programs range from community gardens to nutrition education. Over 1.4 million low-income individuals obtained non-emergency food assistance in 2010 and almost 8.2 million individuals received emergency food assistance from the Community Action network. Many CAAs operate food pantries, often collaborating with other non-profit and faith-based service providers to coordinate services and make the most of the available resources. These food pantries provide low-income families with a place to obtain safe and nutritious food, usually at no cost to them. In 2010, Community Action was able to provide 220,937,704 pounds of food to low-income individuals and families.

The health and physical development of nearly 1.6 million infants and children was improved because of the support that Community Action provided in assisting them and their families to obtain adequate nutrition resources. For example, agencies have organized “weekend backpacks” to provide children who get free and reduced-price meals at school with healthy meals when school isn't in session.

Lack of transportation can limit access to healthy food, too. “In Mississippi — which has the highest obesity rate of any state — over 70 percent of food stamp eligible households travel more than 30 miles to reach a supermarket.”⁶ Community Action provides the resources for new or expanded transportation options for low-income families and the communities where they live. In 2010, CAAs created 2,435,669 of these opportunities that enable low-income families to reach critical destinations, including access to affordable healthy foods.

Food Insecurity and CSBG

Some CAA's have countered the lack of access to fresh, healthy food by giving residents of low-income communities the opportunity to obtain the freshest food possible, by growing their own fruits and vegetables. In the following examples, CAAs describe their own efforts to promote and support community gardening. Each agency has chosen the community garden as a response to the need for access to healthy food, but they differ in their approach because CSBG funding gives agencies the leeway to tailor their local project to meet local needs and opportunities. A Vermont agency has created a hub for agricultural education and has implemented a hands-on gardening program that enhances the food and nutrition curriculum at schools across the state. A project in New York State combines the seemingly

⁶ PolicyLink Center for Health and Place, 2011, *Healthy Food, Healthy Communities*

disparate elements of a prison work release project and a nutrition education program. Programs in Illinois and Tennessee focuses on promoting community building through cooperative gardening, while in Minnesota, the sustainable community gardens are a source of employment and generate revenue by selling some of the fruits and vegetables grown there. The CSBG support for these programs frees each community to implement their own unique response to their local needs.

Tennessee: Urban Agriculture Initiative

Knoxville Knox County Community Action Committee

When the Knoxville community faced food insecurity and limited nutrition resources, the Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee (KKCCAC) created an urban agriculture initiative that revitalized the concept of community gardens. KKCCAC designed their urban agriculture initiative as a three-part program to help low-income individuals and families to obtain food that is affordable and nutritious. The agency operates the Community Action Committee (CAC) Community Gardens, CAC Seed and Plant Distribution, and CAC Beardsley Community Farm to help meet the needs of their low-income clients.

KKCCAC recognized that urban agriculture is one way to strengthen ties among residents in low-income communities — these shared garden spaces provide more than just increased food resources. They add value to the community by forming the core around which new relationships can be created. KKCCAC fostered over 40 local partners with their Community Garden initiative. Shared garden spaces develop a sense of community ownership and stewardship — many police departments recognize community gardens as a successful crime prevention strategy. In 2010, the CAC Community Gardens grew to 24 Community Gardens, all of which produced healthy and nutritious food to be distributed to the community. The free Vegetable Seed and Plant Distribution Program distributed 1,200 sets of seeds and plants to resident of low-income neighborhoods in 2010; the University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service estimates that each set of seeds and plants can produce \$300 to \$600 worth of produce. These two programs are made possible by CSBG, which provides the salary for a Community Garden Manager who manages both the Community Garden sites and the Free Vegetable Seed and Plant Distribution Program.

The CAC Beardsley Community Farm is the third piece of KKCCAC’s urban agricultural initiative. While the gardening and seed distribution programs address the near-term needs of low-income families facing food insecurity, the Farm offers a long-term approach by serving as an educational center and demonstration site for the potential of urban agriculture. The Farm especially encourages the involvement of youth organizations, teaching young people the basic skills of gardening through hands-on learning while in the process, demonstrating the value of gardening as a source of healthy, inexpensive foods. Anyone can volunteer at the Farm in exchange for fresh produce, and excess produce is donated to local emergency food pantries, soup kitchens, and homeless shelters.

New York: Prison Facility Garden Project

Community Action of Orleans and Genesee

Effective use of work release time for individuals incarcerated by the criminal justice system can provide a great return on investment for society. When a prisoner uses his or her skills to produce goods or services for the public, taxpayers get a return on the money they have invested, the local community benefits and the incarcerated individual gains an opportunity to learn a skill and be a contributing part of the

community. Recognizing these benefits, Community Action of Orleans and Genesee collaborated with a local prison facility to develop the Facility Garden Project. The Project uses available land at the prison site and the talents of work release inmates, who plant, weed, and harvest fruits and vegetables under the supervision of prison staff. The agency and other local partners distribute the fruits and vegetables grown by the inmates to low-income families, in both raw form and in prepared food products. Additionally, the work-release inmates learn how to prepare healthy meals using selected vegetables from the Facility Garden Project, and then share that information with the recipients of their gardening success.

Community Action of Orleans and Genesee distributed more than 3,000 pounds of assorted fruits and vegetables grown through the Facility Garden Project to disabled seniors, emergency food assistance programs, and low-income families in the community by working with partner organizations serving all of Orleans County and parts of Genesee County. The harvest also benefited soup kitchens and a local nutrition program, which used the vegetables to prepare meals at their sites.

This innovative partnership created a productive relationship with the local prison system, which yields positive results for the prison, for community organizations, and for low-income residents. CSBG funds were essential in creating this successful collaboration by funding the wages of project planners and staff who distributed the food to consumers, as well as renting food storage space and space for cooking classes.

Vermont: Food Works

Central Vermont Community Action Council

Creating partnerships and merging programs are effective ways for organizations to expand the services they provide to their community. In a successful merger, organizations are able to continue providing high quality and creative programs while benefiting from the efficiencies and cost-savings of joint financial and administrative support. This was the case for Food Works and the Central Vermont Community Action Council (CVCAC) when they joined forces in 2010. Food Works brought programs that would expand the food and nutrition services of CVCAC to meet increasing community need, while CVCAC brought strong administrative and management support to the merger.

Food Works operates the Two Rivers Center demonstration farm, which has emerged as central Vermont's agricultural education hub, strengthening local food supplies and teaching children, families, and seniors how to grow, prepare, and preserve their own foods. The Farm-to-Table program stores and distributes nutritious food to those in need, supports local growers, and strengthens the local food supply system. Food Works offers the opportunity for hands-on learning about nutrition and gardening through their educational programs, such as Gardens for Learning, a program offered in partnership with Vermont Food Education Every Day (FEED) that operates at 19 schools across the state, integrating food and nutrition education into school curricula.

The partnership between the two organizations succeeds because they share a vision and an entrepreneurial approach to alleviating the root causes of hunger. By providing alternative sources of nutritious, healthy food and by giving their program participants the tools they need to grow and prepare their own food, the partners combat food insecurity head-on. Food Works is a part of the Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) department at CVCAC, whose core funding is provided through CSBG. The FCSS Program Director oversees both Food Works and the Two Rivers Center.

Minnesota: Seeds of Success

Community Action Duluth

In the past, many individuals and families supported themselves by farming and producing their own food, but the Industrial Revolution and the urbanization that accompanied it changed that dynamic. When Community Action Duluth needed to create jobs and provide fresh food options to their community, they re-examined these abandoned options for self-sufficiency and recognized that these practices could be updated to provide food security to the community by creating an alternative source of nutritious and healthy produce.

Community Action Duluth started the Seeds of Success program in 2010, using CSBG Recovery Act funding and working in partnership with the A.H. Zeppa Foundation and the City of Duluth. The program creates opportunities for low-income individuals to turn vacant lots into gardens growing fresh produce, such as tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce, peppers, and carrots. Seeds of Success teaches participants sustainable farming methods that eliminate the use of chemical pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers — an approach that is both safer and more economical than typical methods. Some of the produce from these plots is sold to local restaurants, grocery stores, and farmer’s markets, while income-eligible program participants and local food shelves received the rest. In 2011, 15 garden sites throughout the city produced over two tons of food.

Not only does the program build food security in Duluth, it also provides valuable work experience for community members who are unemployed or underemployed. During the summer of 2011, the program employed 20 different people in a wide range of opportunities, from full-time, year-round program management positions to a three-week work experience for novice farmers. Community Action Duluth was proud to receive a Minnesota Nonprofit Excellence and Mission Innovation Award from the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits and MAP for Nonprofits, celebrating the success of this and other agency efforts.

Illinois: Community Garden Project

City of Rockford Human Services Department

In low-income urban communities, residents often experience food insecurity because they don’t have easy access to fresh produce, either at grocery stores or from farms and gardens. This can lead to unhealthy lifestyles, obesity, and other health issues. In the City of Rockford, the City Human Services Department recognized the need for access to healthy food, and used CSBG Recovery Act funds to expand their Community Garden Project. The project started in 2009, with just seven community gardens; the program has now expanded to 44 different gardens across Boone and Winnebago counties.

Participants have embraced the gardens as a creative opportunity as well as a food source; they have planted everything from World War II-style victory gardens to “spaghetti” and “salsa” gardens, where they grow all the ingredients needed to make their favorite dishes. In 2011, the gardens produced 11,600 pounds of fresh food, 2,200 pounds of which was donated to local food pantries through the Plant-A-Row for the Hungry program. People tending the gardens come from a wide cross-section of the community, ranging from skilled gardeners to novices, from adults to youth, and from the physically fit to those with mental or physical challenges. This interaction among residents helps strengthen ties in the community. The agency also worked with the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension to provide participants with classes on nutrition, gardening methods, and canning, helping them to make the most of their gardens.

Achieving Food Security

Access to affordable, healthy food is an important aspect of the complicated issue of food insecurity within low-income communities, communities of color, and towns across rural America. Current policies are clearly inadequate to resolve this problem since “food deserts” continue to proliferate. According to the USDA’s Economic Research Service, there are 6,529 food-desert census tracts in the continental U.S. affecting an estimated total of 13.6 million people. The good news is that there are a number of successful strategies in place to increase food options that are already being implemented in affected communities.

CAAs play an important role at the local level, directing more than \$39 million of CSBG funds to nutrition services that provide both immediate and long-term food security. CAAs have developed community partnerships that improve access to healthy food for millions of American families. State governments have begun to craft their own programs to address food insecurity, many of them focused on creating an economic impetus to bring healthy food choices into underserved communities, creating local employment in the process. The First Lady has even put the problem of food deserts on the national agenda as part of her Move It! initiative. These positive accomplishments just begin to touch on the enormous need. It’s time that policymakers at all levels prioritize efforts to build an equitable and sustainable food system. Ending food insecurity benefits the entire community by expanding access for everyone to wholesome, nutritious foods that can put us on the path to better health. CAAs are ready to be an integral part of the solution and to build and sustain the partnerships that will allow all Americans to attain food security.

Resources

Healthy Food, Healthy Communities is a PolicyLink publication that includes a broad survey of data on food insecurity. PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing economic and social equity by focusing attention on how people are working successfully to use local, state, and federal policy to create conditions that benefit everyone, especially people in low-income communities and communities of color. Their publication is available online at www.policylink.org.

The *Food Desert Locator* is a map program based on data analyzed by the USDA’s Economic Research Service. It can be found at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/FoodDesert/fooddesert.html>.

The American Journal of Preventive Medicine Online has published a variety of studies related to food insecurity. The Journal can be found online at <http://www.ajpmonline.org/>.

The Reinvestment Fund has studied the economic side of food access and offers financing, program design, and research and analysis. Their Food Access initiative is online at <http://www.trfund.com/TRF-food-access.html>.

NASCSP MISSION

Building capacity in States to respond to poverty issues

The National Association for State Community Services Programs (NASCSPP) is the premier national association charged with advocating and enhancing the leadership role of States in preventing and reducing poverty. NASCSPP's vision encompasses the empowerment of low-income families to reach self-sufficiency in its broadest context, through helping States attain full utilization of their resources and implement an extensive array of services to these families, including weatherization, energy assistance, childcare, nutrition, employment, job training, and housing in urban, suburban, and rural communities.



National Association for State Community Services Programs

444 N Capitol St NW, Ste 846, Washington D.C. 20001 | 202.624.5866 | www.nascsp.org