Food Insecurity and Northwest Wisconsin

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Background

Hunger is one of the greatest global issues facing contemporary society. 800 million people suffer from hunger, with an estimated 34,000 children dying – a Hiroshima bomb – every three days (Collins, Lappe, & Rosset, 1998). The issue of hunger is often overlooked in the United States, as such a condition is mistakenly thought to be insignificant in such a prosperous nation. Even less attention is paid to hunger in strongly agricultural and progressive places like Wisconsin. However, hunger is very much present in both Wisconsin and the United States as a whole. In fact, there are over 540,000 people in Wisconsin alone who live in homes that are food insecure, meaning that they do not always have access to healthy food (Row, 2005). Moreover, there is strong evidence that shows food insecurity is not only present, but increasing in Wisconsin. Figure 1 shows that the number of FoodShare (food stamp) recipients in some northwest Wisconsin counties increased by about 300% between 1999 and 2007. The regional average was 24% and the state was 3%. Local food pantries and nonprofit organizations are seeing a constant increase in the demand for food. According to an official of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, more and more children are qualifying for free and reduced lunch programs due to dropping family incomes (Ryan, 2010). Furthermore, many people who do not participate in these programs also experience food insecurity. According to Second Harvest Heartland (2008), the Upper Midwest’s largest hunger-relief organization, an alarming 18% of all Wisconsin meals are unaccounted for. The inference is that these are meals that people skip, after accounting for the meals that individuals prepare for themselves, and receive from public and nonprofit sources. Figure 2 shows the average breakdown of all Wisconsin meal recipients. When taken into account the number of jobs lost during the current economic recession and the rising costs of healthcare, it is likely that the number of families reliant on food assistance will increase even more rapidly in the foreseeable future. Food insecurity has a tremendous impact on the lives of those affected, which, in turn, has societal costs. Children in food insecure households are more likely to miss school, meaning their parents are more likely to miss work. This can have great economic ramifications, especially in single parent or low-income households. Poor nutrition can also negatively affect mental development and academic performance, while also causing stress and emotional problems. The lack of important vitamins and nutrients is likely to result in more doctor visits for preventable medical illnesses, which in turn puts more demands on the country’s medical workforce. Children living in food insecure households are 61% more likely to be overweight than those who live in food secure households, which leads to serious health problems later in adulthood (Eau Claire County Poverty Work Group, 2008).

Preliminary Findings

Many people share a perception that food insecurity is found primarily in urban and individual areas. Indeed, Figure 3 shows that the majority of FoodShare recipients come from around Madison, Milwaukee, and Green Bay. However, this is a function of total population. When examining the number of FoodShare recipients as a percentage of the population (Figure 4), food insecurity is widely prevalent in the rural, northern region of the state. Figure 5 compliments Figure 4, as it was the Door County Peninsula to the southwest corner of the state has the highest average per capita personal income. Figure 6 shows that the southeast region also has more FoodShare licensees per program participant than much of the state. This suggests that FoodShare licensees are more dependent on FoodShare recipients for business.

Significance

Our continuing research further investigates the obstacles to purchasing and obtaining food, the sources and types of food, and the distribution and characteristics of food insecure households. Further analysis with the assistance of people who are involved in the food system in the case study is required to fully understand food and hunger patterns, such as those that occur in the Eau Claire area. Locating where food insecurity exists and evaluating the programs in place to meet the needs of average low-income families is essential for making improvements and determining target areas for assistance. Determining the sources of foods and the characteristics of the system can help local governments to improve food accessibility and community health. This research will contribute to making the current food movement towards the consumption of local and nutritious food more widely accessible and remove the perceptions that it is somehow only for the elite.

Case Study Region

Our project focuses on the food system in rural northwest Wisconsin, specifically eight counties in the Eau Claire region (Figure 8). This region shares many characteristics, including a low average per capita personal income (Figure 9) and a low median household income (Figure 10) in comparison to the state average. This area often receives less attention from government programs and funds than population centers such as Milwaukee and Madison, and may be uniquely vulnerable to food insecurity. Figure 11 shows that the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch in the Eau Claire Area School District has increased at every elementary school in the District over the past four years. This figure also shows the great differences that can exist within a single city in terms of food security. Almost 80% of Longfellow Elementary students receive free and reduced lunch, while Robbins Elementary, which is located only four miles away, has a rate of 20%. Figure 12 shows that counties in the northern region of the state have fewer FoodShare licensees, which means that the food insecure in many rural areas must travel a further distance to receive healthy food than most of the food insecure in urban areas.

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