



## Hunger That Never Subsides

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By Ana Rivas

Boston -- Hunger is news at the start of every holiday season.

On television and radio, in newspapers and on the Web there is an annual rite of reports from church basements and massive feeding halls, in soup kitchens and shelters for the homeless.

The message has been consistent for the past decade. More people are seeking food assistance this year than last year. But while demand for food continues to break records in the state, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported last month that more than 92 percent of the state's households in 2005 had access to enough food for a healthy life. In fact, the USDA says it has been that way, on average, since 1996.

How can it be that demand for food relief has hit historic highs? Why is it reported that hunger continues to be a growing industry?

When it comes to assessing hunger, all eyes are on the long lines of people receiving free food. Local policy makers and analysts quiz poor households and food pantry clients. Their answers create reams of data that show the state ranks at the bottom of the nation when it comes to food insecurity and poverty rates. The USDA's high statewide levels of food security don't contradict these local studies because even during times of relative wealth, these low-income workers were doing worse.

The latest local reports show that although hunger might not be growing, it is becoming more concentrated:\* Days before Thanksgiving, Project Bread, using USDA measures of food insecurity in the 35 poorest cities and towns, reported that the number of people suffering hunger had grown by half since 2003, increasing from 7.8 percent to 18.3 percent of 293,858 households in those areas.\* The four food banks in the state, including the Merrimack Valley Food Bank in Lowell, reported earlier this year that the

36.2 million pounds of food they distributed in 2005 marked a record high, 30 percent above 2001."The need is increasing, absolutely," said Amy Pessia, Merrimack Valley Food Bank executive director.

For instance, the food bank currently supplies food to about 120 distribution agencies in Greater Lowell, the Merrimack Valley, southern New Hampshire and the North Shore. As few as five years ago, the number of receiving agencies hovered at about 60."Take a look at these numbers and the only thing that's clear is that hunger is more of an issue than we think," said Michelle Kahan, a researcher at the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Massachusetts.

Researchers and advocates seem to agree on why people are going hungry: Massachusetts is an expensive state and many working families just don't make enough. Pessia didn't disagree, and added that a "life-changing event" is also a significant factor. Such events include an illness or death, or job loss.

U.S. Census Bureau data indicate that there was no statistically significant change in the poverty rate in Massachusetts between now and 2000-2001, when the national recession ended. A McCormack Institute study "The Persistence of Poverty Through the 1990s" has shown that even during the 1990s economic boom, "the rising tide has not lifted the boats at the bottom." Kahan says low-income families with children work more -- sometimes in two or three jobs -- but do not have more income. As a result, they often fall between the cracks of public-assistance programs.

"The reason why more people go hungry is because food is the thing you have the most choice about when you are paying your bills," Kahan said. "You may have no food, but you still have a place to live, and heating." The federal government says a family of four earning \$19,806 or less a year is living in poverty.

But how far does \$19,806 go in Massachusetts today? To answer the question the Crittenton Women's Union, a human-service organization, developed the "**self-sufficiency standard.**" According to that index, in 2003, a family of four needed \$54,612 to pay for housing, transportation, taxes and food in Boston. The family of four would need \$46,714 in Worcester. Allison Staton, advocacy director at Crittenton, said raw data shows that overall, living costs in Boston have gone up 13 percent between 2003 and 2006. Since 1998, they are up 48 percent.

"These past three years, the major increases have been in health care and child care," Staton said. "This means that low-income families will continue to have to make difficult choices."

Wages, meanwhile, have decreased. In September, the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, an independent think-tank that evaluates economic policy, reported that the hourly wage earned by a typical worker fell nearly 5 percent from 2003 to 2005. The decline from \$17.95 to \$13.35 was the largest in the country during that period, according to the report "State of Working Massachusetts 2006." Jeff McLynch, the center's deputy director, said there's been a broader decline in wages for low-income workers. McLynch said that since the 1980s, the gap between upper- and lower-income families has grown more in the Bay State than in 47 other states.

From 1980 to 1982, the average wealthy family in Massachusetts had the income of about five average poor families. It now has the income of more than seven poor families, the center reported. Food banks of Western Massachusetts in Hatfield, Worcester County in Worcester, Greater Boston and the Lowell-based Merrimack Valley began operations in the early 1980s. By that time, welfare reforms were starting to show their effects. The loss of public support strained the private emergency support system. For years, pantries have been reporting that the rapid growth in the ranks of the hungry was outstripping their ability to meet the demand. In response, the Legislature almost doubled funding for purchasing food for fiscal year 2007.

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