

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Hunger in America 2010
St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance Local Report

Facilitated by Feeding America, the nation's largest charitable hunger relief organization with a network of more than 200 food banks across the country, *Hunger in America 2010* provides a snapshot of Americans who face the hard reality of food insecurity and hunger: who they are, where they live, and how they cope. By collecting and analyzing more than 62,000 in-person interviews with individuals seeking emergency food assistance and more than 37,000 questionnaires completed by hunger-relief agencies, *Hunger in America 2010* seeks to take this information and provide it to hunger-relief agencies, policymakers, and community members so that they can each make informed decisions about how to better help those in need. It is without a doubt the largest study of its kind.

St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance, the world's first food bank, is a prominent member of Feeding America's network of food banks, serving 13 of Arizona's 15 counties with enough food to provide nearly 300,00 meals per day. St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance—along with 180 of its fellow food banks across the country—participated in *Hunger in America 2010* by mobilizing its staff, members of the Board of Directors, and community volunteers to conduct in-person interviews with individuals seeking emergency food assistance at many of the hunger-relief organizations that comprise its network of partner agencies. All told, 425 individuals were interviewed at food pantries, and emergency kitchens and shelters across Arizona. In addition, 187 hunger-relief agencies within the St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance network of partner agencies completed questionnaires, which describe not only the programs they operate to provide emergency food assistance, but also the trends they see among the clients they serve.

Below is a summary of the findings gathered from the client and agency surveys that were gathered by St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance in support of *Hunger in America 2010*.

KEY FINDINGS

- St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance provides emergency food supplies for approximately 477,500 unduplicated individuals each year.
- Of the households that receive emergency food assistance from St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance's network of partner agencies, half have a child under the age of 18.
- More than 40 percent of the households receiving emergency food assistance have at least one person who is working.
- More than 50 percent of those receiving emergency food assistance report having to choose between buying food and paying rent or a mortgage.
- More than one-quarter of those surveyed reported having to choose between buying food and paying for medicine or medical care.

- Across the board, emergency food providers are seeing an increase in demand for services.

In addition, the information gathered by St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance on individuals who seek emergency food assistance and the hunger-relief agencies who provide it for *Hunger in America 2010* provides a window on the emergency food experience in Arizona. Particular trends become apparent upon close examination.

Families make up a large part of the population seeking food assistance

- More than three-quarters of the households who received emergency food assistance have two or more family members.
- Many of these households are caring for young children—nearly 30 percent of households with children in them have a child younger than 5 years old.
- Senior citizens are also part of the equation, with nearly 15 percent of the households seeking food assistance caring for someone who is 65 years or older.

Children are the most at-risk

- Those households seeking food assistance that have children in them have a very high instance of food insecurity—more than 80 percent are food insecure.
- More than 85 percent of households with children under the age of 5 are food insecure, with more than one-third having very low food security.

Women carry a special burden in the emergency food assistance landscape

- The vast majority—nearly two-thirds—of individuals seeking emergency food assistance are women.
- Women are much more likely to seek assistance at a food pantry than a soup kitchen or emergency shelter.
- Women seeking assistance at food pantries are likely caring for children, with more than 42 percent of all households seeking assistance at a food pantry having children under 18.

Those who need emergency food assistance defy the stereotypes

- Nearly half are children.
- More than 80 percent are U.S. citizens.
- Nearly a quarter of those seeking emergency food assistance are college educated.
- A single parent heads only one-third of the households caring for a child.
- Nearly two-thirds have an income less than the Federal Poverty Level.
- Nearly 80 percent did not receive any form of government cash assistance, or “welfare.”

For many, life is a desperate existence

- More than 10 percent of those seeking emergency food assistance have no place to live.

- Nearly one-third of those who do have housing were late in paying last month's rent or mortgage bill.
- Nearly 80 percent are uncertain as to where they will get their next meal, with nearly 40 percent experiencing the physical pain of hunger.
- More than half of the individuals seeking food assistance had to cut the size of their meals or skip meals because there was not enough money for food.
- Nearly half of all surveyed have unpaid medical or hospital bills, and 20 percent have no form of health insurance.

Government food assistance programs are more “miss” than “hit”

- Less than one-third of those receiving emergency food assistance are currently using food stamps.
- Those who do receive food stamps report that their monthly benefits last only three weeks.
- More than one-quarter of those who have never applied for food stamps believe they are ineligible even though more than half of them are, in fact, eligible.
- Only half of the children in the households surveyed receive federally funded school breakfast or lunch programs.
- Only half of the women interviewed who have children younger than 3 years old participate in the WIC program.
- Very few seniors (less than one-quarter) take advantage of senior center lunch programs, home delivery meal programs or senior brown bag programs.

Satisfaction with community food programs is high

- More than ninety percent of those who receive emergency food assistance are satisfied with the amount, variety, and quality of food provided through their local food pantries, soup kitchens, and emergency shelters.
- The vast majority of clients feel that those who serve them treat them with respect.

St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance maintains a strong and diverse network of agency partners, but they are not without their challenges

- Most of the agencies providing emergency food assistance are in it long-term: more than half have been continuously operating for more than 10 years.
- More than two-thirds of hunger-relief agencies provide a multitude of services beyond food assistance, including housing, clothing, nutrition counseling, employment training, legal services, and budget and credit counseling.
- Nearly 80 percent of all agencies served fear for their continued operation under current economic circumstances.
- Many programs were forced to turn away clients during the past year, often due to a lack of resources.

- Food banks are a major source of food for hunger-relief agencies, especially for food pantries.
- Most agencies are reliant upon community volunteers and not paid staff.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this report paint a rather bleak picture of those in need in Arizona. Families are frequently forced to choose between food and other necessities, and their lives are often lived on the brink of complete financial and personal disaster. And too often, the most vulnerable members of our society—our children—become the most at risk for personal suffering. Yet, there are glimmers of hope. Satisfaction with community-based hunger-relief programs is very high—an indication that those in need are not only being provided with life’s necessities, but also that they are being served in a manner that is dignified and respectful. In addition, there exist opportunities to change the dire circumstances that inform the emergency food assistance landscape. For example, existing governmental food assistance programs whose very purpose is to ease the suffering associated with food insecurity hold tremendous room for growth. Not only this, but the level of comfort individuals seem to feel with their local food pantries, and emergency kitchens and shelters provide food banks with the opportunity to lead the way in marketing government entitlement programs to the clients who seek help from their partner agencies, in order to increase participation in them. Indeed, the information gathered from this study indicates that food banks and their partner agencies are in a unique position which affords them the ability to work to ensure that all the needs of their clients are being met.