HUNGRY IN MONTANA:
Factors Contributing to Emergency Food Needs

2018 Client Hunger Survey
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*If it wasn’t for the food pantry, there would be a lot of hungry families. I would be lost without it.*

Michelle, 32, Miles City, husband works full-time

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*Instead of saying the system is broken, we need more people to help. An ounce of kindness goes a long way.*

Woman from Billings, 55, disabled
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hungry in Montana 2018 is the Montana Food Bank Network’s eighth report on the prevalence of hunger in Montana. The study is conducted every two years to identify and examine the underlying reasons for the persistence of hunger in our state, and to illustrate the impact of hunger on the daily lives of the families we serve. We hope this report will improve awareness and understanding of the issue of hunger, demonstrate the tremendous importance of both public and private food programs, and inspire communities and policymakers to take action to reduce hunger across our state.

FACTORS IMPACTING FOOD SECURITY

- Seventy-two percent of clients surveyed reported an income below the federal poverty level in the month prior to the survey, and nearly one in three were living in deep poverty with incomes less than half of the poverty line. Poverty levels were highest among families with children and households living in reservation areas.
- Fifty percent of households included at least one member currently employed. However, of those who were working, 66% were in seasonal, part-time, or temporary jobs. Of those households not working, 65% had at least one household member unable to work due to disability or poor health, and 28% were senior-only households.
- The primary reasons clients reported needing food assistance on the day of the survey included living on a fixed income, food prices, low wages, utility costs, and housing costs.
- Participation in public nutrition programs can significantly reduce food insecurity, yet just 55% of clients surveyed were receiving SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits or participating in FDPIR (the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations). Of those who were participating in SNAP, clients reported valuing the program’s ability to help them feed their families, free up money for other expenses, and access food options not available at the food pantry.
- Just over 19% of clients reported at least one uninsured household member, down from 30% in 2016 and 38% in 2014. The percentage of households with Medicaid coverage increased from 50% in 2014 to 84% in 2018, corresponding to the expansion of Medicaid through the Montana HELP Plan.

EXPERIENCES OF FOOD INSECURITY

- Nearly 60% of clients surveyed reported that adults in the household had to skip meals or reduce portion sizes because they lacked enough money for food. Nearly half (45%) of respondents reported that adults skip meals on at least a monthly basis.
- Forty-six percent of respondents had visited a pantry six times or fewer the last twelve months, but more than two-thirds had been using the pantry for more than a year.
- Sixty-four percent of clients reported having to choose between paying for other necessities (including rent, fuel, utilities, and/or medical care) and buying food in the last twelve months.
- Clients reported numerous challenges related to eating a healthy diet, including the cost of healthy foods and difficulty getting to the store because of distance or transportation issues.

CLIENT STORIES

In addition to collecting statistical information, this study provides an opportunity to hear firsthand the experiences and struggles of those receiving food assistance. Quotes and photos are shared throughout this report, as well as in our Voices of Montana: Stories of Hunger and Hope report available at www.mfbdn.org/research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the Hungry in Montana 2018 report shows that the most effective way to improve food security for all Montanans is a combined effort to strengthen economic security, maximize participation in public nutrition programs, ensure adequate amounts of food available through the emergency food system, and increase access to affordable, healthy food options.

- Recommendations for specific action to alleviate hunger are included on page 18 of this report.
I. INTRODUCTION

Across Montana, we are seeing some gradual improvements in poverty and food insecurity rates, but we continue to have many reasons for concern. In 2017, Montana’s poverty rate was 12.5%, which is our lowest poverty rate since the Great Recession. Additionally, the USDA Household Food Insecurity rate\(^2\) was 11.4%, down from a high of 14.5% in 2011. While these numbers are moving in the right direction, they remain far too high. According to Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap\(^3\), nearly 130,000 Montanans lived in food insecure homes in 2016, including approximately one in six of our state’s children.

We also hear the stories from our network of food pantries and the people they serve regarding the realities of food insecurity in Montana. In 2017, agencies of the Montana Food Bank Network (MFBN) served 98,500 different individuals over nearly 900,000 visits. The sample of food pantry clients surveyed for this report represents just a snapshot of the tens of thousands of families, seniors, people with disabilities, low-wage workers, and others doing the best they can to keep food on the table and make ends meet.

Our biennial Hungry in Montana report examines the factors forcing people to seek emergency food assistance, the impact of participation in SNAP and other public food programs, and the coping strategies that pantry clients use to stretch their food resources. This report highlights the critical role of both emergency food providers and our public food programs in reducing hunger in Montana. We hope that this report will lead to a greater awareness and understanding of the issue of hunger in Montana, and encourage policymakers and community members to prioritize ways to end hunger.

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1 in 10 Montanans received food through an agency of the Montana Food Bank Network

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**Food Insecurity** is the inability to access food in a consistent manner, resulting in reduced quality or variety of diet.

**Very Low Food Security**, also referred to as hunger, occurs when households must reduce food intake or skip meals because the household lacks money and other resources for food.

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**Montana Household Food Insecurity**

![Graph showing Montana Household Food Insecurity rates from 2001 to 2017](image)

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3. Food Insecurity in the United States, Map the Meal Gap 2016, Feeding America
II. HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

A total of 236 individuals, representing 673 household members, participated in our 2018 survey. Just over 40% of respondents were visiting a pantry in an urban area, 36% of respondents were visiting a pantry in a rural area, and 22% were visiting a pantry within or bordering an American Indian reservation.

Household composition can significantly impact the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity, with households that include seniors, children, and individuals with disabilities among the most vulnerable.

- More than 75% of households surveyed included a member from at least one of these high-risk groups.
- Residents in rural communities were most likely to have a disabled household member, and households in reservation areas were most likely to have a child and/or senior in the household.
- Additionally, one in six households included a veteran.

Households with Vulnerable Populations

3 out of 4 households included a child, senior, or adult unable to work due to disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Households with Children (under age 18)</th>
<th>Households with Seniors (age 60+)</th>
<th>Households with Individuals Unable to Work Due to Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>39%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Things were really hard when my husband passed away. I was on disability and taking care of my grandson. It was tough. There should be more assistance for grandparents taking care of their grandkids.

Ginger, Billings, disabled, raising her grandson
ECONOMIC INSECURITY

Food insecurity is typically a symptom of poverty and insufficient income. According to MIT’s living wage calculator\(^4\), a single individual in Montana needs an annual income of nearly $23,000 to adequately cover living expenses. This income equates to $1,898 per month, or nearly 190% of the federal poverty level. Statewide, nearly a quarter of Montana workers earn $1,250 or less each month. Additionally, many seniors and individuals with disabilities live on fixed incomes that have not kept pace with the rising cost of living.

Our survey found that economic insecurity was a primary reason that people were in need of food assistance:
- More than 85% of participating households reported needing help with food due to low wages and/or living on a fixed income.

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- More than 85% of participating households reported needing help with food due to low wages and/or living on a fixed income.

## Households Living in Poverty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reservation Households</th>
<th>Urban Households</th>
<th>Rural Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>82%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, our survey found that 72% of respondents were living in poverty, based on their household income the month prior to the survey. The poverty rate was even higher among households with children at nearly 90%. Of those households with incomes above poverty, most were just above the threshold. Nearly 90% of households reported incomes below 130% of the poverty line, or just over $2,700 a month for a household of four.

Those in deep poverty (incomes below half of the federal poverty level, or just over $1,000 per month for a family of four) are likely to experience extremely high rates of food insecurity.
- More than one in four (28%) survey respondents were living in deep poverty.
- The deep poverty rate for households in reservation areas was a staggering 47%.

### 2018 Federal Poverty Guidelines
(Monthly, 48 Contiguous States)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persons in Household</th>
<th>50% of Poverty</th>
<th>100% of Poverty</th>
<th>130% of Poverty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$506</td>
<td>$1,012</td>
<td>$1,316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$686</td>
<td>$1,372</td>
<td>$1,784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$866</td>
<td>$1,732</td>
<td>$2,252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$1,046</td>
<td>$2,092</td>
<td>$2,720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each add’l person</td>
<td>+$180</td>
<td>+$360</td>
<td>+$468</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Living Wage Calculator, Living Wage Calculation for Montana, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2018

\(^4\) Living Wage Calculator, Living Wage Calculation for Montana, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2018
EMPLOYMENT

While Montana has a relatively low unemployment rate, thousands of Montanans still struggle to find work or face additional barriers to employment, such as a lack of transportation, unstable housing, the need to care for ill or aging family members, mental or physical health limitations, and childcare costs. It is also important to recognize that unemployment rates vary significantly across the state, reaching nearly 20% on the Crow reservation in 2017.

- Nearly one in four households (23%) reported that the inability to find work was a reason for needing food assistance on the day of the survey.

Underemployment also remains a significant concern in Montana with many jobs offering low wages, inconsistent hours, and no benefits such as paid sick leave, leading to higher rates of turnover. As a result, many workers find that having a job fails to protect them from food insecurity.

- In 2018, half of households surveyed had at least one working adult.
- However, of those working, two-thirds were employed in part-time, seasonal, or temporary work.

Of those households without current employment,

- Twenty-eight percent were senior-only households.
- Just over 30% had a household member looking for work. Finding work was particularly challenging for individuals in reservation areas, with 42% of unemployed households reporting at least one person looking for work.
- Nearly two-thirds reported having a household member unable to work due to disability. In rural communities, the rate of disability was particularly high, with 81% of households including at least one person unable to work due to a disability.

_I don't want to be on low income programs, but sadly the rent is too high for wages no matter where you live. I've been at my job for 5 years and I make $9.10 an hour. That's a joke._

_I would like to find something where I could get out of being low income._

_We were middle class and then the divorce came and I've started from the bottom._

Kim, 50, Great Falls, working part time

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**Sources of Income Received by Client Households (2018)**

- **Currently No Income**: 10%
- **Social Security**: 14%
- **SSI**: 14%
- **Disability**: 35%
- **Housing Assistance**: 6%
- **Retirement**: 10%
- **TANF**: 10%
- **Wages**: 42%

**50%**
Households had at least one adult employed
HOUSING

The lack of stable, affordable housing is a pervasive challenge across our state and often a root cause of food insecurity.

- Due in large part to high housing costs, more than one in four clients reported having more than one household living together for financial reasons. The percentage of respondents in shared households was highest on reservations with 37% of clients in this living situation.
- Of respondents with at least three people in their home, half reported having more than two people sharing a bedroom and 37% had someone sleeping in a living room or other common area.
- Overcrowded housing was particularly prevalent among households in reservation areas. Of households with at least three people, 62% reported that more than two people share a bedroom and nearly half (48%) had someone sleeping in a living room or common area.
- 42% of households had moved within the last year. Of these, nearly 40% had moved more than once.

Inadequate housing can also result in higher utility costs and challenges storing and preparing food.

- More than 50% of respondents reported having to choose between paying for utilities or buying food in the last twelve months.
- One-third of respondents reported utility costs as a reason for needing food assistance on the day of the survey.
- More than one in five households reported living in homes that have limited cooking facilities and/or lack refrigeration, further increasing the challenges of accessing an adequate diet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burdened by Housing Costs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had to Choose between Paying Rent/Mortgage and Buying Food</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cost of Housing is a Primary Reason for Needing Food Assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Households without Stable Housing (Homeless or At-Risk of Homelessness)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TRANSPORTATION

Access to reliable transportation is critical for Montana households, as distances to food, work, healthcare, and services can be great.

- One in four respondents reported not having access to a vehicle, making everyday tasks such as getting to work or going grocery shopping significantly more difficult.
- Of the respondents with access to a vehicle, 27% reported that it was not in reliable, working condition.
- 44% of respondents had to choose between transportation costs and buying food in the last 12 months.
- Nearly one in five respondents reported that the cost of fuel contributed to needing food assistance on the day of the survey.

The majority of our housing is becoming nightly vacation rentals. We have no available housing, which has driven up costs. A one-bedroom is almost $1,000. A regular person making $10-$12 an hour can’t afford to live. You have to have two incomes and even then, people are barely making it.

Kathi Arnado, Director, West Yellowstone Food Pantry

5 For the purposes of this survey, the definition of homelessness was left up to the participating client. As a result, many households living with friends, in camper trailers, or other situations that meet traditional definitions of homelessness may not be included in these numbers.
ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Healthcare is a significant concern for many of the families and individuals receiving food assistance in Montana. Even with insurance, healthcare can be difficult to afford on a limited income. For those without insurance, the situation is even harder. Fortunately Montana’s uninsured rate has declined in recent years, following the expansion of Medicaid through the Montana HELP Plan, which is providing health coverage to 95,000 Montanans.

- Fewer than 20% of clients reported at least one uninsured household member, down from 38% in 2014.
- Households with insurance were most commonly covered by Medicaid (84%) and Medicare (34%).
- Just 9% of clients surveyed had employer-provided insurance, and 7% received Veteran’s Administration (VA) health benefits.

Even with Montana’s expansion in health coverage, households still struggle with medical costs, often delaying non-emergency care. Additionally, not all costs are covered by insurance, and many households were still paying healthcare bills.

- Nearly half of respondents (49%) reported having to delay care (medical, dental or vision, or filling prescriptions) in the last year because they were unable to afford it. Delaying dental or vision care was most common as these health services are less likely to be covered by insurance.
- Half of respondents reported having unpaid medical bills; however, this rate has declined since Montana expanded Medicaid and is down from a high of nearly 70% in previous years.

We need better healthcare, better access to medical care. Health effects employment and economies. The government thinks it only impacts the individual but it impacts everything. We need a healthy, educated workforce for the good of our country.

Cal, Lima,
living with two degenerative diseases
IV. PUBLIC FOOD AND NUTRITION PROGRAMS

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)
SNAP is our nation’s largest nutrition program, helping nearly 120,000 Montanans and 38 million Americans keep food on the table each month. The program effectively reduces food insecurity, while supporting local economies. Statewide, participation among those likely to qualify for SNAP is approximately 75%, and participation among eligible seniors is less than 30%.

Just over half (54%) of households surveyed reported receiving SNAP benefits. Only one household (1%) was receiving FDPIR, the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. (Individuals living on reservations can choose to participate in either SNAP or FDPIR.)

- This overall participation rate is fairly consistent with previous survey years, which have ranged from 46% in 2004 to 61% in 2010.
- However, a participation rate of 55% demonstrates the underutilization of SNAP, as 89% of respondents had a household income below 130% of the poverty line, making them likely eligible for benefits.

SNAP Participation (Includes SNAP and FDPIR)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Site Type</th>
<th>Urban: 58%</th>
<th>Rural: 49%</th>
<th>Reservation: 60%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By Household Type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Households with Children: 66%</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Households with a Senior: 59%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult-Only, Non-Disabled Households: 28%</td>
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</table>

SNAP-ED
The SNAP-Ed program provides nutrition education, cooking classes, and a variety of other resources to clients eligible for SNAP. Just 18% of SNAP households reported that they had participated in the SNAP-Ed (or EFNEP, Expanded Food and Nutrition Program) program, but of those who had participated, more than 95% found it valuable.

- Of those not participating, nearly one in three did not have a local program available. Of our survey sites, there is no SNAP-Ed or EFNEP program in Beaverhead County, Custer County, or Gallatin County. While there are programs in the remaining counties, they are often located in just one community and may still be too difficult to access.
- Others reported not knowing about it (37%) or feeling they would not benefit from the classes (28%).

55% Households received SNAP or FDPIR
**Reasons Not Participating in SNAP:** Nearly 60% of the households not currently participating in SNAP had not applied. Additionally, nearly one in five households had been on SNAP previously but did not complete the recertification process required to maintain benefits. The most common reasons for not applying or not recertifying included:

- “Did not know I may be eligible” (38%);
- “The application process is too long and complicated” (32%);
- “I can get by without the program” (26%);
- “I would only be eligible for a low benefit” (17%).

Additionally, 16% of households had applied for SNAP within the last year but were ineligible. Most commonly, ineligible households were denied SNAP benefits because their income was over the threshold, or because they reached the three-month time limit for Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs).

This time limit requires ABAWDs to prove that they are working (or engaged in qualifying work activities) at least 20 hours per week in order to receive SNAP benefits. Individuals not meeting this requirement are only allowed to receive benefits for up to three months in a three year period, regardless of how hard they are looking for work or whether they are facing other barriers, such as health issues or unstable housing.

The time limit can be waived by states in areas of high unemployment. At the time of our survey, Montana had twenty-five counties and six reservations with waivers in place. Of the nine sites where we conducted surveys, five were subject to the three month time limit. The three reservation areas (Cut Bank, Hardin, and Ronan), and Libby were the only survey sites with waivers in place.

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**SNAP means we can buy gas, pay car insurance, and buy the kids new shoes if they need them. It also allows us to buy healthier items and have more variety in our diet.**

Becky, 60, Valley View, lives with her daughter and family.

**Milk is $4 by itself so you can spend that $20 on just a few items.**

Arthur, 63, Great Falls, fighting cancer and unable to work, gets $20 in SNAP.
Value of SNAP: Nearly all households receiving SNAP benefits expressed an appreciation for the program and emphasized its importance in helping their families get enough to eat. Participating households valued the program’s ability to help them feed their families; free up money for other necessitities such as rent, utilities, and childcare; and purchase foods not available at the food pantry, which can be particularly important if foods like dairy or fresh produce are limited at the pantry, or in households with special dietary needs.

Challenges with SNAP: As in previous survey years, a low benefit amount was the most common challenge with SNAP. Nearly 80% of clients reported running out of SNAP benefits before the end of the month, with 57% reporting that their benefits last just one or two weeks.

- Nearly half of SNAP households reported needing food assistance on the day of the survey because their SNAP benefits had run out.

SNAP benefits are calculated based on the USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan (a diet plan intended to provide adequate nutrition at a minimal cost). The Thrifty Food Plan is problematic for a number of reasons, including unrealistic assumptions regarding cooking facilities, time for food preparation, transportation, and the availability and affordability of food. In addition, the plan lacks the nutritional variety called for in the USDA’s own dietary guidelines. The SNAP benefit calculation also assumes that households will have 30% of their net income available to spend on food. The rising cost of living has made this assumption outdated for many households, leaving them with an inadequate grocery budget even with the support of SNAP. Statewide, the average SNAP benefit is $119 per person per month, or less than $4 per day.

Dislike about SNAP (Of SNAP Households)

- Benefit amount too low: 41%
- Difficulty with application or recertification: 16%
- Challenges using EBT card: 4%
- Nothing, satisfied with the program: 52%

SNAP means we are able to eat. It means we can sit down as a family and eat together.

Merri, 38, Cut Bank, looking for work

It has been hard with no [SNAP] office. Some people don’t have phones. You have to go to Browning and get there by 8:00 AM or they don’t have time to see you.

Candace, 29, just moved to Cut Bank, currently 9 people in household
SCHOOL BREAKFAST AND LUNCH PROGRAMS

Ninety-two percent of households with school-age children (age five to eighteen) reported that their kids eat free or reduced price (FRP) school lunch. Slightly fewer, 78%, reported that their children eat both FRP breakfast and lunch.

- The most common reasons for not participating in lunch was that the children were not in school (homeschooled, had just turned five, or were eighteen and no longer in school).
- The most common reasons for participating in lunch but not breakfast were difficulty getting the children to school in time, and a preference to feed them breakfast at home.

Clients tended to be very happy with the school meal programs with 80% reporting that they are completely satisfied. The most common dissatisfaction was the nutritional quality of food served, but only 10% (or seven households) of those participating in school meals reported this concern. Parents reported valuing school meals for the following reasons:

- “Participation in the program helps us stretch our food budget” (73%);
- “Easy for kids to participate” (71%);
- “Program provides nutritious meals” (59%).

SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM (SFSP)

Given the importance of FRP meals during the school year, it is no surprise that summer months are challenging for families. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is intended to help fill this gap by providing free, nutritious meals to children age 18 and under in qualifying communities. Unfortunately, SFSP is severely underutilized in Montana and across the nation. The challenges accessing Summer Food demonstrate the need for increased outreach and policy change to strengthen this important nutrition program.

Just 37% of surveyed households with children reported participating in SFSP. Participation was higher for respondents in reservation areas (55%), compared to urban (32%) and rural areas (18%). The most common reasons for not participating included:

- “Did not know about it” (44%);
- “Transportation challenges” (17%);
- “Prefer to feed kids at home in the summer” (17%).

Of the households that did participate in SFSP, respondents valued the following:

- “Ease of participation/no application” (87%);
- “Helps us stretch our food budget” (83%);
- “Program provides well-balanced, nutritious meals” (80%).
SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION PROGRAM FOR WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN (WIC)

Among households potentially eligible for WIC, 54% were currently participating. Of those not participating in WIC, most had participated in the past but chose not to recertify, or had not even applied. The primary reason for not applying or recertifying was the difficulty of making it to appointments.

Of the households participating in WIC, 70% reported no dissatisfaction with the program. Of the remaining 30%, the primary challenge was making it to appointments. Participants most valued the following:

- “Food benefits help feed my family” (96%);
- “Help with formula” (61%);
- “Health screenings” (57%).

The following chart illustrates participation in the child nutrition programs from each of our survey years. In 2018, School Lunch, School Breakfast, and SFSP each reached the highest rate of participation since we began the survey in 2004. However, WIC and SFSP in particular, still remain largely underutilized. Encouraging participation in the child nutrition programs through outreach, program growth, and strong policies is critical to the health and well-being of Montana’s children. These programs support academic achievement, improve health outcomes, and ensure that all children have the nutrition needed to grow and thrive.

![Participation in Child Nutrition Programs](chart)

SENIOR FOOD AND NUTRITION PROGRAMS

Our survey found participation in the senior nutrition programs surprisingly limited. Of the 75 households with at least one senior age 60+, just 29% reported receiving food through the federal Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP, commonly called Senior Commodities).

- Participation in other senior food programs was even lower. Just 1% of senior households received food through Meals on Wheels, and 20% participated in meals at congregate feeding sites, such as senior centers.

Improving participation in the senior food programs is critical given the health risks associated with food insecurity among seniors, including lower cognitive functioning, an increased chance of hospitalization, poor mental health, a weakened immune system, and reduced physical activity.

It is important to note that a relatively small number of households were potentially eligible for WIC. Responses are based on a total of 46 households.
V. COPING WITH FOOD INSECURITY

SKIPPING MEALS
Nearly 60% of households reported that at least one adult had skipped meals or reduced portion sizes in the last twelve months so that others could eat or because there wasn’t enough money for food. For some clients this situation was rare, but for many, it occurred on a regular basis.
- More than one in four of all households surveyed reported that adults skipped meals or reduce portion sizes on at least a weekly basis. Nearly half (45%) did so on at least a monthly basis.
- Many of the adults who were reducing their food intake were parents choosing to eat less to ensure that their kids had enough food. Others were adults or seniors who reported skipping meals or reducing portion sizes at the end of the month in order to make the food in the house stretch a little further.

In addition to limiting food intake, worrying about food running out before having money to buy more is also an indication of food insecurity. Worrying about food running out takes a significant toll on physical and mental well-being.
- 72% of households reported worrying that the food would run out, including 54% who worried about the food running out on at least a monthly basis.

In Nichole’s words, “I will skip meals to help stretch my food. I skip either breakfast or lunch every day. The last week of the month is the most difficult because it’s when the SNAP runs out. SNAP gives me more variety in my food choice, compared to what I can get at the pantry. I’m able to get vegetables and fruits, fresh meats. And it helps reduce the stress of worrying about how you’re going to eat.”

Nichole, Great Falls, working part time
DIFFICULT CHOICES
Low-income families often must make tradeoffs when spending their limited dollars. Unfortunately, this choice frequently comes down to buying food or paying for other necessities such as rent, utilities, fuel, and medical care.

Nearly two out of three households (64%) reported having to choose between some other necessity (housing, utilities, transportation, or medical care) and food at some point in the twelve months prior to the survey\textsuperscript{7}. Choosing between utilities and food was the most common, across all site types.

- Had to choose between food and paying utilities: 51%
- Had to choose between food and transportation costs: 44%
- Had to choose between food and rent/mortgage: 39%
- Had to choose between food and medical expenses: 30%

\textsuperscript{7}If comparing these numbers to our 2016 report, note that in 2016 we asked participants if they had to choose other necessities "instead of" food. In 2018, we asked if they had to choose "between" other necessities and food.
REDUCED QUALITY OF NUTRITION
Proper nutrition can be difficult to access and afford on a limited income. Often, the foods providing the most calories for the least cost are highly processed and low in nutritional value. Respondents noted that fresh produce is especially difficult to access because it doesn’t store well and much of what is available at the food pantry does not remain fresh for long. Respondents also reported difficulty affording lean proteins and milk, and using inexpensive starches such as pasta to stretch meals.

- Sixty percent of respondents reported that the high cost of healthy food options negatively impacts their ability to eat a healthy diet.
- More than half (52%) reported that food costs were a primary reason for needing food assistance on the day of the survey.
- One in four households reported that transportation challenges make getting to a grocery store a significant challenge, and more than one in five reported living in homes that have limited cooking facilities and/or lack refrigeration.
- Households with seniors were more likely to report that health limitations impact their ability to cook and shop for food (32%), as compared to non-senior households (20%).

The inability to consistently access healthy foods can lead to a number of health problems and a high amount of stress. While there are options for eating healthy even with a limited income, these options may require better knowledge of healthy food choices and an understanding of how to prepare these foods. Stressful lives, varying work hours, transportation difficulties, limited storage or cooking facilities, and working multiple jobs make such options less practical for many clients.

### Challenges to Eating a Healthy Diet (2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthy options are more expensive</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty getting to the store (distance, gas, etc.)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health limitations make cooking/shopping difficult</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited storage or cooking facilities</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Alberta, Charlo, fighting cancer*
For food pantry clients with special dietary needs, accessing nutritious and appropriate foods can be particularly challenging. Half (50%) of respondents reported at least one household member with specific dietary needs. Many households noted the difficulty of meeting these needs with the foods provided by the pantry or with what they are able to afford on a limited budget. Inconsistent access to nutritious foods that meet dietary needs can exacerbate chronic conditions, leading to increased health challenges and heightened healthcare costs.

### Households with Special Dietary Needs (% of total households)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special Dietary Need</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diabetic</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Allergies or Lactose Intolerance</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Salt / Low Fat Diet</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty Chewing due to Dental Issues</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Households with Special Dietary Needs</strong></td>
<td><strong>50%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*I get the best food for us here for our diabetes. We get fruits, vegetables, and other good foods for us. We could not eat this healthy without the pantry. It’s hard to afford the foods we need to keep our blood sugar in good range.*

Natashia, 46, Billings, lives with her disabled adult son
VISITS TO THE FOOD PANTRY
The food pantry is a critical resource for food insecure households, helping to meet the immediate need for food. Pantries differ significantly in the amount of food they are able to provide each client, as well as how frequently clients can receive food.

- On average, 44% of respondents reported that their pantry food lasts less than a week. The other 56% were able to stretch it longer than a week, typically by combining it with other food sources (SNAP or food they purchase), or by skipping meals and reducing portion sizes.

For many clients, the experience of visiting a food pantry was not new. Just over two-thirds of participants had been receiving assistance from a pantry for more than a year. This ongoing need for food assistance demonstrates a shift in the role of food pantries from providing short-term ‘emergency’ assistance, to serving a more long-term, chronic need for help. This shift illustrates that the issue of food insecurity will not be solved simply by providing food. As long as we have households living on incomes insufficient to meet their basic needs, people will continue to rely on food assistance to make ends meet. However, while the need is often long-term, most households are not visiting the pantry every month.

### Number of Visits to the Food Pantry in the Last Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Time Clients</th>
<th>1-6 Visits</th>
<th>7-12 Visits</th>
<th>More than 12 Visits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Senior, Non-Disabled Households</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households with a Senior or Disabled Member</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The importance of addressing the underlying causes of hunger is also illustrated by the reasons that clients reported needing to come for food assistance on the day of the survey.

- Economic insecurity was the primary reason, with 86% of respondents visiting the food pantry because of low wages and/or an insufficient fixed income.
- Food prices were also a key reason, particularly for clients in rural and reservation areas.
- Utility costs, fuel costs, and being unable to find work were most often reported by households in reservation areas.

### Reasons Needing Food Assistance the Day of the Survey (2018)

- SNAP Ran Out
- Fuel Prices
- Food Prices
- Disability
- Rent/Mortgage
- Healthcare Costs
- Unable to Find Work
- Utility Costs
- Fixed Income
- Low Wages

![Reasons Needing Food Assistance](chart.png)
OTHER SOURCES OF FOOD
Many clients reported accessing food through other sources, such as from family or friends (32%), a garden (14%), or hunting and fishing (22%). Nearly 30% of clients reported accessing locally grown food through a farmers market. Participation was fairly consistent across site types, ranging from 28% in reservation areas to 30% in urban areas.

Clients reported the following reasons for not accessing food through a farmers market:
- “Produce at the market is more expensive than at the grocery store” (27%);
- “No market available” (24%);
- “Not interested in going to the market” (21%);
- “Too difficult to make it to the market - schedule conflicts, limited transportation, etc.” (20%);
- “Did not know about market, where it was, how to access” (19%).

Markets were least available to clients in reservation areas. More than 60% of households not utilizing a farmers market in a reservation area did not have a market available, compared to 2% of urban clients and 28% of rural clients.

STRETCHING THE FOOD BUDGET
Respondents were asked what strategies, if any, they use to stretch their food budgets. Respondents frequently reported using coupons, shopping sales, and buying in bulk. Many also noted the importance of cooking from scratch, not eating out, choosing less expensive brands, and shopping at whichever store offers the best prices. Respondents stressed the importance of carefully selecting foods that can be combined into meals, making sure nothing goes to waste, and strictly adhering to a budget and meal plan. Other respondents shared that they eat only at meal times, carefully avoiding snacks or any unnecessary eating.

Additionally, many respondents cut back on the amount of food consumed as a strategy to stretch their food budget.
- Nearly 60% of respondents noted reducing portions or skipping meals because they could not afford more food, or they wanted to ensure that others in the household could eat.

I stretch what should be one meal into two. I've been skipping breakfast daily, lunch sometimes. But I won't skip dinner. If I don't eat something, with my diabetes, I'll start shaking and getting really sick.

Before I had SNAP I was skipping dinner too. I would be in tears because I'd eat cereal and popcorn. Or eggs and toast. That would be my meals. I would literally be in tears.

Kim, Great Falls, working part time
VI. TAKE ACTION

The data and experiences included in this report are clear: far too many Montanans are struggling just to keep food on the table. No one in our state should be hungry, yet we have parents skipping meals to feed their children, seniors choosing between food and medication, and hardworking individuals going to jobs every day and still not making enough money to make ends meet. Fortunately, hunger is a solvable problem and together we can end it. Our state and nation must make ending hunger a priority.

Advocate

Talk to Montana’s elected officials about hunger. Educate them on the needs and challenges in your community. Many of our lawmakers may not understand the prevalence or consequences of hunger in our state. Urge our lawmakers to strengthen household economic security by increasing access to meaningful education and job training opportunities; encouraging economic growth in sectors that provide adequate wages, reliable hours, and health benefits; strengthening anti-hunger and anti-poverty programs; and investing in affordable housing, health insurance, and child care. For more information on how to get involved in anti-hunger advocacy, visit www.mfbn.org.

Federal Advocacy

Support strong child nutrition programs including School Breakfast, School Lunch, WIC, Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) through:

- Innovative strategies and streamlined administrative requirements to increase access
- Adequate reimbursements to schools and program providers to ensure program sustainability and nutritional quality

Protect and strengthen SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) by:

- Opposing harmful cuts and changes to program structure that would limit efficiency and effectiveness
- Improving program rules to maximize program impact for participants, reduce administrative burdens at the state and local levels, and streamline the implementation of state options
- Strengthening programs that complement SNAP such as SNAP-Ed, the Expanded Food and Nutrition Program and Double SNAP Dollar programs

Support the commodity food programs: The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP, or senior commodities) by:

- Ensuring adequate funding and availability of nutritious and appropriate foods
- Appropriating full funding for TEFAP food purchases, as well as storage and distribution costs
- Identifying efficiencies in administrative processes and supporting community program providers to ensure continued access to the commodity programs at the local level

State Advocacy

Strengthen and protect public nutrition programs at the state level by:

- Increasing access to SNAP and WIC through outreach, education, and the maximization of state options
- Promoting alternative School Breakfast models such as Breakfast in the Classroom, Grab N’ Go, or Breakfast After the Bell
- Ensuring continued maximization of the school meal direct certification system and encouraging participation in the Community Eligibility Provision among eligible schools
- Actively promoting the start-up of new Summer Food Service Program sites to reach unserved communities
- Providing funding for transportation, activities, and outreach to increase participation in SFSP
- Identifying funding or other local support needed for senior commodity, congregate meal, or home delivered meal programs for seniors
Support job training and economic development by:
- Increasing economic security among the working poor by improving wages and benefits, including access to healthcare and paid family leave
- Ensuring that education and job training opportunities are meaningful, accessible, and affordable
- Reviewing and revising our state tax structure to better support the working poor

Build a stronger safety net by:
- Supporting and protecting access to affordable child care, housing, healthcare, and other necessities
- Supporting efforts to increase coordination and streamlining between assistance programs
- Strengthening the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF) to better meet the needs of Montana’s families

Community Engagement
There are steps we can all take at the local level to increase awareness of hunger and support ongoing efforts to build a stronger community.
- Increase awareness of the prevalence of hunger and its impact on your community
- Address and correct myths about people in poverty when you hear them
- Ensure programs such as Summer Food and School Breakfast exist in your community
- Talk with your local schools about starting a school-based food pantry or BackPack program
- Support programs that increase the ability of low-income families to access local, affordable foods such as community gardens, food co-ops, CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture), Double SNAP Dollars incentive programs, and EBT, WIC, and Senior Farmers’ Market Programs
- Volunteer at a local food pantry or meal site
- Organize transportation to larger stores or social service agencies for low-income people

Health Community
Given the close connections between hunger and health, the health community can play an important role in addressing and ending hunger.
- Ask your patients, Do you worry that food will run out? Do you run out of food and not have money to buy more? Make referrals to public nutrition programs and other services when appropriate
- Assess physical growth and screen for developmental and mental health in relation to inadequate or poor quality diets
- Offer on-site community gardens and food pantries
- Support anti-hunger, anti-poverty policies that ensure all Montanans are healthy and well nourished

Business Community
The economic security of our state is closely tied to hunger and poverty. Undernourished workers are less effective employees, and food insecure children face numerous risk factors impacting their ability to succeed as adults. The business community can help support anti-hunger efforts in numerous ways.
- Ensure that workers are able to take time off to care for themselves or their family without fear of losing their jobs
- Provide wages that allow for healthy food purchases and other basic needs
- Assure safe, private, and sanitary space for breastfeeding mothers to save their milk while at work
- Cover the start-up costs of a new Summer Food site, expansion of a School Breakfast Program, or a BackPack program
- Donate materials or sponsor activities at Summer Food sites to help increase participation
- Support policies that strengthen our economy and help prepare tomorrow’s workforce
METHODOLOGY

The Montana Food Bank Network (MFBN) completed its eighth biennial client survey in the summer of 2018 to better understand the experiences of those seeking emergency food assistance in our state. The survey was conducted at food pantries in nine communities. Findings from Billings and Great Falls were compiled into one category and termed as “urban”. Findings from food pantries in Cut Bank, Hardin, and Ronan were compiled into the “reservation” category. The “rural” category consisted of findings from Libby, Dillon, Miles City, and West Yellowstone.

All adults (18 years or older) who sought emergency food services at the agencies at the time of the survey were asked to participate in the study and were granted the right to refuse. Trained MFBN survey coordinators conducted one-on-one conversational interviews with clients. A total of 236 clients participated in the survey. Survey participants are not intended to be representative of all food pantry clients, but instead provide a “snapshot” of emergency food clients across the state.

The survey was completely voluntary and confidential. Clients had the option to leave the survey anonymous, provide contact information for follow-up, or to give permission to use their first name and town with any quotes or stories. In addition, some clients gave permission to use their photo in the report. When permission was granted, real names and photos are provided throughout the report. In all other cases, the quotes are left anonymous.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the 236 individuals who were willing to share their stories and experiences with us, to educate others in our state, and to speak out for themselves and their communities.

Thank you to the food pantries that agreed to work with us on this survey and connect us to the families and individuals they serve:

- Beaverhead Community Food Pantry, Dillon, MT
- Custer County Food Pantry, Miles City, MT
- Family Service, Billings, MT
- Harvest Food Pantry, Cut Bank, MT
- Helping Hands in Hardin, Hardin, MT
- Libby Food Pantry, Libby, MT
- Opportunities, Inc. Great Falls, MT
- Ronan Bread Basket, Ronan, MT
- West Yellowstone Food Bank, West Yellowstone, MT

PROJECT COORDINATOR AND REPORT AUTHOR: Lorianne Burhop

THANKS TO: MFBN staff, Board members, and volunteers for assisting with the survey

For more information, please contact Montana Food Bank Network, 406-721-3825, lburhop@mfbn.org