

## COMBATING HUNGER – II

### A PORTRAIT OF HUNGER IN IOWA

By Maureen Berner, University of Northern Iowa

What does it mean to be hungry in Iowa? Hundreds of thousands of Iowans receive government food assistance each year, including over 100,000 children and 100,000 working adults. In addition, regional nonprofit food banks and their local partner service agencies, such as food pantries and soup kitchens, distribute over 10 million pounds of food each year to needy households. This fact sheet offers a portrait of Iowa's hungry, based on over 1,000 surveys of clients using the Black Hawk County Food Shelf (BHCFS), the largest food pantry in Northeast Iowa, based in Waterloo, between July 2004 and April 2005.<sup>1</sup>

#### ARE PEOPLE HUNGRY BECAUSE THEY ARE IN A CRISIS OF SOME SORT?

■ A little over half have suffered some sort of crisis in their lives and are considered to need services for the short term, usually three months. Of the 1,079 clients surveyed to date, 645, or 60 percent, were emergency clients. More disturbing is that 40 percent are considered “supplemental,” meaning they need free food from the pantry as a supplement just to make ends meet each or most months.

#### WHAT SORT OF CRISIS CAUSES PEOPLE TO GO HUNGRY?

■ Contrary to popular thought, people do not go to a food pantry in times of disaster such as fire or flood. The most common reason is losing a job. The category of “other” was comprised of similar changes in a family's economic situation, such as divorce, loss or change in housing, or loss of financial support from family or spouse (or ex-spouse). The bottom line: When you live close to the edge financially, it takes very little to throw you into crisis where you or your family can go hungry.

Type of Crisis*	Number	Percent
Fire	15	2
Loss of Job	199	31
Family Death	15	2
Other	217	34

\*emergency clients only

#### WON'T PEOPLE GET OTHER JOBS?

■ Sometimes a combination of things goes wrong. One reason cited was, “Staying with family, going through divorce, and hours have been cut in last 2-3 weeks.” Or when you live paycheck to paycheck, moving from one job to another still means no food for several weeks. Several stated they were seeking help just until the first paycheck came from a new job.

#### *About this project ...*

This is one in a series of fact sheets about hunger in Iowa and the United States from University of Northern Iowa Professor Maureen Berner. The Iowa Fiscal Partnership is a joint initiative of two nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations – the Child and Family Policy Center in Des Moines and the Iowa Policy Project in Mount Vernon. IFP reports on tax and budget policy are on the web at [www.iowafiscal.org](http://www.iowafiscal.org).

## CAN'T THESE FOLKS GET GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE (FOOD STAMPS)?

■ Over half of the people going to the food pantry **are** receiving some form of government assistance. One quarter receive Social Security. Over 40 percent already receive Food Stamps. Obviously, these government programs are not providing enough support.

Program	Number	Percent of all Emergency clients	Number	Percent of all Supplemental clients	Number	Percent of all Clients
Social Security	114	17	146	34	260	24
FIP (welfare)	62	10	53	13	115	11
Food Stamps	191	30	248	57	439	41
Total having at least one type of support	264	41	305	70	569	53
Total having more than one type of support	92	14	126	29	218	20

*Respondents could indicate more than one type of additional support.*

## DO ANY OF THESE PEOPLE WORK?

■ Twenty percent of emergency, and 23 percent of supplemental clients work. Of all clients, one quarter hold jobs, commonly at local manufacturing, fast food restaurants or retail stores.

## WHERE DO THEY LIVE?

■ Most (60 percent) rent their housing, and another 13 percent live with others. Sixteen percent own their own home. Only 4 percent describe themselves as homeless.

## WHAT OTHER FINANCIAL PRESSURES EXIST FOR THESE PEOPLE?

■ A large number of clients reported they had to forgo food for some other important item.

Item	Emergency		Supplemental		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Prescriptions	132	20	118	27	250	23
Rent/Mortgage	312	48	199	46	511	47
Unexpected expense	77	12	122	28	199	18
Utilities	233	36	178	41	411	38
Medical Bills	115	18	73	17	188	17
Clothing	105	16	86	20	191	18
Kids School expenses	90	14	61	14	151	14
Other	120	19	64	15	184	17

*Totals do not round to 100 percent, clients could report more than one other financial pressure.*

<sup>1</sup> Specific survey results can be obtained from the author. Contact the Iowa Policy Project (319) 338-0773, or [ipp@Lcom.net](mailto:ipp@Lcom.net).