



# The Iowa Policy Project

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **A Secure Nutrition Network**

#### *Public, Private Efforts Fight Food Insecurity in Iowa*

**By Andrew Cannon**

At some point during a year, about 15 percent of American households and 12 percent of Iowa households will be tested on whether they can place enough food on the table for their family to have an active, healthy life.<sup>1</sup> “Will this be enough for my family? Will it last the week? Should I skip lunch so there is enough for my kids for breakfast?” Fully one-third of those who cannot always meet the challenge of food security are in a distressed category. They face such very low food security that they need to frequently skip meals or are unable to satisfy themselves — on a regular basis.<sup>2</sup>

This widespread need for food assistance requires a public and private response. Some public programs — which are on the budget chopping block — are well-known, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP (formerly known as Food Stamps), and free and reduced-price school lunch. The private sphere offers a network of food banks, food pantries and kitchens.

Though these public and private efforts operate independently, there is considerable overlap and interaction. SNAP benefits, for instance, may not fully meet the needs of a family, which may supplement that assistance with foods obtained through a food pantry. Similarly, food banks and food pantries receive quality food supplies and sometimes funding through both federal and state programs.

Budget-cut fever in Washington has put key nutrition programs at risk. Under the Budget Control Act, passed in August 2011, if spending reductions cannot be agreed upon, many programs, including nutrition supports, would automatically face deep cuts.

Apart from deficit reduction negotiations, nutrition assistance programs face a battle in Congress. Food safety-net programs are primarily financed in about five-year increments through what is frequently referred to as the Farm Bill. Political dynamics in Washington will likely challenge efforts to maintain adequate funding for food programs when the 2012 Farm Bill is written.

Even a robust private network of food banks and food pantries cannot fully cover the needs of food-insecure Americans if federal nutrition programs lapse. Policymakers and the public must understand how these private and public programs work, receive funding and interact.

This report examines federal and private nutrition assistance programs, as well as recent state experiments in nutrition assistance.

#### ***Hunger and Food Security in the United States and Iowa***

While hunger and near-hunger are concepts easy enough to understand, USDA researchers now measure “food security” to evaluate the extent of hunger and the effectiveness of the food and nutrition safety net.<sup>3</sup> “Food security” is defined as having “[a]ccess by all people at all times to enough food for active, healthy life.”<sup>4</sup> In an annual survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, households reporting more than two

food-insecure conditions are classified as “food insecure.” Households with “low food security” report reduced quality, variety or desirability of diet, with little or no reduction in food intake; households with very low food security reported at least six out of 10 food-insecure conditions, including reduced food intake.<sup>5</sup> Households with children are seen to have very low food security if they report at least eight out of 18 food-insecure conditions.

As shown in the table at the right, Iowa’s overall food-insecurity level is lower than the U.S. rate. Still, more than 340,000 Iowans on average from 2008-10 were in a food-insecure category.<sup>6</sup> Lee and Appanoose counties had the highest rate of food-insecure households in Iowa in 2009, with 16.4 and 16.3 percent, respectively.<sup>7</sup> The total may be increasing since data for 2009 suggest that food insecurity in Iowa has risen to 12.8 percent, affecting over 382,500 Iowans.<sup>8</sup>

**About 1 In 8 Iowans Experienced Food Insecurity, 2008-10**

	<b>Rate of Food Insecurity (%)</b>	<b>Total Food Insecure</b>
Iowa	12.1	340,000
U.S.	14.5	48,800,000

Note: Iowa data averaged over three years (2008-2010); U.S. data for 2010

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture and author’s calculations.

By USDA measurements, one-fifth of households with children were food insecure in 2009. Iowa typically has lower rates of food insecurity than the national average; still, over 16 percent of Iowa children were food insecure over 2006-08.<sup>9</sup>

**The Recession and Food Security**

The 2007-09 recession caused a dramatic increase in food insecurity across all categories, but particularly in households with children, Hispanic households, and households below the federal poverty level (\$22,350 for a family of four in 2011).<sup>10</sup>

Thanks largely to expanded SNAP benefits through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), food insecurity rates remained virtually unchanged in 2009,<sup>11</sup> even as the national unemployment rate doubled from 5 percent in January 2008, reaching 10.1 percent in October 2009.<sup>12</sup>

**Poverty and Food Insecurity**

Hunger and food insecurity are closely linked with poverty. A 2010 study found that nearly three quarters of households served by the Feeding America network of emergency feeding organizations (EFOs) — food banks, food pantries, soup or emergency kitchens, shelters — had incomes below the federal poverty line (\$22,350 for a family of four in 2011).<sup>13</sup> Iowa does not deviate from the national norm: Household income for 78 percent of Iowa EFO clients fell below the federal poverty line (FPL); average annual income among Iowa’s EFO clientele was even lower than the national average: \$9,240.<sup>14</sup>

But hunger and food insecurity are not just limited to the very poor. Nationally, 20 percent of households with income above the poverty line experienced food insecurity in 2009.<sup>15</sup> Food insecurity seems to afflict a greater share of low- to moderate-income families in Iowa than nationally; over 9 percent of Iowa EFO clients in 2008 had incomes above 185 percent FPL — compared to just 7 percent nationally.<sup>16</sup>

About 38 percent of food pantry clients nationally and 47.5 percent in Iowa came from a household in which at least one adult was employed.<sup>17</sup>

**Public, Private and Nonprofit Supports Meet Food Needs**

A mix of public and private resources assists families. The public-private collaboration is especially apparent with food banks — regional warehousing and distribution centers that store privately and publicly donated foods, and distribute those foods to local partner agencies. Food donated by

individuals, small groups, churches or the food industry is distributed alongside commodities purchased and distributed by the USDA through the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). “Commodities” are typically basic resources that may or may not serve as inputs for other products. Agricultural commodities include corn, soybeans, meat and poultry products, and others.

Thousands of faith-based and nonprofit organizations work to alleviate food insecurity. In Iowa, over 1,160 local and regional emergency feeding organizations (EFOs) distribute food to those in need.<sup>18</sup> EFOs supplement federal food assistance received by individuals, but do not replace it. Clients of both federal food assistance programs and community food assistance programs typically come from households with low food security. Of households that had received emergency food from a pantry or kitchen, about three-quarters reported food insecurity.<sup>19</sup> Thus it is not surprising that nearly one-third of SNAP recipients also obtain food from a pantry at some point during the year.<sup>20</sup> There is less overlap with the other two largest food programs (free or reduced-price school lunch and WIC), but in both cases about 1 in 5 households relied on a pantry at some point during the year.<sup>21</sup>

### **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program**

Of all the food and nutrition assistance programs, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the best known. SNAP helps low-income families and individuals obtain unprepared food.

The table at right displays average monthly SNAP beneficiaries and average monthly benefit per individual for Federal Fiscal Year 2010 for both Iowa and the U.S. SNAP participation is increasing. For the first 11 months of FFY11 (through August), national participation averaged over 44.5 million.<sup>22</sup> State-level estimates for FFY11 are not yet available.

	<b>SNAP Participation, FFY10</b>	
	<b>Average Monthly Participation</b>	<b>Average Monthly Benefit Per Person</b>
<b>Iowa</b>	340,304	\$128.84
<b>Total U.S.</b>	40,301,878	\$133.79

*Source: Food and Nutrition Services, United States Department of Agriculture*

Though states administer the program, the federal government covers the entire cost of the benefits, splitting administrative costs with states.

SNAP benefits are limited to individuals and families whose household earnings fall below 160 percent of the federal poverty level, or FPL (\$35,760 for a family of four in 2011).<sup>23</sup> Benefits average about \$133.80 per person per month, or \$4.46 per person per day. Benefit levels decrease as earnings inch toward the 160 percent FPL threshold. Benefit levels are set by a formula, devised by the USDA. As an entitlement program, SNAP funding is determined by need — indicated by program enrollment. This allows SNAP to respond quickly, particularly for those in need following natural and economic disaster. By contrast, recent proposals in Congress would transform SNAP into a block grant, hampering its ability to respond.<sup>24</sup> Few public support programs are as responsive to economic downturns as SNAP. Since the most recent recession, SNAP enrollment nationally has grown about 69 percent.<sup>25</sup> In Iowa, enrollment grew nearly 43 percent from 2007 to 2010.<sup>26</sup>

### **Other Resources**

In addition to SNAP, the federal government offers a number of other food assistance programs targeted at different constituencies. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, or WIC, aims to help pregnant and postpartum women, provide young children and infants with nutritious foods, such as milk, cheese, eggs, peanut butter, juices, beans and peas and other basics, as well as infant formula. The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) provides high-nutrition foods to low-income households by distributing fruit and vegetables, meat and poultry, beans, peanut butter and other agricultural commodities to EFOs. Free and reduced-price school lunch and breakfast

serve school children from lower-income households; the Summer Food Service Program attempts to continue to provide these children with quality nutrition when they are not in school. In addition, there are a number of other smaller federal programs providing nutritional assistance.

### ***Food Assistance Initiatives in States***

In addition to administering federal food assistance programs, a number of states administer food assistance initiatives of their own. These programs are as simple as state grants to food banks, as complex as commodity surplus distribution programs, or as innovative as Iowa's Help Us Stop Hunger (HUSH) program, in which hunters may donate venison to EFOs.

### ***Conclusion***

Hunger in the United States and Iowa is kept at arm's length through a complex web of financing and services provided by the federal government, state and local governments, private nonprofit and faith-based organizations, and individual and corporate donors.

Though the food assistance web was temporarily strengthened by the federal Recovery Act — both to meet increased need as a result of the recession and to provide a jolt to the economy by increasing consumer demand — the unabated need for food assistance, coupled with the expiration of the Recovery Act and impending fiscal austerity, threaten its integrity. The ability of private charities to scale up to fully meet the nation's food assistance needs is questionable.

Absent an economic turnaround — meaning more and better-paying jobs — both the nation's and Iowa's food-insecure population is likely to remain higher than historical levels. Coming federal budget cuts will make it increasingly difficult for emergency feeding organizations to help those that come to their door.

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<sup>1</sup> Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, "Household Food Security in the United States in 2010," Economic Research Report No. 125, Economic Research Service (ERS), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), September 2011. <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR125/ERR125.pdf>>.

<sup>2</sup> Economic Research Report No. 125.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Bickel, Mark Nord, Cristofer Price, William Hamilton, John Cook, "Guide to Measuring Household Food Security," Office of Analysis, Nutrition, and Evaluation, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA. Revised March 2000. <<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsec/files/fsguide.pdf>>.

<sup>4</sup> "Guide to Measuring Household Food Security."

<sup>5</sup> "Food Insecurity in the United States: Definitions of Hunger and Food Security," ERS, USDA. Accessed August 17, 2011. <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/labels.htm>>.

<sup>6</sup> Author's calculations, based on Economic Research Report No. 125 (2011) and U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2009 American Community Survey, Table B01003; generated by Andrew Cannon using AmericanFact Finder. Accessed August 26, 2011. <[http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?\\_lang=en](http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en)>.

<sup>7</sup> Craig Gunderson, Julia Brown, Emily Engelhard, and Elaine Waxman, "Map the Meal Gap," Feeding America, Accessed August 24, 2011. <<http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-meal-gap.aspx>>.

<sup>8</sup> "Map the Meal Gap."

<sup>9</sup> John Cook, "Child Food Insecurity in the United States: 2006-2008," Feeding America, Accessed August 17, 2011. <<http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/~media/Files/research/state-child-hunger-2010.ashx?pdf>>.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, Steven Carlson, "Household Food Security in the United States, 2007," Economic Research Report No. 66, ERS, USDA, November 2008. <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR66/ERR66.pdf>>. Nord, Andrews and Carlson, "Household Food Security in the United States, 2008," Economic Research Report No. 83, ERS, USDA, November 2009. <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err83/err83.pdf>>.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Nord, Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, "Household Food Security in the United States, 2009," Economic Research Report No. 108, Economic Research Service (ERS), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), November 2010. <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR108/ERR108.pdf>>.

<sup>12</sup> Employment Situation, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Historical Data for A tables. August 5, 2011. <<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>>

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- <sup>13</sup> James Mabli, Rhoda Cohen, Frank Potter and Zhanyun Zhao, “Hunger in America 2010,” Mathematica Policy Research for Feeding America, January 2010. <<http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/hunger-study-2010.aspx>>. And *Federal Register*, Vol. 76, No. 13; January 20, 2011. <<http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/11fedreg.shtml>>.
- <sup>14</sup> James Mabli, Rhoda Cohen, Frank Potter and Zhanyun Zhao, “Hunger in America 2010: Local Report Prepared for the Food Bank of Iowa,” Mathematica Policy Research for Feeding America, January 2010. <[http://feedingamerica.issuelab.org/research/listing/hunger\\_in\\_america\\_2010\\_local\\_report\\_prepared\\_for\\_the\\_food\\_bank\\_of\\_iowa](http://feedingamerica.issuelab.org/research/listing/hunger_in_america_2010_local_report_prepared_for_the_food_bank_of_iowa)>.
- <sup>15</sup> Economic Research Report No. 125.
- <sup>16</sup> “Hunger in America 2010” and “Hunger in America 2010: Iowa.”
- <sup>17</sup> “Hunger in America 2010” and “Hunger in America 2010: Iowa.”
- <sup>18</sup> Iowa Food Banks, Feeding America, Accessed August 30, 2011. <<http://feedingamerica.org/foodbank-results.aspx?state=IA>>.
- <sup>19</sup> Economic Research Report No. 108.
- <sup>20</sup> Economic Research Report No. 108.
- <sup>21</sup> Economic Research Report No. 108.
- <sup>22</sup> Nutrition Assistance Programs Performance Report, October Release (August 2011 data), FNS, USDA. Accessed November 2, 2011. <<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns/data.htm>>.
- <sup>23</sup> *Federal Register*, Vol. 76, No. 13.
- <sup>24</sup> “The Ryan Budget Challenge to SNAP,” Iowa Fiscal Partnership, May 24, 2011. <<http://www.iowapolicyproject.org/2011docs/110525-IFP-SNAP-bgd.pdf>>.
- <sup>25</sup> Sheila Zedlewski, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Counters High Unemployment,” Urban Institute, July 1, 2011. <<http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412365-supplemental-nutrition.pdf>>.
- <sup>26</sup> National and State Program Data: Iowa, Food Research and Action Center, Accessed August 30, 2011. <<http://frac.org/reports-and-resources/reports-2/>>.