



Poverty and Food Insecurity in Wisconsin and Washington County

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Poverty in Wisconsin rose substantially during the 2000s. In 2009, 12.4% of the state's population was living in poverty, increasing to 13.2% in 2010 - roughly 731,479 people¹ - as compared to 8.7% in 2000.² Wisconsin residents are better off economically than the nation as a whole. However, the advantage has narrowed in recent years. Economic conditions in Wisconsin worsened as the state weathered two significant recessions and rising unemployment. As a result, a growing share of households in the state are living in poverty and struggling to meet their basic food needs.

What is poverty?

Although poverty is a subjective term, the federal poverty line is intended to indicate the minimum resources families need for an adequate standard of living. The official poverty line varies according to the number of household members and their ages. The poverty threshold increases each year to account for inflation. In 2010, the federal poverty

line was \$22,314 for a family of four and \$11,139 for one person.³ Most researchers agree that the poverty line underestimates the minimum resources necessary to meet basic needs. Nonetheless, poverty rates are one way to compare economic hardship among groups, across locations, and over time.

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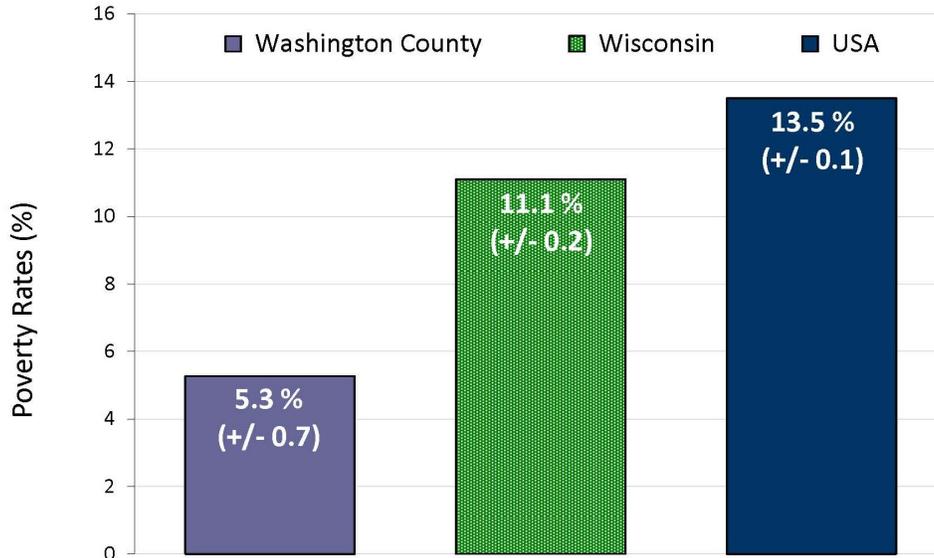
This briefing supplements the *Wisconsin Families – Issues and Demographics* series, Family Living Programs, University of Wisconsin - Extension.

Where is poverty?

The extent of poverty varies greatly across Wisconsin. In Washington County, the poverty rate during 2005-2009 was 5.3%, an increase from 2000 when the rate was 3.6%.

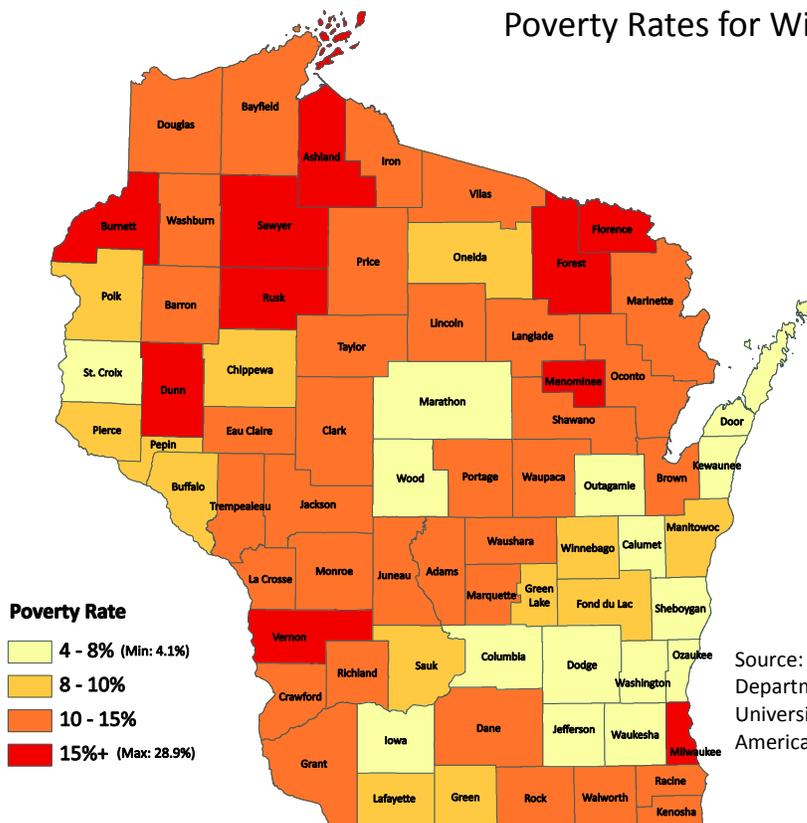
During 2005-9, the poverty rate in Washington County was significantly lower than the statewide rate of 11.1% and was significantly lower than the national average of 13.5%.⁴

County Poverty Rate with State and National Comparison, 2005-2009



Source: American Communities Survey 2005-2009, 5-year estimates

Poverty Rates for Wisconsin Counties, 2005-09



Source: Applied Population Laboratory
Department of Community and Environmental Sociology
University of Wisconsin-Madison
American Community Survey 2005-09, 5-year estimates

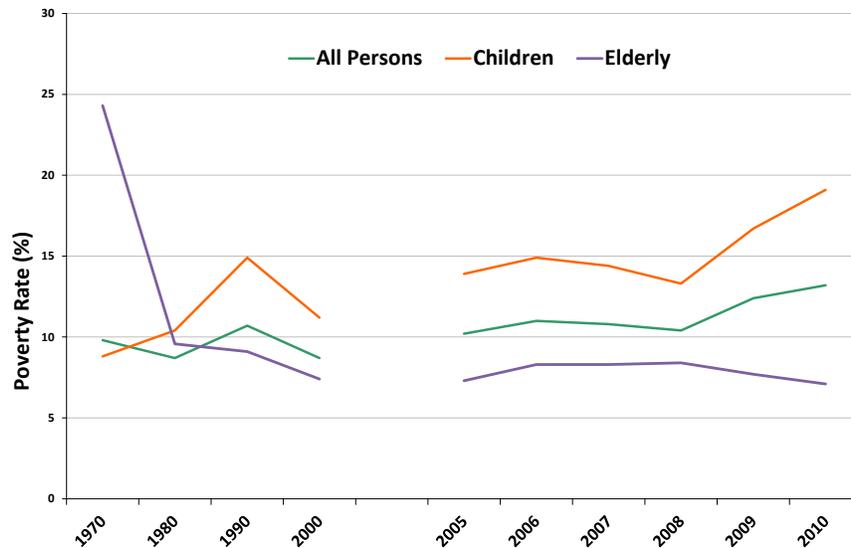
Who is in poverty?

There is no single face of poverty. Historically, poverty in Wisconsin was most common among the elderly population. The proportion of elderly in poverty dramatically declined since 1970. In contrast, the proportion of children living in poverty has increased. Conse-

quently, poverty rates today are higher among children.

Groups at higher-than-average risk of poverty in Wisconsin include children, single-mother households, racial/ethnic minorities, and adults with a high school education or less.

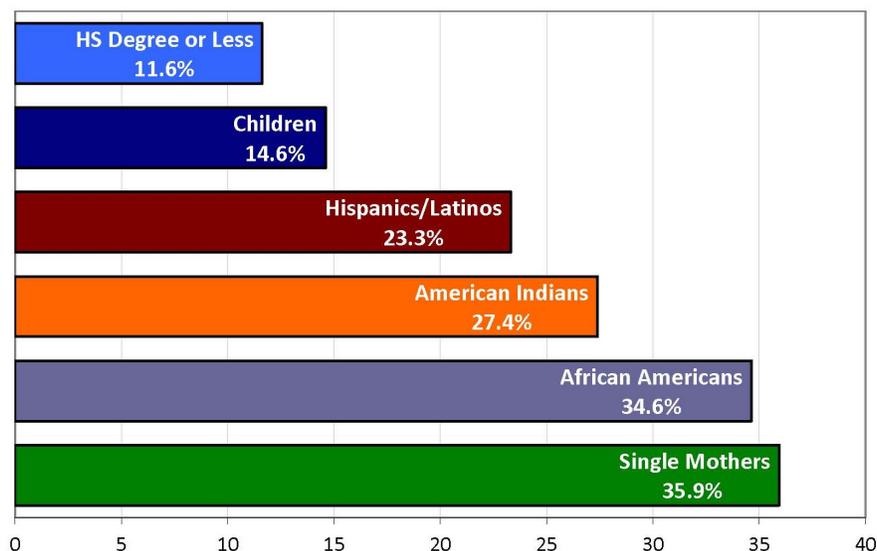
Wisconsin Poverty Rates, 1970-2010



Source: Derived from decennial Census 1970-2000 and American Community Survey 2005-2010, 1-year estimates

* Child poverty rate reflects related children under 18 in 1970 and 1980, and all children under 18 in the remaining years. There is no statistical difference in the reported poverty rates for related and all children in years when both poverty rates are available.

Poverty Rates Among High Risk Groups in Wisconsin, 2005-09



Source: American Community Survey 2005-09, 5-year estimates

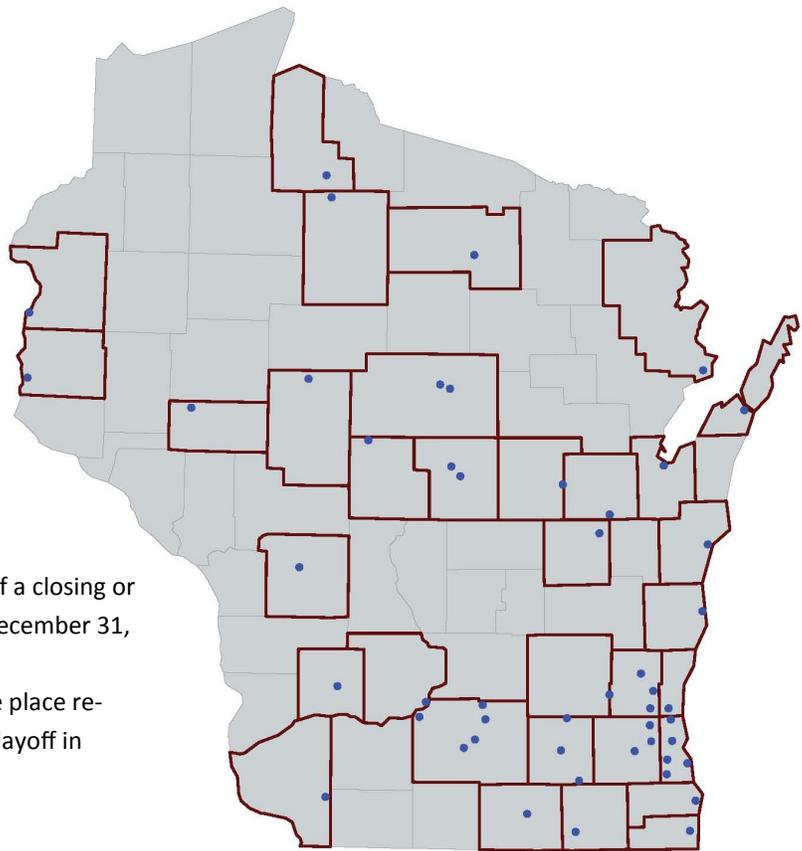
What causes poverty?

Limited earnings potential, including the inability to find sufficient work at an adequate wage, is strongly linked to poverty in Wisconsin.⁵

Wisconsin, and the nation, experienced two significant recessions during the 2000s. Plant closings, layoffs, and unemployment resulted. During May, June and July of 2010 alone, Wisconsin reported nearly 18,000 initial claims for unemployment insurance.⁶

Closings and Mass Layoffs, 2010

- Places with at least one report of a closing or mass layoff, January 1, 2010 – December 31, 2010.
- Counties with at least one place reporting a closing or mass layoff in 2010.

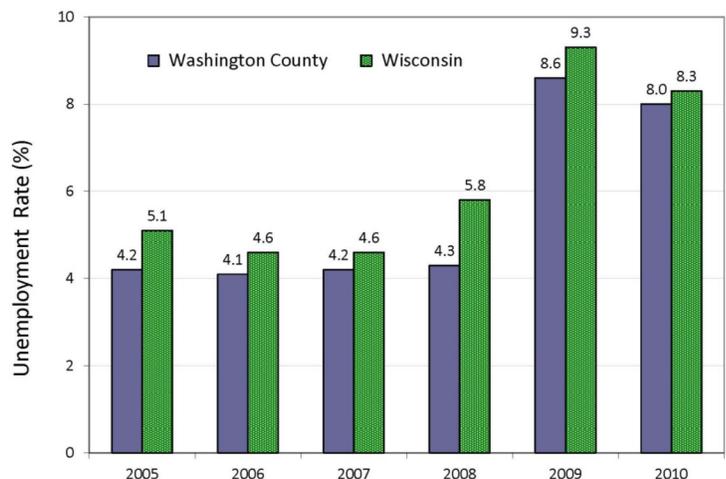


Source: Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development

Although the state has had a large number of layoffs due to a business closing or mass layoff, not all counties and their residents have been equally affected.⁷ 181 layoffs resulting from a business closing or mass layoff were reported in Washington County during 2010.

Unemployment in Wisconsin rose during the past five years, most significantly between 2008 and 2009. In Washington County, the unemployment rate was 8.0% in 2010, comparable to the statewide rate of 8.3%.

Unemployment Rate in Washington County and Wisconsin, 2005-10

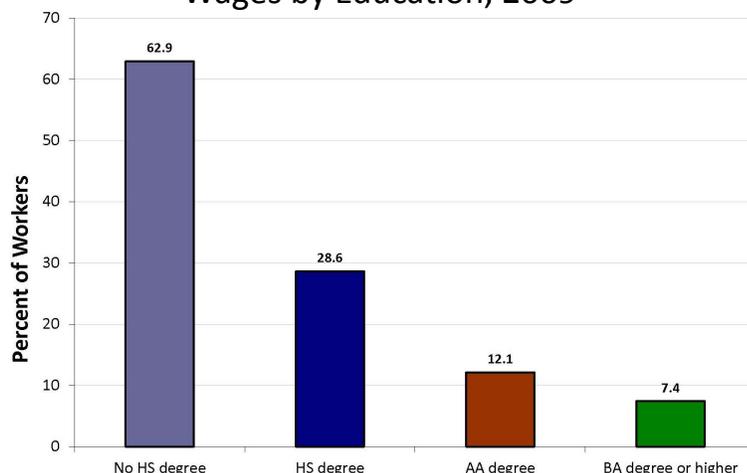


Source: Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development's Annual Unemployment Rates, 2005-2010

Employment is not always enough to escape poverty. In Wisconsin, 23% of all workers earn a lower hourly wage than would be needed to keep a family of four with a fulltime worker out of poverty.⁸

“Poverty wages” are most common among those with lower education. In Washington County, 43% of adults have a high school degree or less, comparable to the statewide rate of 45%.

Share of Wisconsin Workers Earning Poverty Wages by Education, 2009



Source: Center on Wisconsin Strategies (COWS), 2010

How does poverty impact food security?

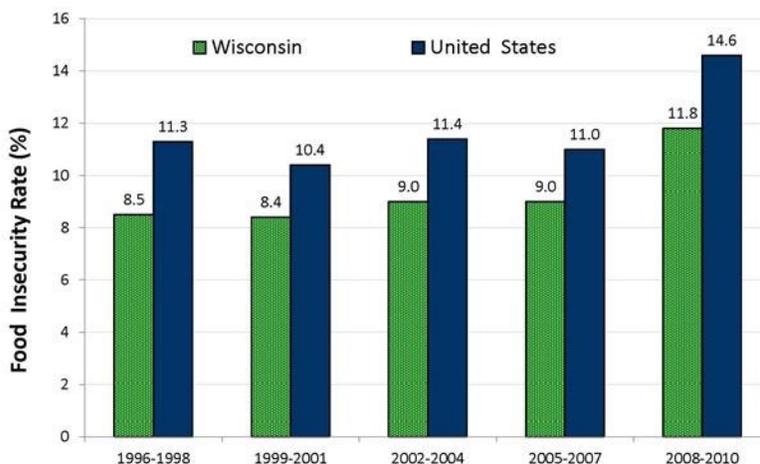
Poverty puts households at much higher risk of food insecurity and hunger. Hunger and food insecurity, in turn, are linked to other problems. For children, these include poor health, behavioral problems, and learning and academic problems.⁹

Food secure households have enough food at all times for an active healthy life. In contrast, households with low food security have uncertain access to food. They report running out of food without having money to buy more, cutting back the size of meals due to lack of money, or having to skip meals altogether.

Like other states and the nation as a whole, Wisconsin households have become more food insecure in the past 15 years. Although Wisconsin continues to fare better than the country as a whole, the rate of food insecurity has increased substantially in the state.

In 1996-1998, 8.5% of Wisconsin's households were food insecure as compared to 11.3% of the nation's households. There was relatively little change through the 2005-2007 period. In 2008-2010, coinciding with the severe economic downturn, Wisconsin's food insecurity rate jumped to 11.8%, while the national rate jumped to 14.6%.

Food Insecurity Rates, 1996—2010

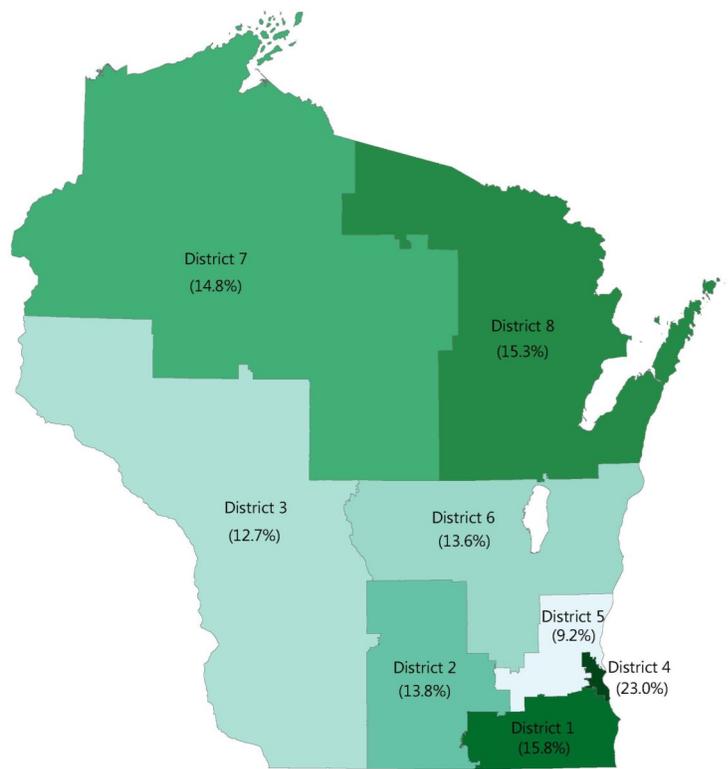


Source: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Food hardship is not experienced equally across all communities in the state. The highest food hardship rate in 2008-09 - 23% - was reported by residents of District 4 in Milwaukee. The next highest rate - 15.3% - was reported for District 8 in the northeastern part of the state.

Washington County is in District 5, where 9.2% of the population reported food hardship. "Food hardship" in these data means that over the past year household members did not always have money to buy the food they needed.¹⁰

Food Hardship Rate by Congressional District, 2009-2010

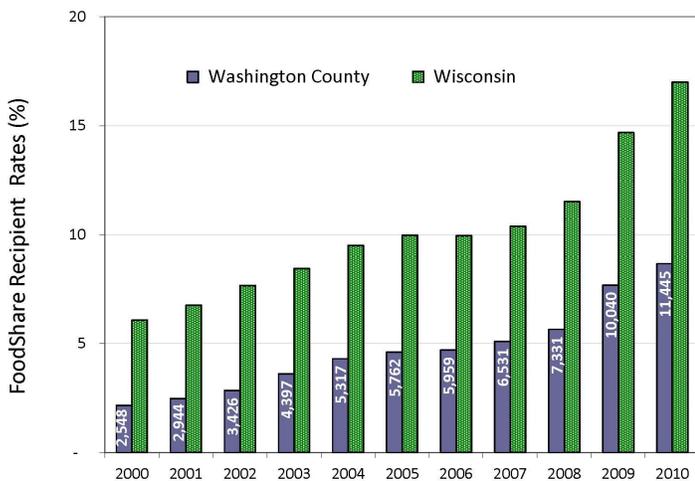


District 1	District 3	District 4	District 7	District 8
Kenosha	Buffalo	Milwaukee	Ashland	Brown
Milwaukee	Clark		Barron	Calumet
Racine	Crawford	<u>District 5</u>	Bayfield	Door
Rock	Dunn	Jefferson	Burnett	Florence
Walworth	Eau Claire	Milwaukee	Chippewa	Forest
Waukesha	Grant	Ozaukee	Clark	Kewaunee
	Iowa	Washington	Douglas	Langlade
<u>District 2</u>	Jackson	Waukesha	Iron	Marinette
Columbia	Juneau		Lincoln	Menominee
Dane	La Crosse	<u>District 6</u>	Langlade	Oconto
Green	Lafayette	Adams	Marathon	Oneida
Jefferson	Monroe	Calumet	Oneida	Outagamie
Rock	Pepin	Dodge	Polk	Shawano
Sauk	Pierce	Fond du Lac	Portage	Vilas
Walworth	Richland	Green Lake	Price	Waupaca
	St. Croix	Jefferson	Rusk	
	Sauk	Manitowoc	Sawyer	
	Trempealeau	Marquette	Taylor	
	Vernon	Outagamie	Washburn	
		Sheboygan	Wood	
		Waushara		
		Winnebago		

Source: Food Research and Action Center, 2011

* Food hardship is defined as the percent of respondents who indicated that there have been times in the past 12 months when they did not have the money to buy food that they or their family needed.

Percent of Population Receiving FoodShare in Washington County and Wisconsin, 2000-10



Source: Derived from Wisconsin Department of Health Services FoodShare Data, Annual Population Estimates, and Census 2010

Another indication of food-related hardship is the share of the population participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, which is referred to as Food Share in Wisconsin). Overall, the proportion of Wisconsin residents who participated in FoodShare increased between 2000 and 2010, particularly as economic conditions declined.

In Washington County, the number of FoodShare participants increased from 2,548 to 11,445. The rate of FoodShare participation in 2010 was 9%, lower than the statewide rate of 17%.

How can I help?

As poverty grows, so too does food insecurity. Both are on the rise in Wisconsin communities. These are complex problems without easy solutions, but communities can make a difference. Poverty and hunger are issues of community and economic development. Although poverty and food insecurity are experienced by individuals and households, communities also experience such hardships.

Communities can reduce poverty and, in turn, food insecurity by promoting higher wages. Higher wages help working people and families escape poverty and stay out of poverty. Some communities and states have passed living wage laws requiring certain employers to pay wages higher than the national minimum. Other communities have pursued economic development plans to attract better paying jobs. Poverty and food insecurity will not be solved by introducing jobs alone, but by introducing well-paying jobs.

Communities can help ensure that supports are available to working families. Family-friendly policies, including parental leave and flexible scheduling, and other work conditions can help working parents succeed at their jobs. Quality, affordable child care helps as well.

Safety net programs also play a role. When families can't meet their basic needs through work, public programs to help with health care, food, housing, heat and other essentials are important. Likewise, community-based non-profit organizations are important in helping families to meet essential needs.

Communities can invest in schools and ensure that all children have support necessary to succeed in school. A good education is one of the best ways for children to avoid living in poverty as adults. Similarly, communities can promote training and education for adults. The risk of poverty declines as education levels increase.

Communities can also help to address food insecurity. Food security stems from economic security, but is also influenced by retail access to affordable and healthy foods; strong federal food and nutrition assistance programs; and a strong emergency food system.

Communities can improve access to affordable and healthy food by promoting the establishment of grocery stores, farmers markets, and other healthy food outlets that are convenient to all community members. Nutrition education programs can help families to stretch limited food dollars.

Communities can also take steps to strengthen access to federal food programs. Possible strategies include starting summer meal programs to help feed children when school is out; developing school breakfast programs; conducting outreach to ensure families are aware of available food and nutrition assistance programs; and improving the nutritional quality of school meals.

Finally, communities can strengthen their emergency food systems by taking steps to increase both the quantity and healthiness of available foods available at food pantries, and by fostering linkages between food pantries and other public and private food resources.

End Notes

¹ The number reported by the 2010 ACS 1-year estimates has a margin of error of +/-17,834. Therefore, we can be 90% certain that the actual number of people in Wisconsin living below the poverty line falls between 713,645 and 734,631.

² Poverty estimates are from the 2009 and 2010 American Community Survey, 1-year Estimates, and Census 2000 SF3. These and other estimates are available through the US Census Bureau on-line through the American Factfinder (<http://factfinder.census.gov> and <http://factfinder2.census.gov>).

³ Three separate poverty guidelines are calculated for the lower 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia, Alaska, and Hawaii. The 2010 guidelines can be found on-line through the US Department of Health and Human Services (<http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/10poverty.shtml>). Poverty thresholds used here and reported by the US Census Bureau can be accessed on-line (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/index.html>).

⁴ The poverty rate reported by the 2005-09 ACS 5-year estimates has a margin of error of +/-0.7%. Therefore, we can be 90% certain that the actual number of people in Washington County living below the poverty line falls between 4.5% and 6.0%. The state estimate falls outside the county range. Therefore, the county estimate is significantly different from the state estimate. A complete table of poverty rates for all Wisconsin counties is available through the Applied Population Laboratory (http://www.apl.wisc.edu/publications/poverty_rates_WI_portrait.pdf).

⁵ Curtis, Katherine J. and Heather O'Connell. County Factors Related to Wisconsin Poverty, 2000. (Wisconsin Poverty Series, Briefing #3). August 2010. <http://www.apl.wisc.edu/publications/WisPovertyBriefing-3.pdf>

⁶ O'Connell, Heather and Katherine J. Curtis. *Recent Trends in Closings and Layoffs in Wisconsin, 2000-2010*. (Wisconsin Poverty Series, Briefing #5). December 2010. <http://www.apl.wisc.edu/publications/WisPovertyBriefing-5.pdf>

⁷ Employees are counted if their employment is terminated, if they are laid off for more than 6 months, or if their hours are reduced more than 50% during each month of any 6-month period as result of a business closing or mass layoff. A business (or plant) closing is reported if it involves a permanent or temporary shutdown of an employment site or of one or more facilities or operating units within a single municipality that affects 25 or more employees. A mass layoff is reported if there is a reduction in the workforce that is not a business closing and which affects at least 25% of the workforce or 25 employees, whichever is greater, or at least 500 employees in an employment site or within a single municipality. This and more information on layoffs and closings is available through the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/er/labor_standards_bureau/business_closing_and_mass_layoffs.htm).

⁸ Center for Wisconsin Strategies (COWS). 2010. *The State of Working Wisconsin, 2010*. (<http://cows.org/pdf/rp-soww-10.pdf>)

⁹ Center on Hunger and Poverty, Brandeis University. 2002. *The Consequences of Hunger and Food Insecurity for Children: Evidence from Recent Scientific Studies*. www.centeronhunger.org/pdf/ConsequencesofHunger.pdf

¹⁰ "Food hardship" is based on a single question indicating whether household members did not always have money to buy the food they needed. "Food insecurity" is based on a series of questions about households' ability to meet their food needs. The two measures are similar but not identical.

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Poverty and Food Insecurity in Wisconsin briefs for all counties can be found at:
http://www.apl.wisc.edu/poverty_food_security.html



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