

# Hartford Food System Community Food Survey

## *Executive Summary*

### **Introduction**

During the past several years, Connecticut and most of the nation have experienced a record strong economy and low rates of unemployment. At the same time, there has been large-scale involvement by both the federal government and private organizations to provide food assistance to the poor. Despite a strong economy and these public and private efforts, millions of Americans continue to experience hunger and food insecurity every year. Therefore, the question is raised: Why are the poor still struggling to have enough to eat?

To address this issue, Katie Martin, the Research Director at the Hartford Food System and a doctoral student at the School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, recently conducted a study in Hartford, CT. The goal of the study is to examine the relationships between household food security and community food resources. Surveys were conducted in the homes of 330 low-income households (income below 185% of poverty) in Hartford, CT from May to October 1999. Preliminary results from the study are described below.

### **Background**

The concern about food insecurity and hunger in Hartford is not new. Several studies have documented high levels of food insecurity and hunger within Hartford. The 1990 Hartford Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project found that 41% of children under 12 years of age in households with incomes below 185% of poverty had experienced hunger, and an additional 35% had experienced food shortages that put them at risk of hunger during the past 12 months.<sup>1</sup> A more recent study of Latino children in Hartford found that 21% of respondents had gone without food for a day or more because their families could not afford to buy food.<sup>2</sup>

### **Household Food Security**

For the purposes of this study, food security was defined as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active healthy life and includes at a minimum: a) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and b) the assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (e.g., without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, and other coping strategies).”<sup>3</sup> Over half of the households from the study experienced some food insecurity during the past 12 months. The following chart lists the four categories of food security and the percentages of households who were classified into each category.

Food Secure	48%
Food Insecure without Hunger	28%
Food Insecure with Moderate Hunger	16%
(where at least one adult experienced hunger)	
Food Insecure with Severe Hunger	8%
(where at least one child experienced hunger)	

### **Relationship between Social Capital and Food Security**

One of the major research questions for this study was to determine if a relationship exists between food security and social capital. Robert Putnam defines social capital as the features of

social organization such as networks, norms and trust that increase a community's productive potential.<sup>4</sup> Social capital is what many people broadly describe as a "sense of community." Previous studies have examined the relationship between social capital and health, but none to our knowledge have examined the influence that social capital has on hunger and food security. Results from this study suggest that having trust in one's neighbors and being involved in one's community are positively associated with household food security. Households that are food secure:

- have higher degrees of social capital,
- are more likely to be involved in social or civic organizations, and
- have lived in their house or apartment for a longer length of time.

**Food Assistance Programs: Who Participates, Who Doesn't and Why**

The study also examined ten major food assistance programs to determine who participates, why people choose not to participate, and what correlations exist between participation and household food security.

While overall participation in many food assistance programs in Hartford is high, results from this study indicate that many of the most needy households do not receive assistance from available resources. Among households who were not only food insecure, but who experienced hunger during the past 12 months:

- 45% did not receive Food Stamps,
- 65% did not receive Welfare,
- 67% did not go to a food pantry, and
- 78% did not go to a soup kitchen for emergency food.

Although many studies have measured household participation in public, private and community-based food assistance programs, few have investigated people's decisions not to participate in these programs. The following charts describe how food secure households have different reasons for not participating in private, emergency food programs compared to households who are food insecure or experiencing hunger. Respondents were asked for reasons why they chose not to participate in a given program, and respondents could choose more than one reason.

*Reasons for not going to a Food Pantry*

Reason	Food Secure n=160	Food Insec n=170	P value
We don't need the food	74%	26%	.00
It is difficult to carry the food home	41%	59%	NS
We don't know where it is located	50%	50%	NS
We feel uncomfortable using the program	65%	35%	.04
No transportation, difficult to get to the program	24%	76%	.00
We believe our family is not eligible	71%	29%	.01

Food secure households were more likely to say that they didn't go to a food pantry because they didn't need the food. Food secure households were more likely to say that they felt uncomfortable going to a food pantry. Food insecure households were significantly more likely to say that it was difficult to get to a food pantry and that lack of transportation was a major reason for not going.

### **Food Shopping Behavior**

Households that are food secure are more likely to shop at a large supermarket, take more trips to a large supermarket each month, are more likely to own a car, and buy *most* of their food at a large supermarket. Households that buy most of their food at medium-sized grocery stores or small corner stores are significantly less likely to be food secure. Food insecure households have difficulty accessing food because they:

- Are less likely to shop at a large supermarket
- Take fewer trips to a large supermarket each month
- Are more likely to take alternative forms of transportation to and from the supermarket

### **Conclusion**

Findings from this research suggest that many of the most food insecure households are not receiving assistance from available food resources, and that transportation is a barrier to food access for food insecure households. Survey results also show that there are important differences as to why certain households choose not to participate in food assistance programs. By clarifying these reasons, we may be better able to serve those who are most in need. In addition, social capital, which involves trust, community involvement and social networks, is positively related to food security. Community efforts do make a difference in food security. These results indicate that rather than focusing simply on food assistance, we need to shift our focus to "building community" and more intangible resources of time and energy in order to fight hunger.

### **References**

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<sup>1</sup> Damio, G. and L. Cohen. "Policy Report of the Hartford Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project." The Hispanic Health Council, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Perez-Escamilla, R., D. Himmelgreen, and A. Ferris. "Community Nutritional Problems Among Latino children in Hartford, CT." Connecticut Family Nutrition Program Technical Report #1, Storrs and Hartford, CT, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Life Sciences Research Office (LSRO). "Core Indicators of Nutritional State for Difficult to Sample Populations," edited by Sue Ann Anderson. Published in *The Journal of Nutrition*, vo. 120, no.11S, November 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Putnam, R. "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Affairs." *The American Prospect*, No. 13, Spring 1993.