

Policy Briefing Paper

October 2006

Food Insecurity in Connecticut: Strategies that Go Beyond the Traditional Responses

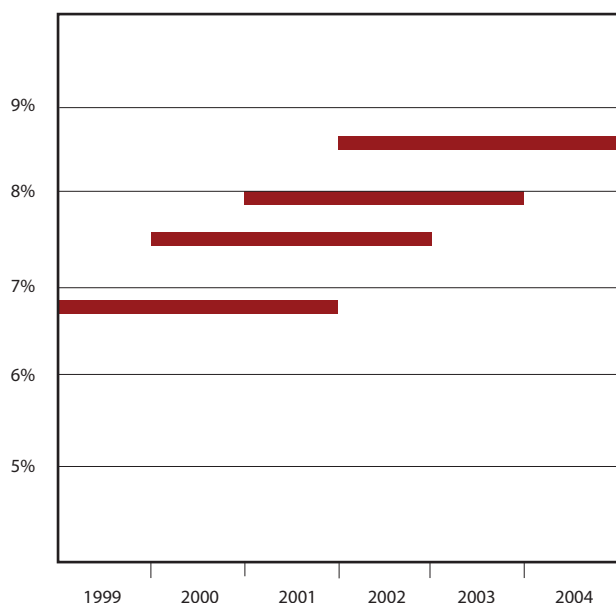
Connecticut is a state blessed with steady economic growth and a high standard of living. Its median household income ranks as the third highest in the nation.¹ Not all residents share in this general prosperity, however. Many rural towns struggle with unemployment and isolation from economic opportunities, while Connecticut's urban areas are among the poorest in the nation. Hartford in particular has the *fourth lowest* median household income among major cities nationwide.²

This economic gap has only widened in recent years. While incomes have grown by 67% for families in the top fifth of Connecticut's income range, income growth for the bottom fifth has lagged behind at 13% since the early 1980s.³ In towns and cities across Connecticut, people live dramatically different lives despite their common residence in a very small state.

These disparities are particularly harsh when it comes to meeting life's basic necessities. Many Connecticut families struggle with food insecurity – not always being able to acquire nutritionally adequate and safe foods due to limited or uncertain resources. For thousands of people in the state, the challenge of how to stretch the grocery budget through the entire week or what to do when there isn't enough food for everyone in the household is a source of tremendous strain and anxiety.

This *Policy Briefing Paper* examines recent trends in food insecurity and presents long-term, sustainable ways to address this issue in the state.

Chart I: Food Insecurity in Connecticut
(Household prevalence averaged in three-year intervals)



Hunger is real in Connecticut and getting worse.

The federal government conducts regular surveys to measure household food insecurity on a state-by-state basis. These statistics are calculated on a rolling, three-year average to minimize any seasonal variations. For Connecticut, household food insecurity rose by 27% between the 1999-2001 and 2002-2004 periods.⁴ The most recent federal measurement finds that nearly 40,000 Connecticut households have experienced hunger in conjunction with food insecurity within a 12-month period.⁵

The number of people without adequate food is climbing despite a corresponding expansion of America's safety net against hunger: charitable food donations and federal nutrition programs. These two forms of assistance represent the primary responses within the nonprofit and public sectors to fight hunger. Yet at a time when private charities are distributing more food than ever before and the federal Food Stamp Program is approaching a record number of participants, this increased food assistance has not been able to keep pace with the rising level of need.

Charitable food donations in Connecticut have nearly doubled in recent years, with food banks distributing more

than 109 million pounds of food during the 1999-2004 period.⁶ (As a basis for comparison, the Statue of Liberty and Eiffel Tower combined weigh 68 million pounds). Without this massive outpouring of aid, hunger in Connecticut would be even worse.

The government is also doing more. While the President has recommended food stamp cuts in recent years, Congress wisely rejected these proposals and the program has expanded significantly in response to escalating need. Connecticut's food stamp caseload rose by 30% between Fiscal Years 2001-2005, with an \$87.5 million increase in benefit levels within the state.⁷

What is causing this sharp rise in food insecurity?

The chief reason why more Connecticut residents are experiencing food insecurity despite the expanded availability of food assistance is because *poverty is also rising*.⁸ As economic conditions worsen for more and more low-income families, the demand for food assistance goes up as well. Federal statistics also show that the opposite effect holds true. Food insecurity generally goes down when the overall economy improves. This trend was apparent during the economic expansion of the 1990s, when food stamp participation rates fell for six straight years.⁹

The close link between hunger and poverty reflects the difficult choices that people make when they lack enough resources for basic necessities. Food expenses are one of the few spending categories that can be scaled back quickly when household income levels fall. It often isn't possible to skip the car payment or renegotiate rent in the short run, but meals are sometimes missed and trips to the grocery store deferred when money is tight.

Consistent with this historical correlation between hunger and poverty, recent statistics show that the number of households experiencing food insecurity has risen since 1999 in tandem with the number of people in poverty. In Connecticut, poverty rates increased from an average 7.4% between 1999-2001 to 8.8% between 2002-2004 at the same time that household food insecurity expanded from 6.8% to 8.6%.¹⁰

Chart 2: Charitable Food Donations
(Millions of pounds distributed statewide by food banks)

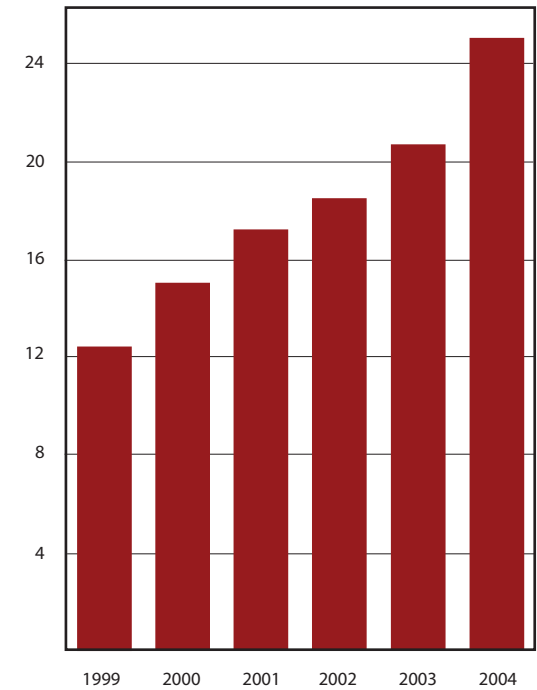
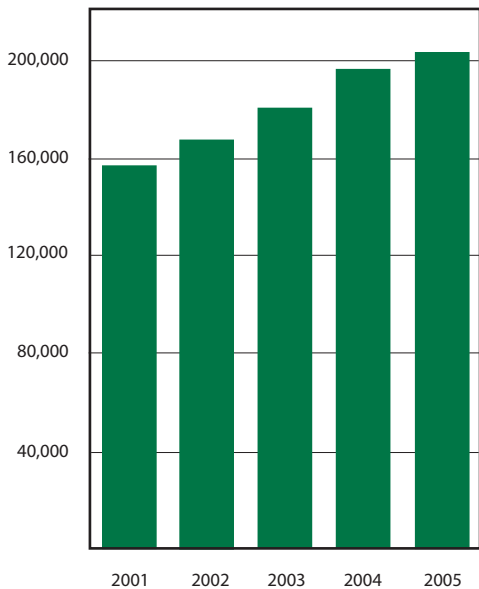


Chart 3: Food Stamp Caseloads
(Average monthly participation in Connecticut)



Long-term policies can help break the link between poverty and hunger.

Upon closer scrutiny, however, changes in poverty rates do not provide a satisfactory explanation for why food insecurity should worsen so dramatically in just a few years. After all, other social problems are also linked to economic conditions but do not exhibit these wide swings in severity. Homelessness doesn't rise by 27% in a three year period when the housing market heats up, nor does crime when the unemployment rate increases. Disparities in public health are a mounting crisis in low-income areas, but the prevalence of preventable diseases doesn't rise and fall with the business cycle either.

What makes hunger different from these other conditions is that Connecticut lacks comprehensive, sustainable mechanisms to address food issues in poor communities. Practically every municipality has a housing authority, police force, and health department that are responsible for ongoing interventions to the social problems mentioned above, but there is no Department of Food to mitigate the causes of hunger and poor nutrition or to develop long-term solutions to these problems.

Instead, we have counter-mechanisms like charitable food donations and federal assistance programs, which represent important tools in

responding to hunger but only treat the symptoms of the problem. They do not address the reasons why so many people need food assistance in the first place.

While a Department of Food would not be a realistic option for most towns, forward-thinking policies can help break the link between poverty and hunger. Policy advocates should consider strategies in three key areas:

1) *Grocery retailing: Improving access to regular sources of food*

The food retail environment in inner cities and poor rural areas is significantly different from the rest of the state. Most supermarkets are concentrated in Connecticut's suburban towns, while larger cities and isolated rural areas have far less supermarket capacity. Fifty rural townships have no supermarkets at all.¹¹

In the absence of better options, urban and rural residents rely on local retailers like bodegas and convenience stores for their grocery needs, or travel regularly outside their own communities to buy food elsewhere. These local retailers typically offer substandard choices compared to regular supermarkets. Shelves at corner markets and bodegas are overflowing with snack foods, since these items sell quickly and have a higher profit margin than regular food staples like boxed pasta or canned soup. Prices are generally higher as well.

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Connecticut policymakers should consider market-based incentives that persuade the supermarket industry to locate more stores in underserved areas. Policy options include economic development subsidies to lower the capital costs of new supermarkets, intra-regional subsidies from a public trust fund that channels operating support to supermarkets in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and new regulations that discourage major chains from shunning particular types of communities in their location decisions.

Steps can also be taken to help existing retailers in inner cities. For example, the Hartford Food System is partnering with smaller retailers to improve the nutritional quality of the groceries they sell. Through the *Healthy Food Retailer* initiative, stores receive promotional assistance and support from city-administered programs in return for shifting a portion of their shelf space from junk food to normal groceries.

2) *State and regional planning: Integrating food considerations into broader public policy*

Food policy councils bring together different stakeholders to advise policymakers on food issues. The Hartford Food Policy Commission was created in 1992 and the state-level Connecticut Food Policy Council was created in 1997 for this purpose. Similar councils are in formation or under consideration in New Britain and New Haven.

Intergovernmental mechanisms like these are essential to develop sustainable solutions to hunger and should be expanded to policy issues that are dealt with on a regional basis as well. For example, car ownership levels are lower in the same urban neighborhoods where supermarkets are scarce, which means that public transportation decisions have an impact on food insecurity. Supermarkets tend to favor undeveloped sites with lots of open space for parking lots and huge stores, which means that land use planning also has an effect on food accessibility. Economic development policies can be used to ameliorate food retail problems as mentioned above, but a recent survey found that most urban planners and development officials do not see food issues as relevant to their job assignments.¹²

State policymakers should integrate food considerations into these planning decisions by making access to food a priority in program criteria and how resources are allocated. Connecticut has fifteen regional planning organizations that help coordinate decisions among neighboring municipalities. These regional planning organizations should also prioritize solutions to food insecurity, following the example of the Capitol Region Council of Governments of the greater Hartford region, which has incorporated food issues in its regional strategy.

3) *Locally grown food: Supporting food producers here at home*

Connecticut agriculture is a vital source of food in the state, but many farmers are being squeezed by rising operational costs and diminishing markets for their crops. High land prices also create an incentive to convert farmland to other uses like housing subdivisions and office parks. In the span of five years between 1997-2002, 15% of Connecticut farms went out of business.¹³

State policies can help farmers while also making food more accessible to people in need. For example, the federal government enhances the purchasing power of low-income shoppers at farmers markets through the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. Demand for these subsidies is oversubscribed in Connecticut; state policymakers should consider budgeting extra money to expand the program.

Like a growing number of states, Connecticut also promotes farm sales to public school systems through the Connecticut Farm-to-School Program. This worthy initiative assists local farmers while improving the nutritional quality of school cafeteria food. However it functions largely at the initiative of local school systems. Suburban districts with low levels of food insecurity have been its most active participants, while urban school districts with high levels of social distress have been less involved in the program. The state should consider allocating additional resources to broaden the economic benefits to participating farmers while refocusing the Connecticut Farm-to-School Program on the communities that need help the most.

Conclusion

Solutions to food insecurity in Connecticut require system-based changes in the local food economy. Simply adding more soup kitchens or emergency pantries is unlikely to register a measurable effect, given the steady rise in food insecurity in recent years despite an enormous expansion of charitable efforts. The sheer scale of hunger in the state requires new strategies that target the routine channels people use to access food.

If Connecticut's income disparities persist and poverty continues to intensify in disadvantaged areas, traditional responses like charitable food donations and federal assistance programs may never match the level of need. Connecticut should invest in comprehensive, sustainable solutions to food problems. These long-term interventions are not a substitute for emergency assistance, but can shore up these other responses by increasing access to nutritious, affordable food in poor communities.

Endnotes:

¹ Webster, Bruce H. and Alemayehu Bishaw (2006). *Income, Earnings, and Poverty Data from the 2005 American Community Survey*. U.S. Census Bureau.

² Welnaik, Ed and Kirby Posey (2005) *Household Income: 1999* (Census 2000 Brief No. 36). U.S. Census Bureau.

³ Bernstein, Jared, Elizabeth McNichol, and Karen Lyons (2006). *Pulling Apart: A State-by-State Analysis of Income Trends*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Economic Policy Institute, Washington, DC.

⁴ Food insecurity rates for the 1999-2004 period appear in the following reports:

Nord, Mark, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson (2002). *Household Food Security in the United States, 2001*. Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 29, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Nord, Mark, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson (2003). *Household Food Security in the United States, 2002*. Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 35, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Nord, Mark, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson (2004). *Household Food Security in the United States, 2003*. Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 42, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Nord, Mark, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson (2005). *Household Food Security in the United States, 2004*. Economic Research Report No. 11, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

⁵ Nord et al (2005).

⁶ Chart 2's annual distribution levels are the combined total for Foodshare and the Connecticut Food Bank, which together have service areas covering the entire state. Poundage data appears in the 2005 Foodshare annual report and 2004-2005 Connecticut Food Bank annual report.

⁷ Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Food Stamp Program: Average Monthly Participation (Persons) and Food Stamp Program Benefits*. Data as of July 25, 2006.

⁸ Rosenbaum, Dorothy (2006). *The Food Stamp Program is Growing to Meet Need*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Washington, DC.

⁹ Hanson, Kenneth and Craig Gunderson (2002). *How Unemployment Affects the Food Stamp Program*. Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 26-7, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

¹⁰ Nord et al for food security statistics. Poverty statistics are from the annual series *Income, Poverty and Health Coverage in the United States* published by the U.S. Census Bureau.

¹¹ See the Hartford Food System's September 2006 Policy Briefing Paper, *Connecticut Supermarkets: Can New Strategies Address the Geographic Gaps*, for a closer examination of supermarket issues in urban and rural areas.

¹² Pothukuchi, Kameshwari (2005). *Attracting Supermarkets to Inner-City Neighborhoods: Economic Development Outside the Box*, *Economic Development*

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FOOD SYSTEM