

Rhode Island

Public Health Brief

Food Insecurity in Rhode Island



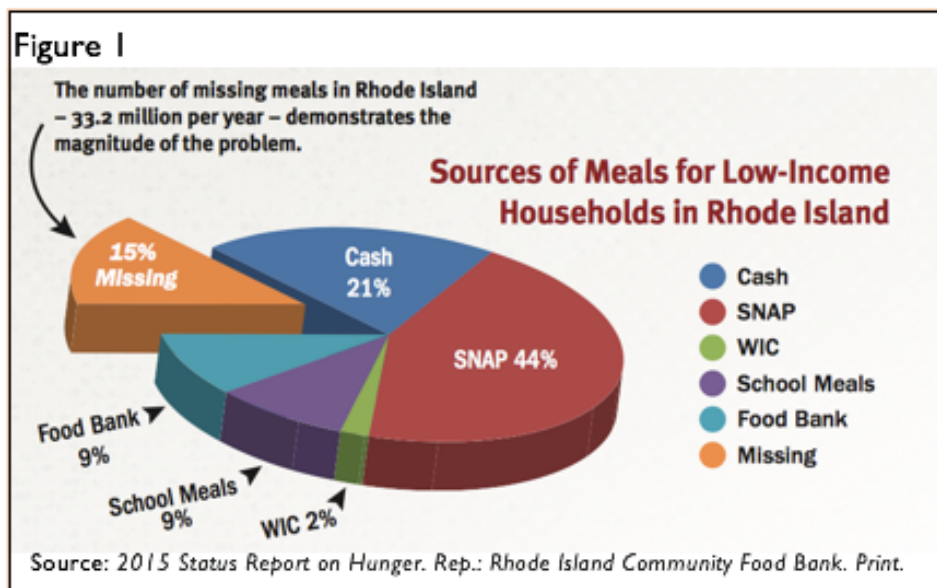
Rhode Island
Public Health
ASSOCIATION

Thousands of families struggle to meet their basic food needs. Currently, 12.7% of Rhode Islanders are food insecure, meaning that 51,000 householdsⁱ are unsure where their next meal will come from due to lack of resources. Individuals experiencing food insecurity often find themselves skipping meals, eating less than they felt they should, or experienced hunger, but did not eat.ⁱⁱ In Rhode Island, 70% of food insecure individuals seeking assistance report having to choose between purchasing food or paying their utilities.ⁱ This speaks to the severity of the problem as well as the many other disadvantages that are tied to food insecurity.

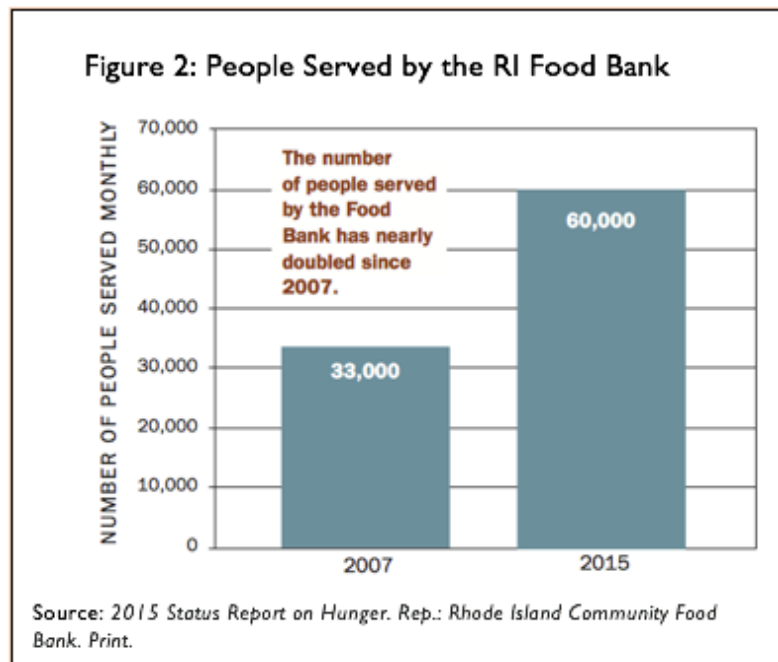
Community Resources: Over 20% of the Rhode Island population currently lives in communities experiencing extreme economic hardship.ⁱⁱⁱ As a result, government nutrition programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), WIC and School Meals are the primary source of meals for low-income households (Figure 1). In 2014, 17% of the Rhode Island population (179,000 residents) received assistance from SNAP^{iv}, a federal program that provides low-income families with benefits to be used to purchase food items. Currently, the average individual enrolled in SNAP only receives \$1.30 per meal,^v making it challenging to purchase healthy food. In 2007, 33,000 individuals sought help from the Rhode Island Food Bank each month. Currently, that number has nearly doubled to 60,000 (Figure 2). Despite providing assistance for many families, these programs do not reach everyone at risk for food insecurity. A significant gap in food assistance means that more than 33 million meals are missed each year by Rhode Islanders at the bottom of the income scale.ⁱⁱⁱ

Consequences of food insecurity: Food insecurity has severe consequences for our most vulnerable citizens: poor children and the elderly. According to the Rhode Island Food Bank, the root cause of food insecurity is poverty.ⁱⁱⁱ Within the state, a large proportion of the population are children and elderly living in poverty, increasing the risk of food insecurity among these groups. Currently, one in five children under the age of 18 in Rhode Island lives in poverty, which is highest among New England states.ⁱⁱ As a result, of the 175,000 Rhode Islanders enrolled in SNAP, 37%ⁱⁱⁱ are children.

Food insecurity can have profound and lasting effects on children by threatening their development, learning and overall health. Young children living in food insecure households are more likely to be in poor health and hospitalized than children in homes with adequate food.ⁱⁱ Additionally, nutritional risk in



children is associated with low grades and behavioral problems at school.^v Seniors are a rapidly growing part of Rhode Island's population, especially the elderly poor. Although Rhode Island has made great strides to reduce poverty in this cohort, almost 10% of Rhode Islanders over the age of 65 live in poverty.ⁱⁱ This can be attributed in part to the fact that social security benefits have not increased to keep up with the rising cost of food, which can be expected to grow annually by 4%. Food insecurity also detrimentally affects the elderly through links to poor health, chronic illness and lower cognitive function among this population.ⁱⁱ



The future of food insecurity:

Rhode Island has taken important steps towards alleviating food insecurity such as increasing funding for Meals on Wheels and offering free meals for afterschool programs.^{vi} Despite the strides, it is painfully clear that thousands of Rhode Islanders still struggle to meet their basic food needs and cannot afford three healthy meals a day. To address this growing challenge, it is crucial to take a multi-level approach. Along with alleviating food insecurity and hunger through federal assistance programs aimed at individuals and families, solutions should likewise be implemented at the community and policy levels.

Consistent with this approach, the

Rhode Island Food Bank has identified the following actions steps to be taken to combat food insecurity within the state:

- Offer free school meals to all students in high-poverty areas
- Prioritize distressed communities in RI for economic development
- Allocate additional state funding for the Food Bank to meet the continued high demand for food assistance.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ "Hunger Facts & Resources." *Rhode Island Community Food Bank*, 2016. 17 Jan. 2017

ⁱⁱ *2015 Status Report on Hunger*. Rep: Rhode Island Community Food Bank, Web. 15 Jan. 2017

ⁱⁱⁱ *2016 Status Report on Hunger*. Rep. Rhode Island Community Food Bank, Web. 15 Jan. 2017

^{iv} "Rhode Island Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program." *Center of Budget and Policy Priorities*. 27 Feb. 2015. Web. 15 Jan 2017.

^v Borg, Linda. "RIC Conference Puts Youth Food Insecurity in Spotlight." *Providence Journal*. 30 Apr. 2015. Web. 15 Jan. 2017

^{vi} *2016 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook*. Publication pg. 44-45 Web. 15 Jan. 2017