

County childhood hunger rate mirrors state, which is higher than average

Karen Wilkinson The Times-Standard

Article Launched: 11/17/2007 01:27:21 AM PST

Not all children in Humboldt County are lucky enough to have a roof over their head and three meals a day.

Many don't always know where their next meal will come from and depend on the schools and local food banks for sustenance.

"It's all those basic things -- food, shelter and utilities -- that are eating away at everyone's ability to make it to the end of the month financially," said Anne Holcomb, Food for People executive director.

In a study released by America's Second Harvest, data shows that one of every five California children live in "food insecure households," meaning they don't always know where they will find their next meal.

California has the 10th highest incidence of child food insecurity in the nation and Humboldt County, where more than 20 percent of children live in households with income at or below the federal poverty level, mirrors those rates, said Humboldt County Office of Education executive assistant Janet Frost.

More than half the state's children receive free or reduced cost school meal programs, whereas 46 percent of all K-12 children in Humboldt County receive the services, she said.

"For some children who come from families that really are struggling, it's a very important meal in the day," Frost said. "It helps deflate the cost of lunch for children and it's a very important aspect of children's learning -- they have to have proper nutrition."

And of the 2,600 to 2,800 people who are served through Food for People monthly, 35 to 40 percent are children, Holcomb said.

"For the folks just barely getting by, it takes one emergency ... those things can pretty quickly put a family over the edge. So many of us live paycheck to paycheck as it is," she said.

In Eureka City Schools, the largest school district in the county with 4,373 students, nearly 700 are homeless, said Maureen Chase, ECS homeless education coordinator. Included in that figure, however, are children who are siblings of K-12 students who are either too old or young to attend school, Chase said.

”When all your energy and your family's focus is trying to find food, clothing and shelter, that's really stressful,” she said. “A lot of times they don't find academic success, because they're living with that insecurity.”

When school's not in, children are in a bind.

Food for People has sponsored the Children's Summer Lunch Program for the past 11 years and serves children who would normally receive free or reduced school meals. There is also the After School Snack Program, which started last year and provides a healthy snack for 375 kids at nine sites countywide, along with the Backpacks for Kids Programs, which provides a backpack filled with nutritious, kid-friendly food each Friday for children at risk of hunger over the weekend.

”So often, the kids feel a stigma, they feel a judgment from their classmates,” Holcomb said. “I know that's why we work with the programs we offer, to be as discreet as possible.”

The results of the study come at a critical time for the nation's hungry, as the Farm Bill is currently stalled on the Senate floor, those who work with the food programs said. The bill contains a potential increase in funding to the Food Stamp program and other nutrition programs that help families put food on their tables.

The average Food Stamp recipient receives \$1 a meal in benefits currently, and the minimum monthly Food Stamp benefit has remained frozen at \$10 since the program's inception in 1977. The legislation has the potential to increase such benefits and provide needed aid to the nation's poor, supporters said.

”One dollar a meal isn't enough anywhere in the country, but especially not in Humboldt County, where the cost of living has skyrocketed,” Holcomb said in a press release. “Housing costs are out of reach for the majority of families, food costs nationwide continue to increase and the recent spike in fuel costs to heat your home and commute to work are definitely putting the squeeze on households that were just barely hanging on previously.”

Texas and New Mexico have the highest rates of child food insecurity, with more than 24 percent of children at risk of hunger. Other areas of the nation with child hunger rates above 20 percent include Idaho, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, and Washington, D.C.

Holcomb said with the holidays coming around, poor families face more stress.

”It puts additional stress on families and kids who aren't having much of a bright holiday to look forward to,” she said. “The other piece we have to look at is health care costs. Folks who don't have access to good nutrition are at higher

The face of hunger

Children living in “food insecure households”

California: 20 percent

Humboldt County: 20 percent at or below federal poverty levels

Karen Wilkinson can be reached at 441-0514 or kwilkinson@times-standard.com