

Policy Paper

Fall 2009

Hunger's Impact on Our Community:

Envisioning a Food-Secure
Southern Nevada

Synopsis of Key Facts and Findings

Prepared by:
The Three Square Food Bank



Intro

Food-insecure households do not have access to enough food due to lack of money or other resources and often rely on the federal nutrition programs or their community's local emergency food system for food.

Households experiencing **very low food security** reduce their food intake or miss meals in spite of various coping mechanisms.

Hunger is the consequence of food insecurity that, because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation.

Three Square is Southern Nevada's food bank, a central location where donated and rescued food is collected and distributed to more than 260 Agency Partners, 180 schools and multiple after-school and summer food service sites. Since our opening two years ago, we have provided 28 million pounds of food - the equivalent of 21.8 million meals - to the community. In addition, we facilitate and administer childhood and senior nutrition programs and engage in advocacy, research and community outreach. A national model project, Three Square is a member of the Feeding America network of food banks.



Hunger in Southern Nevada

Hunger is an often unseen yet significant and pressing problem in America today. We all lose out when members of our community cannot live and contribute to their full potential because the struggle to meet immediate needs is so pressing.

According to a USDA report released in November 2009, Nevada's food insecurity rate increased to 12.4% of households in 2008, up from 10.4% in 2007. Very low food security increased to 4.6% from 4% over the same time period. Applying these rates to Clark County's population of 2 million, that means one in eight households - or nearly 250,000 people in Clark County - experience food insecurity. Of those, 100,000 experience very low food security. **These numbers are staggering.**

Beginning in spring of 2009, the Three Square Food Bank in Las Vegas, Nevada launched an ambitious research initiative: to begin mapping the impacts, implications and indirect costs of hunger in Southern Nevada. This research was done in conjunction with the Southern Nevada Hunger Symposium, (SNHS), a two-part series of events Three Square hosted during the fall of 2009 for local, national and international experts in the fields of hunger and social services. Those discussions and this report explore the impacts of hunger in Southern Nevada in four specific topic areas:

- Children and Education
- Senior Citizens
- Health Care
- Economy and Housing

Additionally, we consider current models of hunger alleviation, how to utilize them more effectively, and what new ideas may be necessary to address hunger in Southern Nevada.

Simply put:

What will Southern Nevada look like if the valley's hunger gap is closed?

Children and Education

Studies increasingly reveal the tremendous consequences of food insecurity and poor nutrition in childhood development and education. Inadequate nutrition has been shown to have a debilitating effect on a child's cognitive function, which often leads to underperformance in school. Hungry children consistently have lower academic achievement. Sustained food insecurity even leads to increased failure and drop-out rates, often resulting in lower earning potential over a lifetime.

Key Facts

- **48%** of Clark County School District (CCSD) children receive free and reduced-price school meals, that's more than 148,000 students.
- **60,000** of CCSD students are food insecure.
- **31,000** children under the age of 18 are served each month by Three Square's Agency Partners.
- Summer food programs are expected to increase in Southern Nevada by **5–10%** in 2010.

Key Findings

- Hunger is a very real, palpable issue that is dramatically impacting educational outcomes in the Clark County School District. The problems created by childhood hunger in school generate collateral impacts throughout the school system.
- While there are numerous federal and state programs aimed at student hunger, few are used to capacity, due to insufficient funding, program complexity, accessibility barriers or a combination thereof.
- Effective hunger-relief, especially in low-income schools, would lift a tremendous burden from administrators and teachers; success would allow a dramatic shift in resources back towards learning and education, instead of meeting student's basic needs.



Because of the dramatic consequences of child food insecurity and the remarkable results possible, eradicating childhood hunger in Southern Nevada may well be the most pressing and significant long-term investment our community can make.

Seniors

Food security and nutrition play a fundamental role in a senior's quality of life, and overall health. Seniors are among the most at-risk groups in America for food insecurity, especially those living alone and on limited, fixed incomes. They face additional challenges in accessing and/or preparing food because of age-specific factors such as decreased mobility and strength, inability to leave the home and specific dietary needs and restrictions, due to medications. Tragically, the challenges of aging can actually increase the risk of food insecurity and worsen its impacts.

Key Facts

- Nevada's senior population grew at a rate **five times** the national average during the early 2000's.
- Seniors now account for **11.1%** of the state's population; the number of seniors in Nevada is expected to surge to **18.6%** by 2030.
- Nevada **lacks adequate geriatricians** and other senior care specialists.
- The Commodities Food Service Program (CFSP) is currently serving **6,000** seniors, only **20%** of those eligible.
- The demand for home-bound services like Meals on Wheels far **exceeds current capacity**.



County	% of Population Over 65
Clark	10.8%
Nye	21.0%
Lincoln	16.1%
Esmeralda	16.1%



Key Findings

- More research and resources are needed to address senior food insecurity; it is difficult to solve a problem that is not fully understood.
- The mode of hunger-relief assistance to seniors is incredibly important. Specifically, prepared food options and companionship during mealtime can each significantly improve the likelihood that seniors receive adequate nutrition.
- Seniors may be particularly reluctant to receive (or acknowledge need for) assistance; seniors are more likely to refuse assistance because they are concerned "someone needs [assistance] more than I do."

Health Care

Studies increasingly demonstrate a link between food insecurity and negative health outcomes. Researchers have also identified connections between food insecurity in early childhood and obesity in later years, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease, Type II diabetes, and other chronic illnesses.

Nevada ranks particularly poor as a state in many national health indicators. In terms of access to care, Southern Nevadans have one of the nation's lowest per capita rate of practitioner availability as well as one of the highest-uninsured (non-elderly) populations. With these challenges, and an ever-decreasing state budget, our community must increasingly focus attention and resources on preventive care including greater access to regular, nutritious food.

Key Facts

- **Healthy foods** can be **harder to find** and **more expensive in low-income areas**, leading to the surprising coexistence of hunger and obesity.
- **Nevada ranks** among the worst states for the number of **doctors** and registered **nurses per capita**.
- **36.8%** of Nevada's children living in poverty lack health insurance.



Key Findings

- A more clinical approach to hunger is needed, including wider use of biometrics and increased recognition of physiological indicators is necessary to determine the actual prevalence of hunger and to track intervention and treatment success.
- There is a need to educate people that obesity, hunger and poverty are interconnected.
- Performing a Community Food Assessment is critically important in order to identify specific neighborhoods with gaps in healthy food access and effectively implement programs.
- Nutrition education programs, coupled with outreach to ensure families receive all their federal nutrition program benefits, can help families make the most of their food budget.

Economic & Housing Stability

The Recession has further exacerbated an already existing need for assistance in Southern Nevada. Record-setting unemployment in particular is causing families to face food insecurity, often for the first time. Further, because food insecurity so often overlaps with poverty, it is not just those who are actually unemployed who are struggling; it is often the “working poor,” who struggle the most. For example, nationally, estimates of the true cost of living are typically twice that of the poverty level. In Nevada, researchers estimate a living wage to be yet higher.

Living wage in Nevada

County	HOURLY Living Wage (Family of 4)	ANNUAL Living Wage (Family of 4)	% of Poverty Level Income
Clark	\$28.84	\$59,987	285%
Nye	\$26.96	\$56,077	267%
Lincoln	\$23.10	\$48,048	229%
Esmerelda	No data	No data	No data

* 185% of poverty is the maximum a family can earn to qualify for most federal nutrition assistance.

While many people in Southern Nevada struggled with housing even before the recession, the number of people experiencing homelessness has dramatically increased. In addition, food insecurity itself and low participation rates in assistance programs hurt the economy through lost spending on food.

Key Facts

- More than **two-thirds** of Clark County’s homeless population identify as being homeless for less than one year; unemployment or losing a job was cited as a primary cause for a person’s homelessness.
- Every dollar spent on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) generates **\$1.73** in additional economic stimulus.
- Nevada’s **low participation rate in SNAP** means the state misses out on millions of dollars in economic activity.

Key Findings

- Hunger and poor nutrition makes it even more difficult for people struggling economically to establish normalcy and continuity; if successful assistance programs are in place and accessible, a person can focus on finding employment or securing a place to live instead of where the next meal is coming from.
- Regular, nutritious meals can help a person (or family) reestablish self-sufficiency and independence.
- The challenge of stretching every dollar seriously complicates a person’s ability to eat nutritiously.

Recommendations

The following recommendations include immediate steps that can be taken to address the challenges and reduce food insecurity in Southern Nevada:

1. Identify and overcome barriers to participation in the federal nutrition programs (including SNAP, School Breakfast, SFSP and CACFP) through outreach to potential clients and program sponsors as well as advocacy to local, state and federal officials.
2. Increase coordination and communication among local service providers, in both the non-profit and government sectors.
3. Improve outreach, pre-screening and referrals at emergency food provider sites.
4. Research senior hunger and identify ways to target program outreach to meet seniors' unique needs.
5. Perform a Community Food Assessment to identify areas lacking food resources so efforts to improve nutrition and food access can be targeted appropriately.
6. Continue to research and publicize the impacts of hunger in our community.

For a more detailed discussion on the above-listed recommendations and key future initiatives, please see the complete version of Three Square's policy paper, *Hunger's Impact on Our Community: Envisioning a Food-Secure Southern Nevada*.



- ✉ 4190 N. Pecos Rd. Las Vegas, NV 89115
- 🌐 www.threesquare.org
- ☎ 702 644 · FOOD (3663)