

On the Edge I and On the Edge II:

Children and Issues of Food Security in Sarasota and DeSoto Counties, Florida

Study by Edumetrics Resources Group, Inc. (2014)

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Context and Research Summary

Prepared by All Faiths Food Bank and Gulf Coast Community Foundation

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Overview

“On the Edge” is an in-depth research study on child hunger and food insecurity in Sarasota and DeSoto counties. Commissioned by All Faiths Food Bank and Gulf Coast Community Foundation, the research is one of the most comprehensive child-hunger studies ever conducted in the country. The data provides insight into the scale of food insecurity in our region and perspective on how children are impacted by the issue.

Context on Food Insecurity in Our Region

Florida has the distinction of joining four other states with the highest child food-insecurity rates in the country. One step away from hunger, food insecurity is defined as having “limited or uncertain availability of, or inability to acquire, nutritionally adequate, safe, and acceptable foods due to financial resource constraint.” Children in Sarasota and DeSoto counties are at risk of falling into higher levels of food insecurity based on alarming trends in poverty, unemployment, and federal budget cuts to hunger-prevention programs.

Poverty and unemployment are primary contributors to food insecurity in our region. The percentage of citizens living below poverty in Sarasota County almost doubled between 1990 and 2010, from 6.8% to 12.8%. According to the Sarasota County Planning Services Division, one of every five children lives below the poverty level, and the rate nearly doubled from 12.9% in 2000 to 21.5% in 2010.

Adding to the challenge of food insecurity is low access to quality food for some families. Specifically, nine neighborhoods in Sarasota County and two in DeSoto join 20 million other Americans who live in “food deserts,” or low-income areas where a substantial share of residents have low access to fresh, healthy, and affordable foods. The issue of food insecurity and access to food is exacerbated by an \$11 billion cut on November 1, 2013, to the federal SNAP program (also known as food stamps), with additional cuts to come.

The Study and Results: Sarasota County

This groundbreaking research reveals alarming numbers of children in poverty in Sarasota County who fall into the category of “food insecurity without hunger.” These children experience extreme worry about matters of food and the availability of food in their homes, and their responses raise concerns about the nutritional quality of the food they are eating.

The survey question that raised the most concern was “*Did your meals only include a few kinds of cheap foods because your family was running out of money to buy food?*” Responses to questions about whether students “*worry that food at home would run out*” before their families have money to buy more and “*did the food that your family bought run out*” also demonstrated food insecurity.

Other key findings include:

- Although there were no notable differences by race/ethnicity, African Americans and Hispanics consistently scored highest on the survey’s “hunger scale scores” compared with other racial and ethnic groups.
- Food insecurity seemed to affect 3rd, 4th, 9th, and 12th graders the most and tended to be more serious among high school and elementary students than middle-schoolers.
- 3rd and 4th graders showed the most worry that food at home would run out.
- At the school level, Atwater Elementary, Alta Vista Elementary, and Wilkinson Elementary consistently emerged as the schools with the highest hunger scale scores (however, the researchers recommend caution in interpreting the results for Atwater and Wilkinson because of moderate student response size).
- Nine census tract areas in Sarasota County are officially considered food deserts. These tracts are largely white with median household incomes between \$31,947 and \$48,160.

The Study and Results: DeSoto County

Poverty is a major contributing factor to hunger and food insecurity in DeSoto County. The number of adults in the county who received food stamps more than tripled in recent years because of the recession, and by 2011, one in three residents received food stamps. DeSoto County has been consistently cited as having the highest percentage of citizens in the state who live below the poverty line. Over one-third of children ages 0–17 in the county live below the poverty line. The percentage of children living in poverty jumped from 31.5% in 2000 to 41.9% by 2010.

Many children in poverty in DeSoto County fall into the category of “food insecurity without hunger.” A significant number of children *experience extreme worry about matters of food and the quality of the food that they eat*. There is also concern among students that *food will run out because of lack of money*.

Other key findings include:

- Overall, there were no notable differences in the food-security levels between students with regard to race/ethnicity with the exception of students self-identifying as *other*; these students were notably more food insecure when compared with students in other racial/ethnic groups.
- There was a notable difference concerning food insecurity between elementary and middle grade levels. More elementary school students worried that food would run out and indicated that their meals included cheap foods because their families were running out of money.
- Overall, all grade levels fell within the range of food insecurity based on their hunger scale scores.
- At the school level, Nocatee Elementary student respondents felt significantly more food insecure than the students enrolled at DeSoto Middle School. Overall, all schools fell within the food insecurity range based on their hunger scale scores.

- Two census tract areas in DeSoto County are officially considered food deserts, with median household incomes between \$29,708 and \$36,049.

Recommendations

Based on the research, the following recommendations were made concerning children, food, and nutrition intake:

- Provide more nutrition education programming in schools for students, teachers, parents, and guardians. Adults need to model appropriate nutrition intake practices for children.
- Expand access to fresh, nutritious foods and supermarket outlets.
- Support strategic expansion of food nutrition programs; develop targeted approaches while maximizing community-wide return on investment.
- Focus on prevention as a critical dimension of childhood hunger relief.
- Impact a critical mass of children and families by striving to develop neighborhood and regional approaches to food insecurity.
- Increase student resilience and coping strategies regarding individual, family, and community hunger.

Terms and Definitions

Food Desert – Low-income urban neighborhoods and rural towns with low access to fresh, healthy, and affordable foods. “Low access” is characterized as at least 500 individuals and/or at least 33% of the population living at least one mile in an urban setting (or 10 miles in a rural setting) from a supermarket or large grocery store.

Food Insecurity – Limited or uncertain availability of, or inability to acquire, nutritionally adequate, safe, and acceptable foods due to financial resource constraint.

Food Insecure without Hunger – The condition of not having regular access to enough nutritious food for a healthy life. High and low levels of food insecurity without hunger are differentiated based on the duration and severity of food-insecure periods.

Food Security – Access by all household members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.

Hunger Scale Score – In order to report the results of the survey administered in the study, the data was scaled to show tendencies toward food security, food insecurity, and hunger among the student population.

Title I Schools - Title I, Part A of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides funding to districts and schools with high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet state academic standards.

About the Research

As it works to develop a more comprehensive understanding of food insecurity in the two counties it serves, All Faiths Food Bank, with support from Gulf Coast Community Foundation, commissioned a local study focused on childhood hunger. The key purpose of this study was to systematically gather information about food-security issues directly from the perspective of children, as opposed to traditional assessments of childhood hunger that have been inferred from household surveys.

The researchers utilized a rigorously developed survey called the *Child Food Security Survey Module* (CFSSM). The CFSSM was the basis of a study conducted in 2009 to determine levels of food insecurity among students in Cook County, Illinois. There were 437 respondents in the Cook County research. In the study of Sarasota and DeSoto counties, 3,648 students responded, making it the largest study based on the Child Food Security Survey Module ever.

The CFSSM was administered to a subset of elementary, middle, and high school students in Title I, high-poverty schools. The trusted and long-standing relationship between the Sarasota and Desoto county school districts, All Faiths Food Bank, and Gulf Coast Community Foundation contributed greatly to the level of access and quality of data that the researchers were able to attain.

To view the full study reports, go to AllFaithsFoodBank.org or GulfCoastCF.org.



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