

POLICY POINTS

➤ POLICY POINTS BRINGS RELEVANT DATA TO TIMELY PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES IN ARIZONA

An Empty Table:

Second Highest Poverty Rate Means More Arizonans Experiencing Hunger

By Richard C. Knopf, Director, ASU Partnership for Community Development and Professor, ASU School of Community Resources and Development and Brian Simpson, Director of Communications, Association of Arizona Food Banks

The pangs of hunger

The U.S. Census Bureau's most recent report reveals a sobering reality: Arizona has the second highest poverty rate in the nation. This shameful distinction calls attention to a long-standing social problem that has been exacerbated by challenging economic times. Today, many Arizonans are experiencing need for the first time, and must seek assistance in ways they had never imagined. Increased demand for emergency food assistance is clear evidence of their plight.

What are the trends?

Arizona Indicators has been tracking trends for three food assistance demand indicators – households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly Food Stamps) benefits, pounds of food distributed by Arizona food banks, and number of emergency food boxes distributed. Each shows a recent – and sharp – increase.

The number of Arizona households receiving SNAP benefits increased by 26.9% between 2008 and 2009, an increase of over 66,000 households. Prior to 2008, the number of Arizona households receiving SNAP assistance was relatively stable, with only modest increases over the years. Since the end of 2009 through September 2010, SNAP participation by Arizona household has grown another 6.3% to record high numbers.

Similarly, the number of pounds distributed by Arizona food banks increased alarmingly – 26.7% between 2009 and 2010 (see figure 3, next page). That constituted an increase of over 28 million pounds distributed over a one year period. Previously, the number of pounds distributed was relatively stable over the past decade, except for a dip in 2008 which experts attribute to the early onset of the recession causing cutbacks in corporate donations, the reduction of federal funding prior to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, and one-time distribution challenges for the Arizona Statewide Gleaning Project in the Nogales region.

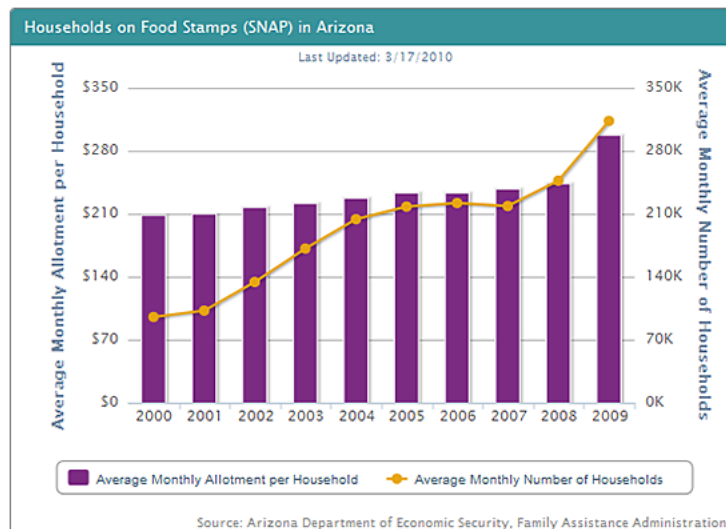


Figure 1: Arizona Households enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Food Stamps), 2000-2009.



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For more information, contact Andrea Whitsett at (602) 496-0217 or andrea.whitsett@asu.edu.

Arizona Indicators is a project of Morrison Institute for Public Policy.

411 N Central Ave
Suite 900
Phoenix, Arizona
85004-0692
(602) 496-0900 Main
(602) 496-0964 Fax
MorrisonInstitute.asu.edu

Meanwhile, the number of emergency food boxes distributed within Arizona has risen consistently since 2005, when reliable statistics began being collected. The increase between 2008 and 2009 was 15.3%, double the increase from 2007 to 2008. However, it is important to note increases in emergency food boxes distributed do not mirror the increases in total pounds distributed and SNAP participation because of limits on how often a household can receive an emergency food box, as well as the size of the emergency food box itself. The amount of food, thus the total poundage comprising each box, varies by household size. Each food box provides a household, individual or family with a 3-5 day supply of nutritionally balanced food in times of crisis.

What is the gap?

SNAP benefits do not always eliminate food insecurity for those in need. In 2010, the average SNAP benefit per Arizona individual is \$1.42 per meal. Feeding America, a national hunger relief charity, estimates the average cost of a meal for an individual achieving food security is \$2.05. Thus, on average, SNAP benefits cover only 69.3% of the average meal cost for Arizonans struggling with hunger. Even though Arizona enrollment rates for SNAP are high, demand for emergency food also remains high. In fact, the most recent calculations by the Association of Arizona Food Banks reveal the emergency food assistance network, including food banks, is only meeting 61.2% of the food need after programs such as SNAP have been tapped.

The story does not stop there. Those who do not have enough food often stretch their dollars by consuming high-calorie, low-nutrient foods because they tend to be less expensive. Obesity among those without adequate food security is a growing epidemic. As a result, there are other dimensions to “the gap,” including future health care costs, projected to grow as a result of this phenomenon (see <http://www.letsmove.gov>).

Additionally, individuals and families experiencing hunger are forced to make tough sacrifices and trade-offs. Feeding America’s *Hunger in America 2010* report reveals 43% of Arizona citizens using food banks were forced to choose between paying for food and paying for shelter. Nearly half (48.6%) chose between paying for food and paying for utilities and nearly one-third (31.9%) chose between food and medical care.

Who seeks emergency food?

The *Hunger in America 2010* report also revealed 900,000 Arizonans (unduplicated) received emergency food in 2009, a dramatic increase of 85% since 2006. This is roughly the number of people living in the Tucson metropolitan area. These numbers correlate well with recently released USDA food insecurity data which shows that 14.5% of Arizonans from 2007-2009 were food insecure, the 13th highest rate in the country. This latest figure represents a 10.7% increase over the percent who were food insecure from 2004-2006, demonstrating the magnitude of the recession’s impact on hunger.

In *Hunger in America 2010*, nearly half of those requesting assistance were of Latino/Hispanic ethnicity (45.6%), almost 40%

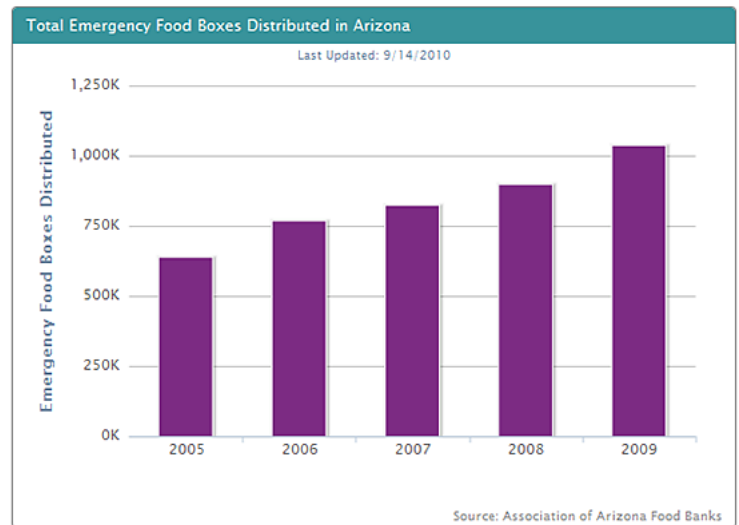


Figure 2: Number of Emergency Boxes Distributed in Arizona, 2005-2009.

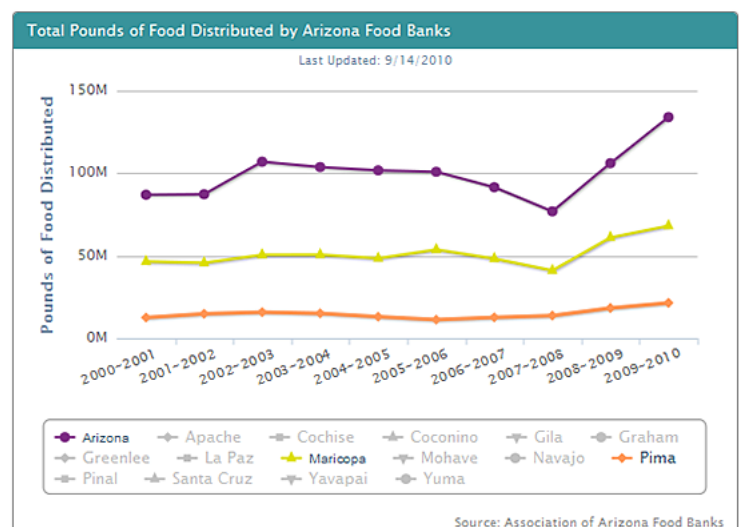


Figure 3: Number of Pounds Distributed by Arizona Food Banks, 2001-2010.

were Non-Hispanic White (38.7%), less than five percent were Non-Hispanic Black (4.8%) , and 3.9% were American Indian/Alaskan Native. For comparison, the state-wide population distribution is 29.9% Latino/Hispanic, 58.8% Non-Hispanic White, 3.4% Non-Hispanic Black, and 4.1% American Indian/Alaskan Native.

In some ways, the data challenge conventional stereotypes of who in Arizona seeks emergency food. Only 11.8% of food recipients were homeless, only 7% were over sixty-five years of age, and over a quarter (27.1%) of food recipients had completed trade school, attended college or achieved a college degree.

How are children impacted?

One quarter of Arizona children are unlikely to have regular meals, and the meals they do receive are likely to be unbalanced and nutritionally inadequate. The most recent USDA Report on Food Security (2009)

identified Arizona as one of the three worst states in child food insecurity – lagging behind only Arkansas and Texas. Nearly one in four Arizona children under the age of 18 have “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate or safe foods” or “limited or uncertain ability to acquire adequate acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways”. Cutting portions and skipping meals can lead to school absences and challenges in the classroom, with long term implications for the employability and productivity of Arizona’s future workforce.

Will the storms intensify?

Most experts say they will, and emphatically so. Those close to the data say that the ravaging effects of Arizona’s recession have not yet surfaced in the data, which lag behind current realities by up to two years. Anecdotal reports from service providers persistently state the demand is spiraling upwards, and moreover, that the very character of demand is changing. News reports frequently chronicle stories of former donors and volunteers who now ask for services themselves. In fact, the Arizona Community Action Association has initiated a state-wide publicity campaign called *The Changing Face of Poverty* to bring attention to this very phenomenon. The current recession has created hunger in Arizona that is no longer confined to those who have been chronically poor. Neighbors and friends who never expected to need help with day-to-day survival are now requesting emergency food assistance.

Concerns about federal spending, and the pressure to cut budgets, will further exacerbate the hunger plight of Arizonans. In Washington, the pressure is intense to scale back SNAP benefits, which were bolstered by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. While emergency food services have thus far been relatively spared the worst of state budget cuts, they are not immune to the inevitable cuts that will surround currently deteriorating state revenues.

What can be done now?

Experts have ideas about how to respond to this crisis, at least in the short term. Recommended actions include encouraging citizens to tell elected officials that, in an era of budget cuts, funding for Arizona’s human services safety net must be a priority. Experts also advocate for enhanced collaboration among direct service providers in order to maximize available resources. While existing volunteer support is substantial, rising demand necessitates expansion. Additionally, strategies should be developed to cultivate new volunteers with diverse skill sets such as grant writing, media relations, and supply chain management. Lastly, faith communities, business partners, and civic organizations are largely untapped relative to their capacity to help; new relationships should be forged.

How can we address the root cause?

Food insufficiency in Arizona is a direct result of an inadequate base of living wages in Arizona. With 74% of emergency food clients living at or below the federal poverty level – a little more than \$1,800 a month for a family of four – their income is simply insufficient to cover basic living costs. Choices are being made – between food and other necessities such as rent, utilities and medical care – and the nutritional value and availability of food suffers. Ultimately, the emerging storm of Arizona hunger can only be addressed by strong collective efforts to reduce unemployment and raise the level of living wages available to Arizona residents. By not addressing this core issue, Arizona will continue to be known as the state with the second highest poverty rate in the country. And with that reality, the pain of Arizona’s hunger, and the demands for emergency assistance, will only intensify.

What About the Statewide Gleaning Project?

Since 1980, many sectors of Arizona’s economy have joined forces to rescue and distribute food that would otherwise go to waste. This program, called the Arizona Statewide Gleaning Project, has now rescued, transported and distributed more than 812 million pounds of food. At its peak (2004), the Project supplied nearly 80 million pounds of food annually for emergency assistance. Today, that contribution is down to 45 million pounds.