Poverty and Food Insecurity in Wisconsin and Washington County

Katherine J. Curtis, Community, Natural Resource and Economic Development and Judi Bartfeld, Family Living Programs
University of Wisconsin—Extension

Poverty in Wisconsin rose substantially during the 2000s. In 2009, 12.4% of the state’s population was living in poverty, increasing to 13.2% in 2010 - roughly 731,479 people\(^1\) - as compared to 8.7% in 2000.\(^2\) Wisconsin residents are better off economically than the nation as a whole. However, the advantage has narrowed in recent years. Economic conditions in Wisconsin worsened as the state weathered two significant recessions and rising unemployment. As a result, a growing share of households in the state are living in poverty and struggling to meet their basic food needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is poverty?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Although poverty is a subjective term, the federal poverty line is intended to indicate the minimum resources families need for an adequate standard of living. The official poverty line varies according to the number of household members and their ages. The poverty threshold increases each year to account for inflation. In 2010, the federal poverty line was $22,314 for a family of four and $11,139 for one person.(^3) Most researchers agree that the poverty line underestimates the minimum resources necessary to meet basic needs. Nonetheless, poverty rates are one way to compare economic hardship among groups, across locations, and over time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Curtis is Assistant Professor of Community and Environmental Sociology at UW-Madison and UW-Extension Demographic Specialist. Bartfeld is Professor of Consumer Science at UW-Madison and UW-Extension Food Security Research and Policy Specialist. This research was supported by the Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station. We are grateful for the research assistance of Dagoberto Cortez and the technical assistance of Roz Klaas, Heather O’Connell, and Libby Bestul.

This briefing supplements the Wisconsin Families – Issues and Demographics series, Family Living Programs, University of Wisconsin - Extension.
Where is poverty?

The extent of poverty varies greatly across Wisconsin. In Washington County, the poverty rate during 2005-2009 was 5.3%, an increase from 2000 when the rate was 3.6%. During 2005-9, the poverty rate in Washington County was significantly lower than the statewide rate of 11.1% and was significantly lower than the national average of 13.5%.

Source: Applied Population Laboratory
Department of Community and Environmental Sociology
University of Wisconsin-Madison
American Community Survey 2005-09, 5-year estimates
Who is in poverty?

There is no single face of poverty. Historically, poverty in Wisconsin was most common among the elderly population. The proportion of elderly in poverty dramatically declined since 1970. In contrast, the proportion of children living in poverty has increased. Consequently, poverty rates today are higher among children.

Groups at higher-than-average risk of poverty in Wisconsin include children, single-mother households, racial/ethnic minorities, and adults with a high school education or less.

* Child poverty rate reflects related children under 18 in 1970 and 1980, and all children under 18 in the remaining years. There is no statistical difference in the reported poverty rates for related and all children in years when both poverty rates are available.
Limited earnings potential, including the inability to find sufficient work at an adequate wage, is strongly linked to poverty in Wisconsin.\textsuperscript{5}

Wisconsin, and the nation, experienced two significant recessions during the 2000s. Plant closings, layoffs, and unemployment resulted. During May, June and July of 2010 alone, Wisconsin reported nearly 18,000 initial claims for unemployment insurance.\textsuperscript{6}

Although the state has had a large number of layoffs due to a business closing or mass layoff, not all counties and their residents have been equally affected.\textsuperscript{7} 181 layoffs resulting from a business closing or mass layoff were reported in Washington County during 2010.

Unemployment in Wisconsin rose during the past five years, most significantly between 2008 and 2009. In Washington County, the unemployment rate was 8.0% in 2010, comparable to the statewide rate of 8.3%.
Employment is not always enough to escape poverty. In Wisconsin, 23% of all workers earn a lower hourly wage than would be needed to keep a family of four with a fulltime worker out of poverty.⁸

“Poverty wages” are most common among those with lower education. In Washington County, 43% of adults have a high school degree or less, comparable to the statewide rate of 45%.

How does poverty impact food security?

Poverty puts households at much higher risk of food insecurity and hunger. Hunger and food insecurity, in turn, are linked to other problems. For children, these include poor health, behavioral problems, and learning and academic problems.⁹

Food secure households have enough food at all times for an active healthy life. In contrast, households with low food security have uncertain access to food. They report running out of food without having money to buy more, cutting back the size of meals due to lack of money, or having to skip meals altogether.

Like other states and the nation as a whole, Wisconsin households have become more food insecure in the past 15 years. Although Wisconsin continues to fare better than the country as a whole, the rate of food insecurity has increased substantially in the state.

In 1996-1998, 8.5% of Wisconsin’s households were food insecure as compared to 11.3% of the nation’s households. There was relatively little change through the 2005-2007 period. In 2008-2010, coinciding with the severe economic downturn, Wisconsin’s food insecurity rate jumped to 11.8%, while the national rate jumped to 14.6%.
Food hardship is not experienced equally across all communities in the state. The highest food hardship rate in 2008-09 - 23% - was reported by residents of District 4 in Milwaukee. The next highest rate - 15.3% - was reported for District 8 in the northeastern part of the state.

Washington County is in District 5, where 9.2% of the population reported food hardship. “Food hardship” in these data means that over the past year household members did not always have money to buy the food they needed.

Another indication of food-related hardship is the share of the population participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, which is referred to as Food Share in Wisconsin). Overall, the proportion of Wisconsin residents who participated in FoodShare increased between 2000 and 2010, particularly as economic conditions declined.

In Washington County, the number of FoodShare participants increased from 2,548 to 11,445. The rate of FoodShare participation in 2010 was 9%, lower than the statewide rate of 17%.
Communities can invest in schools and ensure that all children have support necessary to succeed in school. A good education is one of the best ways for children to avoid living in poverty as adults. Similarly, communities can promote training and education for adults. The risk of poverty declines as education levels increase.

Communities can also help to address food insecurity. Food security stems from economic security, but is also influenced by retail access to affordable and healthy foods; strong federal food and nutrition assistance programs; and a strong emergency food system.

Communities can improve access to affordable and healthy food by promoting the establishment of grocery stores, farmers markets, and other healthy food outlets that are convenient to all community members. Nutrition education programs can help families to stretch limited food dollars.

Communities can also take steps to strengthen access to federal food programs. Possible strategies include starting summer meal programs to help feed children when school is out; developing school breakfast programs; conducting outreach to ensure families are aware of available food and nutrition assistance programs; and improving the nutritional quality of school meals.

Finally, communities can strengthen their emergency food systems by taking steps to increase both the quantity and healthiness of available foods available at food pantries, and by fostering linkages between food pantries and other public and private food resources.
End Notes

1 The number reported by the 2010 ACS 1-year estimates has a margin of error of +/-17,834. Therefore, we can be 90% certain that the actual number of people in Wisconsin living below the poverty line falls between 713,645 and 734,631.

2 Poverty estimates are from the 2009 and 2010 American Community Survey, 1-year Estimates, and Census 2000 SF3. These and other estimates are available through the US Census Bureau on-line through the American Factfinder (http://factfinder.census.gov and http://factfinder2.census.gov).

3 Three separate poverty guidelines are calculated for the lower 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia, Alaska, and Hawaii. The 2010 guidelines can be found on-line through the US Department of Health and Human Services (http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/10poverty.shtml). Poverty thresholds used here and reported by the US Census Bureau can be accessed on-line (http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/index.html).

4 The poverty rate reported by the 2005-09 ACS 5-year estimates has a margin of error of +/-0.7%. Therefore, we can be 90% certain that the actual number of people in Washington County living below the poverty line falls between 4.5% and 6.0%. The state estimate falls outside the county range. Therefore, the county estimate is significantly different from the state estimate. A complete table of poverty rates for all Wisconsin counties is available through the Applied Population Laboratory (http://www.apl.wisc.edu/publications/poverty_rates_WI_portrait.pdf).


7 Employees are counted if their employment is terminated, if they are laid off for more than 6 months, or if their hours are reduced more than 50% during each month of any 6-month period as result of a business closing or mass layoff. A business (or plant) closing is reported if it involves a permanent or temporary shutdown of an employment site or of one or more facilities or operating units within a single municipality that affects 25 or more employees. A mass layoff is reported if there is a reduction in the workforce that is not a business closing and which affects at least 25% of the workforce or 25 employees, whichever is greater, or at least 500 employees in an employment site or within a single municipality. This and more information on layoffs and closings is available through the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/er/labor_standards_bureau/business_closing_and_mass_layoffs.htm).


10 “Food hardship” is based on a single question indicating whether household members did not always have money to buy the food they needed. “Food insecurity” is based on a series of questions about households’ ability to meet their food needs. The two measures are similar but not identical.

Poverty and Food Insecurity in Wisconsin and Washington County by Katherine Curtis and Judi Bartfeld, 2011

Poverty and Food Insecurity in Wisconsin briefs for all counties can be found at:
http://www.apl.wisc.edu/poverty_food_security.html