

# Our Neighbors' Food: Sitting at the Table

*Emily Mark*

Associate Professor Emeritus



Kansas State University  
Agricultural Experiment  
Station and Cooperative  
Extension Service

Family & Consumer  
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What do hunger and food insecurity mean in the United States? When “hunger in America” is discussed, it generally refers to recurrent and involuntary lack of access to sufficient food due to poverty or constrained resources, and can lead to malnutrition.

It is estimated that one billion people in the world suffer from hunger and malnutrition, and about 24,000 die each day from hunger or hunger-related causes. Three-fourths of those who die are children under age 5. Famine and wars cause about 10 percent of hunger deaths, though these tend to be the ones most often publicized. By far, most hunger deaths are caused by chronic malnutrition.

This is the face of hunger today. For many, hunger is different than what you might imagine: Third World children living in extreme poverty. Today millions of people go to bed hungry in America – some of them in your neighborhood. Many are not homeless or unemployed. Rather, they are ordinary people who hold jobs, appear healthy, may even be active in the community; but they do not have the resources to provide enough food or nutritionally sufficient food for themselves or their families every day. Sometimes hunger is caused by the temporary loss of a job, a divorce, or a catastrophic illness. Many times people must choose between paying rent or utilities and putting food on the table.

Why be concerned with hunger in Kansas? Hunger reduces a child’s ability to learn, decreases a worker’s productive energy, and weakens an elderly person’s resistance to disease. Hunger prevents people from

reaching their full productive potential. In 2000, 11.3 percent of Kansas households experienced food insecurity (19th in the nation) and 3.4 percent experienced hunger as well (20th nationally).

## Key elements of community food security

Community commitment to build a local food system and fight hunger.

Local economic and job security.

Education and awareness.

Local infrastructure.

Food production, marketing, recovery, and donations.

Research, monitoring, and evaluation efforts.

Bolstering the federal nutrition assistance safety net.

In some developing nations where famine is widespread, hunger manifests itself as severe and visible clinical malnutrition. In the United States, hunger usually manifests itself in a less severe form. Established programs can help to provide a safety net for many low-income families. While starvation seldom occurs in this country, children and adults do go hungry, and chronic mild undernutrition occurs when financial resources are low. The mental and physical changes that accompany inadequate food intake can have harmful effects on learning, development, productivity, physical and psychological health, and family life.

## Food for thought

Over the last two decades new terms have evolved to describe the widespread, but less severe, hunger problems typically encountered in the United States.

“**Food security**” is a term used to describe what our nation seeks for its people – assured access at all times to enough safe food for an active, healthy life without dependence on emergency sources to meet basic food needs. In a nation as affluent as ours, this goal is readily achievable. “**Food insecurity**” refers to the lack of access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times. There are different levels of food insecurity.

Since 1995 the U.S. Census Bureau has conducted an annual survey of food security among a nationally representative sample, using the food security module in the Current Population Survey (CPS). The questions deal with anxiety that the household budget is inadequate to buy enough food, inadequacy in quantity or quality of food eaten by adults and children in the household, and instances of reduced food intake or consequences of reduced food intake for adults and for children. Households are classified as “food secure,” “food insecure,” or “food insecure with hunger.”

The survey is widely regarded as a reliable indicator of household well-being and serves as the basis in evaluating progress toward reducing food insecurity – one of the U.S. Surgeon General’s health objectives for the nation by the year 2010. The goal is to increase food security from 88 percent of all U.S. households (1995) to 94 percent.

Households classified as hungry are those in which adults have decreased the quality and quantity of food consumption to the point they are likely to be hungry, or in which children’s intake has been reduced to the point they are likely to be hungry and adult food intake is severely reduced.

Even when hunger is not present, adults in households classified as “food insecure” have such limited resources that they may run out of food, reduce equality of food in the family, feed their children unbalanced diets, or skip meals so their children can eat.

According to the results of the Census Bureau survey, those at greatest risk of food insecurity live in households headed by a single woman, are Latino or African-American, or have incomes below the poverty line. Overall, households with children experience food insecurity at more than double the rate for households without children.

Other evidence that many people are hungry in America comes from the widespread reports of increases in the number of households seeking emergency food at feeding programs, food pantries, and soup kitchens. A high number of food insecure households in a nation with our economic plenty means the fruits of our economy, and the benefits of public and private programs for needy people, are not yet reaching millions of low-income people who are at great risk.

Poverty and food insecurity rates are closely linked. In Kansas, the unemployment rate rose from 3.9 percent in 2000 to 5.2 percent in 2003. The state ranks 12th for children living in poverty: more than 1 in 10. Kansas food stamp use is below the national average for food insecure households: Only about 50 percent of those eligible use food stamps. Households rated as food insecure make up 11.3 percent of those in the state, and 3.4 percent are food insecure with hunger also noted.

*Source: Household Food Security  
in the United States*

## Hunger facts

- A 2002 survey of emergency food assistance providers found that more than half of food bank and food rescue organizations reported facing needs they could not meet.
- Nearly two-thirds of adult emergency food recipients are women, and more than one in five are elderly.
- Some 20 to 30 million Americans have inadequate resources to meet their monthly expenses and buy enough food to live healthy lives.
- One of six elderly people in the United States has an inadequate diet.
- Young people are more likely to live in poverty than any other age group, and the disparity is growing.
- One of four American children under age 6 lives in poverty.
- In the United States 64 percent of children under age 6 in female-headed single parent families live in poverty.
- Children make up almost one-third of the population living below the federal poverty line.
- Children who experience food insecurity and hunger are more likely to show behavioral, emotional, and academic problems than children from low-income families who do not report experiences of food insecurity.
- Consequences of hunger in children include infant mortality, anemia, and poor learning as well as frequent colds, ear infections, asthma, headaches, and stomachaches.
- Nearly 12 percent of the U.S. population lives below the federal poverty level.
- The federal poverty level is about \$18,400 for a family of four, but families earning twice that much can experience food insecurity.
- Each year, America has two million homeless people.
- In Kansas 303,000 people experience food insecurity.
- More Spanish-speaking individuals than English speakers experience food insecurity.
- Single females experience greater food insecurity in their households than their married counterparts.
- In Kansas, 40,000 of the 97,000 people who have experienced hunger are children.
- The Food Stamp program is the mainstay of the national nutrition safety net.
- Each month, 140,000 Kansans receive food stamps.
- The average monthly Food Stamp benefit per person is \$67.23 (FY 2002).
- Kansas ranks 47th in the percentage of low-income children who participate in summer feeding programs, and only 7 percent of children who are eligible are served.
- Kansas ranks 15th in the percentage of low-income children participating in school breakfast, with only 48 percent of those eligible served.





## Low-cost meal

Red beans and rice supply the body with an excellent source of protein at a minimum cost. Consider serving a meal of Red Beans and Rice to your family. The

savings can be used to make a contribution to help fight hunger locally.

The recipe also could be served at a community or organizational event.

### Red Beans and Rice

#### 6 portions

- 2/3 cup celery, chopped
- 2/3 cup onions, chopped
- 3/4 cup green pepper, chopped
- 2 cans (1 lb. each) red beans, undrained
- 1 bay leaf
- 1/2 teaspoon ground white pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon dry thyme leaves
- 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1/2 teaspoon dry oregano leaves
- 1/4 teaspoon ground red pepper
- 1/8 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon hot sauce
- 2/3 teaspoon bottled smoke flavoring
- 2/3 cup water
- 3 cups cooked rice (for 1/2 cup servings)

Spray large saucepan with cooking spray or lightly coat bottom with vegetable oil. Place prepared vegetables in pan and cook over low heat until softened. Add beans to cooked vegetables. Add seasonings and water. Bring to a boil, cover, reduce heat and simmer 2 to 3 hours, stirring often.

Cook to end point temperature of 180 to 190°F. Beans should be spicy and slightly hot, with a faint taste of smoke. Sauce should be the consistency of gravy.

Serve beans over rice.

#### Nutrition per serving

Calories:	238	Dietary fiber:	15g
Protein:	13g	Calories from fat:	3%
Carbohydrates:	54g		

*To those who have hunger, give bread.*

*To those who have bread, give a hunger for justice.*

*– Latin American Table Prayer*

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