

Food

What We Know

Food Insecurity

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are guaranteed basic human rights in the United States. In order to live, one must be able to eat, but not everyone knows where his or her next meal is coming from. Food insecurity is a problem that affects many Americans and is associated with poor health.

Every stage of life is impacted by the effects of hunger. The younger a person is when they experience food insecurity, the more they will be affected later in life². Prenatal nutrition is extremely important for growth and brain development. For people experiencing food insecurity, rates of preterm births and low birth weight are higher compared to the national population. Both poor iron and folic acid intake during pregnancy are linked to preterm births and low birth weight. Nutrient deficiencies also lead to a higher risk for birth defects, obesity, diabetes, and cardiac disease. Nutrition received in infancy sets is vital to life-long health.

Unfortunately, there is an inverse relationship between the nutritional quality of food and its cost². It is often easier to get cheaper, nutrient-lacking food. Children in food deficient homes grow up eating a large amount of calories and protein and a low amount of vitamins. This leads to slow growth and being underweight. The negative effects of food insecurity continue through the teenage years. Children who suffer from food insecurity are more likely to perform poorly in school. These children tend to have poorer mental functioning and social skills. Severe hunger is also associated with chronic illness, behavior problems, and obesity. Nutrition influences health at all ages, starting early in life, and contributing to health and success throughout adulthood.

The availability of food also influences food insecurity and nutritional value of food in a household. When a family does not have access to transportation, access to healthy food is also limited. Diets are healthier when grocery stores or restaurants are close to neighborhoods¹. “Food deserts” occur when grocery stores are not within walking distance to residential areas. People in lower socioeconomic classes may not have access to cars or other forms of transportation. This limits their access to healthier food sources. Access to food influences the nutritional value of the foods in a household. When households have limited access to food, the health of the entire family is affected.

Obesity

The nutritional value of the food we eat can influence health in many ways. Diets high in fat and sugar often lead to obesity, as is the case for many Americans today. Obesity puts both men and women at risk for a wide range of chronic illnesses and cancers³.

Local Implications for Harrisonburg/Rockingham

According to Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap, Harrisonburg’s food insecurity rate is 18.8%. This percentage is even higher for children. In Rockingham County, the food insecurity rate is 8.5% and 17.5% for children. In Harrisonburg City, 71.3% of kids are eligible

for free or reduced lunch, compared to 42% of children in Virginia overall.⁴ Childhood obesity is ranked by community stakeholders as the 3rd most important problem facing the local community.⁵ Rates for childhood obesity, although equal to Virginia's overall, are high, with 34% of Black/African American youth, 38% of Hispanic youth, and 29% of males classified as overweight/ obese.⁵

There are many programs in place to provide meals and food for people in need. Many churches in Harrisonburg have food pantries, e.g. Patchwork Pantry housed at Community Mennonite Church, Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church, and the Salvation Army. The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank provides a large amount of food to both individuals and institutions serving food insecure residents. The farmers market in downtown Harrisonburg and social services also collaborate with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), allowing the use of food stamps at the farmers market. Residents can apply for WIC benefits at the Harrisonburg/ Rockingham WIC office.

The Harrisonburg/ Rockingham public school systems provide meals to students, and local schools are joining in the fight against childhood obesity. Safe Routes to School, a grant-funded program, is working to promote increased physical activity, including walking and biking to school. Second Home provides low income children with healthy snacks, homework assistance, and a stable place to go both before and after school, providing children with the essential tools for academic success. Shenandoah Valley United's United Project is designed to provide financial assistance to children who can't afford the soccer fees, in order to encourage physical activity. Soccer coaches come to low-income schools to teach 3rd and 4th graders about soccer and nutrition.

For elderly residents who are food insecure, Valley Program for Aging Services coordinates the local Meals on Wheels program.

References

- ¹Caspi, C. E., Sorensen, G., Subramanian, S. V., & Kawachi, I. (2012). The local food environment and diet: A systematic review. *Health & Place, 18*(5), 1172-1187. doi:10.1016/j.healthplace.2012.05.006
- ²Cook, J. T., & Frank, D. A. (2008). Food security, poverty, and human development in the united states. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1136*(1), 193-209. doi:10.1196/annals.1425.001
- ³Guh, D. P., Zhang, W., Bansback, N., Amarsi, Z., Birmingham, C. L., & Anis, A. H. (2009). The incidence of co-morbidities related to obesity and overweight: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMC Public Health, 9*(88) Retrieved from <http://download.springer.com/static/pdf/600/art%3A10.1186%2F1471-2458-9-88.pdf?originUrl=http://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/article/10.1186/1471-2458-9-88>

⁴ Students Approved for Free or Reduced Price School Lunch. Retrieved May 16, 2016 from <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/3239-students-approved-for-free-or-reduced-price-school-lunch?loc=48#detailed/5/6870/true/1380,1232,1123,1031,923/any/12923,6682>.

⁵Community Health Solutions. (2015). A community health needs assessment prepared for Sentara Rockingham Memorial Hospital. Retrieved from <http://www.sentara.com/Assets/Pdf/About-Us/Community-Health-Needs-Assessments/SRMH-2015-Community-Health-Needs-Assessment.pdf>