

PART II FOOD CONSUMPTION: ISSUES AND ASSETS

OVERVIEW

Part II of *Food Matters: Farm Viability and Food Consumption in Missoula County* addresses food consumption issues and assets. To provide a backdrop for understanding food-related issues in the County, this section begins with a chapter that addresses why food security is important for all community members and not just for those labeled food insecure. The next two chapters describe how students and faculty developed and administered a survey and conducted focus groups to learn about Missoula County residents' food-related concerns (including quality, access and transportation to food outlets, cost, eating behaviors and choices) and what they perceived as the food-related assets in Missoula County. One of the study's primary goals was to investigate how food concerns and assets vary according to income level. Using two data collection methods (a survey and focus groups) allowed us to gather breadth, depth, and richness of information. Reliance on more than one data source also helps compensate for errors that may occur in each and allows for thematic comparisons across methods to check for data reliability.¹ Both methods gathered information on participants' income level; however, for the focus groups, we specifically recruited low-income individuals to investigate food consumption issues from their perspective.

Survey and focus group findings are presented in order of their importance to study participants. Pie charts and bar graphs are used to illustrate the most salient study findings. Tables included in the appendices of the report provide statistical information on each item assessed in the survey.

¹ Using more than one data source to gather information on the same topic is called triangulation. "Data from different sources can be used to corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate the research in question." (see Marshall, C. and Rossman, G. (1989). *Designing qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, p. 146).

CHAPTER 5
SOWING THE SEEDS:
UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY FOOD CONSUMPTION

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For the earliest hunters and gatherers and cultivators of food, attending to issues of food consumption was a matter of survival. Clans, tribes, and communities mapped out territory dependent upon the availability of food. They developed informal and complex systems of marketing and exchange and they expended considerable time and energy daily in the pursuit of nourishment. Food shortages, a result of poor planning, weather conditions, pestilence and disease, poor hunting or soil conditions marked impending disaster for ancient societies.¹ Food security was a matter of life or death. But times have changed, or have they?

In a highly industrialized, technology-dependent society food security is still a life and death matter. In the United States, the wealthiest nation on earth with an overabundant food supply, 13 million children live in households with limited or uncertain access to a nutritionally adequate diet.² In 2000, Montana ranked 9th among all other states in the U.S. in both food insecurity and hunger. Thirteen percent of households (46,000) were defined as food insecure and 4% of households (14,000) were defined as food insecure with hunger.³ Montana is also among five other states whose relative hunger status has worsened since 1996.⁴

Food security is a complex issue. It is not simply a problem for those households living below the poverty line whose ability to purchase food is compromised by low wages, underemployment, unemployment, or poor physical and mental health. It has relevance for all food consumers. Food security includes having access to healthy, nutritional foods as an ever-increasing number of research studies provide evidence of the linkages between diet and health-related problems including some types of cancer, obesity, and food borne illnesses. It also includes having a voice in decisions affecting the types of foods made available to consumers, as the food industry spends billions of dollars yearly to promote highly processed and packaged foods while neglecting to advertise the benefits of fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy food choices.

¹ Busch, L. and Lacy, W.B. (1984). *Food security in the United States*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

² Nord, M., Kabbani, N., Tiehen, L., Andres, M., Bickel, G., & Carlson, S. (2002). *Household food security in the United States, 2000*. Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report Number 21. Washington, D.C.: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Available at:
<http://www.ers.usde.gov/publication/fanrr21/>

³ Sullivan, A. and Choi, E. (2002). *Hunger and food insecurity in the fifty states: 1998-2000*. Waltham, MA: Center on Hunger and Poverty, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University.

⁴ Ibid.

In completing the first of the Community Food Assessment reports, *Our Foodshed in Focus: Missoula County Food and Agriculture by the Numbers*, we learned food-related trends and their possible impact at the local level. For example, between 1960 and 2000, Missoula County's population increased dramatically by 114%. The greatest percentage of growth occurred outside the city limits in rural sections of the county. Much of the development is taking place where farms and ranches once stood. What this means is more food consumers and fewer places to grow food, which translates into increased dependency on foods imported into the county. Also, in 1997, residents spent nearly 16% of their per capita income on food. In that same year, residents spent 36% more on food than the typical U.S. citizen.⁵

Hunger and food insecurity are largely a function of the ability to buy food. In 2000, nearly 15% of Missoula County residents and 9% of families lived below the poverty line. Strikingly, only about 30% of the students eligible to participate in the Free and Reduced School Lunch Program in the County actually do participate (based on data from 1999 through 2002). Many low-income people are apparently not participating in the Food Stamp Program. For instance, at the time of the last Census of Population in 2000, about 6% of the County's population received food stamps in an average month. But nearly 15% of the population lived below the poverty line.

Welfare reform policy instituted in 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), made substantial cuts to a number of social welfare programs and much of the policy's savings to taxpayers came from reduced expenditures for the Food Stamp Program.⁶ Since the inception of PRWORA, welfare caseloads have dropped significantly. While some interpret this as an incredible success, the introduction of more complex eligibility requirements and other barriers to receiving benefits have driven more families into deeper poverty.⁷ According to *Our Foodshed in Focus*, most of the emergency food providers in the County have witnessed an increased use of their services in recent years. Clients made nearly 31,300 visits to the Missoula Food Bank in 2002; that number was up 19% from four years prior (1998). The Poverello Center served about 300 meals a day in 2001 and 2002, while a fairly new agency, Missoula 3:16, served an average of 66 meals a day in 2002. The Seeley-Swan Food Pantry was the only rural agency for which statistics were available. They distributed 825 boxes of food in 2002, which was 77% higher than their figures for 1999, the year the pantry opened.

Certainly, times have changed in many ways since the days of the hunters and gatherers, but food insecurity persists as a major problem confronting all of us today. This report puts a face on food consumption issues in Missoula County by presenting residents' food-related concerns as well as the assets they identify in our local food system. This

⁵ Note that tourists and the University of Montana student population may affect the accuracy of these estimates.

⁶ Allen, Patricia. (1999). Reweaving the food security safety net: Mediating entitlement and entrepreneurship. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 16, 117-129.

⁷ Working for Equality and Economic Liberation (WEEL). (2003). Missoula, Montana. *Welfare reform: A WEEL overview*. Retrieved October 8, 2003. www.weelempowers.org.

section of *Food Matters* provides ample food for thought and action as we explore local food consumption issues and recommend ways in which these can be addressed.