LOSING GROUND

875 MILLION MEALS LOST AND COUNTING
RESEARCH BRIEF – MARCH 2017
ABOUT THE OHIO ASSOCIATION OF FOODBANKS

The Ohio Association of Foodbanks is Ohio’s largest charitable response to hunger. We represent Ohio’s 12 Feeding America foodbanks and their 3,300 member hunger relief agencies. Our mission is to provide food and other resources to people in need and to pursue areas of common interest for the benefit of people in need. Last year, the association and its statewide hunger relief network distributed 208 million pounds of food – or about 173 million meals – to Ohioans in need. The association recognizes that hunger is merely a symptom of poverty and engages in other efforts to eradicate poverty and hunger, including serving as the home of The Ohio Benefit Bank™ and operating Ohio’s largest federal navigator program for the Affordable Care Act. For more than 25 years, we have advocated for equitable public policy at the state and federal levels to decrease hunger in Ohio. We work with local, regional, and national partners to inform policymakers, media, and other stakeholders about the issues facing Ohio’s families.

OUR MEMBER FOODBANKS

INTRODUCTION

About 1.8 million Ohioans were receiving federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits in October 2013 (SNAP, also known as food assistance or food stamps). Across-the-board cuts to food assistance benefits went into effect beginning November 1, 2013, leading to an estimated loss of about $29 per month in benefits for a household of three. Compounding the impact of these cuts, the State of Ohio elected to forego a federal waiver from the United States Department of Agriculture beginning January 1, 2014 which would have allowed unemployed adults without dependents to continue to receive modest food assistance benefits while seeking paid employment. About three years later, in February 2017, 303,084 fewer Ohioans are receiving food assistance benefits.

What impacts have these cuts and changes had on the emergency hunger relief network in Ohio? This research brief compiles data from several studies and sources to provide an overview of the continuing prevalence of hunger and food insecurity confronting individuals and families throughout our state, and the challenges facing Ohio’s hunger relief network in meeting the need.

HUNGER IN OHIO

- About 1.5 million Ohioans receive SNAP benefits
- More than 2 million Ohioans rely on the emergency hunger relief network for help with food
- Nearly one in six Ohioans, including about one in four children, are food insecure

LOSING GROUND: 875 MILLION MEALS LOST AND COUNTING

All SNAP recipients in Ohio and across the nation saw reductions in their benefits beginning November 1, 2013, when Congress decided to end an increase to SNAP benefits made as part of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. In Ohio, 44 percent of households receiving SNAP include children, over 15 percent of households include someone who is elderly, and nearly 29 percent of households include someone who is nonelderly and disabled.

Additionally, the State of Ohio chose to pass up a federal waiver offered statewide by the United States Department of Agriculture beginning January 1, 2014. The waiver would have allowed unemployed, able-bodied, childless adults between 18 and 50 years of age to continue to receive modest SNAP benefits—100 percent federally-funded benefits—while seeking employment. This waiver had been in place in Ohio since the Great Recession when unemployment rates and labor surpluses climbed, and in spite of continued eligibility for the waiver given the state’s economic climate, an estimated 134,000 unemployed, able-bodied, childless adults are now subject to a work requirement. Their SNAP benefits are now time-limited, so that unless they can secure at least 20 hours per week of paid employment or access one of a very limited number of volunteer work experience opportunities, they can receive just three months of SNAP benefits in every 36-month period.

Over the past three years, these cuts and changes have totaled $1.28 billion in lost food assistance benefits—a loss of 875 million meals for low-income Ohioans—which is more than the entire Ohio Association of Foodbanks network distributed in that timespan.

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4 Ohio Association of Foodbanks analysis of Ohio Department of Job and Family Services Public Assistance Monthly Statistics
DECLINING HOUSEHOLD SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Mapping an Increase in Eligibility for Foodbank Services
(Individuals in households with incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty level)

2009 FIVE-YEAR ESTIMATES
3,462,181 individuals (30.9%)

2015 FIVE-YEAR ESTIMATES
3,818,355 individuals (33.9%)

The Ohio Association of Foodbanks is mandated to serve households at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level—which is about $40,840 for a family of three. This threshold is widely considered the standard for self-sufficiency, but unfortunately, the number of individuals in households below this threshold has continued to rise greatly since the end of the Great Recession. In fact, in 75 of Ohio’s 88 counties, there was a greater percentage of people eligible for foodbank services in 2015 than there was in 2009.

MORE HOUSEHOLDS STRUGGLING

The Ohio Association of Foodbanks network has experienced a steady increase in demand for help with food, and now serves more than 2 million Ohioans each year. Recent 2015 five-year estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey indicate that one-third of Ohioans are eligible for help from Ohio’s foodbanks. Households experiencing SNAP cuts are turning to Ohio’s hunger relief network more frequently, while most households not income eligible for SNAP (over 130 percent of the federal poverty level) have no other nutrition assistance programs on which to rely.

About two-thirds (62 percent) of the households served by Ohio’s hunger relief network receive SNAP benefits. However, half of those households report exhausting their monthly SNAP benefits within two weeks or less, and fully 85.5 percent report exhausting them within three weeks or less. Ohio’s hunger relief network has become a staple source of food for many Ohio households — with six in ten households reporting that they rely on the network regularly for help with food.

Ohio’s 12 Feeding America foodbanks track duplicated counts of the number of households and individuals, by household type and age, receiving help with food from the hunger relief network. Pantry statistics from the first quarter of state fiscal year 2014 (July to September 2013) compared to the first quarter of state fiscal year 2017 (July to September 2016) reveal an increase of 74,342 more seniors served, representing a 20 percent increase in just four years. This trend will only continue as more baby boomers near retirement and face the challenge of making ends meet on limited, fixed incomes. Reports show that nearly half of all boomers are not on track to be able to afford basic expenses in retirement.\(^6\)

Hunger relief agencies already report difficulty keeping up with continued high demand for help with food. In the most recent Hunger in Ohio study, one in four hunger relief agencies (23.8 percent) reported that their agency had experienced cutbacks, and 24 percent reported having less food than needed to meet their clients’ needs. Many agencies reported obstacles to distributing healthier foods, including the inability to store/handle healthier, fresh foods (34 percent). Nearly six in ten agencies (58.6 percent) operate with no paid staff.\(^7\)

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CONCLUSIONS

The Ohio Association of Foodbanks and its statewide hunger relief network has continued to experience growing demand for help with food, even while the state of Ohio experiences so-called indicators of economic recovery. Seven years out from the end of the Great Recession, there continue to be high numbers of individuals and families seeking out help from Ohio’s hunger relief network, many on a regular basis. Prior to across-the-board cuts to SNAP benefits in late 2013 and the reinstatement of a work requirement for unemployed childless adults in early 2014, Ohio’s hunger relief network was already experiencing challenges in providing adequate amounts of nutritious food to households seeking help. These cuts and changes to SNAP — the nation’s first and most important defense against hunger and poor nutrition — have greatly exacerbated the hunger crisis in Ohio, as indicated by continued high numbers of households served by Ohio’s foodbanks.

Half of the households served by the Ohio Association of Foodbanks had at least one individual who was employed in the past year, but nearly half of those households (46 percent) report the longest-employed person worked part-time (less than 30 hours per week), suggesting limitations in the household’s earning potential. This finding mirrors a larger trend of stagnant median household incomes, in spite of lower unemployment rates. The Ohio median household income remained 3.7 percent lower in 2015 than it was prior to the Great Recession in 2008 (when adjusted for inflation). With limited earned income growth potential and weakened SNAP benefits, more low-income households are turning to Ohio’s hunger relief network than ever before — and many are returning more regularly than they once did.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Low-income households and the charitable hunger relief network that serves as their last line of defense against hunger cannot afford to absorb any more spending tradeoffs, reductions, or harmful policy changes. The loss of more than $1.28 billion in 100 percent federally-funded SNAP benefits has already had an astronomical economic impact. Every $5 in federal expenditures on SNAP generates $9 in local spending, so this loss of SNAP benefits has not only impacted the food budgets of low-income families — it has also led to an estimated $2.3 billion in lost revenue for grocers and retailers, lost sales tax revenue, and lost economic growth. Additionally, the stated goal of the expansion of Medicaid coverage in Ohio — improved health outcomes — will be difficult to achieve with inadequate nutrition, as food insecure individuals are 1.3 times more likely to experience more hospitalizations and longer inpatient stays, 3.5 times more likely to experience depression, and 2.9 times more likely to have a poorer overall health status.

The State of Ohio must recognize that, just like Medicaid, SNAP is an entirely federally-funded program which directly benefits vulnerable populations while generating revenue for local economies. SNAP is a proven work support program that puts low-income Ohioans in grocery store lines instead of in food pantry lines, and should be strengthened at every opportunity. The State of Ohio should avoid introducing additional barriers into the administration of SNAP in Ohio that would deter needy families from maintaining access to this critical nutrition safety net.

The State of Ohio should support the Ohio Association of Foodbanks request of $30 million per year for the Ohio Food Program and Agricultural Clearance Program in the upcoming 2018-19 state biennial budget to respond to this growing hunger crisis, while supporting Ohio farmers and growers.

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Ohio's largest charitable response to hunger