

Fighting Food Insecurity

The Produce Box Project for Seniors

The Facts About Seniors and Food Insecurity



Sandy Iwen has seen the numbers growing. A nutrition/healthy aging specialist at Elderbridge Agency on Aging in northwest Iowa, she views intake forms that reflect how seniors see their own food security.

“We ask how often they’re afraid of running out of food before the end of the month,” Iwen says. “A lot more say ‘often’ or ‘sometimes,’ which indicates food insecurity.”

In fact, according to the 2016 National Foundation to End Senior Hunger report, 16 percent of seniors face the threat of hunger in the U.S. And the people most at risk are not necessarily who you might expect. Nationwide, the majority of food-insecure seniors are white and had income levels above the federal poverty line.



Sixteen percent of seniors face the threat of hunger in the U.S.

This is no surprise to Tim Getty, regional nutrition services coordinator at the Heritage Area Agency on Aging in Cedar Rapids, who sees the counterintuitive trends every day. “Someone may have \$40,000 a year in income but no access to healthy foods, and they’re just as much at risk.”

Even in Iowa, where seniors make up nearly 16 percent of the population (ranking 12th in the U.S. for percent of population over 65 years of age), the problem of food insecurity often goes undetected. While many programs address nutrition and food insecurity issues for kids and families, seniors may be overlooked.

What causes food insecurity among seniors in a state that’s known for feeding the world? Several factors are key.

Income level. In Iowa, Social Security benefits average \$1,369 per month. Yet 43 percent of single retirees and 23 percent of married retirees rely on that monthly check for 90 percent or more of their monthly income.

Iowa Senior Hunger Partnership

According to Doris Montgomery, state coordinator of the Iowa Nutrition Network at the Iowa Department of Public Health, many people think seniors “should have the money they need through Social Security, but that’s not the reality of it.”

One senior who participated in a focus group on food insecurity said he receives \$708 a month, which he uses to pay rent, utilities and for medicine. “What is left after that to buy groceries?” he said.



Rising costs and limited income force many seniors to choose between paying for medications or food.

While SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits can supplement a senior’s food budget by an average of \$84 a month, many people don’t take advantage of them due to pride, confusion about the application process or a feeling that others need the food more than they do.

“They don’t want to take from someone else,” says Getty. “They will use their food and their resources for their grandchildren, other people’s children and their pets.”

Rising costs. While the prices of food and health care have steadily increased, Social Security cost of living increases have not kept pace.

For seniors on medication, this can create a tug-of-war between paying for prescription drugs or food.

As a focus group participant said, “...if you’re diabetic, you have to pay for medication. If your insulin costs more than what’s left—which mine does—well, then you shortchange yourself on the food. Or you shortchange on the insulin.”

Food deserts. Lack of grocery stores can be a particular problem in rural Iowa counties, says Janet Buls, outreach coordinator for the Northeast Iowa Area Agency on Aging.

“It’s very rural in our area. A couple of counties don’t have hospitals, and until six years ago, we had a county without a grocery store. Regardless of income, if you don’t have access to produce, it doesn’t matter how much money you have.”

Limited mobility and transportation. Many seniors no longer drive. Others are homebound or have no family nearby to take them to a grocery store, food pantry or meal site.

“I live on the far side of town,” said one focus group participant. “So if I want to come here for a meal, I need to depend on someone else to pick me up and take me home. And I can’t take the taxi, because that’s \$10 round trip. If I had \$10, I would buy more food.”

Embarrassment or sense of shame. For many seniors, it’s hard to admit that they’re food insecure. “Our circumstances don’t come from us being lazy,” said one focus group participant. “We worked all our lives. But health circumstances have caused us to get into a real bind. It feels horrible to ask for help.”



Lack of transportation can limit access to grocery stores and meal sites.

According to Montgomery, seniors may conceal their circumstances from their own families. “One senior told us that when her daughter was coming to town, she spent her entire month’s food budget at once so she could fill her cupboards and hide the fact that she doesn’t have enough food.”

Confusion between food insecurity and poor nutrition. “A lot of seniors are malnourished but overweight,” says Buls. “Due to money or other variables, they may eat food that’s cheap and not nutritious.”

Approximately four out of five older adults don’t consume the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables, Buls says. “For five dollars, you can go to a fast food joint and get a sandwich, drink and fries. At some places, you get a dessert, too.”

So how do these factors change the quality of life for seniors?

According to the focus group, seniors may reduce the size of meals or skip them altogether, and they may forego meats, fruits and vegetables. One participant snacks all day on dry cereal instead of eating meals, while others portioned out a single sandwich during the day or made a batch of tuna salad to last an entire week.

Solving the problem requires more public awareness, says Getty. “Many people realize that Meals on Wheels or senior dining sites exist, but they don’t fully grasp the problem. There’s a lot of focus on childhood hunger, but within 10 years there will be more older adults in Iowa than school age children. That’s going to raise medical and health care costs and the need for more government assistance.”

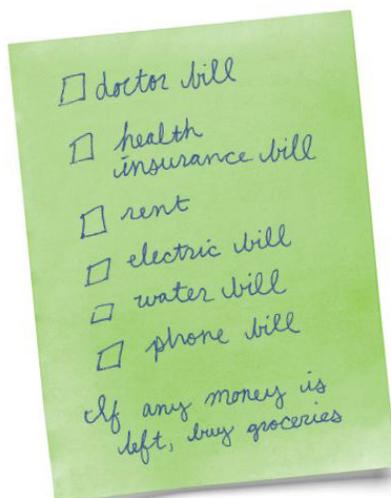
Montgomery agrees. “The senior population often already has the palate and appreciation for fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods,” she says, “but they are not able to take care of themselves in the way they’d like.”

“Anything we can do to help people to live independently in their homes, close to their community and family, is what everyone prefers. We’ve got to figure out how to support people in ways that are common sense and not wait until a crisis occurs.”

Next up: *The Produce Box Project and how it’s helping address food insecurity and nutrition issues for seniors.*



With lack of healthy foods, seniors may be overweight but malnourished.



Seniors, we can help you find a food pantry, meal delivery service or meal site near you. For help finding healthy food, dial:

2-1-1
LifeLong Links: 866-468-7887
Food Assistance Hotline: 1-855-944-FOOD (3663)



This material was funded by USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - SNAP.



The Iowa Senior Hunger Partnership developed marketing materials to promote United Way's 2-1-1, Lifelong Links and the Food Assistance Hotline.

Program developed by Iowa Department of Public Health in partnership with Iowa Department of Human Services and Department on Aging. This material was funded by USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—SNAP. This institution is an equal opportunity provider.