

Nutrition

Illinois Interagency Nutrition Council

Obesity Hunger

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Illinoisians Face Dual Challenges: Obesity And Hunger

The paradox between hunger and obesity has attracted much attention. Some have suggested that federal food programs are giving the poor too much food, resulting in increased obesity among low-income people. The Illinois Interagency Nutrition Council (INC) looked at the research and determined the issue to be more complex.

Obesity Is A Public Health Epidemic In Illinois

- About 65% of U.S. adults are overweight or obese. Obesity affects all races, ethnicities, ages & socioeconomic groups.¹
- In Illinois, 59% of adults are overweight.²
- In Illinois there were an estimated 145,420 children in 6-11 years age group & 199,833 teens in the 12-19 years age group who were overweight in 2002.³
- Prevalence of overweight in Illinois children ages 2-5 continues to increase. From 9.3% (1976) to 14% (2003).⁷
- Environmental factors, socioeconomic status, poor food habits & physical inactivity all contribute to obesity. Easy access to inexpensive, high calorie foods & decreased opportunities for physical activity have worsened the obesity epidemic.⁴

Why do obesity and hunger co-exist?

- For example only 23% of Illinoisians eat the recommended 5 or more fruits and vegetables per day.²
- Nearly 883,892 (6.7%) Illinoisians are currently living with Diabetes.³
- Compared with their higher-income counterparts, low-income people may have fewer opportunities to purchase healthy, high quality food & to engage in physical activity.^{8, 9, 10} Poor nutrition and lack of exercise, in turn, contribute to obesity.
- Weight gain among low-income people may also result from periodic episodes of food insecurity. For many people, food stamps & money for food run out before the end of the month.
 - For example, many Illinois families run out of food stamps within the first 2

Food Insecurity and Hunger in Illinois

- About 9.0% of Illinois households are food insecure and do not always have enough money to buy food. Another 3.0% of Illinoisians are food insecure with hunger⁵
- 14% of Illinois children received food stamps in 2003 & 16% of Illinois children lived in poverty in 2003.⁶
- 45% of Illinois children with access to school lunch are eligible for free & reduced price lunches in 2004.¹⁴
- 11.8% of Illinoisians live in poverty-- more than in any other midwest state.¹³

Definitions

Food insecurity – Occurs whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire food in socially acceptable ways, is limited or uncertain.

Hunger – The uneasy or painful sensation caused by involuntary lack of food, which over time may result in malnutrition.

weeks of the month.¹¹ When money & food stamps again are available in the following month, some may overeat cheap foods that are high in calories, fat, & sugar. This could result in gradual weight gain over time.¹²

Studies to date have been small and somewhat limited in scope. Therefore, researchers cannot state definitively that food insecurity causes an individual to become overweight or obese.

What Needs To Be Done?

More studies are needed, but action needs to be taken today. The obesity and hunger epidemics are serious and real.

- Ensure that low-income families and children have access to nutritious, affordable, and safe foods. Many programs are already in place to address these issues. For instance, the WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children) Program, Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs, Child and Adult Care Food Programs, and Food Stamp Programs make healthy foods more accessible to this population.
- Protect funds for emergency and supplemental food programs. These programs provide a nutrition safety net for low-income families and children.
- These suggestions are a starting point to help address obesity and food insecurity. More research is needed to better understand obesity among food insecure populations.

Web Sites of interest

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service. The Surgeon's General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity
<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/default.htm>

Food Research and Action Center
<http://www.frac.org>

Center on Hunger and Poverty
www.centeronhunger.org

Illinois Interagency Nutrition Council
<http://www.aces.uiuc.edu/~INC>

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- 7CDC, Pediatric Nutrition Surveillance System
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- 13DeNavas-Walt C, Proctor B, and Mills R. Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the U.S.; 2003. US Dept of Commerce & US Census Bureau, August 2004.
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