

Bringing Hunger Home

by Bruce Weik and Peter Schwartzman

The world is full of hungry and malnourished people (detailed in last week's article). We would like to think hunger and malnutrition are someone else's problem or that it occurs someplace else. But that would be wrong.

In December 2008 the Galesburg Community Impact Group (consisting of Galesburg Chamber of Commerce President Bob Maus, businessman Rick Sundberg, Knox County Regional Superintendent of Schools Bonnie Harris and alderwoman Karen Lafferty, among others) released a study entitled, "A Call To Action: Poverty in Knox County, IL." Although hunger and malnutrition are closely linked to poverty, there was no mention on any type of problem related to hunger; in fact, neither the word "hunger" nor "food" was used in the report. Alternatively, one of the study's major points was the perceived problems that families bring with them who move here from Chicago. While some of the Chamber's solutions help soothe the souls of the "haves," they recommended nothing to help the situation of food scarcity, hunger or malnourishment.

This shouldn't surprise anyone. Hunger in Galesburg is a difficult subject to approach. No one likes to think about it. Few want to talk about it, from the clergy to the media to the hungry. No one wants to look at and confront the reality that there are people and kids in their "backyard" (i.e., Galesburg and Knox County) who are hungry and/or malnourished, and whose basic nutritional needs are not being met. Most distressing of all, some of the "zipped-lipped" are the very people and agencies attempting to help; conversations with heads of local food providers revealed, curiously, their downplaying of any unmet hunger problems in the area.

Hunger is a symptom of poverty. The poverty rate in Knox County in 2007 was reported as 17.6 percent (see chart, Illinois' value is 11.9 percent). Given increases in unemployment (now officially at 11.5 percent in Galesburg—a more realistic number probably would be 20 percent, since we don't count people not receiving unemployment or whose unemployment has run out), we have the makings for a severe food problem, including scarcity, hunger, and malnutrition. District 205's 2009 Report Card states that 54.4 percent of students enrolled in the district are eligible to receive free or reduced lunches; this number is closer to 60 percent now. This means that over half of the children in the district may face food scarcity in their household, exposing the possibility of a more widespread hunger issue. To think that these statistics are not relevant or somehow inaccurate, or that they spell out a scenario other than a potentially serious problem with hunger and malnutrition, is to be both

Since we have started looking at the problem of hunger and malnutrition in Galesburg, we determined that no good statistics are kept on this all-important of issues, including almost nothing from the Knox County Health Department. So, without hard data to go by, we set out to ask people who work closely with children in our community to give real-life testimony to the problem. This is what they had to say:

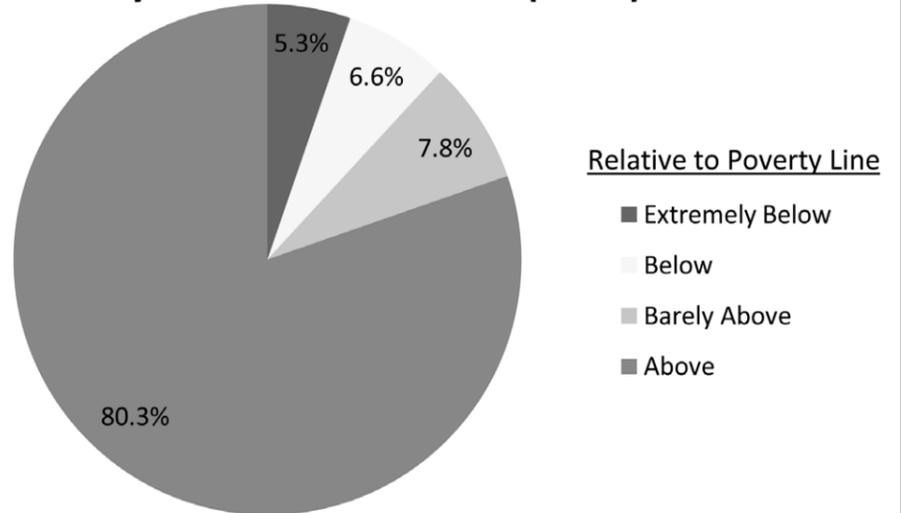
Teacher A (with 12 years of experience in District 205): "I have noticed more and more children depending on school lunches over the past 10 years. This could be a factor that parents are working and can't pack lunches. It is also a factor of our changing economy in this town.... It seems that school lunches are the only nutritious meals these children are getting these days. As a teacher, I have visited many children's homes and I have helped to buy food for families. Many years ago, I remembered a child telling me that his mother put all the food in a locked van (each day) so no one in the house would have access while they were out. I visited another home where the student showed me a cupboard with only a few scattered bags of ramen and offered to cook one for me. This year, I have a student living with a family elder and they depend heavily on a local food pantry for supplies. I am sure that many families living amongst us are in need of food to feed their children."

Teacher B (with 15 years of service in District 205): "I think the numbers of students who qualify for free/reduced lunch at Steele [Elementary] has risen dramatically since I've been here.... I personally haven't witnessed children going hungry since they almost all eat breakfast and lunch at school. I do know from personal experience that in the past people such as the school nurse, outreach workers, [and] teachers have kept food in their rooms (crackers, cereal, etc.) to give to kids who were hungry/missed breakfast, etc."

Teacher C of District 205 for 12 years: "I have had children express to me that they do not have much to eat at home or that their parents are unable to purchase any food until their monthly assistance arrives. I often ask children what they had for dinner on the previous evening just to ensure they are eating. I do find that some of the foods they are surviving on at home are not the most nutritious (which tend to be the most affordable when buying in quantity on a limited income), such as ramen noodles, to name one example. We try hard at school to make sure that all students take advantage of the breakfast program. Even for students arriving late, we make accommodations to ensure the students start the day off with something to eat. Students have the opportunity for at least two meals a day during the school week. This is just one more reason of many for students to maintain good attendance. I have also directed families to utilize the FISH Food Pantry and the Salvation Army for emergency food needs. I understand the number of individuals utilizing the FISH Food Pantry has significantly increased."

Jim Jacobs, teacher in District 205 for 35+ years: "During the school year 2000-2001, 86 percent of Nielson's African-American students were on free or reduced lunch and 62 percent of the school's European-American students were on free or reduced lunch. This is significant because it would indicate that well over 60 percent of Nielson students during that school year were relying principally on the school food programs for a portion of their daily nutrition, implying that there may not have been ample food or ample nutritious food in the homes of these children. Of course,

Poverty status of Illinoisans (2007)



Source: Heartland Alliance Poverty Report 2009

getting a school breakfast and a school lunch does not necessarily mean that those meals were nutritious.

There are two observations that I am convinced would stand up to scrutiny. First, the number of children who were unable to provide their own lunches when going on a field trip seemed to increase over time. This would indicate that food and money to buy food was scarce in the home. Second, although subtle, the percentage of obese children seems to increase. This would indicate a diet heavier in starch and wasted calories, which is a diet that is a less nutritious. There were times when students would come late, after breakfast had been served, and complain of hunger. As far as I know, each time this happened, the teacher brought the student down to the office so that the principal or office staff could get them some breakfast."

School Volunteer in District 205 for several years: "I see kids who are hungry and not clothed properly. The school does what it can to serve breakfast and lunch. But what

about when the kids are not in school, on weekends, vacations, during the summer?"

The story becomes clear. We have a food scarcity, hunger, and malnutrition problem in Galesburg and Knox County. We also have an apparent denial of the problem, coming from our community leaders, all the way down to the hungry themselves, unwilling or unable to put into words their present situation (for a multitude of reasons, not the least of which are shame and lack of hope). But we are planning to change all of this. There are enough of us seeing the problem to make it possible for us to do something about it. Mother Teresa was credited with saying, "If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one." That wisdom makes this problem a lot more solvable. Next week, you'll see some of the things we're coming up with. We think you'll be pleasantly surprised. We hope you'll want to get involved. (For more information, visit this website: <www.ThePeopleInGalesburg.org>.)

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