

MU research team releases first Missouri Hunger Atlas

More than \$1.1 billion a year is spent on public programs in Missouri, yet a new University of Missouri study reports the state has a rising number of people worried about having sufficient amounts of food and coping with hunger. The MU Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security has released a new tool in the fight against hunger. The first Missouri Hunger Atlas details the distribution of hunger in the state and the success of programs trying to meet food insecurity and hunger needs.

“This is a pioneering study because, for the first time, we have charted hunger in every Missouri county and St. Louis City,” said Matt Foulkes, co-author and assistant professor of geography in the MU College of Arts and Science. “With the help of state agencies, the atlas documents 16 different measures of need and 12 different measures of program success in reaching people eligible for services.”

The Atlas details which counties have the highest and lowest percentages of need and which counties are doing the best job of meeting those needs. Researchers said they were pleased to find the areas of highest need often scored very high in addressing those needs.

“The areas of highest need, such as southeast and south central Missouri were also high performers in meeting hunger needs,” said Sandy Rikoon, co-author and director of the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security. “On the other hand, suburban and higher income areas had a comparatively lower percentage of need, but those areas often have larger populations and were typically lower performers in addressing those needs.”

According to the team, poverty is the No. 1 predictor of food insecurity, which is defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as access by all people at all time to enough food for an active, healthy life.

“It’s not just hunger that concerns the team,” said Nikki Raedeke, co-author and assistant professor in the Department of Nutritional Sciences in the College of Human Environmental Sciences. “We have to be concerned about both the quantity and quality of food. Obesity is a problem in all groups, but especially the poor because they are less likely to be able to obtain nutritious foods.”

The Missouri Hunger Atlas will be presented to lawmakers on Wednesday, Feb. 27 in Jefferson City. The team plans to release annual updates of the Atlas. They hope to raise awareness and assist public agencies and private groups working on hunger issues.

“We are interested in raising awareness about the hunger problem in the state,” said Rikoon, who also is a professor of rural sociology in the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. “However, we want that awareness to translate into action and to motivate people to do something about the issue.”

“The Atlas also includes statewide maps that group counties in terms of need and program performance,” said Joan Hermsen, co-author and associate professor of sociology in the College of Arts and Science. “For policymakers, the maps will be an indispensable aid.”

“During 2004-2006, an average of 4.4 percent of Missourians experienced hunger and the physical, psychological and social harms of not having enough food,” Rikoon said. “Regretfully, recent trends in hunger are not positive ones for the state. Current averages for hunger represent a more than 20 percent increase over the averages for 2001-2003. That increase is one of the highest in the nation. It is likely that food insecurity and hunger needs will keep rising in the near future.”

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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