

[back to article](#)



Hungry Eyes - More N.C. children go without food

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The three children hadn't eaten a full meal in two days.

In desperation, their grandparents knocked on the door of a downtown Wilmington church.

The children waited in the car as their grandparents asked the minister at the door for help.

He gave them a box of pop-top cans of Vienna sausages and pork and beans.

"They got the food, drove out of the parking lot and stopped beside the road to feed the kids right away," said Jennifer Caslin, development manager at the Wilmington branch of the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina.

Such scenes are increasingly common here and throughout the state as joblessness and the weak economy put ever greater strains on an already thin safety net. You don't have to look hard to see hungry children in North Carolina. Whether it's families skipping breakfast so the food will stretch through dinner, or eating packaged foods, because fruits and vegetables are too expensive, many of the state's children aren't eating balanced, nutritious meals.

In May, Feeding America, the largest food bank network in the country, released the results of its first analysis of food insecurity in early childhood, "Child Food Insecurity in the United States: 2005-2007." North Carolina ranked second worst in the nation with 24.1 percent of its children under 5 judged to be food insecure and lacking regular access to nutritional food. The state was 10th worst in the same Feeding America study of food insecurity in children 0-18 years old, using figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Nationally, the food insecurity average is 17 percent for children under 5.

Demand for food at the nation's food banks has increased 30 percent in the past



Photo by Mike Spencer
Children eat lunch in the cafeteria of Freeman Elementary School. The children were eating lunch with the help of the Summer Food Service Program with New Hanover County Schools.

year, said Ross Fraser, media relations manager for Feeding America. "So many people have been plunged into poverty," he said, "and it's terrible for children because it stunts their growth in all ways."

Indicators of food insecurity in North Carolina include high child poverty rates, the 11 percent unemployment rate, broken families, the high price of fresh food and a 21 percent increase in households with food stamps since 2007, said Alexandra Sirota, director of policy and research, Action for Children North Carolina in Raleigh.

North Carolina ranked 37th in child well-being in the recently released 2009 Kids Count Data Book from the Annie E. Casey Foundation using factors such as the percent of low-birth-weight babies, infant mortality rate, child death rate, teen death rate, teen birth rate, percent of teenaged high school dropouts, percent of teens not attending school and not working, percent of children in families without a parent with full-time and year-round employment, percent of children in poverty and percent of children in single-parent families. The state did improve one level from its 38th ranking in 2008.

Often the youngest children fall through the cracks, subject to their parents' ability – or inability– to provide nutritious foods.

"There are a lot of programs that are available once (kids) get into the school system, but those aren't always available for young children until school age," Sirota added. "The fact that families are both losing their jobs and earning such low wages that they're living in extreme poverty is an indicator of that added stress when you're trying to feed the family."

BRIDGING THE GAP

When parents can't feed their children regularly, often the schools, local social service networks and churches try to fill the need.

And in the summers, when school's out, the need for meals for children increases. The New Hanover County school district hosts a federally-funded Summer Food Service for Children Program at 15 schools and community centers in the county for any child, 18 years old or younger, to eat a lunch-time meal. For six weeks this summer, the program served about 700 kids each day. That number is slightly lower than previous years because funding for the program came in after the end of school this year and didn't get advertised, said Anne Ohlson, schools child nutrition supervisor.

"We do see a lot of hungry children who are waiting for us when we show up with the food," said Imer Smith, director of Child Nutrition for New Hanover County Schools. Historically, most of those children would show up at inner-city sites, but the number of children coming to the program's sites outside the city is increasing.

An 8-year-old girl and her 4-year-old brother were among a crowd of about 10 children who were waiting for the Food Service lunch to start at the doors of the Jervay Communities meeting center one day a few weeks ago. The girl and her brother walked from their Jervay home across the square to the center each day

that week for lunch. Lunch was a turkey and cheese sandwich, cucumber slices with ranch dressing, a peach cup and skim chocolate milk.

"I love ranch on my sandwich," the little boy said, smiling and slathering his bun.

During the school year, Caroline Hines is seeing more and more parents who can't pay their child's food accounts as food service director at Rachel Freeman Elementary School. Parents who don't qualify for free or reduced meals have sent her notes asking her not to allow their children to eat if they don't bring money with them because the parents can't afford the charge: \$1.25 for breakfast or \$2 for lunch. Defaulted lunch accounts at all New Hanover schools have risen from \$18,223 in 2008 to \$29,203 at the end of last school year. New Hanover County Schools saw an increase in children in free and reduced lunch programs from 9,792 in 2007-08 to 10,375 in 2008-09.

"I had a child who came in at breakfast and waited until the end to get the leftover food that no one had opened," Hines said, adding that teachers and school social workers sometimes buy students meals. Some parents won't fill out the free lunch forms because "they think people will know their child needed it."

FEEDING THE POOR

What she sees during the school year frustrates Hines. The state "feeds prisoners," she added, "but our school children that have done nothing wrong are going hungry."

But just feeding children during the week often isn't enough. The local Food Bank's Backpack Program helped 75 children each week during school last year take meals home to help their family over the weekend. The children bring the backpacks back to school each week to be refilled at the Food Bank. One of the parents of the children who participated in the Backpack Program wrote: "I thank you for the program because so many kids might be in the same place as my girls were. They didn't have food before they went to bed at night."

In the tri-county area, many times churches are the main sources of food pantry help for the poor.

The South Brunswick Interchurch Council Food Pantry in Shallotte has seen a 33 percent increase in children ages 0-17 served there since August last year, said Mary Pritchard, a council member.

This spring, Life Community Church in Wilmington was distributing about 800 food boxes a month through the national Angel Food Ministries. Most of their box recipients were families. The church hopes its new location in Independence Mall will help people in need find Angel Food easier.

"We've had people make comments that if it wasn't for this program, we wouldn't be eating," said Mindy McAdams, church director of Angel Food Ministries.

One inner city pastor who works regularly with hungry families in his church

blamed the child hunger he's seeing on the lack of family structure.

"I've seen latch-key situations where the parents aren't home and they tell the kids, there's something in the fridge for you to eat," he said, "But you're talking to an 8-year-old child or younger who doesn't know how to cook."

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Percentage of Food Insecurity for Children under 5 by State Compared to National Average



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