

Eliminating child hunger in South Carolina

According to a 2011 report from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), among households in South Carolina (SC), 90,000 adults and children reported skipping meals, going without food for a whole day, and cutting the quality of their food because they did not have enough money for food.

Household food insecurity has detrimental effects on children, including adverse physical and mental health outcomes.

Carrie Draper, Nutrition Center Affiliated Scholar, received a University- Community Initiative Research Award through the Initiative for South Carolina's Future to identify causes of child hunger in SC and to develop solutions in partnership with people who are actually experiencing hunger.

Draper, project coordinator, who also has her Master in Social Work degree from USC said, "As someone with a social work background, I feel it is important to develop and implement strategies that enable people to personally communicate their own experiences to the general public and community stakeholders."

For the project, six families that are at risk for food insecurity will be asked to video record their experiences related to food access throughout an 8 week period.

The method that will be used is based on PhotoVoice- a participatory action research strategy that enables participants to identify, represent, and enhance their community through the use of photography. Except, in this project, instead of using cameras participants will use camcorders to record their experiences.

Draper said, "We want to see and hear first hand the barriers families are facing in accessing food for their families, and what strategies they are using to manage the best they can. Is it that they are hitting walls when trying to get SNAP benefits (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program)? Or are they lacking reliable transportation to be able to maintain a job, and therefore, an income to buy food? Or are gas stations the only food source they have close to their residence?"

The goals of the project will be to reflect the community's strengths and concerns related to food access; highlight personal and community issues through group discussions; and inform community leaders and policymakers about household food insecurity.

"We want people to see more than just the numbers of those who struggle to have enough food to eat in SC. We want community leaders and policy makers to understand that as much as people are trying, many just simply cannot afford to provide enough good wholesome food for their families every day. Ultimately, we want child hunger to become a policy priority in communities, and in SC as a whole," said Draper.

This study will serve as part of a larger study funded by the USDA to answer the question of how child hunger can be eliminated in the United States by 2015.

Key Points

- Research has shown there are 90,000 food insecure households in SC.
- Food insecurity is associated with adverse physical and mental health outcomes.
- USC researchers will ask six families at risk for food insecurity to video their experiences around food access.
- The goal of the project will be to highlight personal and community issues through group discussions and inform the community about household food insecurity.
- This project will be part of a larger effort to identify the household and community-level conditions that are creating families who are food insecure.

The larger study, which began in July 2011, will continue for two more years within an eight-county region in South Carolina, including Richland, Fairfield, Kershaw, Chester, Lancaster, Calhoun, Orangeburg and Clarendon.

The study, led by Sonya Jones, PhD, seeks to identify the household and community-level conditions that increase the risk of hunger. Researchers are interviewing community leaders and food system stakeholders, as well as surveying 600 families to determine what strategies can be implemented to end child hunger.

One of the things they want to determine is whether anti-hunger organizations are coordinating their efforts, "so if a family applies for assistance from one program, they are also referred to other programs," Sonya Jones, Arnold School Faculty member and Principle Investigator said.

Draper says the University- Community Initiative Research Award will complement the USDA grant because it provides the opportunity to gain "an insider's perspective". She said, "This study will complement the data collection from the larger study, provide a deep and rich perspective on child hunger experiences in South Carolina, and hopefully, help us in answering the ultimate question of: How can South Carolina communities eliminate child hunger?"