



Transcript for Institute for Research on Poverty Podcast featuring Judi Bartfeld

Hosted by David Chancellor

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[Chancellor] For this podcast, I talked with Judi Bartfeld about food hardship trends in Wisconsin and the U.S. and about a new website project that she is working on. Bartfeld is director of IRP's RIDGE Center for National Food and Nutrition Assistance Research, a professor in the UW Madison Department of Consumer Science, and a Specialist with the University of Wisconsin- Extension.

Many people know SNAP or Food Stamp use has seen a big increase since the start of the great recession and that unemployment and poverty levels continue to be uncomfortably high. And, according to the latest data, nearly 13% of people in Wisconsin are classified as food insecure. This figure tracks fairly close to the current rate of poverty in Wisconsin but Bartfeld cautions that this isn't a simple one to one relationship between the two measures.

[Bartfeld] The relationship between poverty and food insecurity is an interesting one. Because, on the one hand, poverty would be the single strongest predictor of food insecurity but by the same token, they don't really track nearly as closely as you might think. So what you find is that if you look at poor households, actually fewer than half of them would be considered food insecure. And if you look at food insecure households, fewer than half of them are actually poor. So there's a lot of other things that are going on. One of the things we're increasingly seeing is that the broader environment—really broadly defined—makes a big difference and you can look at a number of dimensions. So you can think of the economic circumstances—things like the unemployment rate, things like the prevailing housing costs, access to transportation. These all play a role – you can look at Federal food assistance programs and we find that stronger access to summer food programs, to school breakfast programs—those all play a role. Stronger emergency food system matters and then there is a lot of emerging interest in looking at the role of the broader food environment in terms of access to healthy and affordable foods that are available in the community.

[Chancellor] I asked Professor Bartfeld how researchers actually go about defining food insecurity. She says that food insecure households are, as the name implies, households that have uncertain access to food—at least through normal channels.

[Bartfeld] So what you see with food insecure households is that they'll report running out of food and not having the money to buy more—they'll report relying on a limited set of low cost foods or cutting back the size of meals due to lack of money. Or, skipping meals altogether. So, it's really a broad concept that ranges from fairly low-level adjustments to difficulty affording food to fairly severe kinds of reductions in intake.

[Chancellor] There is a complex set of measurements behind this range in level of food security. Since the mid-1990s, official food security estimates have been developed out of a supplement to the current population survey. They're based on an 18 item scale where respondents are asked about a broad range of behaviors that a family might adopt if they're struggling to meet their food need.

[Bartfeld] Based on how they respond to this set of questions, they're defined as anywhere from fully food secure to marginally food secure to having low security to very low food security. Now a lot of the numbers that you see when you're trying to assess the situation within a state or a smaller area don't use that whole complex scale because the data simply don't exist at the local level. So you see other measures that people will call things like food hardships that are based on one question or a small number of questions that will be fairly intuitive—for instance, a question that's often used is as simple as "Was there a time in the past year when you didn't have enough money to buy the food you needed?" So, it's both—there's both a complicated way of measuring it and some quick and dirty ways that people use to get a handle on what's going on.

[Chancellor] I asked Bartfeld what actually happened to the food hardship rates in the Great Recession—particularly given the sharp rise in poverty and unemployment starting around 2008.

[Bartfeld] I think what we saw with the most recent recession is a much larger increase in food insecurity and we've seen a more sustained increase. And this is true both if you look at what is happening in Wisconsin and if you look nationwide—the jump was really pretty profound. I think, you know, if you look at what contributes to food insecurity, poverty is a predictor and above and beyond poverty, unemployment itself is a really strong predictor of food insecurity so in the case of the recent recession, we really had both of those to a larger than average degree so we have sustained periods of economic hardship and then we have the really sustained periods of high unemployment. And what you find is that even for families that aren't poor, the income shocks associated with unemployment are a really strong risk factor for food insecurity. So, I think those two really are feeding off of each other in terms of making food insecurity rates so high right now.

[Chancellor] Yet, according to Bartfeld, right in the midst the recession—right after this jump, an interesting thing started to happen. Even as poverty and unemployment figures showed more bad news, rates of food insecurity stopped going up. This leveling off of food insecurity came as almost a pleasant surprise amidst a lot of other gloomy data and it really seemed to show that the food security safety net was working.

Meanwhile, as Bartfeld pointed out earlier, local level food hardship data is often hard to come by. Over the last several months, Bartfeld and her colleague Amber Canto have been working with UW–Madison’s Applied Population Lab to develop a website that can serve to fill this gap in Wisconsin. The website is called the Wisconsin Food Security Project and is found at foodsecurity.wisc.edu.

Let’s turn to Professor Bartfeld for more on how the website works.

[Bartfeld] What we’ve been doing with the Wisconsin Food Security Project website is to try to develop a data and mapping portal where you can look at a variety of local indicators that are broadly related to food insecurity, both local estimates of food hardship rates, as well as local estimates of poverty rates, of housing costs, of participation in federal food programs, a whole lot of different demographic factors that might be linked to food insecurity.

[Chancellor] Bartfeld says that they’re trying to pull all of this data together so it can be viewed on a map and juxtaposed against where different kinds of food resources in the community are located.

[Bartfeld] So, where are the summer meal programs? Where are the food outlets where you can use your SNAP benefits? Where are the farmers’ markets, where are the farmers’ markets that actually accept SNAP benefits? So we’re in the process of trying to put together a really comprehensive picture—both of the food environment, as well as the broader community characteristics that we think are relevant to food insecurity. The hope is that communities can use this to identify high risk areas that either do or don’t have sufficient kinds of food resources.

[Chancellor] Many people know that SNAP or Food Stamp usage has seen a big increase since the start of the great recession, and that unemployment and poverty levels are still high.

Although the Wisconsin Food Security Project has been live throughout the summer of 2012, the website will be seeing some big additions during the month of August. There will be more ways to display the data, more food environment information, and more narrative about the food hardship issues facing people in Wisconsin. So be sure to check back for updates in early September.

I want to thank Professor Bartfeld for taking the time to talk to us.

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