

# One in five...

## Food insecurity among children in Lincoln and Lancaster County, Nebraska

One of every five children in Lincoln and Lancaster County...



...cannot be certain of having anything to eat tonight.

A preliminary report based on the results of the Center for People in Need's 2009 "Face of Poverty" survey of 2,319 low-income households in Lincoln and Lancaster County



*One in Five...*

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## Introduction

**I**f they think about hungry children at all, most Lincolnites probably don't think about the hungry children of this report. These are not "pet peeve" children—the ones who irritate us by whining at their mothers in the grocery store checkout line, the ones who stare at us soulfully over the back of a restaurant booth, or the ones who, while doing their homework, will mindlessly scarf down an entire batch of bridge mix you were saving for book club.

Those children may be hungry at that particular moment, but usually theirs is a passing, easily satisfied hunger, not the debilitating ache and pallor of chronic hunger or the dread-laden emptiness of a family whose food won't last to the next paycheck.

The hungry children of this report don't spend much time in restaurants, and their families can seldom afford treats like candy or bridge mix (although filling, calorie-laden snack food and fast food may sometimes substitute for more nutritious meals in food insecure households). And there are some days when these children and the households they live in cannot be sure there will be anything for supper, let alone for an after school snack.

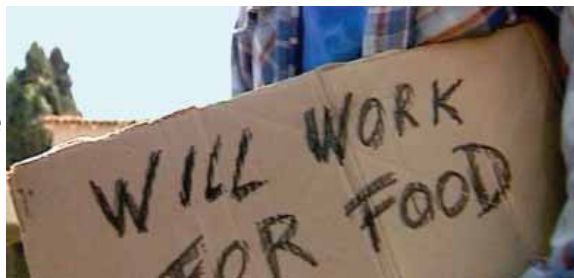
**Nationally 42.2 percent of households with income below the poverty line experience food insecurity.**

"Food insecure," in the parlance of the USDA and others who track poverty and hunger—the two are directly related—means being uncertain of having or being able to acquire enough food to meet the needs of all family members. A food secure household has access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members.

According to figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, **14.6 percent of all American households (49.1 million people) were food insecure at some time during 2008**, the most recent year for which complete statistics are available.

The Department of Health and Human Services reports that **10.7 percent of all Nebraska households (74,900) are food insecure.**

Narrowing the focus to Lincoln, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that **12.9 percent of the city's roughly 252,000 residents (32,500 individuals) are food insecure.**



What do those statistics mean for children? **Nationally, households with children had nearly twice the rate of food insecurity (21.0%) as households without children (11.3%).** The percentages are even higher for some household types, such as those with children and headed by a single woman (37.2%), by a single man (27.6%), and households with incomes below the poverty level.

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In Nebraska, and more specifically in Lincoln and Lancaster County, hunger and its sidekick, poverty, sometimes go virtually unseen. From time to time we may look away from the pleading eyes of a man holding a "Will Work for Food" sign at the parking lot exit of a suburban home store, maybe wondering if that tattered piece of cardboard is a genuine plea for help or the stage prop of a con man.

But we seldom ask ourselves if the little boy and his sister we see walking hand-in-hand down a grade school sidewalk are on their way home from school to a nutritious supper, a slice of bread fried in drippings, or nothing at all.

What follows is a snapshot of hunger in Lincoln and Lancaster county with emphasis on its effects on children. In some respects it is a hybrid report. The statistical basis is the Center for People in Need's most recent needs assessment survey, which gathered data from an unusually large respondent base. **The 2,319 households surveyed represent nearly 40 percent of the Lincoln households with income below the poverty line.**

But rather than simply reporting cold statistics, we have tried to put a human face on hunger in this city and county with an anecdotal and speculative approach as well. We hope it will open your eyes to the day-by-day dilemmas and choices faced by the hungry children and families in our midst.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Beatty Brasch".

Beatty Brasch  
Executive Director  
Center for People in Need.

## The Center for People in Need's 2009 "Face of Poverty" Survey of Families and Children

In December 2009, in connection with its holiday toy distribution, the Center for People in Need conducted a 56-question survey to gather information about the barriers and challenges faced by low-income families and their children. It was the fourth such survey. The first took place in 2006.

The survey was completed by 2,319 respondents, each representing a different household. Although some respondents did not answer every question, and some checked more than one of the supplied replies to one or more questions, the large number of respondents lends unusual credibility to the data.

Each question in the survey (and every distinct subset of each question) can be correlated with all or any other of the questions or subsets, allowing us to create a detailed picture of each respondent's circumstances, and to gain a broad understanding of the relationships among all the elements addressed by the survey.

Six questions, question groups, and parts of questions directly addressed the household's ability to obtain enough food to meet the needs of every household member and the respondent's subjective feelings about the family's food security. The questions are reproduced below.

The survey also gathered demographic, employment, and education information and asked questions about utilities and rent, insurance and health care, access to aid, childcare, transportation, clothing and personal care, and other areas of life.



### Survey Questions used in the Preparation of this report

14. BELOW IS A LIST OF CONCERNS YOU MAY HAVE. PLEASE CHECK THE MOST APPROPRIATE BOX FOR EACH ITEM.

a. Having enough food each week for myself and my family  Not at all worried  Somewhat worried  Very worried

23. Do you have enough food for your family for the next week Yes No

FOOD: PLEASE CIRCLE ONE IN EACH BOX

a. Do you have trouble buying enough food for your family? Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

b. If you get government assistance with food (Food Stamps, WIC), is the amount you get enough to feed your family? Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

c. If you use food programs like Center FOOD/Food Bank and Food Net, are you able to get enough food to feed your family? Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

d. Do you need more than one of these programs to get enough food to feed your family? (Food Stamps AND Food Net, for example) Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

24. Check all of the following that apply:

I or others in my household sometimes skip meals because I (we) don't have enough food

Children in my household sometimes go hungry

I sometimes have to choose between buying food and paying a bill

Children in my household don't get nutritious meals at home

25. Which of these food programs do you use? (check all that apply)

Food stamps  WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) Program  Food Net  Center FOOD/Food Bank

Salvation Army  People's City Mission  Good Neighbor Community Center  Emergency Food Pantries

Free/Reduced School Lunch  Friday Backpacks  Other

26. If you do NOT receive Food Stamps, what is the reason?

I don't know about the Food Stamp program

I haven't applied for Food Stamps

I applied for Food Stamps but I was turned down

Other (please specify):

## Hungry Children: Food Insecurity Among Children in Lincoln and Lancaster County

**F**or the next half hour or so, try on a new identity: You are the mother of two children, both under 18 years old. You live in Lancaster County, Nebraska. Not unusual—you are one of 65,249 Lancaster County families who match those characteristics.

Your income is \$15,000 per year. That puts you among the 10 percent of those families—6,320 of them—who live below the poverty line (\$18,310 for a single parent with two children).

You are single. That makes you a fairly typical head of a household in poverty in Lancaster County: **70 percent of the county's children in poverty live in single-householder families, and 92 percent of those households are headed by a woman with no husband present.**

That means the household's entire income is your responsibility. So is the entire burden of child care. What's atypical about your situation is your salary. The odds against someone in your situation making as much as \$15,000 are high. **Of the estimated 6,770 children living in poverty in Lancaster County, nearly half live in families with income less than half the poverty level.** Only 51 percent live in families like yours, with income between 50 percent and 100 percent of the poverty level.

Some might say you should count yourself lucky to be making 82 percent of the federal poverty level, but try budgeting for food, rent, utilities, clothing, medical expenses, transportation, and all your other needs. That includes daycare, too, because you are working part time, and both of the children are below school age.

Not surprisingly you often find it hard to make your money last through the month, and sometimes you have to make some hard choices. Letting the children go hungry is unthinkable, (but ninety-one families—5 percent of the respondents said children sometimes went hungry).

Keeping them full often means feeding them more carbs and sugar than is good for them. Cheap food often tends to be high in sugar, fat,

and salt, starch, and carbohydrates. Highly nutritious food is usually more expensive and preparation is more labor intensive. A bag of carrots costs \$1.49, but you can get a drive-thru kids' meal—burger, fries, and a soda—for 99 cents. Which are you going to choose?

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Some days, probably, you pretend you aren't hungry so the kids can eat. **Nearly half (45 percent) of the CFPIN respondents said that someone in the family skips meals when there isn't enough food to go around.** The kids aren't really fooled, though. They eat in silence, feeling unhappiness and guilt that shouldn't rest on their thin shoulders.

If they were school age they could get a nutritious lunch at school every day, at a reduced cost or even free. You do get WIC (Women, Infants, and Children assistance), But that seldom lasts through the month.

So it's very likely that you play a constant game of "bill roulette," buying food by ignoring a statement or two—last month the gas bill, this month the electricity, next month the rent. It's a gamble that only buys time, at best. The house always wins. But 72 percent of your peers are playing it, too.

You're getting food stamps, but your income is a little too high to qualify for enough to keep the kids well fed—but too low to afford the hours of child care you would have to pay for if you worked full time. Sometimes more income—the kind of income you can earn—becomes a zero-sum game.

Choices made long ago don't matter much now.

When you're out of money and the only thing to eat in the house is breakfast cereal—no milk, just cereal—it doesn't make the children feel any fuller to tell them that you're sorry now that you didn't finish high school.



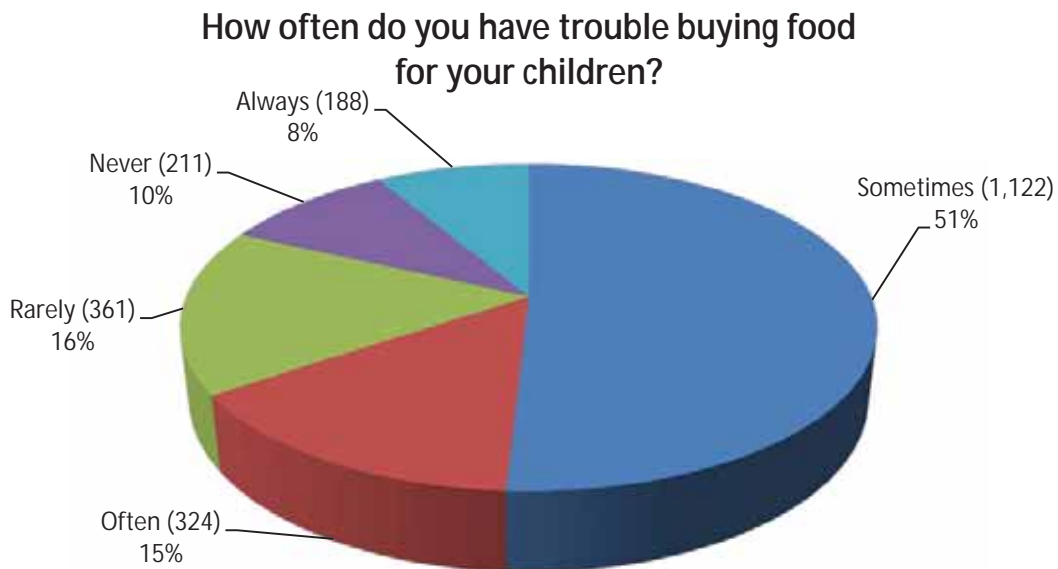
Are you beginning to have credibility issues with your new identity? Beginning to feel that you're being taken in by a knee-jerk sob-story? Maybe some hard data from the Center for People in

Need's most recent needs assessment survey would help. For more information about the survey itself, completed in December 2009 by respondents representing 2,319 separate households, see page 3.

### **Buying Food, Facing Food Shortages**

*Perhaps the fundamental statistics illustrating the magnitude of the problem locally are best represented by the following two charts showing respondents' difficulty buying food for their children and the strategies they use to cope with food shortages:*

Figure 1



*Of the 2,206 respondents to this question, **74 percent Always, Often, or Sometimes have difficulty buying food.** Only 10 percent Never have difficulty, and 16 percent Rarely do. In all, **90 percent of the respondents have some level of difficulty providing enough food for their children.***

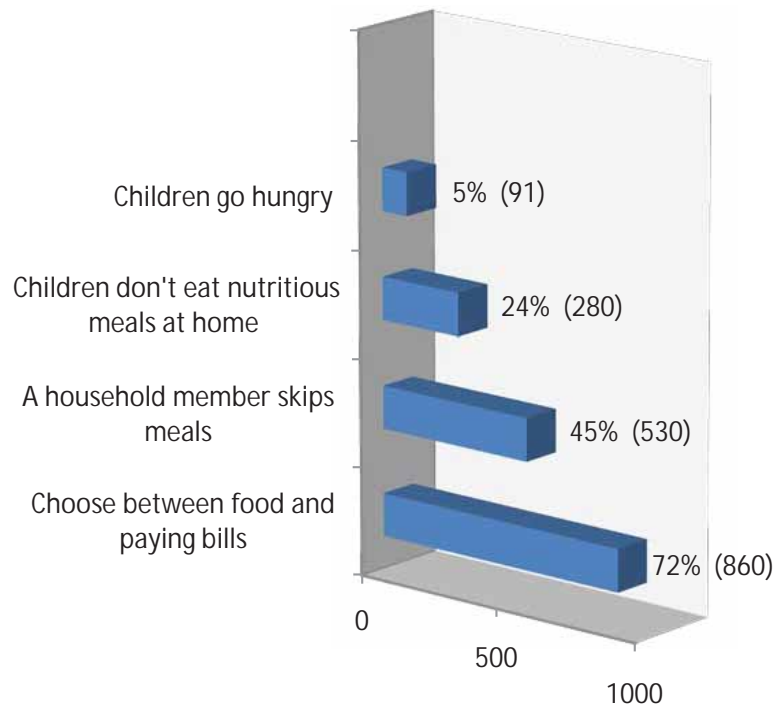
***The average household size of the CFPIN survey takers is 4.46 (the national average is 2.45), and most include children younger than 18. The difficulty buying food in most of the households surveyed directly affects children.***

*But few of the real-world choices available to families who can't afford enough food are much more than temporary, short-term expedients that may solve an immediate problem but do nothing to bring the victims out of poverty and into self sufficiency.*

The most common strategies for dealing with household food shortages are a series of “lesser evils” choices. **Diverting money from bill-paying funds and skipping meals to leave additional food for children are the most common expedients.** Less common, and potentially more harmful, are allowing children to go hungry or providing substandard nutrition. **All four strategies carry potentially harmful effects.** The harm caused by hunger and poor nutrition is self evident. Less obvious are the psychological and developmental consequences of knowing that another member of the household has gone hungry, and of observing the effects of leaving bills unpaid in order to buy food.

Figure 2

### How do households cope with food shortages?



“This is a skewed game you’re asking me to play,” you might be thinking. “There are resources out there, public and private programs to help people like the single mother I’m supposed to be impersonating. What about Food Stamps? What about school lunch programs? This country has

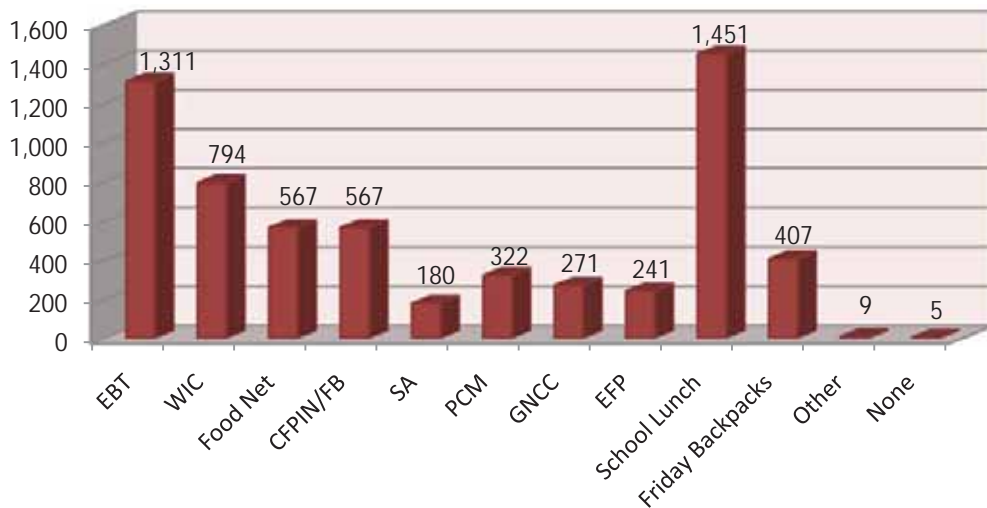
warehouses full of surplus food. ‘My children’ and ‘I aren’t out there completely on our own!’ No, you’re not completely on your own. Assistance is available, But what programs do you qualify for? How completely do they fill the need? The following charts suggest answers to those questions.

The majority of food assistance in Lincoln and Lancaster County is delivered through the ten programs along the horizontal baseline of Figure 3. The number above each bar is the number of CPIN survey respondents who use the service. Abbreviations are explained in the paragraph below the chart.

**Three government programs, EBT (Nebraska’s federal Food Stamp program) WIC (federally financed assistance to mothers and children up to age 5), and the federally subsidized reduced-price and free school lunch program serve the largest number of clients. All the programs help alleviate childrens’ hunger; WIC and the school lunch program are designed specifically for children.**

Figure 3

### Households using government- and community-based food assistance



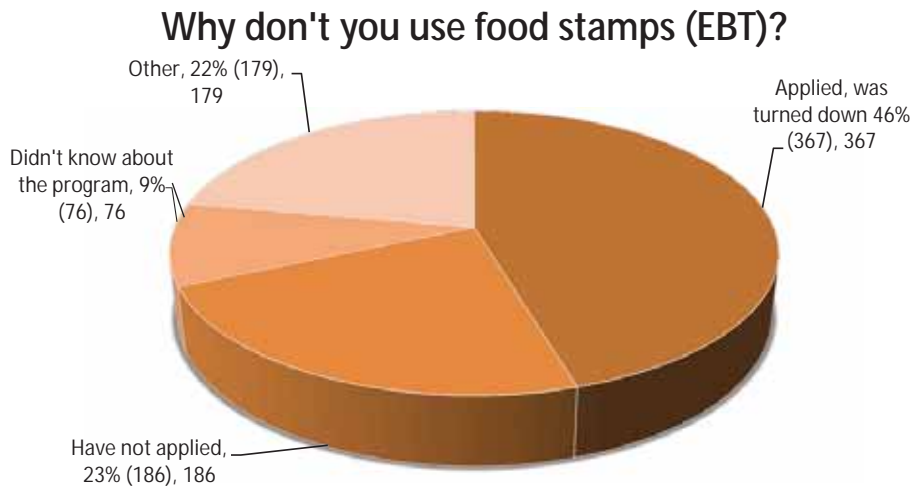
#### Assistance Program Abbreviations

- EBT:** Electronic Benefits Transfer. Nebraska’s program for accessing the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (formerly Food Stamps).
- WIC:** Women, Infants & Children program. Federally funded assistance to mothers and their children up to 5 years old.
- Food Net:** A Lincoln volunteer not-for-profit corporation distributing food throughout the city.
- CFPIN/FB:** Center for People in Need/Food Bank. Two Lincoln not-for-profits that distribute food weekly in partnership.
- SA:** Salvation Army. An international, church-based. Basic needs services include food pantries.
- PCM:** People’s City Mission. Lincoln church-based not-for-profit. Distributions include food.
- GNCC:** Good Neighbor Community Center. Lincoln church-sponsored emergency basic needs.
- EFP:** Emergency Food Pantries: Government-private partnerships providing emergency food.
- School Lunch:** Federally funded discounted and free lunches for low-income students.
- Friday Backpacks:** Food distributed at schools by Food Bank of Lincoln, a local not-for-profit.

So there is some assistance available—but even though the resources are present, it doesn't necessarily follow that you have access to them or, in some cases, qualify for them. Food Stamps, (EBT),

for example, is probably the most widely known food assistance program in the nation, but about 38 percent of the respondents to the CFPIN survey don't participate in the program:

Figure 4



You're one of the 62 percent with Food Stamps, but that leaves 38 percent impoverished and without them. Of the CFPIN survey respondents who don't have Food Stamps 46 percent say they have applied but were not accepted.

among CFPIN respondents, but you might qualify for WIC, the women, infants and children program. There really aren't any other government programs to choose from.

Since your children aren't in school, you can't take advantage of the federally subsidized school lunch program, the most widely used assistance program

And what about your Food Stamps? Are they an adequate supplement to your own earnings? Most recipients say no. It's no surprise that you wake up at night worried about feeding the kids.

*Figure 5 makes it clear that government food assistance does not provide full food security to most clients. **Government programs provide sufficient food only Sometimes, at best, for 62 percent. Only 35 percent say their needs are Always or Often fully met by these programs.***

Figure 5

### Is government assistance sufficient to feed your family?

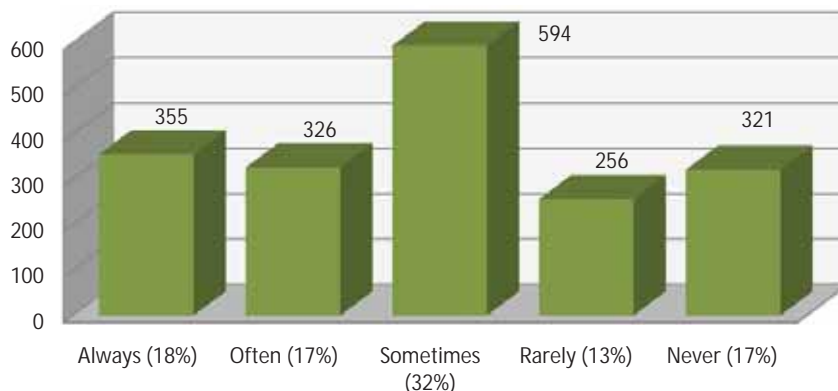
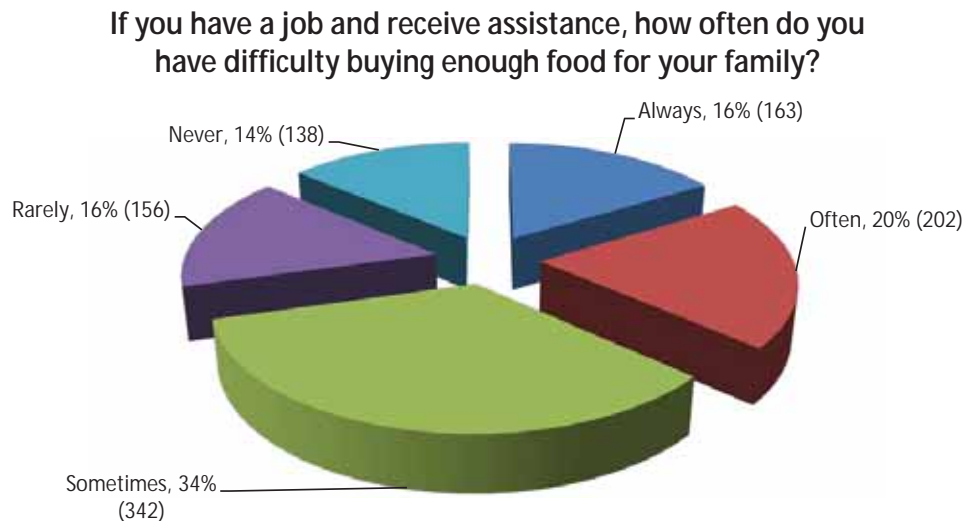


Figure 6 indicates that even if you have a job but make less than the federal poverty-level income, food assistance programs make little difference in the difficulty you experience buying food for your children. **Only 30 percent of job holders who also receive assistance Rarely or Never experience difficulty** (compared to 26 percent for all respondents), and **70 percent Always, Often, or Sometimes have difficulty** (compared to 74 percent of all respondents).

Figure 6



“The rich are different from you and me,” F. Scott Fitzgerald supposedly remarked to Ernest Hemingway, who is said to have replied, “Yes, they have more money.”

Whether it actually happened that way—or at all—the often-quoted exchange suggests that Hemingway believed the rich are not much different from you and me. That they aren’t endowed with special righteousness, aptitudes, and glamour, however much we (and some of Fitzgerald’s writing) may tend to sentimentalize, mythologize, and stereotype them.

The same conversation, with a couple of substituted words, might aptly apply to mother and children whose world you’ve been inhabiting:

“The poor are different from you and me.”  
 “Yes, they have less money.”

The little exercise in role playing you’ve been strug-

gling with for the past eight pages or so is over now. Although it has hardly been detailed or intense enough to pull you deeply inside the skin of your single-mother alter ego, it has been successful if it has given you some sense that it is not some innate quality or innate defect in the character of low-income people (in 2010 we are not so free with the term “poor” as in Fitzgerald and Hemingway’s day) that makes their lives different from ours. It is for many, if not most, the limited range of choices that their circumstances make available to them that keeps them from escaping the repeated cycle of poverty, hunger, and joblessness. The amount of energy consumed in keeping a low-income family fed, clothed, and housed in many cases precludes much opportunity to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, the remedy so often thoughtlessly prescribed by their relatively well-off critics.

In some respects the single most clearly articulable

conclusion to be drawn from the survey this report is based on is exactly that: Low income people encounter nearly insurmountable barriers to recovery—not because they are different from you and me, but because they have fewer options.

Obviously the survey also reveals a huge amount of quantifiable data—information about our city and county available nowhere else. But boiled down to its essence the survey demonstrates that people with less money have fewer and worse choices available to them than do people with more money.

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The effects of that reality on children should be stunningly obvious. When families suffer, the suffering falls disproportionately on children. Not because low-income families do not love their children or fail to protect their children, but because children are more vulnerable.

From the survey we know that 90 percent of the low income households served by the Center for People in Need in 2009 have difficulty providing enough food for their families, and 74 percent always, often or sometimes do.

The average household size is 4.46 people.

Presuming two adults and two children per family (a conservative estimate, since we know families in poverty are much more likely to be headed by a

single adult than by a couple), there are, among the survey takers alone, 3,432 children under age 18 who cannot count on the proverbial three squares per day.

Extrapolating those figures to the the entire low-income population of Lancaster County—estimated at 6,320 households—would bring the number of children in food-insecure families to 9,354, a significantly higher figure than the official estimate of 6,770. But rather than quibbling over numbers and formulas, the point lies in addressing the problem.

The CFPIN survey shows that Government programs help, but do not alleviate the difficulty families have providing food. The survey also indicates that non-governmental programs make a significant contribution toward relieving hunger.

tribution toward relieving hunger.

The survey does not address the role of ordinary, secure members of society in helping to alleviate hunger in this community. However, the conclusion is inescapable:

Ordinary citizens can offer relatively little to government-funded programs. But through their support they can offer

everything to non-governmental not-for-profits who are so often the last line of defense for the hungry people among us.



***Hungry Children:***

***Food Insecurity in Lincoln and Lancaster County, Nebraska***

is based on a needs assessment survey of 2,319 households taken in December 2009 by the Center for People in Need, 3901 N 27th St., Lincoln, NE 68521. Additional copies available on request. Complete results of the 2009 needs assessment survey have been gathered in a pamphlet called *The Face of Poverty Today in Lincoln, Nebraska*. It is also available on request.

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