

SPECIAL REPORT: HUNGER AMONG BALTIMORE COUNTY CHILDREN

“Poverty and Food Insecurity Affect Thousands of Schoolchildren in Baltimore County”

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The dramatic increase in suburban poverty within counties around Baltimore City includes tens of thousands of children attending Baltimore County Public Schools. According to data submitted by the school system to the Maryland State Department of Education, over 53,000 children attending county schools live in poverty. This figure comes from the number of children receiving Free and Reduced Meals (FARM) in county schools. This figure does not include pre-school children, or children whose families have not applied for Free and Reduced Meals in schools, so the overall number of children in poverty is certainly higher. In 2013, about 30 percent of the children in Baltimore County lived in poverty (Annie E. Casey Foundation).

Although almost all county schools have seen significant increases in schoolchildren living in poverty, in four Councilmanic Districts in Baltimore County, the First, the Fourth, the Sixth, and the Seventh districts, the majority of schools in those districts have over 50 percent of students in poverty. For example, in the Fourth District, 18 of 20 schools have poverty levels of 50 percent or higher, and in the Seventh District, 26 of 31 schools have over 50 percent of children in poverty. In all Councilmanic Districts, almost one-third or more of the schools have a poverty level of at least 30 percent. My son’s high school, Loch Raven High School, had 97 students receiving FARM in 2004; today it is 285 students, or 32 percent of the population. These figures demonstrate the relatively lower but dramatically increasing rates of poverty in the Third District; Pot Spring Elementary has 268 students receiving FARM, or 44 percent of its students, a poverty increase of 188 percent over the last 10 years.

Yet many low-income families in Baltimore County do not qualify for FARM. In order to qualify for free or reduced meals in schools in 2014-2015, the annual income of a family of four must be below \$44,123 (185 percent of the poverty level) to qualify. The current poverty level for a family of four is \$23,850. In Maryland, where living costs are high (and there are no adjustments for cost of living in different states except for Hawaii and Alaska), the United Way of Central Maryland has devised a different figure to evaluate poverty, i.e., the income required to be self-sufficient. In Baltimore County, this figure for a family consisting of an adult, a preschooler and a school-aged child is 335 percent of the poverty level (\$19,790), or \$66,296.

Thus the United Way works to assist residents whose income is near or below 300 percent of the poverty level: “Across all of Maryland’s counties the income needed to meet basic needs is far above the Federal Poverty Level” (United Way of Central Maryland, 2013). And according to a recent article in the *Jewish Times*, 23 percent of Baltimore County residents, or nearly 1 in 4, lived below 200 percent of the poverty level in 2012 (<http://jewishtimes.com/35642/the-changing-face-of-poverty/>).

Although not all children in poverty are food-insecure, poverty and food insecurity are closely linked. According to Feeding America and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, about one in five children in

Maryland, or about 260,000, are food insecure. In Baltimore County, over 31,000 children struggle with food insecurity, the second highest level in the state and slightly more than Baltimore City.

Unmet need: There are various groups attempting to feed children in county schools, including the Maryland Food Bank, which operates 24 food pantries in schools where the majority of students living in the areas served by the schools live in poverty, but Baltimore County has 97 schools where the poverty level is 50 percent or higher. The Food Bank provides food but cannot supply volunteers, who must also be certified in food handling; all staffing must come from the schools themselves. The schools also need storage space for food. According to Maryland Hunger Solutions, in 2012-2013, Baltimore County schools were serving breakfasts to 54.9 percent of low-income students, earning it a "C" grade – the state-wide goal of 70 percent participation has been achieved in several other counties. http://www.mdhungersolutions.org/pdf/md_school_breakfast_report_card_dec_2014.pdf.

Other groups, such as the Assistance Center of Towson Churches, provide assistance but only serve the central area of the county. Church food pantries and other groups providing food often have sporadic hours, and currently there is no updated directory of assistance centers for providers. The last directory in Baltimore County was updated in 2013 by a volunteer.

Homelessness in Baltimore County public schools: In 2013-2014, there were 3,136 homeless children attending county schools, an increase of 682 over the previous year. Some of their situations include living in hotels or doubling up with families or relatives. Because these students' access to food over the weekends is uncertain, some churches have begun backpack programs in connection with a school near their church; children take a backpack from the school, with foods chosen by a nurse nutritionist, on Fridays and bring it back on Mondays.

Long school breaks and the summer remain problematic, although Maryland Hunger Solutions has some summer meal sites in the county open for breakfast or lunch or snacks, and a Summer Club Program for breakfast and lunch (19 sites in the county in 2014) is run by the Maryland Food Bank. In the 2013-2014 school year, Baltimore County had five afterschool agencies providing food in the At-Risk Afterschool Meal Program, but 90 county schools were eligible for this program.

According to the Maryland Food Bank, food insecurity makes it more difficult for children to concentrate and learn, and can lead to major stress and discipline problems. In a recent *USA Today* article on hungry schoolchildren, "Schools becoming the last frontier for hungry kids" (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/04/05/public-school-dinners-pantries/70389176/>), a counselor interviewed at one school always asks students having trouble in school if they are hungry and if they've had anything to eat. Invariably, she says, "They say 'Yes. I'm starving.' "

Thirty schools in Anne Arundel County are now serving dinners at schools to needy students and served nearly 90,000 dinners last year. At the time of writing this article, I was unable to ascertain if Baltimore County Public Schools serves dinners in schools with high poverty rates.

The League of Women Voters in Baltimore County is currently considering studying poverty and food insecurity in children in the county next year. Other possible actions include requesting that the County Council establish a commission to study the problem of poverty and food insecurity in children of the

county; requesting additional resources from the county to better fund current food programs assisting children, including the Assistance Center of Towson Churches and the Maryland Food Bank; and updating the Emergency Resource Guide.

The effects of feeding hungry children in schools are in turn dramatically positive. According to Monica Butta, who helps run the backpack program (Food for Thought) feeding some students at a local elementary school through the Church of the Holy Comforter (Lutherville), “The school has reported that the supplemental food we provide has created a demonstrable difference in the children we serve: the children are ‘glowing.’ We cannot dramatically change these families’ circumstances, but we can help the children be ready to learn ... we can help to stabilize small parts of our community that are vulnerable, to reach a new level of economic security.”