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Phila.-area district 2d-hungriest in U.S., study says

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Pennsylvania's First Congressional District - which includes Chester, South Philadelphia, and parts of North Philadelphia - is among the hungriest in the nation, according to a report released yesterday.

The district, represented by Democratic U.S. Rep. Bob Brady, is second only to the 16th District in the Bronx, N.Y., for so-called "food hardship," as measured by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), a national nonprofit in Washington whose aim is to eradicate hunger. FRAC defines food hardship as the lack of money to buy enough food to satisfy a family's needs.

Using data from a survey of more than 500,000 Americans between January 2008 and December 2009, FRAC learned that more than 36 percent of households in the First District answered "yes" to the question, "Have there been times in the past 12 months when you did not have enough money to buy food that you or your family needed?"

In the United States as a whole, 18.5 percent of households polled in the last quarter of 2009 answered yes, meaning that food hardship in the First District was at nearly twice the national level.

Overall in the United States, the food-hardship rate was even worse for households with children. Nearly one in four such families suffered food hardship in 2009.

In an e-mailed statement, Brady responded last night to the FRAC report: "This report is deeply troubling. But there is a direct correlation between food hardship, the economy, and the loss of jobs. The country is in the grip of the worst economic crisis in recent history. Since the start of the recession over a year ago, increasing unemployment rates and job losses have been a priority concern nationally.

"And, for people who are living on the economic edge in the First Congressional District, this period of economic crisis is devastating. Everyday, I work as hard as I can to introduce, pass, and support legislation that will create and save jobs."

For Tianna Gaines, a 30-year-old single mother of three children under 6 living on public assistance in North Philadelphia, hunger is a nearly constant companion.

"Things get tight at the end of the month, and sometimes I don't eat so my kids can," she said. "We call going to the supermarket the 'golden chore,' because it isn't easy getting the right foods to eat.

"The hardship of living without food is figuring out where it's going to come from."

To get its data, FRAC used information gathered by the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, a survey that has interviewed 1,000 households per day year-round since Jan. 2, 2008. The index is a partnership of the Gallup polling organization and Healthways, a for-profit company whose stated purpose is to help people maintain or improve their health.

The Gallup-Healthways hunger question is similar to one asked by the U.S. Census Bureau and analyzed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, FRAC president Jim Weill said.

In November, the USDA released a report that said 49 million people - 17 million of them children - were unable to consistently get enough food to eat in 2008. That represented 14.6 percent of all households.

According to FRAC's report, in the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington metropolitan area, the food-hardship rate for 2008 through 2009 was 16.7, which ranked the area 64th out of 100 - meaning there were 63 metropolitan areas in worse shape.

Overall food hardship in Pennsylvania decreased between 2008 and 2009, from 17.9 percent to 15.9 percent.

Conversely, in New Jersey, food hardship went from 14.1 percent in 2008 to 15.5 percent last year.

Weill said he could not say why the figure for New Jersey had gone up. He added that Pennsylvania may have gone down because it was following national trends.

For example, in the first quarter of 2008, 16.3 percent of U.S. household indicated that they had food hardship.

By the fourth quarter of 2008, food hardship was at 19.5 percent; that period was one in which the economic crisis was worsening, unemployment was rising, and food prices were skyrocketing, according to Weill.

In 2009, however, the number of people in food hardship dropped to 18.5 percent of U.S. households in the last quarter.

Why did things improve slightly?

Weill said food prices fell 2.9 percent between November 2008 and November 2009.

Also, benefits to food-stamp recipients increased beginning in October 2008, Weill said.

And, in Pennsylvania last year - as in many other states - rules were changed to allow more people than ever to receive food stamps.

Even though food-hardship numbers did not increase in 2009, that is by no means cause for celebration, Weill said.

"There are still far, far too many families living in food-hardship households," he said. "We ought to be appalled."

Philadelphia hunger expert Mariana Chilton, a Drexel University public-health professor, agreed.

"This is absolutely awful," she said. "Millions of children are still experiencing food insecurity" - being unable to consistently get enough to eat. Weill said that "food hardship" and "food insecurity" - used by the USDA - were similar terms.

In her own study, through research at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children in North Philadelphia, Chilton was able to show that in Philadelphia households with children under age 3, 11.2 percent had food insecurity in 2006, compared with 19.4 percent last year.

"It's the economic downturn and inadequate income support for low-income families," she said. "The safety net does not work well."

Chilton said the FRAC study was valuable because it described conditions of poverty within each congressional district.

"I can speak directly with Brady and the others and say, 'Look at this rate. How are you going to handle this?' "

After studying the FRAC report, Carey Morgan, executive director of the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, said she was not surprised to see the numbers.

Like Chilton, she said government officials should be made accountable to "enact responsible policy" to aid the poor - such as helping women on welfare receive more support for child care so they can go to work.

"What's particularly troubling is the hardship numbers around children," she said. "The impacts of poverty on kids won't be felt until 20 years from now, when these kids are grown, and we won't have a viable workforce."

People who are hungry say the rest of the world isn't aware of what they go through.

"Everyone thinks things are OK, but they don't see how bad things are," said Barbie Izquierdo, 22, of North Philadelphia, a single mother of 4- and 2-year-old children who has been laid off from a furniture-store sales job.

"People don't see how kids have to eat less for us to get through the month."

Izquierdo said there are too many limitations and rules governing programs such as food stamps. "Officials need to make rules that make sense, and to increase funding," she said.

Hunger's invisibility is a major problem that precludes its being solved, said Joanna Cruz, 25, a single mother of two young girls in South Philadelphia.

She lives with the father of her children, who makes \$11 an hour in a bakery.

"People think hunger is like in Africa - bloated bellies and flies," she said. "My daughter doesn't look like that, but she doesn't get enough to eat half the time. People don't understand how hard it is to come by food."

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