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Study: 650K Ind. residents received emergency food

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Nearly 650,000 Indiana residents -- almost half of them children or seniors -- received emergency food from local food banks last year as the recession lingered, according to a statewide study released Tuesday.

The study, conducted by the groups Feeding Indiana's Hungry and Feeding America, found that 37 percent of the households served have at least one employed adult, said Emily Weikert Bryant, a spokeswoman for Feeding Indiana's Hungry. Twenty-five percent of adults in the households Feeding Indiana's Hungry serves are working at least part-time, she said.

"The findings illustrate the growing problem of hunger in the weak economy and the significant connection between the economy and the increased need for emergency food," Bryant said.

The study, which the groups say is the first of its kind in Indiana, found that about 37 percent of client households in Indiana receive food stamp benefits. Among households with young children, half participate in the federal nutrition program for women, infants and children. And more than half of the households with school-aged children also receive federal school lunch assistance.

"What this says for Indiana is that the folks who are being hit the hardest are the folks who are trying to provide for themselves and unfortunately don't have the resources available to them to have enough food to supply their family," Bryant said.

Last year, the federal government said an estimated 49 million Americans were at risk of hunger.

Feeding America, a national domestic hunger-relief charity that runs a network of food banks, conducts a national hunger study every four years. But this is the first time all 10 of the group's Indiana food banks took part to create a comprehensive state report, Bryant said.

Lisa Travis, who leads a team studying Indiana's working poor for the Indiana Community Action Association, said the survey is consistent with state data collected by the association. But she said the number of people still struggling after receiving government benefits is alarming.

While families sometimes run short on food stamps, Travis said the number of food-insecure Indiana families -- those who don't know where their next meal will come from -- is unsettling.

"It's often been a trend that if you spend too much in food stamps that at the end of the month, families need to go to the food pantry," she said. "But the fact that they are considered food insecure and they are receiving that benefit is kind of a concern to us."

Pam Altmeyer, President and CEO of Gleaners Food Bank, Indiana's oldest and largest food pantry, said the food bank interviewed more than 400 people across central Indiana for the report. She said the study is both a measure of how well state food banks are serving the population and a challenge for them to improve.

"What it means to us is that we have a definitive assessment of the job that we're doing and how much more needs to be done. And there is still a great deal to be accomplished," Altmeyer said.

In 2009, the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration issued more than \$103 million in food stamps, up 35 percent from 2008.

The study found that nearly half of those surveyed said they had to choose at least once in the last 12 months between buying food or paying utilities. More than three quarters of client households with children are food insecure.

Bryant said that 37 percent of the same group have very low food security, which she said the United States Department of Agriculture uses to represent hunger.

"A lot of times food ends up being just another thing on the list that you never have the resources for. It's unfortunate, it's distressing, it's very disheartening," she said.

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