

# Even in Lincoln, the face of hunger may surprise you

BY JENNIFER BAUMAN

The theme of today's fifth annual National Hunger Awareness Day is "the face of hunger will surprise you," and this is a lesson I am fortunate enough to receive regularly in my work at the Food Bank of Lincoln. Every day, something reminds me of the poverty many of our neighbors experience, right here in the middle of great wealth. And the more I understand this, the more convinced I am that people simply don't realize how bad things are for some families or we'd all be doing more about it.

Last year at this time, the Food Bank was concluding work on a nationwide hunger study commissioned by America's Second Harvest. More than 150 member food banks from across the country conducted interviews and surveys in what is said to be the largest study of its kind ever undertaken. For our part, the Food Bank of Lincoln sent a corps of volunteers and staff to conduct interviews at pantries, soup kitchens and shelters in our 16-county service area. We sat and listened to 250 people from all walks of life who were at these agencies on the days we were assigned to visit.

The hunger study left a lasting impression on most of us who participated and challenged many of our assumptions about who is seeking hunger relief. In short, the face of hunger did surprise us on many visits, and it reminded us that we shouldn't make assumptions about who's hungry based on appearance or preconceptions.

Many of the people we talked to at pantries and soup kitchens work at least one job and still have difficulty feeding their families. No small wonder when many jobs pay minimum wage and do not offer health insurance or other benefits. You may be fortunate enough to have a job that allows you to fill your cupboards, but you can't assume that's true for other working

## LOCAL VIEW



BAUMAN

During the project, we talked to many homeless and unemployed people from a wide range of demographics. Not infrequently we found ourselves surprised to learn that the person facing us was homeless — or nearly so. You couldn't pick most of these folks out in a lineup. They're just like us and our own friends and neighbors. They are us. Most of us living in comfort now could be among the homeless statistics but for one layoff, serious illness or accident. If you examine your own situation, you may find that your economic safety net is not as secure as you might like. Today you may be volunteering at Matt Talbott Kitchen or donating to your church food pantry, but tomorrow you may find yourself in a food line.

It's too easy to look at an unemployed person and assume that this is by choice without considering possible mental or emotional illness, gaps in talent or training. Education is expensive, and mental health care is shamefully inaccessible to many people. In our interviews, we didn't always understand a person's barrier to employment until we had talked with them for quite a while. Frequently their stories surprised and inspired us.

There are many causes for joblessness or underemployment that aren't apparent at first glance:

people. For a powerful demonstration on managing a household budget on limited resources, go to the Tour of Poverty at the Food Bank's Web site, [www.lincoln-foodbank.org](http://www.lincoln-foodbank.org).

chronic or catastrophic illness, fixed incomes, the challenges of caregiving or parenthood — especially in single-adult households. Taken singly, any one of these factors presents a challenge, but combinations of circumstances can make economic recovery impossible. The slippery slope into poverty is well-greased.

Time and again, hunger study participants told us they were forced to choose between buying food and paying for rent, utilities and other necessities. Some of the people you interact with regularly — friends, neighbors, co-workers — are making these impossible choices every day. And that shouldn't be, especially when there is wealth and abundance all around us. There is plenty of food in America to feed everyone living here and then some. Right now it isn't getting to the people who need it, but we have the means to change that.

Census 2000 showed one in 10 Lincolniters living below the poverty level, and we know these numbers have risen since that time. So on this National Hunger Awareness Day, be mindful that many people right around you are in need. And do something about it. Contribute to a hunger-relief organization or volunteer your time at a charitable agency. Contact your legislative representatives and urge them to advocate for public policy that takes better care of those in need. If you are a policymaker or have some form of influence, be responsible and take action to help relieve hunger. Start back at the roots of poverty by making improvements in health care, housing, public health and education.

Realize that a comfortable lifestyle is a blessing not experienced by everyone. If you get involved, the beneficiaries of your generosity will be many and might just surprise you.

Bauman is agency relations coordinator for the Food Bank of Lincoln.