

# EMPTY PLATE: For every two people who are full today, one local person goes hungry

[Jackie Leatherman](#)

November 21, 2007 - 5:37PM

*The Monitor*

One of every three people in the Rio Grande Valley regularly needs help putting food on the table. To make matters worse, the supply of donated food comes nowhere close to meeting the demand — especially this year.

"We've had a lot of shortages on food, particularly this year," said Terri Drefke, executive director of Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley. "It has gotten worse and worse. It's not just us — every food bank in the country is suffering."

Alexander Mata is one of the lucky ones who will get to spend Thanksgiving like everyone else this year — at home, eating turkey, watching football.

The 29-year-old Pharr resident picked up a food package from St. Anne's Church in Pharr on Wednesday.

He said the food would let him enjoy the holiday at home with his own family.

"We would have had to find a family member who is having a turkey dinner, but that would be imposing on their family," he said.

But the ones who are hardest hit by hunger are also the ones least able to do anything about it.

Most of the people who benefit from food stamps in the Valley are children younger than 17, and 15 percent of children in the Valley know what hunger feels like on a regular basis.

A recent report by America's Second Harvest, a Chicago-based hunger relief organization, states that Texas is second in the nation for child hunger — after New Mexico — because nearly one-fourth of Texas children don't get adequate meals.

Nine years ago, the McAllen school district met federal qualifications to offer free breakfasts and lunches to every student.

The district immediately had huge increases in students who were eating half of their weekly meals at school — but that still left the other half up to the children's families.

Ten out of the district's 32 cafeterias still get regular requests from children for second helpings after they finish their meal.

"That tells me that they are hungry at home and perhaps they went to bed without dinner," said Carmen Ocañas, the district's food service director. "That tells me that there is still hunger out there. I'm not talking about the bigger kids. I'm talking about the elementary level."

Josesa Treviño, who organizes food donations at St. Anne's Church in Pharr, said summer is the peak demand time for donations because the children are out of school.

"That's when (the people) really come in," she said, adding that there are always new people requesting assistance.

Research shows that children who are not properly nourished have more health problems, said John Cook, an associate professor at the Boston University School of Medicine and a lead researcher for the America's Second Harvest study.

"Their health status is reported lower by their parent," he said. "They are more likely to be hospitalized since birth and they are more likely to have development problems reported by their parent."

Whether it's the lack of federal funding, the vast rural communities of Texas, fluctuating prices and employment levels in the state's oil and gas industry, or the low wages of recent immigrants that are contributing to children's hunger, there is no simple solution to the problem, Cook said.

"The children bear the brunt of the problem regardless of what we may think of their parents," he said.

Parents in need are often forced to choose between paying rent, keeping the electricity on or feeding their children.

Unfortunately, food is often the only one they have much control over.

Overall in the Valley, 9 percent of families are chronically hungry, based on local data.

Statewide, that figure is 16 percent, according to the similar but more complex measure of hunger used by America's Second Harvest.

About one-third of Valley families live below the federal poverty level, with the exception of Starr County, where almost half of its population falls in the poverty category, according to U.S. census data. The 2007 poverty level in the United States for a family of four is \$20,650 in annual income.

Local officials say they have seen an increase within the past two years of senior citizens needing assistance. U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics show only a slight increase from 7.8 to 8.6 percent in the last two years for Valley residents 65 and older receiving food stamps. They say Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security are not covering their cost of living, forcing them to choose between food and medicine.

On top of the number of children in the Valley who know constant hunger, other hunger-related problems also are plaguing the region.

One of those is that local officials are only reaching 20 percent of the population who qualify for food assistance. Another problem is that there isn't enough food to feed everyone who needs it.

Food stamps and assistance from the food bank are often only intended to provide meals for a week or two, at best, not the entire month.

The local food bank is pushing to improve community education about government aid programs, to reach people who qualify for assistance but don't know it. Also, when residents ask to qualify for government medical aid, officials are automatically determining if they also qualify for food assistance.

The Valley food bank allocates on average 1.28 pounds of food per person per meal, which includes one serving from each of the five food groups.

But government aid reductions have crippled the local food bank, leaving it to rely more on smaller, individual donations and businesses, said Drefke, the agency's executive director. On top of that, the rising cost of gasoline, electricity and groceries has cut into the size of the donations the agency receives, she said.

A temporary state grant encouraging Texas growers to donate citrus and produce to food banks has provided some relief, Drefke said, but she stresses that the operative word there is "temporary."

"We know that there is a lot more people that need food assistance," she said.

Jackie Leatherman covers Hidalgo County government and general assignments at The Monitor. She can be reached at (956) 683-4424.