

Hungry for data

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DOCTORS IN the Grow Clinic at Boston Medical Center see hungry children all the time. Under age 3, these babies and toddlers suffer from a condition called "failure to thrive." But in Boston, hungry children are largely invisible. They do not look like children in ads calling for Third World relief, and they are not a lobbying force in politics.

Deborah Frank, director of the Grow Clinic, says no one takes a comprehensive statistical look at the well-being of babies. So as the Grow Clinic treats patients, it also collects data and uses this evidence to advocate for better policies.

Launched in 1998, C-SNAP -- the Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program -- collects data from the Boston Medical Center as well as hospitals in Torrance, Calif. (near Los Angeles), Minneapolis, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Little Rock, and Baltimore.

The numbers indicate that things are getting worse, Frank says. The number of underweight babies is increasing, and they have more hospitalizations. In the first half of 2004, Boston had a 21 percent rate of food insecurity, which is defined as lacking enough food to feed all family members. The rate was 18 percent in the first half of 2000.

These findings prompt questions about the cause of increasing food insecurity. How are babies and young children being affected by state and national policies like welfare reform? How will they be affected by state and national proposals for tougher work requirement rules?

Unfortunately, collecting and analyzing data can be expensive. And lots of potential information falls through the cracks separating government agencies. While leaders of nonprofit organizations often describe troubling examples of how policies hurt people, they frequently don't have supporting statistics.

So C-SNAP wisely relies on donated dollars, including seven years of support from the Anthony Spinazzola Foundation, which raises money from the food and hospitality industry. In the past, the Spinazzola Foundation made the more typical philanthropic move of funding projects that served clients or created new facilities. But foundation officials decided that collecting data would help the public and policy officials better see and understand the face of hunger. This year's Spinazzola food and wine gala on Friday will help the Grow Clinic gather the hard facts about hunger that policy makers can't easily dispute.

Too often public policy is a matter of story-telling. Politicians pick anecdotes and bromides that support their preexisting ideas. But in the Internet age, the country has ample technology to gather facts, pushing government officials to build wise, humane policy that is based on evidence. ■