

food insecurity

Understanding food inequity on campus

In a school where 73% of the student body is considered economically privileged, the other 27% could be overlooked.

*Editor's Note: *The name of this source has been changed to ensure their privacy and protection. Their grade remains accurate.*

This 27% is not just a figure: It is 369 students. 369 students who are considered economically disadvantaged and at risk of food insecurity.

Food insecurity is when a person lacks regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

In a county where 226,280 residents struggle with hunger — 70,200 of those being children — food insecurity could be considered “extremely prevalent,” according to Feeding America.

This is the reality for freshman Lena Brand*.

Lena Brand's Reality

An average day for Brand starts at 5:20 a.m. She wakes up, gets dressed, and gets ready for school within 20 minutes. She wanders to the kitchen to check for anything she can eat, and most of the time, there's nothing.

“We can't really get cereal or afford milk sometimes. So usually we just get the

\$1 bread,” Brand said. “Some days I can have breakfast. Some days I can't. I just feel bad when I don't have enough food to start my day. I only rely on school food. It's just kind of hard for me.”

Anyone in a food insecure household is at risk of being underfed and undernourished, according to United Way PBC. This can manifest in several physical and mental symptoms including: reduced energy, impaired cognitive abilities, damaged school performance, and worsening physical health.

For the days that Brand can't eat at home, she eats the free, school provided breakfast. But she says that these meals are just not enough for her to feel full.

“A single donut is not that nutritional,” Brand said. “Even if you add the applesauce and milk, it isn't really enough for an average high schooler.”

The World Health Organization states that breakfast consumption, especially for young adults, is crucial throughout the day. Missing breakfast, or a lack of proper nutrients in the meal, results in less potential energy, which is necessary for a young adult to be active daily.

daily.

“I feel super tired throughout the day,” Brand said. “I'm always trying to not sleep. The subject seems interesting, and I try to pay attention to the work. I would close my eyes, and next thing you know, I just slept through the entire class.”

The Food Research and Action Center states that even moderate levels of food insecurity can cause serious harm to both children and adults. Specifically, it can cause stunted growth, iron deficiency anemia, weakened infection resistance, and delayed development.

As a result of reduced eating, Brand was diagnosed as anemic.

“I've gotten used to not eating,” Brand said. “I'll even forget that I have to eat.”

full.

So I have to go to the doctor all the time and miss school and take a lot of medications. It just makes me feel bad.”

Brand is just one of the 369 students facing food insecurity.

At The District Level

Allison Monbleau, Palm Beach County School District Food Service Director, said “hunger and food insecurity drastically went up” for students due to Covid-19.

“So many times (students) don’t know where their next meal is coming from,” Ms. Monbleau said. “There are some that are very well off and then some that are not.”

Every meal served in the School District Lunch Program must follow “stringent guidelines” set by the United States Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (USDA). This includes at least one 1/2 cup serving of fruits or vegetables with every school meal, offering whole grain meals, having minimal sodium meals, and including 450 to 600 calories in breakfasts and 750 to 850 in lunches. According to Ms. Monbleau, the school district meals meet or exceed guidelines.

Ms. Monbleau said the district lunch program allows “every family the opportunity to submit a free reduced price meal application to us,” but as of June 22, 2021, all people 18 years and younger became eligible

for free breakfast and lunch.

However, not all students take advantage of the free meal program. According to cafeteria manager Amy Kelso, only about 33% of the student body eats the school lunch.

lunch.

“That’s the thing that I like the most about the free meals for all,” Ms. Monbleau said. “It would break down the feeling for those that need it. If they’re seeing the others that don’t necessarily need it but they’re eating, they might join in. You know, the more the merrier kind of thing and some wouldn’t be as uncomfortable.”

“Even though we’re providing free meals to all, we’re not serving all,” Ms. Monbleau said.

In a casual survey conducted by *The Muse* through English classes, of 728 students, 32% of respondents “never” eat food from the cafeteria. Ms. Monbleau said a lack of student consumption of the lunch program contributes to “a stigma sometimes attached” to food insecurity.

“(Students think) ‘I’m not going to go in and get food, because they’re going to know that I’m in a financial situation that I may need the food,’” Ms. Monbleau said. “We need food. It’s your life. You have to eat. And to think that people feel badly about that. That’s very sad.”

Ms. Monbleau thinks that the first step to eliminating the stigma surrounding food insecurity is to increase awareness. She encourages students to eat school lunch so it is normalized.

Ending Insecurity

To put an end to food insecurity, Ms. Monbleau said society needs to tackle the conditions that lead to it in the first place.

“It’s more than just giving the food,” Ms. Monbleau said. “Solving the problem is looking at infrastructure and getting people jobs and homes where they can feel secure, and they can have the money to start providing their own food.”

Feeding South Florida, a hunger-relief organization serving Palm Beach, Broward, Miami-Dade, and Monroe

Counties, is working to decrease the prevalence of food insecurity in the community by providing immediate access to nutritious food. They achieve this through their home delivery model, community caring centers, and school pantry or backpack program. In order to address the infrastructure problem, as Ms. Monbleau stated, Feeding South Florida has launched workforce education programs, including culinary, warehouse, and commercial truck driving programs.

“We need to be informing ourselves and understanding why the cycle of hunger and poverty exists,” Community Engagement Coordinator at Feeding South Florida Michele Fernandez said. “All of this is to address the concept that a lot of times people find themselves experiencing food insecurity due to either joblessness or lower income than what is needed to provide for their family.”

Feeding South Florida offers student volunteer opportunities six days a week. At their Boynton Beach location, students aged 12 and up can volunteer to sort food on Saturdays. Monday through Friday, students aged 18 and older can volunteer at the community

kitchen. For more information, go to volunteer.feedingsouthflorida.org. Ms. Fernandez says that volunteering in the community is how we can all work toward ending food insecurity.

“Is it enough what we’re doing? No, it’s not,” Ms. Monbleau said, speaking on the district’s actions towards food insecurity. “I think everyone has to come together and work together to solve this problem.”

If you are in need of food assistance, contact United Way of Palm Beach County by dialing 211.

If you are in need of emergency food assistance, visit <https://feedingsouthflorida.org/benefits-emergency-services/> for help.

For volunteer opportunities with Feeding South Florida, visit volunteer.feedingsouthflorida.org.

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