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Hunger and Food Insecurity

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INTRODUCTION

Fifty million Americans – one in five children - go to bed and awaken hungry. Across the United States, the number of families and individuals who are food insecure or living in constant fear of not being able to feed their families and themselves has remained constant or been growing for many years. The country's crippling economic crisis is resulting in record high spikes in poverty, unemployment, hunger and homelessness.

CAUSES

Trends in national food insecurity levels parallel national poverty levels, showing how food insecurity is inherently connected with income. This was shown to be especially true during the recent recession. The number of families that experience food insecurity has risen dramatically since the current economic crisis began in 2008.ⁱ The principle causes of food insecurity in the United States are:ⁱⁱ

- Unemployment
- High housing costs
- Low wages and poverty
- Lack of access to SNAP (food stamps)
- Medical or health costs

WHO EXPERIENCES FOOD INSECURITY?

In 2010, 14.5% (17.2 million) of households in the United States experienced food insecurity at one time.

According to the USDA Economic Research Service, in our country, the most likely family to go hungry consists of a single Hispanic mother with children living in a major southern city.

Demographically:

- Households with children have almost twice the rate of food insecurity as households without children.
- 26.1% of Hispanic households and 25.2% of black households experience food insecurity, compared to 10.8% of white households experience food insecurity.
- Almost 14% of households experiencing food insecurity consist of a married couple with children, but 35.1% of households consist of a single woman with children, and 25.4% of households with a single father and children experience food insecurityⁱⁱⁱ.

Geographically: The southern United States, California, and Ohio have food insecurity rates above the national average. Sixteen percent of households in the South are experiencing food insecurity, as opposed to 12.4% of households in the northeast. Major cities have much higher rates of food insecurity than non-major cities, but there is almost no difference between rural and urban areas.

Hunger and Homelessness: An Introduction

Food insecurity and hunger stem from poverty and a lack of reliable income sources, making the homeless population the most vulnerable. For more information, check out our Hunger Among the Homeless factsheet on the NCH website. Here are some quick statistics:

National hunger statistics from the USDA mentioned in this fact sheet do not actually include those experiencing homelessness. This means that some of the figures are “biased considerably downwards due to the omission of the homeless from the survey, which is based on household addresses” (Household Food Security in the United States in 2010).

- 10% of the clients of Feeding America (the largest food aid provider in the US outside of the federal government) are without a place to live.
- Homeless rank good health, a steady job, income, and housing above obtaining food, which are all of those same factors mentioned above that are causes of food insecurity^{iv}.

CONSEQUENCES

Hunger

Last year, 6.4 million households skipped meals multiple times and ate much less than they were used to. That means that 5.4% of the nation experienced:

- Abnormal eating practices such as making meals last for hours, or binge eating, as well as significant increases in social introversion, irritability, anxiety, anger, and depression.
- Physical symptoms of hunger such as gastrointestinal distress; dizziness; headaches; hypersensitivity to noise, light, and cold; reduced strength; and poor motor control.
- Cognitive changes which include impaired concentration, reduced alertness and comprehension, and poor judgment.^v

Health Care

Without health insurance, malnutrition can create astronomical health care bills, and the need to continually put food on the table can prevent families from paying them off. Feeding America, the largest food provider outside of the federal government, reports:

- 30% of its clients have at least one member in poor health
- 24% have no health insurance
- 47% have unpaid hospital bills.

Children

It is a tragedy that in the United States in 2010, 16.2 million, or 1 in 5 children experienced food insecurity. Children that continually go hungry often have poor health, behavioral and emotional problems, and difficulties in socializing with peers. Obesity among food insecure children is also extremely common, due to the low quality of food they receive.

- Children that are obese suffer through asthma, respiratory problems, diabetes, low self-esteem, and even much higher rates of suicide.
- Cognitively, children that enter kindergarten malnourished have been shown to do much more poorly on math tests and to learn less during the year, beginning their educational journey with a serious handicap.

One study suggested that if a family has experienced food insecurity at any point during a child's toddler years, the child is 3.4 times more likely to be obese by the time they are 4 1/2 years old (Grief, Lee 2008).

By the time they are teenagers, food insecure children are more than twice as likely to have seen a psychologist and to have been suspended from school (Grief, Lee 2008).

The strongest predictors of how a child will develop are the parents' mental states^{vi}, and parents will often forgo eating full or healthy meals for themselves so that their children might eat better.^{vii} While this means better physical health for the children, it also results in the parents becoming more aggressive, irritable, and distressed, which adversely effects the development and psychological state of their children.

Alienation

Families and individuals that experience food insecurity also often experience a sense of alienation from society. This stems from the lack of control over how they feed themselves and their family, and their reliance upon the charity of others. Only those who have run out of options obtain food from emergency sources as a last resort. This forced giver-receiver relationship alienates the hungry from the rest of society, and makes them feel shame and distress about their food insecurity.^{viii}

Food Deserts

Food deserts contribute to food insecurity and are a principle cause of hunger for 5.7% of households in the United States. Food deserts are areas where inhabitants cannot access affordable and nutritious food. They are not a myth but a well documented phenomenon.

- There are 6500 food-deserts in the continental United States
- About 75% are urban, while 25% are rural

Low income families prefer supermarkets because they consistently have a cheaper, healthier, and more diverse selection of food, and they are used as the bench mark for the figures to the left because of this. However, the poor are often forced to shop at smaller food stores such as 7-Eleven due to food deserts.

- 2.3 million households live more than a mile from a supermarket, and an additional 3.4 million live between one-half to 1 mile from a supermarket and do not have access to a vehicle.^{ix}
- 11.5 million people (4.1%), live in low income areas more than 1 mile from a supermarket.^x

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

With the new budget in April, Congress cut 40% (\$80 million!) of funds from the Emergency Food and Shelter Program, which serves homeless programs and food programs around the country. This disastrous cut represents the disregard for the hungry that the current Congress has, especially when more, not less funds are needed in this economy.^{xi}

Food insecurity is inherently intertwined with income. The low income population group is most likely to experience food insecurity, and also most affected by food insecurity because of the complexity of the interrelated issues they must overcome just to put a meal on the table. Thus the most important policy to counter food insecurity, hunger, and food deserts in the United States is to even out income distribution, so that those at the bottom of the scale are more able to live on their own income. Numerous federal programs currently exist to accomplish this goal: Earned Income Tax Credit, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and food and nutrition assistance programs, such as WIC, school meal programs, and SNAP.

The USDA's SNAP program, the descendant of the Food Stamps Program instituted during the depression, is the foundation of the US Government's policy response to hunger and food insecurity. In 2009, the USDA increased SNAP eligibility levels and allowed single jobless adults without children to receive benefits as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. As a result, by December of 2009, participation in SNAP increased by 25% to 39 million people, and the benefits received increased by 17% to an average of \$134.55 per month. Impressively, the number of low income households experiencing food insecurity on a monthly basis actually declined by 2.2% in spite of rising unemployment. However, the majority of cities in US Conference of Mayors 2010 report agreed that SNAP benefits should be increased even more to further reduce food insecurity, along with creating more affordable housing, providing employing training and utility assistance programs. Numbers of regular users of food pantries (as opposed to sporadic, emergency relief users) have risen dramatically, and of those, many also rely on SNAP benefits, showing that SNAP benefits at their current level alone are not enough for a month of meals.^{xii} Furthermore, states with the highest rates of food insecurity also reported the lowest participation with SNAP. Therefore, local governments need to encourage more locations to accept and to advertise SNAP.^{xiii}

Government support for work related benefits is also important. Families often have to choose between putting food on the table and keeping themselves healthy; knowing that doctor's visits and emergency room bills are taken care of can function as income, and helps families plan where the next meal will come from.

Finally, food insecurity is often geographically determined, as is the case with food deserts. As such, federal policies are not always ideal. Local and state governments must work together to do their own research and determine the best specific policies for their regions.

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