



HUNGER AND FOOD SECURITY

BACKGROUND READING

“To many people hunger means not just symptoms that can be diagnosed by a physician, it bespeaks the existence of a social, not a medical problem.”¹

- *President's Task Force on Food Assistance, 1984*

Essential questions

- What is hunger? How can we measure it?
- How can we measure food insecurity?
- Why is there hunger and food insecurity in the United States?
- How should hunger and food insecurity be addressed?
- Who should be responsible for addressing hunger and food insecurity?

Introduction

Hunger has been defined as the discomfort, weakness, illness or pain caused by a lack of food.² Although the United States has been called the “land of plenty,” 4 million U.S. households reported experiencing hunger during 2010 because they could not afford enough food.³ Almost one in seven U.S. households—over 17 million—suffer from food insecurity, a condition that includes hunger (in more extreme cases), as well as having to skip meals, compromise on nutrition and rely on emergency food sources such as food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens.³ The presence of hunger and food insecurity in the United States raises questions of why they prevail, how they should be addressed and who should be responsible for doing so.

Hunger in America

Hunger in the United States first garnered significant national policy attention during the Great Depression, a global economic downturn in the 1930s that left a quarter of the American workforce unemployed.⁴ Economic conditions were already particularly bad for American farmers, who had accumulated enormous debt from investing in costly, specialized machinery—part of the transition to a more industrialized food system (refer to *History of Food*).⁴ Farmers were also producing far more food than they could profitably sell; at the same time, millions of Americans were hungry. This phenomenon has been described as a “paradox of want amid plenty.”⁵

The U.S. government responded with several new programs. Most were intended to help struggling farmers by reducing **agricultural surpluses**, though some of these efforts went hand-in-hand with hunger relief programs.^{4,6} In 1932, Congress authorized the government to purchase surplus wheat from farmers and donate it to the Red Cross for hunger relief.⁷⁻⁹ This represented a major

shift in the role of the U.S. government, as feeding the hungry was traditionally considered to be the role of private charities.⁸ Many policymakers argued that the government had no role in hunger relief, believing it would undermine America's work ethic.⁸ Some also questioned the extent of hunger in America.⁸ Many social workers also criticized the idea, arguing that government handouts undermined their clients' dignity.⁸

Despite objections, federal food and nutrition assistance would gradually expand over the following years, leading to the institution of early food stamp programs in 1939.¹⁰ The **National School Lunch Program** (refer to *Food Environments*) was later established in 1946, adding additional government support in the campaign against hunger. Support for the program was amplified by the realization that two out of five World War II draftees were rejected primarily because they were undernourished.¹¹

Hunger in America again came under scrutiny in the late 1960s, after a series of investigations in the rural South reported evidence of widespread hunger. These were followed by the award-winning CBS News documentary, *Hunger in America*, which drew further attention to domestic hunger. Much of the American public was shocked to learn that hunger could exist in a country with such an abundant food supply. They reacted with outspoken criticism of federal programs, calling for greater food and nutrition assistance to the poor.^{8,11,12} The government responded with several initiatives, including an expansion of the Food Stamp Program, the School Breakfast Program, free and reduced price meals in schools, and the **Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children** (WIC).¹²

Emergency food programs

During the early 1980s, the U.S. economy suffered from a severe recession that left many Americans unemployed. Federal budget cuts, meanwhile, weakened many social support programs.¹³ These events coincided with a dramatic rise in poverty.¹⁰ Hunger once again became evident throughout the United States,¹⁰ while homelessness became increasingly apparent in large cities.¹³

America's poor turned to food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens and other charitable programs for help. To meet the urgent need, the size and number of these **emergency food** programs multiplied over the course of just a few years.¹³ Today, emergency food programs provide assistance, at least during parts of the year, to more than one in twenty Americans.¹⁴ Millions of Americans support these programs through donations of food, money and volunteer labor.¹³

Sociologist Janet Poppendieck argues that the proliferation of emergency food programs indicates a failure on the part of society to deal with the root causes of poverty. By making charitable donations, Poppendieck adds, Americans can alleviate the discomfort evoked by seeing hunger and poverty, creating a "culture of charity" that allows the government to "dismiss its responsibility for the poor." Poppendieck paraphrases English author Samuel Johnson in describing this arrangement

as “kinder, but less just,”¹³ referring to the abundance of charity in a society that lacks legal obligation to uphold its citizens’ right to food.

Food security

By the time someone experiences hunger, they may already have suffered considerable harm (see *Consequences of food insecurity*, below). For this reason, U.S. policymakers have expanded their attention from a narrow focus on hunger to a broader lens that examines **food security**—a concept that includes the conditions that lead to hunger.⁶

Food security is a measure of having consistent access to safe, adequate and nutritious food for an active and healthy life.^{15,16} For a household to be considered food secure, its members must be able to acquire this food without resorting to emergency food programs, scavenging, stealing and other coping strategies.¹⁵ If a household does not meet these conditions for any part of the year, or if these conditions are uncertain, it is considered food insecure.¹⁵ For example, food insecure households include those that are unable to afford balanced meals, worried their food will run out before they have money to buy more, forced to skip meals because they can’t afford enough food, and—in more severe cases—hungry because they can’t afford enough food.³ In the United States, close to 15 percent of households (over 17 million) experience food insecurity at some point during the year.³

Contributors to food insecurity

Globally, food security depends on three key factors: food availability, stability and access.¹⁷ First, there must be an adequate (available) food supply. Regions with large populations but little farmland, for example, may be unable to produce enough food to feed its inhabitants. Second, the supply must be stable. Some regions may have adequate food supplies during parts of the year, but that falter during drought seasons. Third, people must have physical and economic access to food. In regions suffering from armed conflict, corruption, poverty or **inequitable** food distribution, a stable and abundant food supply holds little value if people are unable to physically reach it and afford it.

Because the United States has an abundant and stable food supply, U.S. food security has primarily been concerned with issues of food access—particularly households’ ability to afford food.

Poverty is frequently cited as the root of food insecurity.¹⁸ In 2010, 40 percent of households below the U.S. **federal poverty level** were food insecure, compared to only 7 percent of households whose incomes were well above the poverty level.³ Unemployment, low paying jobs, substance abuse, mental health problems and reduced government benefits (such as food stamps) may partly explain why some food insecure households struggle to afford adequate food.¹⁸ Their food budgets may compete with other priorities, including housing, medical and child-care costs.¹⁸

The physical environment in low-income neighborhoods may pose additional barriers to accessing affordable, healthy food (refer to *Food Environments*). Low-income neighborhoods often have fewer supermarkets,¹⁹ which generally offer a wider variety of fruits and vegetables at lower prices than smaller food stores.^{20,21} In both urban and rural communities, households that don't own a vehicle and live far from supermarkets may be particularly affected.²²

Consequences of food insecurity

Residents of food insecure households face greater risks to their health and well-being. Food insecurity has been linked to **obesity, diabetes, dietary nutrient** deficiencies, low fruit and vegetable intake and other indicators of unhealthy diets.¹⁸ Some nutritionists argue that the links between poverty, food insecurity and obesity can be partially explained by the lower cost of foods high in **added fats, added sugars** or **refined grains** (such as snacks, soft drinks and fast food), which tend to be cheaper per **calorie** than **nutrient-dense** foods (such as certain fruits and vegetables).²³ Other possible explanations include factors such as psychological stress and a lack of accessible nutrition information among food insecure communities.^{18,24}

Children may be particularly affected by hunger and food insecurity. Studies have found links between food insecurity and poorer academic performance, school absences, suspension from school, involvement in fights, headaches, depression and other physical, emotional and behavioral concerns.^{18,25-27}

Interventions

Above, we introduced federal food and nutrition assistance, emergency food assistance, and some of the strengths and limitations of charitable interventions against hunger. This section provides further insight into federal programs, followed by an introduction to the community food security movement.

Federal food and nutrition assistance programs

Today, federal food and nutrition assistance programs such as WIC and the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program** (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) continue to help increase food security for millions of individuals; in 2011, one in five Americans participated in at least one of these programs at some point during the year.²⁸

Federal food and nutrition assistance programs also benefit the U.S. economy. Participation in SNAP, for example, encourages people to spend more on food—every dollar's worth of SNAP benefits generates an additional 17 to 47 cents of additional spending, which supports grocers, wholesalers, farmers and other businesses.^{29,30} When SNAP benefits are accepted at farmers' markets, they have the added benefit of supporting local farmers (refer to *Food Distribution and Transport*). Funding for SNAP is allocated in the U.S. **Farm Bill**.

Some argue that federal food and nutrition assistance programs exclude many people who should be considered eligible.³¹ Households are eligible for programs such as SNAP and free and reduced price school meals if their income is below 130 percent of the U.S. federal poverty level,^{32,33} which is set at three times the estimated cost of an adequate diet.³¹ When the poverty level was created in 1963, Americans spent a third of their disposable income on food; today, Americans spend closer to 11 percent on food, while other costs—such as housing and transportation—have risen substantially. The formula for the federal poverty level has not been updated to reflect these changes, leaving many Americans without much-needed support.³¹

The community food security movement

After recognizing the limitations of emergency food and federal food and nutrition assistance programs, activists began to explore other means of addressing food insecurity. In 1994, the community food security movement took hold in the United States, with the goal (among others) of providing community residents with a safe, nutritious and **culturally appropriate** diet.¹⁷ It strives to build self-reliance, empowering residents to acquire adequate food without depending on emergency food or federal assistance.⁶ Where possible, it seeks to provide food grown using **sustainable agricultural** practices (refer to *Agriculture and Ecosystems*) and **local food systems**, unlike anti-hunger programs that generally have not focused on how or where food is produced.³⁴ Some community food security advocates have begun to recognize the importance of creating an infrastructure that supports farms throughout a given **region**, recognizing the limits of what can be produced locally (refer to *Food Distribution and Transport*). Finally, community food security emphasizes local decision making and citizens engagement, in contrast to federal programs that are shaped by decisions made primarily by the government.⁶

In practice, the community food security movement takes a systems approach (refer to *Ingredients of the Food System*).⁶ Rather than responding to food insecurity with isolated interventions, the movement recognizes the relationships between farmers, distributors, retailers, community residents, researchers, non-profits, policymakers and other participants in the food system. **Food policy councils** illustrate this approach by bringing together representatives from these different groups to examine the food system and develop recommendations to improve it.³⁵

Many community food security projects help to build relationships between farmers and consumers. These projects can provide community members with better access to fruits and vegetables, while providing greater transparency into how their food is produced, processed and distributed.⁶ To this end, the movement works to establish community gardens, farmers markets, **community supported agriculture** (CSA) programs and urban farms.⁶

Other projects work to build self-resilience among communities. Educational programs offer residents training on how to grow, preserve and prepare produce for themselves and for their

community. With small loans and entrepreneurial training, community members can start up small businesses that produce food for farmers markets, stores and restaurants.⁶

These examples demonstrate how the community food security movement strives to promote community self-reliance, social justice and democratic decision-making.¹⁷ While these goals are worthy in their own right, more research is needed to measure how the movement is affecting hunger and food insecurity on a national scale.

Conclusion

Hunger and food insecurity pose large and complex problems—in part because they are closely tied to poverty,¹⁸ a condition that has prevailed since the beginning of recorded history. Federal nutrition assistance programs and community food security projects strive to address these challenges; these complementary approaches weave what has been called a “safety net” designed to prevent people from sliding into hunger and food insecurity.⁶ While these programs have been successful in many respects, the challenge remains to provide all persons with equitable access to safe and nutritious food.

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