



The Challenge of Hunger in America

The world produces enough food every day to feed every single man, woman, and child – 7 billion people – 2,700 calories, several hundred more than the recommended daily amount for most adults. The National Resources Defense Council released a report in 2012 documenting that 40 percent of food in the United States goes uneaten, equivalent to 20 pounds of food per person every month and \$165 billion wasted each year. Yet, the World Food Programme (WFP) reports that 842 million people – one in eight – go to bed hungry every night. Most live in developing countries, and children and women are particularly susceptible. Sixty-six million primary-aged school children attend classes hungry across the developing world.

Hunger is traditionally described as needing something to eat and is most commonly visually represented as a complete absence of food. Yet the issue of hunger is much more multi-faceted, involving both malnutrition and undernourishment. Undernourishment occurs when people have food but their intake does not meet daily caloric needs for their body. Malnutrition occurs when the physical function of a person is impaired and cannot maintain natural growth, be it physical or intellectual. Living day-to-day on a caloric intake significantly lower than recommended can have lasting repercussions, especially for youth.



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Poor nutrition is the cause of death for nearly 3.1 million children under the age of five every year worldwide.

A 2010 *New York Times* article detailed this struggle in “The Obesity-Hunger Paradox.” The South Bronx, possessing one of the highest obesity rates in the country, was found to have the most severe hunger-related issues in the United States. How can people be both obese and hungry?

Many advocates against hunger believe it has to do with food security – a term that pops up often in conversations

regarding the hunger crisis. The World Food Summit of 1996 defines “food security” as “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.” In the case of malnutrition, malnourished people can be underweight, have stunted height, and yes, even be obese. The World Health Organization explains that food security or insecurity is contingent upon availability, access, and use.

Food Insecure?

Food insecurity is a term that Kendall Smith '10 unfortunately has to use every day in her current role as Marketing Coordinator for the Food Bank of Northwest Louisiana.

“Here, we don’t use the term ‘hunger’ as much as we use ‘food insecure.’ The USDA defines food insecurity as someone not having access to enough food to maintain a healthy lifestyle.”

According to Feeding America, the largest hunger-relief charity in the U.S., 49 million Americans lived with food insecurity in 2012. Households with children, especially those with single parents, and those who identified as Black or Hispanic reported higher rates of food insecurity than the average. And a population that is routinely overlooked – seniors – accounted for 4.8 million of those who were food insecure in 2011.

Smith believes that hunger relief efforts like Feeding America are needed on both a national and local level to truly build positive thought and action:

“We [the Food Bank of Northwest Louisiana] are actually a member of Feeding America. They work with 250

Food Banks across the states. Feeding America helps us network, secures grants as well as other funding for us, and provides us with corporate donors. Feeding America is a big partner for us as is Feed the Children. Through the advocacy of these big, national organizations, we are able to secure commercials and lobbyists to help further our efforts.”

With so much food insecurity affecting the nation, large-scale efforts have been underway. In an effort to tackle obesity and hunger head on, Congress passed and President Barack Obama signed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in December 2010. The bill, which helped 115,000 children gain access to school meal programs, passed with bipartisan support in both houses of Congress.

In her remarks at the signing, First Lady Michelle Obama noted,

BY THE NUMBERS

14.5

percent of U.S. households were food insecure in 2012

66

million American primary school-age children attend classes hungry

49

million Americans lived in food insecure households in 2012



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“We can all agree that in the wealthiest nation on Earth, all children should have the basic nutrition they need to learn and grow and to pursue their dreams, because in the end, nothing is more important than the health and well-being of our children. Nothing. And our hopes for their future should drive every single decision that we make.”

A National Effort

Feeding America donates food to more than 25 million Americans every year and serves more than 200 food banks across 50 states, supplying upwards of 2 billion pounds of food. The Meals on Wheels Association of America focuses on the senior population, providing meal services to those in need. Oxfam International, a confederation of 13 organizations working together, attempts to bring about lasting change by directly working with communities and empowering the underserved to better their lives.

Joanna Warren '16 is worked to address food insecurity through Oxfam and its CHANGE Initiative program this past summer. The program provided leadership and advocacy training for Warren, who subsequently has spent the current academic year as a CHANGE leader.

“I find hunger to be one of the most pressing contemporary issues our world faces,” said Warren. “Oxfam has a great campaign called GROW that focuses on justice issues surrounding food such as ending hunger and supporting a healthy farm industry internationally.”

Warren and Santé, a Centenary living learning community, implemented an Oxfam-specific public advocacy campaign in the fall.

Santé, dedicated to overcoming poverty

and diseases, is based in the World House for Social Justice. Students who live in this House – a common residence—work to remove barriers such as poverty that inhibit a person or persons from reaching his, her, or their full potential. World House for Social Justice students are encouraged to approach the world with an open mind and search for meaning and purpose.

With the help of the Residence Hall Association and the National Residence Hall Honorary, the World House residents hosted an Oxfam Hunger Banquet. Upon entering the banquet, students were handed a card determining their income level for the night (high, medium, or low) and served accordingly.

“I’m hopeful that the event provoked thought and action,” said Warren.

A Hand Up

Abbey Rubel '02 has concentrated her hunger advocacy in the local community, more specifically the Cedar Grove community in Shreveport. Rubel serves as the Volunteer Coordinator for Common Ground Community Center, a faith-based organization that tries to make a difference through caring relationships and genuine acts of service. In her work at Common Ground, Rubel oversees the food pantry and a Thursday night community meal.

“We have seen our numbers at the community meal jump in the last year,” said Rubel. “A large meal used to be 120 people. Now, that is a small crowd, and we are averaging between 150 to 200 attendees every Thursday.”

Common Ground also supplies a bag of groceries to each household at the conclusion of the Thursday night meal to help families make it through the week.



Abbey Rubel '02 and volunteer collect donations from Panera Bread.

As they see need increasing across the community, Common Ground is planning for the future.

“One of the things we are working toward is giving our community members a hand up rather than just a hand out,” said Rubel. “We would love to start a food pantry co-op where each household would donate a small amount and then be able to come through and ‘shop’ for their own grocery items in the food pantry for four visits. This would allow community members to spend \$10 while getting \$50 worth of groceries each month.”

And for those who have no money to donate?

“For those who could not afford it, we would absolutely hope to set up a program where they could volunteer their time at the community center in return for the fee. We would be giving community members dignity and choice and a feeling that they are banding together to help themselves.”

One of the many resources from which Common Ground receives food is the Food Bank of Northwest Louisiana. The Food Bank sorts, warehouses, and distributes food to over 150 non-profit organizations in a seven-parish area. In 2012-13, the Food Bank distributed seven million pounds of food, helping 33,000 people each month.

The Food Bank works as a repository for donated items. The group receives donations from corporations, foundations, individuals, food drives, and Feeding America. Then, they store the donations and distribute them to local food pantries, shelters, soup

kitchens, senior centers, and community centers.

The Food Bank provides food to take home and hot meals for school-aged children through its Backpack Program, Kids Café, and a Summer Food Service Program, attempting to supplement the times during which children cannot depend on free breakfasts and lunches from school. A Senior Program helps local elderly stretch their budgets with a monthly box of non-perishable groceries.

Though the Food Bank cannot directly give food to those who need it, they provide goods to those food pantries that do, and when asked, help make the connection between the food insecure and food pantries.

“We ask those in need what their ZIP code is and give them the food pantry that is closest to their home, and they can go once a month to get a box of food,” said Smith. “For a family of three, it’s 45 pounds, and it goes up from there, or we can direct people to one of the meal sites in the Shreveport-Bossier area.”

The Food Bank also recently wrote a grant proposal to implement a software system to prevent client duplication. Once introduced, cooperating agencies will be on the same network and have the ability to share client profiles, showing an up-to-date listing of food pantries each person has visited.

“We understand that people need food, but we also are trying to serve as many people as possible,” said Smith.

Just a Symptom?

With all of the organizations out there fighting hunger, why does the issue still persist? The World Food Programme



(WFP) notes that there are six interconnected reasons for the continued presence of hunger in a world that produces more than enough: poverty, lack of investment in agriculture, climate and weather, war and displacement, unstable markets, and food wastage.

The most pervasive reason for hunger in the United States continues to be what the WFP calls the “poverty trap: people living in poverty cannot afford nutritious food for themselves and their families, making them weaker and less able to earn the money that would help them escape poverty and hunger.” However, there does seem to be disagreement on the subject among non-profits. Feeding America notes that although food insecurity and poverty are related, they are not the same, and unemployment is a much stronger indicator of food insecurity. Nevertheless, in 2012, 46.5 million people were at or below the poverty line, the majority of whom were people aged 18 to 64.

Centenary trustee Reverend Carol Borne Spencer '69 and her husband Reverend Frank Spencer, both ordained deacons in the Episcopal church, experienced the link between hunger and poverty when they helped found Stewpot Community Services in Jackson, MS. The goal of the group is to “promote, develop, stimulate, and encourage physical and spiritual development by providing nutritious meals to the community.” Stewpot began as a simple soup kitchen but has since morphed into a 16-ministry organization, which runs four shelters for short and long-term living, a day shelter, a food pantry, and a soup kitchen. The Community Kitchen continues to provide a noontime meal to anyone – no questions asked – seven days a week, year round.



Frank Spencer of Stewpot Community Services discusses their food pantry.

“One of the things we are working toward is giving our community members a hand up rather than just a hand out.”

Abbey Rubel '02

“All aspects of poverty, the homeless, the working poor, and more are victims of food insufficiency, especially here in Mississippi – the hungriest state in America,” said Carol.

Frank continues to serve as the Executive Director while Carol has begun to serve also on the board of Hope Federal Credit Union, which helps the underserved in Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Tennessee. Hope currently has a program in New Orleans to deal with food deserts.

“Both Frank and I are motivated by our Christian mandate to feed the hungry and give shelter to the homeless,” said Spencer. “Poverty has many facets, and a community must care for those who cannot care for themselves.”

Anti-hunger advocacy groups have been trying to break down the barriers that poverty puts in place. At Common Ground, Rubel and her corps of volunteers not only provide hot meals and food bags but also clothing and children’s activities, working to form relationships and community. The Food Bank has created a community garden outside its walls with Shreveport Green in an effort to supplement senior meals



with fresh produce, an initiative echoed in Feeding America's own push for fresh goods.

"Produce is expensive," said Smith. "But that is what people really need. They can't afford it, but they need these nutrients to live a healthy life."

The Fight Continues

United Nations food agencies reported in October 2013 that 12 percent of the world's population is still suffering from chronic hunger. That number is down from 17 percent of the population recorded from 1990-1992. The numbers are dropping – but slowly and not at the rate that was outlined in the UN Millennium Development Goal. The number of undernourished people was supposed to be halved by 2015. The slow progress could prove disheartening, but Rubel and Smith continue their work along with many others.

"It's the people who work here," said Smith. "The people I see everyday. We're like a family. We're not a faith-based organization, but we do the Lord's work. I have a passion for fighting hunger." ■

ASK THE EXPERT

Given America's wealth, why do millions of citizens still struggle to meet basic nutritional needs?



According to U.S. Census data, over approximately the last four decades, the richest 20 percent (and particularly the top 5 percent) of Americans have accumulated a greater proportion of wealth, leaving the other 80 percent relatively static or declining. Our failure to pay people who work full time a living wage has made it difficult for the poorest Americans to meet basic human needs, and there are two important contributing factors. First, underemployment is a major issue for many workers and families. Many Americans are employed full-time in various jobs yet do not make enough money to lift their families above the poverty line, which suggests a systemic problem with American labor policies and the distribution of wealth.

Second, there seems to be an unfortunate trend of blaming the poor for their situations which reduces income inequality to an individual problem rather than a large scale systemic one. For example, a widespread ideology in America is, "If you work hard enough, then you will succeed." By extension, those who do not succeed economically thus are perceived as lazy or somehow individually deficient.

Because of these perceptions, many believe that poverty results from individual behavior. They therefore fail to examine how our economic system creates such vast income inequality. If we do not ask this question, we will most certainly continue to blame the poor, applaud the wealthy, and remain blind to how social systems affect national challenges such as hunger.

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Explore the relationship between hunger and obesity.

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Find out where else hunger is striking using the Hunger Map.

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