

**THE EFFECTS OF HUNGER  
AND FOOD INSECURITY IN AMERICA**

**Submitted to:**

**Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry  
U.S. House Committee on Agriculture**

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Chairman Baca and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Jim Weill, President of the Food Research and Action Center, and we deeply appreciate the opportunity to testify at this important hearing today.

We greatly appreciate as well the work you did to produce an excellent nutrition title in the Farm Bill over the past 18 months; and we applaud your leadership in taking up so quickly the important concern of what remains to be done to address hunger in America and its harmful effects.

Before talking about the effects of hunger on the people of this country, I would like to discuss very briefly the extent of hunger and food insecurity. It is, after all, only because the problems of hunger and food insecurity are so unnecessarily widespread in our country that the effects are so significant for children and for adults, for our nation's health and educational systems and outcomes, for our nation's productivity, and for the economy as a whole and our fiscal well-being.

The latest official poverty data and hunger data from the Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Agriculture are for 2006, and they tell us that, even as the economy grew in the early part of this decade, lower-income Americans were receiving a shrinking share of the economic pie. Because of inadequate wages and economic supports, the number of people living in poverty rose from 31.6 million in 2000 to 36.5 million in 2006. The number of people living in households facing food insecurity – the government phrase for families without the resources to feed themselves enough, or unable for economic reasons to purchase a healthy diet, or otherwise struggling with hunger – rose from 31 million in 1999 to 35.5 million in 2006. More than 12 million of the people living in food insecure households were children.

The problem not only has been getting broader, it has been getting deeper: almost all of the growth in food insecurity from 1999 to 2006 was in the most severe sub-category, what USDA now calls “very low food insecurity” (and which was known, until two years ago, as “food insecure with hunger”). The number of people in households in this most severe sub-category rose from 7.8 million in 1999 to 11.1 million in 2006.

Almost certainly the numbers are considerably worse today. For much of the last year the economic data have been dominated by rising food and energy prices, stagnant or declining wages, and growing unemployment, as well as severe housing problems. The food insecurity numbers described earlier were for 2006. There is little doubt that the 2007 data, which will be released in November, will be worse, and that the data for 2008, which we will not see released for another 16 months, will be worse still.

There are interventions needed now to mitigate the impacts of wider and deeper food insecurity caused by the current inflation and economic downturn. The suffering of families has deepened considerably. For example, the Food Research and Action Center estimates that the monthly cost of the Thrifty Food Plan (the food stamp market basket) has grown by \$40 for a family of four since food stamp benefits were last adjusted for

inflation – a huge impact on low-income families that already had inadequate resources to purchase a healthy diet.

Most important, in the short run, is the need for a temporary boost in food stamp benefits. This not only will help low-income families grapple with weak economic conditions, including rapidly rising food prices, but also will provide real economic stimulus to the nation's economy. Dollar for dollar there is no better stimulus expenditure than food stamp benefits because they get into the economy so fast: USDA and the states can get them quickly onto beneficiaries' Electronic Benefit Transfer cards, and hard-pressed beneficiaries will spend the boost quickly. This has been noted in the last six months by economists and budget experts ranging from Martin Feldstein to Robert Rubin, and from Ben Bernanke to Peter Orszag.\* It is essential that a significant increase in food stamp help be part of any forthcoming economic stimulus or economic recovery package.

But we also must recognize that this nation had intolerably high levels of food insecurity before the economic downturn and escalating food price inflation, and will have them after economic recovery unless we focus on long-term solutions as well.

Long-term solutions are essential because the damage from hunger and food insecurity to individuals and families, to schools and the health care system, and to our economy as a whole is so great. I am just going to summarize how the harms play out, and then focus briefly on a couple of particular points.

- Maternal undernutrition can impair body, organ and cellular growth in the fetus; increases the risk of certain birth defects; and contributes to low infant birthweight, which is strongly correlated with perinatal and infant mortality.
- Food insecurity among very young children can cause stunted growth, iron deficiency anemia and delayed cognitive development. Cognitive delays then can last well beyond the period of nutritional deficiency – the resulting impaired IQ, motor skills and coordination can last into the elementary school years and beyond.
- Food insecurity harms children's physical growth and immune systems, and causes weakened resistance to infection. Food insecure children are far more likely to be reported in poor health, to catch colds, and to have stomach aches, headaches, ear infections and asthma.
- Food insecurity in both early childhood and the school years means that children lag their peers and learn less, and these learning deficits cumulate. School-age children who are food insecure are more likely to be absent from school, be hyperactive; behave poorly; be held back; do worse on tests; and be placed in special education.

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\* These and other statements can be found at [www.realstimulus.org](http://www.realstimulus.org)

All of these consequences of hunger and food insecurity result in increased health, mental health, hospitalization, educational, juvenile justice and other costs. As just one example, among children under age 3, according to one study, those who are food insecure are 90 percent more likely to be in poor health and 30 percent more likely to require hospitalization.

For adults as well, there is a broad range of adverse outcomes of food insecurity. Some of them carry over from childhood. But food insecurity during the adult years independently means lower productivity and, as is true with children, means more doctor visits, higher rates of hospitalization and longer hospital stays, and poorer health.

Adult hunger and food insecurity also harm the children in the household. Two examples show how not only does hunger harm adults and children, but also how children will suffer even when adults bear the brunt and the children have enough to eat. One example involves depression, anxiety and stress; the other, overweight and obesity.

Often both of the parents or the single custodial parent in a household do everything they can to protect the children from the direct consequences of food insecurity or hunger: the children eat first, and get “enough” to eat (it may be filling but not be an adequate, healthy diet because of the resource constraints). But the parents are often hungry or skipping meals to protect the children. The resulting stress and depression with which food insecurity is associated harm not only the parents but the children’s health and mental proficiency. Food insecurity adversely affects parent-child relationships.

One survey of several thousand mothers of 3-year old children in 18 large cities found that mental health problems in mothers and behavioral problems in their preschool-aged children were twice as likely in food insecure households as in food secure households. In discussing their findings, the researchers assert: “Social policy can address food insecurity more directly than it can address many other early-life stresses, and doing so can enhance the well-being of mothers and children.”

As to obesity, research has shown that obesity too can be a consequence of food insecurity. Obesity among both adults and children means more cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and hypertension. Among adult food insecure women who have children, the reasons for obesity may include the ways in which low-income mothers must cope with limited resources for food—sacrificing at times their own nutrition in order to protect their children from hunger and lower nutritional quality. Food insecurity and poverty may also act as physiological stressors leading to hormonal changes that predispose adult women to obesity.

But there are connections between food insecurity and obesity for children as well. Children in food insecure households are more likely to be at risk of overweight or to be obese. When children are both born at low birthweight and live in a family suffering from food insufficiency, they have a 27.8 times higher chance of being overweight or obese at age 4 ½ .

Finally, we must not forget that food insecurity harms seniors. Food insecure elderly persons have been found to be 2.33 times more likely to report fair or poor health status. And food insecurity among elders increases disability, decreases resistance to infection, and extends hospital stays. Moreover, many medications need to be taken with food to assure their effectiveness. Too many seniors have to skip meals in order to purchase medication, only to see a “Take with food” label on the prescription bottle because without food the drug will be less effective. Medically this is self-defeating, and, ultimately, costly. And from the patients’ perspective it is a cruel “Catch-22.”

What all this comes down to is that hunger and food insecurity not only are unnecessary and immoral in our wealthy nation, but they are vastly counter-productive in every important realm. They are a hindrance to our accomplishment of a range of essential national goals:

- At a time when the nation is looking for strategies to broaden health insurance coverage and improve quality of health care while controlling costs, eliminating food insecurity is a necessary part of an effective and cost-effective national health strategy.
- As the nation struggles to address its obesity epidemic, establishing food security and assuring that families have resources adequate to purchase a healthy diet are essential components of a successful anti-obesity strategy.
- At a time when our scientific knowledge of the critical importance of early childhood development has been growing by leaps and bounds – although our policy development is having trouble keeping pace – eliminating food insecurity is a prerequisite to the strongest possible early childhood policy.
- As the nation struggles with education policy and the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, eliminating food insecurity is a compelling and cost-effective strategy to improve schools and student performance.
- And as we struggle to restore economic growth, boost productivity, improve our competitiveness, and keep deficits under control, eliminating food insecurity is one important key to improving the nation’s economic and fiscal futures.

It is essential that we address hunger and food insecurity in this nation and thereby eliminate the harms they cause. The Food Stamp Program and other federal nutrition programs have brought the nation a long way; and the recent Farm Bill made some important improvements in the Food Stamp Program. Again, we thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the Subcommittee, for your leadership in accomplishing this. But the Food Stamp Program (or, as it will be known from October 1st, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP) in particular must be strengthened further so we can truly move towards eradicating hunger and food insecurity in the midst of our great affluence.

This requires three broad strategies: making benefit allotments adequate; opening eligibility to more needy people; and connecting more eligible people with benefits, since only 65 percent of currently eligible people, and barely half of eligible low-income working families, participate in the program.

Food stamps alone can't end hunger in this country – we also need stronger cash programs for economic security (refundable tax credits, unemployment insurance and other investments) and stronger child nutrition programs (school meals, WIC, summer and afterschool food, child care food). But food stamps are the critical base of the anti-hunger strategy.

Let me first address the pre-eminent need – to make benefit allotments more adequate. Food stamps are extraordinarily effective for families, but allotments just aren't enough to sustain health and well-being. It is the norm rather than the exception for a food stamp recipient household's benefits to run out several days before the end of the month - - often in the third week of the month. The Thrifty Food Plan, which is the underlying structure for the benefit amounts, has never represented what a family needs to purchase a minimally adequate diet, other than on an emergency basis. This shortfall of benefits was bad enough before, but it has been exacerbated by program changes in the 1980s and 1990s that, through several negative actions, cut benefits. (One 1996 change, freezing the standard deduction from income, was fixed prospectively by this year's Farm Bill; but much of the damage that the 1996 law and earlier changes have caused to benefit levels remains unremedied. As just two examples: benefits used to be adjusted for inflation twice a year, but now it is only once a year, which is particularly damaging in times of high inflation; and maximum benefit allotments were cut across the board by three percent in 1996.)

As this nation seeks to reduce the effects of hunger and food insecurity, adequate food stamp allotments are essential. SNAP benefits should be based on a food plan that reflects what it actually costs to feed a family a healthy diet, and the income counting rules that determine what share of a full allotment a family gets should be based in current economic realities.

The nation will need as well to have the program reach more low-income people. This means removing some arbitrary barriers to access for very needy people that are still in federal law. But it also means better efforts, at all levels of government, to connect already eligible people to benefits.

Only 65 percent of eligible people actually receive food stamp benefits. In many states, cities, towns and rural areas the number is far worse, because there is too much red tape, or too little outreach, or state and local rules narrow and discourage participation. Last autumn the Food Research and Action Center released a report on Food Stamp Access in Urban America. That analysis found that in 2007, in the 24 cities we looked at, the estimated rates of participation ranged from a low of 35 percent in San Diego, California to 98 percent in Detroit (Wayne County), Michigan. Three of the cities and counties with

the lowest rates were in California – San Diego, Los Angeles, and Oakland (Alameda County).

When states or cities, or any areas, forego food stamp benefits, it harms low-income people. But it also harms local economies. USDA has found that every dollar of food stamp benefits, paid for by the federal government, that enters a community produces nearly twice that much in economic activity. In other words, there is nearly a 2:1 multiplier effect. The food stamp benefits not only, therefore, reduce hunger and poverty, but they create jobs and other economic benefits that further combat hunger and poverty and boost the community economy.

But states and cities are foregoing many billions of these dollars. Our 24-city study, for example, found that the cities were leaving \$2.27 billion in federally-funded food stamp benefits unclaimed.

The cost of hunger and food insecurity to individuals, families, communities and the nation is far too high to continue to tolerate these and other losses. It is too high a cost in terms of health, education, productivity, mental health, economic growth, and community development. It is within this nation's capacity to end hunger and food insecurity. We look forward to working together with the members of the Subcommittee to make a stronger, more adequate and more accessible SNAP program a far more reliable bulwark against hunger in America.