



## Childhood Hunger in America

### Overview Prepared by the Grants Department of Share Our Strength

Each day, nearly one-fifth<sup>i</sup> of America's children face hunger. In other words, they live daily with the likelihood that they will wake up, go to school, play, or go to bed hungry.

#### Food Security

These 13.9 million<sup>ii</sup> "food insecure" and hungry children can be found in urban and rural areas in all geographic regions of the country. They are raised in both married and single-parent homes, and they represent all races and ethnicities. While a little over 10 percent of adults<sup>iii</sup> in this country report moderate to severe difficulty in accessing the food<sup>iv</sup> they need, nearly 20 percent of all children<sup>v</sup> suffer from this problem. The disproportionate effect they feel from food insecurity signifies that considerable work is needed to safeguard the health and future of all American children.

#### Poverty

Poverty is a primary indicator for food insecurity and hunger. Children in households with income below 130 percent of the poverty level have a 44 percent chance of experiencing problems with access to food.<sup>vi</sup> While lack of sufficient funds to meet food needs at all times is a major issue, there may be additional problems when it comes to accessing nutritious foods. For instance, many people in low-income neighborhoods may have to travel great distances to find full-service grocery stores.

#### Adverse Consequences of Hunger and Food Insecurity for Children

##### Health

- Poorer overall health status and compromised ability to resist illness
- Elevated occurrence of health problems such as stomachaches, headaches, colds, ear infections and fatigue
- Greater incidence of hospitalizations

##### Psychosocial and Behavioral

- Higher levels of aggression, hyperactivity and anxiety, as well as passivity
- Difficulty getting along with other children
- Increased need for mental-health services

##### Learning and Academic

- Impaired cognitive functioning and diminished capacity to learn
- Lower test scores and poorer overall school achievement
- Repeating a grade in school
- Increased school absences, tardiness and school suspension

From: *The Consequences of Hunger and Food Insecurity for Children: Evidence from Recent Scientific Studies*, Center on Hunger and Poverty, June 2002

This can be attributed to supermarkets relocating to suburban areas, barriers to transportation, restricted shopping options, and a prevalence of low-nutritive-value fast-food restaurants.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Overweight and Obesity**

In the past 30 years, overweight has doubled and obesity has tripled among children.<sup>viii</sup> Because eating and exercise habits in childhood lead to the habits of adulthood, overweight and obesity will continue to compromise the strength of our workforce and health-care systems in the future.<sup>ix</sup> This has a serious detrimental impact on children's health, producing problems that range from developmental disorders to serious chronic diseases previously thought to occur only in adults.<sup>x</sup> Poverty and obesity often co-exist in the same family or individual because food insecurity is not limited only to those without adequate food supplies. Even if people fear running out of food, or are beginning to get low on resources, they will reduce the quality or quantity of the foods they eat.<sup>xi</sup>

### **Health**

Food insecurity among children not only impedes growth and development,<sup>xii</sup> but also causes children to be sick more often, hospitalized more frequently, and to have poorer mental health and greater rates of behavioral disorders.<sup>xiii</sup> Even though adults frequently employ coping strategies to try to protect children from hunger, their food intake and learned food patterns are still affected,<sup>xiv</sup> making them more susceptible to obesity and further deleterious health conditions.

### **Federal Programs**

Federally funded programs provide means of support to low-income families and their children. These programs range from emergency food assistance to food stamps to school meals. Many of these resources are vastly underutilized. To provide the best support to American children and make use of federal funds, participation rates for these programs must be improved. Constraints to participation in these programs include lack of knowledge of eligibility, inaccessibility, and barriers in the application process.

“When children live in households with chronically inadequate resources to buy food, they are susceptible to the long-term double damages of food insecurity and hunger and of obesity. In order to avoid these negative health and developmental consequences, we must ensure better access to comprehensive and high-quality nutrition programs for our nation's most vulnerable children.”<sup>1</sup>

**SCHOOL BREAKFAST** (an estimated 44 percent of eligible children currently participate)<sup>xv</sup>

The School Breakfast program was started to help ensure that children had a nutritious meal prior to the school day so that they could concentrate and learn better.

**CACFP** (2,974,726 average daily child participants)<sup>xvi</sup>

The Child and Adult Care Food Program provides reimbursement to child and adult-

care homes and centers to mediate costs associated with feeding these individuals. This enables many centers to provide more nutritionally balanced meals, including after school meals.

**FOOD STAMPS** (an estimated 56 percent of eligible people currently participate)<sup>xvii</sup>

The Food Stamp Program is a monthly supplement that low-income individuals and households can use to help cover costs for food. This program increases a family's income by freeing up money for other expenses.

**SCHOOL LUNCH** (presumed at optimal participation rates)

The National School Lunch Program provides nutritious lunches to children in most schools across the country. Children may qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch based on their families' income level.

**SUMMER PROGRAM** (an estimated 19 percent of eligible children currently participate)<sup>xviii</sup>

The Summer Food Service Program provides meals to low-income children during the summer months. Many children who receive free and reduced-priced meals during the school year don't have adequate sources of food at home and rely heavily on this supplement.

**WIC** (7,798,635 average monthly number of participants)<sup>xix</sup>

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children helps to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk. The program provides nutritious foods to supplement diets, nutrition education, and referrals to health care and other social services.

**EITC** (estimated 82 percent of claimants had qualifying children in 2002)<sup>xx</sup>

The Earned Income Tax Credit is a tax reduction and a wage supplement for low-income and moderate-income working families. The federal government administers an EITC through the income tax. The EITC can reduce child poverty, increase effective wages, and cut taxes for families struggling to make ends meet.<sup>xxi</sup> In some locations, EITCs have also been enacted on a state level.

"A full-time minimum-wage worker earns the equivalent of just under *half* of the poverty level for a family of four. Even with the earned income tax credit (EITC), this family's income is only about 70 percent of poverty. Food stamps make it possible for such working-poor families to stretch their income so that it approaches the poverty level."<sup>1</sup>

### **Emergency Food Assistance**

The emergency food network in this country covers a broad range: small food pantries giving out individual meals, to large food banks that supply thousands of pounds of food to organizations that supplement individual and family food needs. Many people who rely on these food sources are disaster victims, children, working poor, single-parent families, newly unemployed, mentally ill, disabled, or elderly.<sup>xxii</sup> The largest food bank network in the country, America's Second Harvest, estimates that it serves approximately 9 percent of all Americans.<sup>xxiii</sup> These emergency food sources currently provide food for thousands of American families each year.

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## The Solution

Food security is a multifaceted issue necessitating work on both the household and community levels. In order to meet the needs of hungry and food insecure children in the United States, we must focus on creating multiple points of access to economic support and food supplies. We have the resources and capacity to provide for every child in this country. All children in the United States could be hunger-free with the implementation of a holistic response to improve federal food and nutrition programs, nutrition education resources, programs for family economic security, and emergency food networks.

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<sup>i</sup> America's Second Harvest, Food Research Action Center, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *Why Food Stamps Matter*, May 19, 2005, 1.

<sup>ii</sup> America's Second Harvest, Food Research Action Center, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *Why Food Stamps Matter*, May 19, 2005, 1.

<sup>iii</sup> Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews and Steven Carlson, *Household Food Security in the United States, 2004*, October 2005, 6.

<sup>iv</sup> Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews and Steven Carlson, *Household Food Security in the United States, 2004*, October 2005, 4.

<sup>v</sup> Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews and Steven Carlson, *Household Food Security in the United States, 2004*, October 2005, 18.

<sup>vi</sup> Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews and Steven Carlson, *Household Food Security in the United States, 2004*, October 2005, 15.

<sup>vii</sup> Ed Bolen and Kenneth Hecht, California Food Policy Advocates, *Neighborhood Groceries: New Access to Healthy Food in Low-Income Communities*, January 2003, 3.

<sup>viii</sup> Christina Paxson, Elisabeth Donahue, C. Tracy Orleans, and Jeanne Ann Grisso, *The Future of Children: Introducing the Issue*, Vol. 16 No. 1, Spring 2006, 3.

<sup>ix</sup> Ron Haskins, Christina Paxson, and Elisabeth Donahue, *The Future of Children Policy Brief: Fighting Obesity in the Public Schools*, Spring 2006, 2.

<sup>x</sup> Christina Paxson, Elisabeth Donahue, C. Tracy Orleans, and Jeanne Ann Grisso, *The Future of Children: Introducing the Issue*, Vol. 16 No. 1, Spring 2006, 4.

<sup>xi</sup> Center on Hunger and Poverty and Food Research Action Center, *The Paradox of Hunger and Obesity in America*, 3.

<sup>xii</sup> America's Second Harvest, Food Research Action Center, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *Why Food Stamps Matter*, May 19, 2005, 1.

<sup>xiii</sup> Center on Hunger and Poverty, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University, *The Consequences of Hunger and Food Insecurity for Children*, June 2002, 3.

<sup>xiv</sup> Congressional Hunger Center, The UPS Foundation, *Discussion Papers National Hunger Forum: How Extensive is Childhood Obesity And What is its Relationship to Hunger?*, March 31, 2004, 5.

<sup>xv</sup> Food Research and Action Center, *State of the States 2006*, March 2006, 14.

<sup>xvi</sup> Food Research and Action Center, *State of the States 2006*, March 2006, United States Statistics Page.

<sup>xvii</sup> Food Research and Action Center, *State of the States 2006*, March 2006, 2.

<sup>xviii</sup> Food Research and Action Center, *State of the States 2006*, March 2006, 17.

<sup>xix</sup> Food Research and Action Center, *State of the States 2006*, March 2006, United States Statistics Page.

<sup>xx</sup> Urban Institute, Brookings Institution, *Claims By State 2002*, 2006, 1.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ami Nagle and Nicholas Johnson, *A Hand Up: How State Earned Income Tax Credits Help Working Families Escape Poverty in 2006*, March 8, 2006, 1.

<sup>xxii</sup> Douglas L. O'Brien and Halley Torres Aldeen, *Hunger in America 2006: Report on Emergency Food Distribution in the United States in 2005, Executive Summary*, 2005, 2.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Douglas L. O'Brien and Halley Torres Aldeen, *Hunger in America 2006: Report on Emergency Food Distribution in the United States in 2005, Executive Summary*, 2005, 5.