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CULF 2321.02

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14 February 2013

### **Everyone is Starving: The Problem with Hunger**

Most people do not think about what it means to be hungry all of the time, to not know when or from where your next meal will come. Imagine you are standing in line at the local grocery store. There is a woman in front of you with a young child and all she has in her hands are minimal amounts of bruised fruits and the cheapest brand of canned beans. Maybe she is old and her teeth have fallen out, maybe she is young and nervous. Her child is crying and she tries to shush him as she pulls out her few dollar bills to pay the cashier and shuffles out the door. Most people would not look twice at her and would do their best to stay away from her because of how she looks and acts. They would feel sorry for the child, or perhaps become irritated, or might assume that she is homeless, when in fact she may actually have a home with her son. However, she is so poor that old fruit and canned beans are all she can afford to feed herself and her son for the next week. This scenario illustrates how hunger is a big issue in the Central Texas area. In response to this problem, people have proposed various policies and statistical information showing just how big of an issue hunger really is in America and in Texas, how the public can further understand what is causing this issue and what can be done to help resolve it.

Experts have documented and reported on the scope of hunger; it has been

shown to be very closely tied to both unemployment and poverty. The USDA implements the Thrifty Food Plan in order to figure out how food stamps should be allotted to families and individuals. Researchers at the Food Research and Action Center say that the plan “is the least expensive market basket of food the government prices...” Research shows that, based on the minimum wage of \$7.25, it would take 86 hours to earn enough to cover the current cost of the Thrifty Food Plan (\$627.00 for a family of four), (FRAC). According to the statistics listed on Austin Capital Area Food Bank website, approximately 150,000 families in Travis County alone have to choose between paying for food, paying the rent, or paying their utility bills, (“Hunger 101”). Further reading on the Capital Area Food Bank website revealed the information that approximately 43% of households with incomes below the poverty level have trouble providing enough food. More than one-third of low-income families with incomes somewhat above the poverty level (up to 185%) also have difficulty providing adequate access to food, (“Hunger 101”). With a rise in food and housing costs these people have less money to buy what they need to support their families.

According to the study conducted by U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service members Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, a group formed by the U.S. government to provide leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, rural development, nutrition, and related issues based on sound public policy, the best available science, and efficient management, the most likely family to go hungry in America consists of a single Hispanic mother with children living in a major southern city. 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 the 10.8% of white households which 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 insecurity, (Coleman-Jensen, et al). As shown on the Capital Area Food Bank website, there are more families enrolling in SNAP (formerly Food Stamps), and that number in Travis County steadily increases. There was an 8% increase in food-related calls to 2-1-1 (from 6,457 calls in 2008 to 6,987 in 2009), (“Hunger 101”). This increase in call volume suggests that the United States may have worse consequences in the near future. As the Founder and President of Celebrate Kids, Inc. who holds a Ph.D. from Purdue University in Reading and Educational Psychology, Dr. Kathy Koch, provided in her 2000 essay, research which states that “3 million households with more than 9 million people were food insecure with hunger”, she added that individuals in a given household went involuntarily without food due to a lack of financial resources, (Koch). Compare this information to the newer study in 2010 performed by Rhoda Cohen, Project Director at Mathematica Policy Research Inc., and her associates, which states, “approximately 48,000 different people in Travis County rely on food banks, food pantries, etc., for food each week”, (Cohen, et al). If these numbers continue to rise as they have, then historically this issue might not get any better, but may in fact get much, much worse.

It is not just the world that has an issue with hunger. There are the “poor” groups of people who have less than others, whether by bad luck or just lack of resources, in America as well. As the USDA researchers found, the southern United States, California, and Ohio have food insecurity rates above the national average. 16% 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, (Coleman-Jensen, et al). According to Koch’s research from 2000, “9.7% of US households do not always have access to enough food”. A lot of these families have children. Statistical information from the Capital Area Food Bank from 2010 shows that in Travis County alone “158,270 people are at risk of hunger”, (“County Hunger Maps”).

The history of hunger in America was not widely discussed until more recently in history. According to the research of Koch, in 1939 at the end of the Great Depression the food stamp program was launched and it has since become the nation's primary safety net for millions of low-income families, (Koch). It wasn’t until the 1960’s that a permanent food stamp program was established when, in 1961, President John F. Kennedy ordered the Agriculture secretary to expand food-distribution programs and to establish a pilot food stamp program in six regions. In 1964, Congress established a permanent food stamp program after President Lyndon B. Johnson declared an “unconditional war on poverty”. These policies from the 1960’s started the ball rolling on more policies and regulations in the later years, for instance in 1966 Congress

created the school breakfast program to help prevent children from low income families from going hungry while they were at school, (Koch).

Koch goes on to mention how the biggest breakthrough for food stamps and food-related aid was in the late sixties when, at the first White House conference on hunger, President Richard M. Nixon called the problem an “embarrassing and intolerable” national shame. In 1980-81 a manufacturing decline eliminated thousands of jobs and Congress broadened food stamp eligibility requirements three times to help account for all the people who lacked a means of providing for themselves. Food stamp participation reached record levels in the early 1990s, but Congress cut food stamp benefits as part of welfare reform. Koch continues to explain that in August of 1993, the Childhood Hunger Relief Act improved access and benefits for families on food stamps. Congress and the newly elected President Bill Clinton promised to fully fund WIC and expand school breakfast and summer food programs by 1996, (Koch).

Things seemed to be getting better at this point in history; however, in 1994 the new Republican majority in Congress debated ways to cut social programs and reform welfare and in 1995 slightly more than 10 percent of the U.S. population was receiving food stamps, costing \$24.6 billion a year. In 1996 Congress raised the minimum wage to \$4.75 per hour and reformed welfare, making deep cuts in the food stamp program and the school breakfast and summer food programs. In 1997, Congress restored food stamp eligibility to young, elderly and disabled immigrants and restarted some school, summer and adult-care food programs, but it still was not enough. In September 1, 1997 the minimum wage increased to \$5.15 and the federal share of food stamps dropped to

\$21.4 billion. In 1998 poverty and unemployment declined amid an economic boom, but food stamp participation declined faster than poverty and private charities reported a surge in requests for emergency food. In October 2000, Congress relaxed food stamp eligibility but refused to restore food stamps for non-citizens. And finally, by December 2000, the U.S. Conference of Mayors and Catholic Charities USA reported continuing increase in requests for food aid all over the country, (Koch).

Koch's information is a little bit dated, since her article was published in 2000. However, even though over twelve years have passed, the need in America has only increased and all of this information holds true today, in 2013. For example, there are still families who go without food. The Capital Area Food Bank states that 21% of people in Travis County are missing meals, ("County Hunger Maps"). Food deserts also contribute to food insecurity and are a principle cause of hunger for 5.7% of households in the United States. According to the research done in 2009 by Michele Ver Ploeg and her fellow researchers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Economic Research Service, 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, 75% of which are urban, while 25% are rural. There are 2.3 million households which 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. Approximately 11.5 million people (4.1%), live in low income areas more than 1 mile from a supermarket. 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, (Ver Ploeg).

After the Great Depression, the Southern states were in such a bad way that they could not properly recover. Prices of food and other essential items went up and the value of the US dollar went down, making it harder for families to support themselves on the minimum wage. More immigrants, both legal and illegal, continued to move to the United States, taking jobs from Americans already living here who needed the jobs perhaps even more than the immigrants did. This created a greater need for more jobs and a rise in population as well. In Texas especially there has been an influx of Hispanic immigrants, bringing with them large families with a lot of children to provide for and thus creating a bigger need for more available food, (Cohen, et al).

Experts and political figures have put policies into effect in more recent years to try and deal with hunger. According to the research by Cohen, in 2010 more than 66% of people under age 65 participated in some sort of government aid in Central Texas and were unemployed, (Cohen, et al). This creates another branch of needy people. With greater need of jobs and with items becoming still more expensive, the cost of food is rising and it is becoming increasingly more difficult for lower-middle class people to provide for themselves without some sort of aid. Groups of people, primarily the lower-middle class minorities, are getting help from the government via WIC (Women, Infants and Children), TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), SNAP (formerly called Food Stamps), etc. According to the information provided by the Food and Nutritional

Service which is a branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides Federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, as well as to infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk, (Food and Nutrition Service). Also mentioned on the Food and Nutrition Service website, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) offers nutrition assistance to millions of eligible, low income individuals and families and provides economic benefits to communities. The Food and Nutrition Service works with State agencies, nutrition educators, and neighborhood and faith-based organizations to ensure that those eligible for nutrition assistance can make informed decisions about applying for the program and can access benefits. FNS also works with State partners and the retail community to improve program administration and ensure program integrity, (Food and Nutrition Service). Between these two types of government aid as well as other programs like TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), which helps out low income families by giving them monetary assistance for their non-food living costs such as housing, transportation and clothing, there are many options out there for families and individuals in need.

However, even though there are policies in place and there is government aid available to people who need it, 39% of Travis County residents are at risk for hunger, yet they are not eligible for most nutrition programs, (“County Hunger Maps”). When there are statistics like this in a time when food prices and the cost of living are still on

the rise, it makes it difficult to see a real solution in the near future and it makes one wonder if the amount of policies or regulations will do anything to help the people who are still in need at this very moment. Places like the Austin Capital Area Food Bank do their best to help out with this growing problem of hunger and they serve nearly 300,000 people each year with 41% of their clients being children, (“Hunger 101”). Even after all of this, it still begs the question: Is this enough to end hunger? Perhaps only time will tell.

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