



Physical and Behavioral Effects of Childhood Hunger By Laura Farrell-Wortman

Hunger can affect people in all walks of life, but one group in particular are the most at risk of experiencing a food crisis - children.¹ In the United States, 15.3 million children live in households that don't have enough food to eat on a regular basis, and 21% of all American children live at or below the poverty line.² In the counties served by Second Harvest Foodbank, 18.7% of children are food insecure - over 51,000 kids - and 35% of them live in families who do not qualify for federal nutrition assistance.³ Too many children in our country are going hungry, but a lack of adequate food resources can have impacts beyond hunger. Food insecurity - meaning a lack of access to enough food or a lack of access to nutritious food - has serious ramifications for the physical, academic and psychological well-being of children.

The youngest children - infants, toddlers and preschoolers - are particularly at risk for long-term consequences from periods of food insecurity. The stresses of hunger can begin in the womb, as 25% of children of food insecure families are born underweight.⁴ Infants and toddlers who experience food insecurity are two-thirds more likely to be developmentally delayed than their food secure peers.⁵ Iron-deficiency anemia, a common side effect of malnutrition due to hunger, has shown to be especially detrimental to infants; school-aged children who suffered from anemia as babies were shown to suffer from "impaired memory and social functioning" more than a decade after receiving iron to treat their deficiencies.⁶

Both a lack of nutrition and the stresses that hunger places on a family can affect a growing child; as the organization Child Health Watch notes, "The stress that family hardships, like food-insecurity, place on a young child physically alter the development of crucial brain structures controlling memory and psychosocial functioning. Early childhood is the narrow window during which one builds the basic capacity to learn and interact productively with others; disrupting this brief period diminishes children's ability to acquire complex school skills as they grow, and, later, job skills."⁷ By the time they reach kindergarten, food insecure children often lag behind their peers in emotional and physical development.

¹"Child Food Insecurity in America"

²"Child Food Insecurity in America"

³Map the Meal Gap 2016

⁴Weinrab et al 4

⁵Hickson et al

⁶Alaimo et al 52

⁷Hickson et al



Because of the serious health implications of hunger on the very young, identification of those at risk of food insecurity is key, and it is a job that requires a community-based effort. Those who work with children, such as doctors, teachers, social workers, etc, should learn the warning signs of hunger and how to direct families in need to the resources that can help. Second Harvest's HungerCare Coalition offers healthcare workers the necessary education and access to resource materials in order to help their patients with nutrition assistance. This includes not only information on how their patients can access food, but how to make the healthiest food choices for their families. The HungerCare Coalition empowers doctors and other healthcare professionals to help safeguard their patients' health in both the short and long term.

Hunger continues to be a challenge to the development and behavior of children in grade school and beyond. First- through fifth-graders who were food insecure were found to be more likely to experience interpersonal conflict with classmates, to have repeated a grade and to score below average on achievement test scores than their food secure peers.⁸ Children of hungry families are also twice as likely as their food secure peers to score low on tests of healthy attention and emotional functioning; they were also absent from school twice as many days as children who did not experience food insecurity.⁹ These effects are the result of both the physical manifestations of insufficient food - lack of sufficient calories and nutrients, for example - and of the psychological stress that food insecurity can place upon the entire family. Children experiencing the most severe levels of hunger had parents with reported anxiety scores more than double those of children who don't experience hunger.¹⁰

One of the most significant ways in which the US addresses childhood hunger is directly through schools, with the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. The National School Lunch Program provides reimbursement to schools for serving free or reduced price meals to students whose families incomes are below 185% of the poverty level. Meals served through the program must meet or exceed nutritional standards set by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Likewise, the School Breakfast Program enables schools to provide students with healthy breakfasts before the academic day begins.

⁸Asahiabi 5

⁹Murphy et al 168

¹⁰Weinrab et al 4



The USDA also provides students and school food service staff education on nutrition and food preparation for optimal health.

Food insecurity is a traumatic and difficult experience at any time during the year, but summers in particular present an extra challenge to hungry families. The loss of the structured school day and the daily interaction between schools and families means that far fewer families are able to take advantage of programs designed to alleviate hunger. In fact, over 43% of low-income families in the United States report that it is harder to make ends meet during the summer months.¹¹ The Summer Food Service Program, run by the USDA, provides meal service for children when school is out, but there is a sharp drop off in the number of families who access this program once the school year ends.¹² In 2014, though 21.5 million children received meals through the National School Lunch Program, only 2.7 million received meals through the Summer Food Program - a reduction of nearly 90%.¹³ The children who need healthy, consistent meals during the school year still need those meals during the summer; the need doesn't end when the school year does.

Assistance is available for families and individuals beyond the school day as well. In terms of government nutrition assistance programs, the most significant and wide reaching is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), otherwise known as food stamps. In 2013, 44% of all SNAP participants were children.¹⁴ Other federal programs such as the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program provide further nutrition support for infants, toddlers and their mothers. As school-based programs only begin to intervene when children are old enough to attend kindergarten, these programs are crucial to addressing the nutrition needs of children before they enter grade school.¹⁵ Community organizations such as Second Harvest Foodbank provide a second line of defense for those whose need exceeds the assistance they receive from government sources, or who do not qualify for federal assistance. Our Kids Cafe program helps to reach children in need by focusing on community areas where kids and teens congregate after school.

What, then, can community members do to help alleviate the significant problem of child hunger? There are many ways that we can all help to mitigate the effects of food insecurity on children.

¹¹Orovecz et al 3

¹²Orovecz et al 3

¹³"Child Hunger Fact Sheet"

¹⁴"Child Hunger Fact Sheet"

¹⁵Hickson et al



- Learn the warning signs of hunger and the resources available for those experiencing food insecurity in your community.
- Encourage your local, state and national representatives to support public programs that alleviate hunger and poverty, such as SNAP, WIC and the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs.
- Support organizations in your community who are working to provide food and health resources to those in need, such as foodbanks, food pantries and nutrition outreach programs.

Childhood hunger can cause serious long-term impacts, but it is a problem that we can solve together. When we all make the health and well-being of the children in our community a priority - through the partnership of schools, government agencies and community organizations like Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin - we can make strides towards ending child hunger in America.



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