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Food Insecurity and Children: Hunger? ... In America?... How is that possible?

Robert D. Sanborn

CHILDREN AT RISK, sanborn@childrenatrisk.org

Angelo P. Giardino

Texas Children's Health Plan, apgiardi@texaschildrens.org

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The discussion and evidence around food insecurity and children is both confounding and enlightening. Despite protests by some that persistent hunger does not exist in America, the research on the issue is clear: food insecurity does exist, and its impact on children is wide-ranging and affects many well-documented aspects of children's and their families' lives. Unfortunately, many policymakers who are positioned to instigate real change through evidence-based programs are either not receiving the message or are not responding to it; either way this is not a good situation for children. This issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children (JARC)* aims to paint an accurate portrait of the extent of food insecurity and its devastating impact on our country's next generation.

There is no doubt that we live in a country where opportunities abound and where the streets are figuratively, for many, paved with gold. In the midst of all of this wealth and opportunity, we harbor an amazing hidden secret about the number of children and families that worry about having enough food to eat. We are even more reluctant to discuss the fact that American children actually go hungry in this great nation on a regular basis. It is hard to admit, but we are a country with significant food insecurity. There are hungry children living in America. This begs a number of questions: How can a nation atop the free world, one of the richest nations in existence, be home to so many children who are hungry and who live with food insecurity? And in light of this pressing problem, why aren't our public officials, and the public in general, seized with a greater sense of urgency?

The facts about food insecurity will be discussed at length within this issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children*. The consequences children face when they grow up in hunger are clear. A young child who goes to school hungry is likely to suffer academically. She or he is more likely to have health challenges, is less likely to develop mentally and emotionally, and is more likely to become obese. These are but a few of the serious challenges faced by children who grow up in food insecurity.

On a radio show recently, a caller to the program touted community food banks and church food pantries as the easy and obvious solution to hunger among children. While programs like these do help, they are severely under-equipped to deal with the vast extent of the hunger problem. Hunger and food insecurity are rarely a one-time occasion for families, where a stop at the local food pantry for someone's spare canned goods will be enough to get the family through a minor crisis. More often, food insecurity is a troubling symptom of long-term economic hardship, and it is the bodies of our children who bear the misfortune of trying to

develop normally in a time of nutritional need. In short, informed policies that promote long-term solutions are essential, and while episodic help is of benefit, the comprehensive fix is what our children deserve.

The research presented in this issue of *JARC* helps to put food insecurity into a broader context. Just as food insecurity is not a one-time occurrence for a family, it is also not a problem that occurs in isolation. Food insecurity exists as a byproduct of a myriad of other problems, all rooted in a lack of resources. Some of these resource deficits are material. As Katherine Joyce and her colleagues at Children's HealthWatch point out, families struggling with food insecurity are also likely to be struggling to pay housing and energy bills. To fully address the problem of food insecurity, the mental health problems experienced by caretakers in food insecure households must also be addressed. In their review, Perez-Escamilla and Pinheiro outline the strong evidence in the literature for household food insecurity acting as a psycho-emotional stressor, further complicating the physical issues of suboptimal child development. In their article, Chilton and Rabinowich encourage a view of food insecurity that takes into account the association between very low food insecurity and exposure to toxic stress.

The basic facts are clear:

We know that when children are hungry, they do not perform well academically and they suffer physically and emotionally. By simply finding the best and most efficient ways to feed children on a regular basis, we can help children be more successful in almost every area of their lives. Fortunately for policymakers, the problem of food insecurity has some clear-cut solutions. Food programs with a proven track record of addressing food insecurity should be available and easily accessible to children and their families. These programs include food stamps or SNAP, WIC, and free- and reduced-price school breakfast and lunch. In high poverty communities, successful school-based food programs include universal free programs, in-the-classroom meal programs, and grab-and-go school food programs. All of these are effective ways to get nutritious meals into the mouths and bellies of children who live in food insecurity.

The development of sound public policy around children should always begin with the dispassionate examination of data. When it comes to food insecurity, the data reveal the undeniable reality that too many children do not know where their next meal is coming from. Texas provides a good example of the problems that such children face. It is a state rich in resources that has proven remarkably resilient in the midst of economic strife. However, though we pride ourselves on providing

economic opportunity for all of our citizens, the numbers on food insecurity are stark. The most recent data show that Texas ranks above the national average in the percentage of food insecure households, and roughly one quarter of Texas' children live in poverty. Over 2,000 schools in Texas have student populations where over 80% of the children attending are economically disadvantaged. Additionally, Texas has the lowest number of supermarkets per capita compared to any other state. The relatively few supermarkets that exist are unevenly distributed so that residents of low-income communities have the most difficult time accessing healthy foods. At the same time, the data show that large percentages of eligible families and children are not participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs, and Summer Food Service Programs, all of which provide essential help for food insecure families. The lesson learned is that Texans must make better use of the opportunities before us to help our children rise above the dangers presented by hunger and lack of adequate nutrition.

While Texas provides a good example of the food insecurity problem, it also provides examples for how to move forward. As advocates, we are all too familiar with the persistence and far-reaching effects of poverty, particularly with regard to young children. Because we see poverty's devastating effects, we fight hard in those areas where we see potential solutions. One example of an area in which policy change can have a great impact on child hunger is the implementation of universal free school breakfast in the classroom. This method of increasing student participation in school breakfast has shown remarkable success in supporting student academic achievement, as well as overall health, at little to no cost to participating schools. Houston has also seen strides made in increasing low-income communities' access to fresh, healthy foods. Public officials, industry leaders, and non-profit advocates have gathered in a combined effort to shed light on the existence of food deserts and the potential such areas hold for increased capacity to provide fresh food. Lastly, efforts are being made to link eligible families to available government resources through assistance with SNAP applications and innovative methods of delivering school meals that increase student participation. It remains clear, however, that much more work needs to be done to ensure that no child in America goes hungry.

The unfortunate reality is that, in many of our most food insecure neighborhoods, myth, opinion, and ideology can hinder the process of feeding hungry children. There is a persistent myth that there are no hungry children in America. Another commonly-held opinion is that parents have it within their power to rectify food insecurity, provided they

just work a little harder. However, the truth is that many of the Americans who are food insecure are already part of the workforce, and, conversely, many working Americans are eligible for food stamps. Finally, there is an ideology that perpetuates the idea that our government should have no role in feeding the hungry, when indeed there is an historic precedent (not to mention economic, and child development imperatives) that validates a sound public policy of ending food insecurity. All of these unfortunate beliefs are significant misrepresentations of reality. The bottom line is that a number of children and families in our midst experience food insecurity on a regular basis and effective means do exist to confront this problem. The question is do we as a nation want to meet this challenge head on and use evidence to help solve this problem? The evidence and commentaries presented in this issue should hopefully compel a resounding yes to the question of whether or not we want to address this threat to the health and well being of children and families in America.