

Food Insecurity: When was the Last Time You Ate?

LaQuandra Gooden

Alliance University

Goal Statement

When was the last time you ate? For me, I ate this morning around 6 am, I ate again at 10 am, and later on I will be able to eat meals throughout the day. However, some American citizens, especially populations who are in poverty may not have the same answer as me due to food insecurity. There are some people who have not eaten in 2 days, 2 weeks, and in some extreme cases a month. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), food insecurity can be defined as “*a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food*” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). Just to clarify, food insecurity and hunger are not the same things. Hunger is a feeling when a person has not eaten food which can consist of stomach growling, an empty stomach, and/or a headache. Nevertheless, food insecurity consists of not having consistent access to food that is adequate to live a healthy life due to socio-economic constraints.

In 2021 33.8 million Americans reported they were food insecure, and among this population, children are affected the most by food insecurity at 87.5% percent (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). Food insecurity has a detrimental effect on American households and families. For example, it can lead to health-related issues, exacerbate poverty, and can put individuals/families under financial strain, because they're not sure whether they should pay their bills or purchase food to survive. Not knowing when you will be able to eat your next meal is frightening, especially if you have dependents. Nobody wants to see themselves or loved ones die from not having food consistently. It is clear the human body is to be nourished because it has hunger cues, and is dependent on nutrients to help keep it intact. As wealthy, modernized, and powerful as this country is, no American should be going to bed, and walking around not having access to adequate food. Food is a basic human need and the American population has the

right to life, security of person, and freedom from hunger (United Nations, n.d.). As professionals and governmental officials it is our duty to ensure we do not violate these human rights, and ensure the American republic has access to secure food to thrive and live a healthy life. It is vital we address and create a sustainable policy that dismantles food insecurity in America.

Scope of the Problem

There are many factors that cause food insecurity such as unemployment/underemployment, failing healthcare systems, poverty, systemic racism, racial discrimination, and location (Feeding America, n.d.). Furthermore, as mentioned in the goal statement, food insecurity has deplorable effects on populations who are affected by it. The effects consist of mental health issues, physical health issues, health-related, growth and development issues for children, child maltreatment and neglect, financial strain, and malnourishment (Feeding America, n.d.). The populations affected by food insecurity are Latinos, African-Americans, Native/Indigenous Americans, college students, children, women, rural America, veterans, senior citizens, disabled people, and the LGBTQ+ population (move for Hunger, n.d.).

According to the USDA, 8.6 million adults lived in households with very low food security (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). 5.0 million children lived in food-insecure households in which children, along with adults, were food insecure (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). 521,000 children (0.7 percent of the Nation's children) lived in households in which one or more children experienced very low food security (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). Based on USDA findings, the patterns and traits of households that experience low food security consist of *“households of single moms (8.0 percent), women living alone (6.0 percent)*

and men living alone (5.9 percent), households with reference persons who are Black, non-Hispanic (7.9 percent) and Hispanic (5.5 percent), households with incomes below 185 percent of the poverty line (10.2 percent) and households located in principal cities (4.6 percent)” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022).

Food insecurity also contains various aspects, it can consist of availability, accessibility, and utilization (Dennard et al., 2022). Not having accessibility to food can consist of not having the ability to have access to adequate food that is affordable but also accessible. For example, Sara, a 38 years old, single mother who lives in rural America may live 2-4 miles from the nearest supermarket in their town, the supermarket is not within walking distance, and a car would be the only use of means she has to get to the supermarket. However, what if Sara does not have enough money for gas until she gets paid in the next 4 days? Sara and her child would not be able to eat for four days. Another aspect of food insecurity I want to highlight is the availability of food that is healthy. For example, Let's say Thomas is a 63-year-old African American man who lives in the East New York area of Brooklyn, NY. Even Though New York City is an urban area that is full of resources, depending on the location of a neighborhood the resources are scarce. Thomas is elderly and the closest supermarket is 20 blocks away from him, traveling 20 blocks to get groceries is too tedious for Thomas because he's a senior citizen. The Crown chicken spot and bodega in his neighborhood is more feasible for him because it is 1 block away. Thomas eating fatty foods is not ideal because it can cause health complications such as high cholesterol and diabetes. Thomas' circumstance is an example of someone who lives in a food desert.

You might ponder “*What is a food desert?*” A food desert can be defined as an urban neighborhood where it is difficult to purchase affordable fresh and healthy food. A food desert highlights how fresh food is not available to people who live in low-income neighborhoods which is correlated with a racial background at times. Lastly, an example of food utilization can consist of not having access to nutritious meals and foods, in urban area supermarkets. This concept may be perpetuated by the redlining of supermarkets, redlining supermarkets can be defined as super chain supermarkets such as Wholefoods are reluctant to be in inner cities and low-income neighborhoods, they prefer to be in affluent and suburban neighborhoods (Zhang & Debarchana, 2016). Due to supermarket redlining, inner cities low-income neighborhoods are subjected to supermarkets that have poor-quality nutritional food and the inventory stock of food is limited (Zhang & Debarchana, 2016).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic food insecurity has increased, and the inflation of food has exacerbated food insecurity for populations who experience it. About 9.6 million U.S. employees lost their jobs, based on averages of the first three quarters of 2019 and the first three quarters of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bennett, 2021). Once again we can see how unemployment, poverty, and low income all interlink and can cause food insecurity. If a household does not have financial security or employment earnings to purchase food, it will experience food insecurity. Not having financial security and unemployment are factors of poverty. Poverty is the real culprit of food insecurity because a person does not have the necessary means and resources to live adequately or afford basic human needs.

Past Policies

The past policies that address food insecurity were the Food Stamp Program (FSP), the Food Stamp Act, the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977, 1993 – Mickey Leland Childhood Hunger

Relief Act, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, and the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). **The FSP** started in 1939, the FSP was created to serve people on relief (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). The people on relief would buy orange stamps equal to their normal food expenditures, for every \$1 worth of orange stamps purchased, 50 cents worth of blue stamps were received (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). The orange stamps were used to buy any food and the blue stamps were only used to buy food determined by the Department to be surplus (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). According to USDA the program ended in the spring of 1943 because unemployment in America was no longer widespread (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018).

The Food Stamp Act was enacted in 1964, President Johnson solicited Congress to pass legislation making the FSP permanent (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). The reason for the Food Stamp Act of 1964 was to fortify the agricultural economy and enhance access to nutrition among low-income households (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018).

The Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 was enacted by both the Republican cabinet and the Democratic cabinet and presented Congress with proposed legislation to reform the FSP in 1977 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). The Republicans wanted the bill to provide benefits for the disadvantaged populations, and harden controls on the FSP program (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). The Democrats wanted the bill's focal point to be centered on increasing access to disadvantaged populations, diminishing errors, and keeping a tight rein on food stamp abuse (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018).

The Mickey Leland Childhood Hunger Relief Act in 1993, provided \$2.8 billion in benefit increases (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). The Mickey Leland Childhood Hunger Relief

Act contained deductions for legally binding child support payments made to non-household members, increases the limit on the dependent care deduction from \$160 to \$200 for children under 2 years old and \$175 for all other dependents, and improved employment and training dependent care reimbursements (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018).

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) eliminated the allotment of recipients to AFDC and changed it to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). PRWORA abolish eligibility for legal immigrants for food stamps and incorporated a time limit on food stamp receipt for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) who are not working at least 20 hours a week or participating in a work program (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018).

Lastly, the **Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, alias the 2002 Farm Bill**, was passed (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). The Farm Bill reinstated eligibility for food stamps for entitled aliens who have been in the United States for at least five years, re-establish qualifications for immigrants receiving certain disability payments, and reinstate eligibility for children of aliens regardless of the timeframe they have been in the United States (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018).

Current Policies

The current policies that have been enacted to address food insecurity are Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), Summer Nutrition Programs, and Afterschool Nutrition Programs.

The **SNAP** program is for low-income families and individuals (Grafton & Hassink, 2020) The program can be described as monthly benefits for food dispensed on an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card (Grafton & Hassink, 2020). Beneficiaries are able to buy food at grocery stores, farmers' markets, and other food outlets across the country that accept SNAP (Grafton & Hassink, 2020).

The **WIC** program is for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum mothers. Including infants and children up to age five (Grafton & Hassink, 2020). The recipients receive monthly benefits through electronic cards and/or checks depending on the state. WIC participants can redeem their benefits in grocery stores and food retailers that accept WIC (Grafton & Hassink, 2020). WIC offers breastfeeding support, nutrition education counseling, and health referral services (Grafton & Hassink, 2020).

The **National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program** are for school-aged children of families whose incomes are low or moderate (Grafton & Hassink, 2020). School-aged children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals (Grafton & Hassink, 2020). The reduced-price meals consist of breakfasts and lunches that meet federal nutritional standards provided in schools that partake in the program (Grafton & Hassink, 2020).

The **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** program is for infants to children up to age five that attend qualified child care centers, in-home daycares, Head Start, and Early Head Start programs (Grafton & Hassink, 2020). Usually, the children are served two free meals and a snack that meets federal nutrition standards (Grafton & Hassink, 2020).

The **Summer Nutrition Program** is a program for children up to the age of 18 years of age (Grafton & Hassink, 2020). During the summer, participants who qualified visit participating sites and are able to receive two free meals that meet federal nutrition standards (Grafton &

Hassink, 2020). The meals are offered at participating schools and community sites during the summer season (Grafton & Hassink, 2020).

The **Afterschool Nutrition Programs** is a program for children up to the age of 18 years old (Grafton & Hassink, 2020). Eligible participants receive free healthy snacks and/or meals that meet federal nutritional standards (Grafton & Hassink, 2020). This program takes place during after-school programs, school programs on the weekends, or school programs during school holidays (Grafton & Hassink, 2020).

Proposed Solutions

Increased SNAP Requirements: Even though there are policies put into place to help reduce food insecurity, there are some limitations that exist within these policies. For example, SNAP has income requirements and limits in order for someone to qualify. Furthermore, the allotment may not be enough for households especially due to skyrocketing food inflation. The income requirements for SNAP should increase as well as the allotment amount towards beneficiaries.

End Supermarket Redlining: Policymakers and USDA should put an end to supermarket redlining and implement healthy food supermarkets in low-income and low-income inner cities neighborhoods, so these neighborhoods can have access to affordable healthy food.

Free Food Delivery Service: SNAP recipients, citizens that live in rural America, citizens that live in food deserts, and people who are not on SNAP but experience food insecurity should qualify for a third-party food delivery service that can deliver groceries to them.

Free Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner Programs: There should be a federally funded free 3 meals a day program for all ages, that take place on the weekend and evenings that offer nutritional meals for individuals, and families.

SNAP for College Students: College students who have no income or come from low to moderate-income families should automatically qualify for SNAP during the college semesters, so they have access to free food. Not all college students can afford their school meal plans.

Create more Employment opportunities/Increase minimum Wage: Due to poverty being the main culprit of food insecurity, creating jobs for people with no GED, or High School diploma can be helpful. Furthermore, the federal minimum wage needs to increase to \$31 an hour. Having employment and an income that is sustainable can help families and individuals afford groceries and their basic needs.

SNAP for Undocumented Immigrants: Undocumented immigrants are a vulnerable population, it is not easy for them to attain employment, and if they do the wages they make are cheap. Providing SNAP for undocumented immigrants can help prevent malnutrition, food insecurity, and physical health and mental issues.

Involvement of Local Communities

Community involvement is very important for a community to thrive and be successful. When a community comes together, residents can create solutions to solve problems that are an area of concern for the community. Furthermore, community engagement brings the community together, helping residents stay informed and up to date about community news, events, and changes. Some communities have community centers and recreation centers to congregate with one another. In addition, food pantries have been a staple in communities to help address food insecurity in underserved and low-income communities. Well-known food pantries and organizations that provide food for populations that experience food insecurity are Meals on Wheels, Feeding America, Food Banks, and City Harvest. A new trend that stems from the COVID-19 pandemic is community refrigerators. The purpose of having a community fridge is

that it supplies food for people in the neighborhood who cannot afford groceries or need a meal. Residents from the local community can volunteer by contributing food/groceries they purchase or overstock into the community fridge. Community fridges also reduce and/or limit food waste, by residents adding food they may not plan on eating or soon to expire can be used by someone else to create a meal. Another amazing aspect of community fridges is that residents can get creative and make murals on the fridge, when murals are designed on the fridge they can tell a story of the community from their values, and show the community's cultural identity. Implementing community fridges to help combat food insecurity is an awesome facet to involve communities in being in an active role in solving communal problems in a way that empowers them and brings each other together.

Involvement of Communities of Faith

Spirituality, religion, and faith can be a pillar for some communities, especially underserved communities. Faith and spirituality can be protective factors for individuals and families due to it bestowing a sense of security, socialization, and structure. For some people, faith-based organizations have been an outlet where they can receive basic needs, spiritual counseling, and support from. Communities of faith have a long-standing history of being charitable to people in need. Charity and giving are standards communities of faith live by. In the past, some communities of faith lived by laws and customs that were centered on giving, charity, and caring for the poor, disabled, and oppressed people (Karger & Stoesz, 2018). Some of the charitable deeds communities of faith provided were feeding the poor, offering medical services, and advocating for the needs, the mistreatment, and social welfare of oppressed groups. In the past, monarchs, states, and the federal government barely got involved in community service, and charity (Karger & Stoesz, 2018). Some communities of faith came together and will build

orphanages, settlement houses, almshouses, hospitals, and soup kitchens to address the needs of oppressed and vulnerable populations (Karger & Stoesz, 2018). Faith-based organizations that are known for being involved in community service are Catholic Charity, Salvation Army, God' Love We Deliver, Bread for the World, Buddhist Global Relief, Hindu American Foundation, Islamic Relief USA, Muslims Against Hunger, and Leket.

Conclusion

Based on the information discussed in this policy brief, to combat food insecurity in America it takes community and joint effort. Governmental leaders, federal, state, social work professionals, faith-based organizations, and local community organizations have the necessary resources and expertise to meet the needs of people who are affected by food insecurity. No American citizen should be going days and nights without food, it is our duty to protect and serve American citizens. Having food is a basic human need, and this human right should not be violated by any means. So today, when you sit down and eat a nutritional meal, just know you have the privilege to reckon and say the last time you ate was today. However, keep in mind that there are individuals and families who cannot say the last time they ate was today, nor have access to food daily. So once again, "When was the Last Time You Ate?"

References

Bennett, J. (2021, April 15). *Fewer jobs have been lost in the EU than in the U.S. during the COVID-19 downturn*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved April 14, 2023, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/15/fewer-jobs-have-been-lost-in-the-eu-than-in-the-u-s-during-the-covid-19-downturn/>

- Dennard, E., Kristjansson, E., Tchangalova, N., Totton, S., Winham, D., & O'Connor, A. (2022, September). Food insecurity among African Americans in the United States: A scoping review. *PLoS ONE*, *19*(9), 1-16. Academic Search Complete. 10.1371/journal.pone.0274434
- Feeding America. (n.d.). *What is Food Insecurity?* Feeding America. Retrieved April 14, 2023, from <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/food-insecurity>
- Grafton, H. H., & Hassink, S. G. (2020, July 9). *Food Insecurity and Health: Practices and Policies to Address Food Insecurity among Children*. NCBI. Retrieved April 14, 2023, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7347342/>
- Karger, H. J., & Stoesz, D. (2018). *American Social Welfare Policy: A Pluralist Approach*. Pearson.
- move for hunger. (n.d.). *Home*. YouTube. Retrieved April 14, 2023, from https://moveforhunger.org/hunger-facts?gclid=CjwKCAjw8-OhBhB5EiwADyoY1VnbMBai05PmwVvxTBHxtZyYUa0hzp5aak8dYvZiID3mZBvIXlFbQBoCqm8QAvD_BwE
- United Nations. (n.d.). *International Bill of Human Rights*. OHCHR. Retrieved April 14, 2023, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights/international-bill-human-rights>
- U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2018, September 11). *A Short History of SNAP | Food and Nutrition Service*. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Retrieved April 14, 2023, from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap>

U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2022, October 17). *Definitions of Food Security*. USDA ERS. Retrieved April 14, 2023, from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/definitions-of-food-security/>

U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2022, October 17). *Key Statistics & Graphics*. USDA ERS. Retrieved April 14, 2023, from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/key-statistics-graphics/>

Zhang, M., & Debarchana, G. (2016). Spatial Supermarket Redlining and Neighborhood Vulnerability: A Case Study of Hartford, Connecticut. *Transactions in GIS : TG*, 20(1), 79. doi.org/10.1111/tgis.12142