A Taste of Reality: Hunger in the United States

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Mommy says don’t worry because in heaven there is plenty of food and lots of toys and everyone can eat anything they want. Sometimes I think about heaven...I can’t wait until I die and get to go there. (Budgett, Age 7)

I can’t really tell you why or anything, but sometimes we have enough [to eat] and sometimes there’s not. (Joshua, Age 10)

Over the past several years, I have been researching hunger in the United States for a book I am currently writing, Hungry to Be Heard: Voices From a Malnourished America. The research consists of 54 intensive interviews of hungry Americans in more than a dozen states, a survey of 200 college students in the Boston area, and an intensive literature review. The story of hunger in America is a complex and nuanced story with many catalysts and solutions. Interspersed throughout this piece are the voices of our fellow Americans, those who live in conditions of hunger.

Within our country lies the scathing paradox of hungry Americans amidst plenty, hungry Americans amidst vast abundance, hungry Americans amidst overwhelming waste. Each day, millions of hungry Americans battle with the undernutrition resulting from the realities of day-to-day poverty. Hunger robs their bodies of the physiological ability to function properly, their minds of the capacity to learn and contribute, and their souls of the emotional will to compete.

Sometimes we have a day, a day when there’s enough food for everyone. That’s a good day, but it doesn’t happen like that all the time.... Some days one or two of us have to not eat [skip a meal] so that the others can eat. If I could, I would make it be me everyday, me who didn’t eat. But I have to work [in the fields] and I can’t do that if I don’t eat. (Jose, Age 41)

I think that hunger just might be something that’s not to be described. It’s just always there. You try to think about other things, but no matter how many games you try to play or [how] hard you try to trick yourself into not thinking about it, you can’t. Sometimes it hurts, and sometimes it makes you tired, always wanting to sleep. (Mary, Age 68)
It kind of feels like there’s something turning in your tummy and then it grows like this (he makes a growling noise) and then you just forget about it. But sometimes it’s still there and you just hold and wait ‘til the next time you eat. (David, Age 11)

There’s no one way to describe what hunger feels like. Sometimes it pokes at you, like someone’s sticking their finger in your stomach every few seconds. Sometimes it hurts like the worst cramp, like the worst cramp. Sometimes you don’t even feel it, but you’re just tired or have a headache or no energy or you’re cranky or it’s there, it’s there but you don’t feel the pain in your stomach every time. Sometimes it’s like there’s a snake twisting and turning in your stomach and it just hurts. But it always, always, is something that changes who you are and how you go about your day. (Lisa, Age 34)

Hunger leaves the mind unable to reach its full potential. It decreases a person’s attention span, ability to concentrate, and ability to remember. It increases irritability and decreases learning potential. According to the Center on Hunger at Brandeis University, hungry kids are much more likely to develop learning disorders and behavioral problems and are significantly less likely to stay in school. Hungry adults are less productive in their place of work, more likely to be moody, and often less emotionally even-keeled when facing pressure situations. As such, hunger has a way of being the catalyst in a vicious cycle. Increased hunger creates decreased ability to work, learn, and excel, which decreases a person’s ability to get ahead, which decreases a person’s chance that they and their family will remain hungry. And hunger eats away at the American workforce, creates untold amounts of potential unrealized, and weakens our ability to compete in the global economy.

Yeah, I mean, I fall asleep in classes a lot now and even when I’m awake I’m not really paying attention like I know I should, it’s so hard to pay attention. I mean, you definitely can’t be the same way when you’re hungry. (Jessica, Age 15)

FRAC reports that, according to recent national surveys and reports, between 13 and 16 million American children experienced hunger in 2006. A child who is hungry in a land of plenty will inevitably become holistically malnourished, losing faith in society and humanity. Although we like to see the dreams of our nation reflected in our children’s faces, reflecting from the faces of our hungry children are their nightmares, resentment, apathy, and lost dreams. Plain and simple, hungry children are much less likely to grow up respecting the rules of a system that has failed them from the beginning.

All these people got all this food, you see, and they throwing it away. You tell me why I shouldn’t be shitty about it? You can’t sit right there and tell me that you wouldn’t be shitty if you were hungry, right? (Matthew, Age 15)

I sit in school and hear everyone—parents, teachers, everyone—telling me that I should obey their rules and I do, I really do. But then I think to myself, ‘why should I follow their (society’s) rules when all the people who make the rules couldn’t give a rat’s you-know-what about me?’ (George, Age 15)

Hunger also hurts on emotional levels. Imagine the pain of knowing that people around you, people who are supposed to be your “fellow Americans,” live wastefully and extravagantly while you go without basic means of subsistence. Imagine that they simultaneously elect officials who create a labyrinth of policy that perpetuates your hunger. Those I interviewed consistently stated that the callous indifference and rationalization of those who are supposed to be your brothers and sisters is likely the very most painful aspect of living hungry in the U.S.

What I can’t understand, what I’ll never no matter how long I live on this earth be able to understand, is how people can’t care that children are hungry. It goes against everything I’ve been taught and believe in. No child should have to know how painful this world can be and how mean the people are to not care. (Owen, Age 38)
As poverty increases in the U.S., and as the social safety net is being systematically cut, more and more Americans are experiencing hunger on a regular basis. Hunger is a social outcome of poverty, a complex problem interconnected to the many cultural and structural trends that create and perpetuate mass poverty in a wealthy nation such as ours. Trends in work, education, wages, taxes, family, and public policy have come together to enable the disease of hunger to spread throughout our country. According to FRAC and data collected by the seminal annual Second Harvest Survey, since 1980 there has been a 250% increase in the number of Americans who go hungry due to poverty. The majority of these are children, elderly, and people living with disabilities. As wages have dropped, jobs have been downsized, and the tax burden has increasingly been shifted to middle and lower class individuals, the government has responded with a concomitant reduction of the social welfare system. And somewhere along the way, a discursive campaign to blame poor people for their poverty has infiltrated the American psyche.

Combined, these trends and others have created the social disgrace of mass hunger in a land of plenty. More people are experiencing hunger than at any time since the Great Depression. Although it might ease our collective conscience to buy into the idea that all of a sudden millions more Americans are lazier than two decades ago, any intelligent analyst has to consider that massive social trends like these occur due to structural catalysts. For instance, the US Census Bureau reports that on average poor people work harder today than in 1980, and yet they have experienced vastly increasing levels of hunger.

I WAS ALWAYS TOLD THAT IF I work hard enough then I will advance myself and my family. I will be able to buy those things that I didn’t have when I was growing up as a kid in a poor neighborhood. And so I did what I was supposed to do and I stayed out of trouble, and that was hard to do where I come from, and I went to school and did my work. And then when I started working I put my head down and just gave it everything I have, I worked as hard as I think I know how to. When there was overtime, I put in overtime. When someone asked me to do something, I did it. And I’ve worked as hard as I can as long as I can remember but sometimes it’s damn hard to even put enough food on the table or to have enough heat in the apartment. (Owen, Age 38)

EVERYONE TALKS ABOUT THE American Dream of cars and homes and boats and mansions. But me? Hard as I work, I can only dream of putting enough food on my table so that my kids have enough to eat. That’s my American Dream. (Marla, Age 37)
According to United for a Fair Economy, an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit group that studies the concentration of American wealth, over the past two and a half decades there has been a significant decline in wages for the bottom 40 per cent of American workers and a freeze on the minimum wage for most of this time period. An increasingly common trend among business has been to move toward contingent labor forces (often without benefits); a move, essentially, from a reliance on skilled labor among the lower and working classes to one on unskilled labor, with a corresponding result of lower wages paid. There has been, additionally, a busting of labor unions and labor laws protecting American workers, particularly low-wage earners. A new and unprecedented trend toward “downsizing” and “restructuring,” and a large-scale deindustrialization at home and the movement of working-class jobs to other countries has, overall, pitted the American working class against laborers from poor countries around the world. The result, clearly, is more hunger in America.

United for a Fair Economy also points out that despite the fact that the aggregate economy has mostly been booming, and that CEO pay rose by over 500 percent in the 1990s alone, poor people find themselves swimming against a massive current created by a changing work structure. Although they are swimming harder than before, they are still falling behind. Our rising tide, in fact, has not “lifted all boats.” Rather, the boats of poor people are taking on water fast.

Meanwhile, we continue to systematically reduce our social welfare protections for poor Americans. Importantly, many of the programs targeted for cuts have been food and nutrition programs. Other programs that have been cut, like housing and healthcare assistance for poor people, have created a greater financial burden on the budgets of poor people and, in turn, have forced many into unthinkable choices between paying for healthcare, heat, housing, and food.

**Right Now I’m Holding**

down two different jobs, one that’s pretty much full-time and then another one that gives me about 20 hours or so a week and this is six days a week that I’m working now. But no matter how hard I work we simply can’t get by on what I’m making…Minimum wage at one place and a little better at the other doesn’t help me enough in terms of feeding my children. (Betsy, 41)

**Sometimes It Gets Cold**

around here and I just can’t turn the heat up anyhow. If I get bigger heat bills, that just means less food the next month and so the choice just wears on me. Can we wait out the cold or should I turn up the heat and later on down the line know that we’ll have to skimp on food? Killer choice, I’ll tell you. (Frank, 37)
I try my best with what little money I have, but it doesn’t always happen. I had to choose between food and everything at one point or another…And food lost most of the time. (Mary, Age 68)

As a result of the structural constraints of the American economy, combined with the fact that the US offers the least generous welfare assistance programs of any of the world’s highly industrialized nations, more Americans find themselves living in post-assistance poverty, by far, than in any of these other nations. And, as a direct result of this fact, the fact of mass poverty, tens of millions of Americans are experiencing hunger. But still, as a society, we remain in denial that this social disease is all around us, caused in large part by our social system, catalyzed by our roles as social actors and bystanders, and urgently awaiting our actions to create and implement the social solutions that can eradicate hunger from our society.

Those who are hungry are indeed quite attuned to our collective denial. In fact, all 54 of those I interviewed indicated that the worst part of being hungry is that you feel “invisible.” How can it be that 35–40 million Americans are invisible? It is a multifaceted invisibility, purposeful on one level and ignorant on another. The media continues to ignore the issue of hunger, or at least remains unwilling to examine the structural catalysts of mass poverty in a land of great wealth. When hunger is discussed, hungry people are often portrayed either as sad cases needing our charity or as stereotypical welfare freeloaders, not as ordinary people facing extraordinary circumstances. Politicians and educators avoid the topic and make the issue invisible on their agendas and in their curriculum and, when pushed, often pass along the same half-truths and untruths guised as whole truths. Some may do this because they are mean-spirited or unsympathetic, some because they have a vested interest in the status quo of our system, and most simply because they themselves are uneducated about the massive social problem of hunger and its structural catalysts. Organizations like the Food Research and Action Center and United for a Fair Economy work to educate all of us to these truths, but it is clear that more needs to be done. Invisible from our collective conscience is the fact that between 1980 and today, the amount of hungry and food insecure people in the United States has more than doubled. Invisible is the fact that 27 percent of American children under twelve are hungry or at risk of hunger. Invisible from the conversation is the fact that 3.3 million elderly Americans will experience hunger this year. Invisible from our less-than-honest discussion about poverty and hunger is the fact that nearly two-thirds of households experiencing hunger in the United States have at least one person who is working full-time. Invisible is the admission that 25 percent of full-time, year-round workers earn less-than-poverty-level wages and that nearly 70 percent of these hard-working Americans faced conditions of hunger last year. It is much easier to blame poor people than to take an honest look at poverty. It is much easier to dismiss hunger as a failure of those who are hungry than to recognize it as a moral failure of society. And as we continue to take these easier routes of analysis and rationalization, the epidemic of U.S. hunger continues to erode the moral fiber of our nation. The existence of mass hunger in our overabundant nation may indeed tell us more about those of us who are not hungry than it does about those who are.

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