

The hungry child

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Wednesday, 26 February 2014 14:39



*We were homeless.
My mom. My big sister and me.
We slept in the car. . .
We went to IHOP and we only got one pancake and we shared it.
That was our breakfast...
When I was tired of sitting in the car, I would talk to my mom.
She would always say a prayer so we could have a better life.
We should buy kids good food when they are homeless.
We should help them out.*
-- Jasmine, age 7

*There are six people in our family.
But only five sit down to dinner.
That's because my mom doesn't eat.
She wants to make sure we have enough food.*
-- Vanessa, age 6

Some children cheer when schools close for winter storms, but there are hungry children in America right now for whom another snow day this week meant another day without access to school breakfast or lunch. Despite criticism some big city mayors have kept schools open on snowy days this winter so their children would not go without food. These same children suffer over the weekends. While some schools have food pantries and send children home on the weekends with backpacks filled with food, it is still far, far from enough and only a drop in the bucket of need. Schools report students who arrive hungry on Monday morning or cry when they miss the bus or it's late because that means they've missed breakfast.

The record 16.1 million children living in poverty, including over seven million living in extreme poverty, leaves millions of children suffering from hunger in our nation with the world's largest GDP. In 2012 more than one in nine children in the United States lived in households where children were food insecure, meaning they lacked consistent access to adequate food; more than one in five children — 15.9 million — lived in households where either children or adults or both were food insecure. In some families, like Jasmine's, hunger compounds other crises like homelessness, making them even worse. In many others hunger is almost hidden—a quiet

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secret of parents struggling to recover from the recession and no longer able to stay afloat. Food pantries have reported that some of the same community members who were once regular donors helping to fill the shelves are now regular visitors in need of help themselves.

Black and Hispanic households with children were more than twice as likely as White households to have food insecure children, but White households comprised the largest group of households (43 percent) with food insecure children. In 2010 and 2011, three-quarters of households with food insecure children had one or more working adults, 80 percent of whom worked full-time.

Children's physical health and brain development depend on access to nutritious food, especially in the earliest years of life. Hunger and malnutrition have devastating consequences for children. Federal nutrition programs continue to be a critical support to ensure children's daily nutritional needs are met: they put food on children's plates, help build healthy minds and bodies, and help lift families out of poverty. A recent study found that needy children who received food assistance before age five were in better health as adults. Food programs are particularly crucial for younger children, as they are more likely to be in poor health, experience developmental delays, and be food insecure when their families' food benefits are reduced or ended. These programs work. Yet they are not reaching every child in need.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, which serve over 22 million children — more than one in four children in America — were cut in the recent farm bill by \$8.6 billion over 10 years. An estimated 850,000 households, including 1.7 million people, will see a reduction on average of \$90 a month in their food assistance. This cut comes on top of the substantial across-the-board benefit reduction that took effect in November 2013 and affected all SNAP households. These cuts are morally offensive and economically indefensible, especially when so many non-needy farmers and others will continue to get agricultural welfare subsidies. SNAP is the only defense against the wolves of hunger for 1.2 million households with children who had no cash income other than SNAP in an average month in FY 2011; FY 2012 is expected to show an increase. It is shameful that Congress continues to treat poor Americans like second class citizens by cutting supports they desperately need.

Like SNAP, the school lunch, breakfast, and summer feeding programs, which provide meals to children in school and during the long hot summer months, are crucial and effective anti-poverty investments that help combat child hunger. They also play a vital role in ensuring children are fed and able to succeed in the classroom. In one study, children who were food insecure in kindergarten saw a 13 percent drop in their reading and math test scores by the third grade compared to their food-secure peers. In FY2012, more than 21 million children received free or reduced-price lunch through the National School Lunch Program and nearly 11 million children received free and reduced price breakfast. When school is out, though, it's a different story.

The long summer break can be the worst time of all for our young as hunger does not take a summer vacation. The Children's Defense Fund's latest report shows only 10 percent of the number of children who relied on free or reduced-price lunch during the school year received meals through the Summer Food Service Program. Despite the fact that it is 100 percent federally-funded and has the potential to create local jobs for cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and

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others, too many states and communities drag their feet, create mindless bureaucratic hurdles, and make it as difficult as possible to get resources to serve meals to hungry children during the summer. I have never understood why and it should be stopped. [Click here to see the 10 best and 10 worst states for child enrollment in Summer Food Service Programs.](#)

It is crucial to start asking about and planning right now for summer feeding programs in your community to make sure there is no child hunger crisis in your area this summer. Encourage local congregations, organizations, community centers, parks and recreation departments, and others to open their doors and feed hungry children this summer. These entities are eligible to become summer feeding sponsors and sites. If you have a connection to a local service or civic program discuss this issue with them and encourage them to take advantage of the opportunity to help hungry children get food. Adults and older children can volunteer to help prepare or serve meals at local sites. Visit the USDA's website to learn more.

There should be no hungry people—especially no hungry children—in any community in rich America. Jasmine, Vanessa, and millions of children like them deserve better.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.