Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project

Executive Summary

A Survey of Childhood Hunger in the United States
# FOOD RESEARCH AND ACTION CENTER

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Executive Summary

Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project

A Survey of Childhood Hunger in the United States

Food Research and Action Center
Introduction

Millions of kids are hungry in America. This is the dramatic but inescapable conclusion that emerges from the national report of the Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project — the most rigorous and comprehensive study of childhood hunger ever conducted in this country.

The results of the seven local CCHIP studies provide an indication of the extent of hunger among children and families in the United States. In a nation whose wealth and resources are the envy of the world, literally millions of children do not get enough to eat on a regular basis.

Hunger hurts everyone. It robs children of proper physical development and the ability to learn. It causes health problems and increases education costs. Hungry children who cannot concentrate in school are less likely to reach their potential and become fully productive adults — which ultimately means that our society will be less competitive in the world marketplace.

Among our key findings:

- An estimated 5.5 million children under age 12 in this country are hungry.
- An estimated 11.5 million children under age 12 are hungry or at risk of hunger.
- Hungry children are two to three times more likely than children from non-hungry low-income families to have suffered from individual health problems such as unwanted weight loss, fatigue, irritability, headaches, and inability to concentrate in the six month period prior to the survey.
- Children who report a specific health problem are absent from school almost twice as many days than those not reporting specific health problems.

The study paints a disturbing picture of the day-to-day struggle of low-income households to maintain a nutritionally adequate diet. It shows that shelter (housing and utility) costs dominate the budgets of most of these households, leaving little money for food and other necessities. It shows that many working families, including those with a member employed full time cannot escape hunger. It shows that low-income families are quite resourceful in marshalling public and private food assistance, yet often cannot, meet their families' needs. And that when hunger hits a family, the parents are usually the first to do without food so their children can eat.

The widespread childhood hunger found in this study is a national shame; but fortunately it is a shame that can be ended. In the long run, pursuit of various strategies to reduce the level and pain of poverty will reduce hunger among American children. But, kids can't wait for the long run.

There is a wealth of evidence, including new findings in this
study, that suggest that by strengthening an array of federal programs already in place, much of the childhood hunger problem in this country can be eliminated. They include such children’s programs as the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC); the School Breakfast Program; the National School Lunch Program; and, the Summer Food Service Program for Children. Many of these programs are underfunded or underutilized. In addition, few people realize that 51 percent of all Food Stamp Program recipients are children and that 83 percent of all food stamp benefits go to families with children. Food stamp benefits are low and barriers to participation prevent millions of children and families from receiving program benefits.

Food program improvements recommended at the conclusion of this report provide the centerpiece of a Campaign to End Childhood Hunger that we at FRAC, in partnership with anti-hunger groups across the country, are launching with the release of this report. It is a long-term public education and public policy advocacy effort that has the ultimate goal of gaining food security for all children and families in the United States. We invite all readers of this report to contact us for more information.

If we are truly committed to ensuring that no child goes hungry in the United States, we must begin to develop as careful and comprehensive a battle plan for the fight against childhood hunger as we have for political campaigns and military operations. We have the resources and the knowledge to do so much good for our children.

Through publication of this report and the launch of the Campaign we hope to inspire a national debate on childhood hunger and immediate action to remedy it — for no child goes hungry by choice and no one gains when a child goes hungry. If not for moral reasons alone, then for pragmatic economic reasons, we must put an end to childhood hunger. It is imperative that we begin now.
We at FRAC are proud to have completed the enormous undertaking that the CCHIP study represents. The cost to our organization alone over the past three years has been in excess of a half million dollars; when added to the costs of our local sites, the total study costs exceed one million dollars.

CCHIP has been funded almost exclusively from private sources. While a full list of national and local contributors is included elsewhere in the full report, special recognition is due the Primerica Foundation for initiating this project in 1984. The project had the active support of then Chairman and CEO of Primerica, William S. Woodside, who now serves as Chairman of Sky Chef, Inc. Peter Goldberg, now the President of the Prudential Foundation and then Vice President for Public Responsibility for Primerica, played a major role in conceptualizing and actualizing this project.

Special thanks also are due the Kraft General Foods Foundation, the largest underwriter of the CCHIP study and this report. Kraft General Foods Foundation has also joined in the Campaign to End Childhood Hunger — providing invaluable assistance at the national and local levels.

Other support at the national level has been generously provided for CCHIP by:

The Pillsbury Foundation
Burlington Northern Foundation
The Ford Foundation
Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger
Sara Lee Foundation
William T. Grant Foundation.

Thanks is also due to dozens of foundations, corporations and others who contributed to individual CCHIP studies.

The role of state and local groups across the country has been essential to the success of this project. Many of the groups conducting CCHIP surveys are very small — with limited budgets and already overextended staffs. The rigorous science required in the CCHIP methodology meant that raising the money and managing the study was an enormous challenge. The groups conducting these studies are specifically acknowledged elsewhere in the full report, but we want to reinforce our gratitude for the tremendous contribution of all who participated at the local level — including project supervisors, interviewers and the families interviewed.

One statewide organization — the Connecticut Association for Human Services — deserves special praise. It was this group that had the foresight and gumption to initiate CCHIP in 1984. It was CAHS that conducted the original pilot test in New Haven, Connecticut and also played a strong supportive role in the subsequent Hartford
survey. Matthew Melmed, the Executive Director of CAHS, and Helen Ward, the Director of Research, deserve the primary credit for pioneering CCHIP. Laura Cohen, Director of the Connecticut Anti-Hunger Coalition, has been instrumental in following through on their work.

We are also deeply indebted to an eminent group of academics and researchers for serving as the Technical Advisory Committee for CCHIP. While all TAC members are listed elsewhere in the full report, special mention is warranted for Dr. Victor W. Sidel, who chaired the committee. The TAC members gave generously of their time and talent to assure the credibility and soundness of the study's methodology and the accuracy of its findings.

Finally, recognition is due those who actually made CCHIP happen on the national level. Although all FRAC staff have been involved, Lynn Parker, our Director of Nutrition Policy and Research, planted the seeds for this project in the mid-1980s by bringing together for the first time academics who were interested in working together to figure out how to document hunger at the community level. She deserves special praise for coordinating many aspects of this project and serving as liaison to the CCHIP staff.

Members of the CCHIP staff, however, are those who have literally lived and breathed this project for over three years. Through sheer hard work, great personal sacrifice, and tremendous dedication, this lean staff has compiled a remarkable record of achievement. Invaluable contributions have been provided by staff members Valerie J. Wehler, Dr. Richard I. Scott, Dr. Jennifer J. Anderson, John M. Anthony, and Iona A. Wehler. Drs. Scott and Anderson also served on the Technical Advisory Committee.

Ultimate praise and credit for the completion of the CCHIP study rests with Project Director Cheryl A. Wehler. She has brought extraordinary intelligence and perseverance to the overwhelming task of completing this project. This has required not only sophisticated research skills and an ability to interpret complex data, but also strong management capabilities to recruit and supervise the CCHIP staff and to assist small, grassroots groups in conducting this complicated study. More than anyone else, the completion of this CCHIP study is a tribute to Cheryl Wehler's skill and dedication.

Robert J. Fersh
Executive Director
Food Research and Action Center
March 1991
Millions of kids are hungry in America. But these children often seem invisible. In fact, many Americans are unaware of the dimensions of the tragic but solvable problem of hunger here at home. It's time to make childhood hunger a national priority.

During the 1980s, reports from local feeding programs, state networks, and regional coalitions spoke painfully about the growing specter of hunger, especially among families with children. An economic down-turn combined with cuts in federal safety-net programs — including food assistance programs — increased the demand for emergency food.

But many policymakers discounted these reports as anecdotal. They questioned the reliability of the information. In 1984, the President's Task Force on Food Assistance concluded that it could not "report definitive evidence on the extent of hunger" because an acceptable measure had not yet been developed.

To document the need, a comprehensive, scientifically valid study of hunger among low-income families with children under the age of 12 was developed by the Connecticut Association for Human Services with the assistance of a distinguished panel of child health and research experts. National replication of the study, called the Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project, or CCHIP, was coordinated in seven sites across the country by the Washington, D.C.-based Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). This report is based on the results of these seven CCHIP studies.
Key Findings

If combined hunger rates from the seven surveys hold for the nation as a whole, when applied to the latest and best available national data, an estimated 5.5 million American children under 12 are hungry. This means that one out of every eight children under 12 living in the United States is probably hungry.

According to the same projections, an additional six million children under 12 are at-risk of hunger because their families are experiencing food shortage problems. Taken together, 11.5 million American children under 12 are either hungry or at-risk of hunger based on these estimates. Put differently, one out of every four children in the United States is likely to experience at least one food shortage problem.

The impact of hunger on children in families surveyed by CCHIP manifests itself through health problems, problems which affect school attendance. When compared with children from non-hungry families, children from hungry families were much more likely to suffer from infection-based health problems and were two to three times more likely to show symptoms of low energy stores in the six-month period prior to the survey.

In comparison to non-hungry children, hungry children are:

- more than three times as likely to suffer from unwanted weight loss;
- more than four times as likely to suffer from fatigue;
- almost three times as likely to suffer from irritability;
- more than 12 times as likely to report dizziness;
- more than twice as likely to have frequent headaches;
- almost twice as likely to have frequent ear infections;
- almost three times as likely to suffer from concentration problems; and,
- almost twice as likely to have frequent colds.

And when children become ill, they miss school. Children who report any specific health problems are more likely to be absent from school than those not reporting specific health problems, missing almost twice as many school days.

When applied to the best available national data, the seven site results indicate that roughly 12 percent of all families with children under the age of 12 in the United States experience hunger. In addition, 28 percent of all families with children under 12 living in the United States are estimated to be hungry or at-risk of hunger, using these projections.
The CCHIP survey of families with incomes at or below 185 percent of poverty with at least one child under the age of 12 was pilot-tested in New Haven, Connecticut. A demonstration project was conducted in Washington state. The results from these studies were released in 1987 and 1988, respectively.

Over an 18 month period, from February 1989 to August 1990, FRAC coordinated separate CCHIP surveys in Alabama, California, Connecticut, Florida, Minnesota, Michigan and New York. A total of 2,335 families were surveyed door-to-door for the final CCHIP report. The number of low-income families sampled per site ranges from 257 in Minnesota to 434 in Michigan. The results from these seven sites are included in this report.

The first statewide CCHIP survey was conducted in Massachusetts from October 1989 to January 1990. The results of this study will be released in April 1991.
CHIP defines hunger as the mental and physical condition that comes from not eating enough food due to insufficient economic, family or community resources.

The measurement of hunger developed by CHIP attempts to detect food insufficiency due to constrained resources. The CHIP survey measures insecurity about having the resources to procure foods of choice, perceived insufficiency of food intake, actual food shortages and alteration of eating behaviors due to restricted or inadequate resources.

To measure hunger, a scale was formulated composed of eight questions — taken from the 105 questions in the survey — that indicate whether adults or children in the household experience food shortages, perceived food insufficiency, altered food intake due to resource limitations or inadequate food resources. These key questions, each pertaining to the preceding 12 months, are:

- Does your household ever run out of money to buy food to make a meal?
- Do you or adult members of your household ever eat less than you feel you should because there is not enough money for food?
- Do you or adult members of your household ever cut the size of meals or skip meals because there is not enough money for food?
- Do your children ever eat less than you feel they should because there is not enough money for food?
- Do you ever cut the size of your children’s meals or do they ever skip meals because there is not enough money for food?
- Do your children ever say they are hungry because there is not enough food in the house?
- Do you ever rely on a limited number of foods to feed your children because you are running out of money to buy food for a meal?
- Do any of your children ever go to bed hungry because there is not enough money to buy food?

These questions were chosen because they elicit the extent of sustained food insufficiency due to constrained resources. They are based on questions tested in previous surveys, but are more precise in language and have been tested with low-income families.

A score of five or more on the scale of zero to eight (that is, five affirmative responses out of eight) indicates a food shortage problem affecting everyone in the household. Therefore, families answering five or more of the eight hunger questions positively are classified as hungry. This is because a score of five or more:

- indicates that five or more different signs of hunger are present in the household; and,
- indicates that at least one of these signs of hunger directly affects the children in the household.

A score of one to four indicates that the family is “at risk” of hunger because it shows at least one sign of a food shortage problem.
Federal programs are already in place to address hunger in the United States. Some are specifically designed to enhance the food purchasing power of low-income families, while others help to increase the intake of nutritious food by low-income children. These programs include the Food Stamp Program; the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC); the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs; the Summer Food Service Program for Children; and, the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

Hungry families in the CCHIP survey were significantly more likely than non-hungry families to participate in the Food Stamp Program. And, when the programs were available, many hungry families and the children within them participated in WIC and the school lunch and breakfast programs. Furthermore, households that participated in the Food Stamp Program were more likely to participate in WIC.

While hungry families were more likely than non-hungry families to avail themselves of the benefits of these food assistance programs, many hungry families who were eligible for program benefits encountered barriers to participation.

The Food Stamp Program is designed to assist low-income families in purchasing a minimally adequate diet. Of the 1,922 families surveyed by CCHIP and eligible for food stamps, 708 (37%) were not participating. Of the 2,335 households interviewed in the CCHIP surveys, 406 households (17%) had never applied for food stamp benefits. The most commonly given reason for not applying was that the respondent did not believe the household was eligible (65%). An additional one-fifth (21%) were embarrassed to use food stamps. Of the 263 households that did not apply for food stamps because they did not think they were eligible, 131 (50%) were probably eligible for program benefits and 140 of them (53%) were found by CCHIP to be hungry or at-risk of hunger.

Of all the households surveyed, 676 (29%) had applied for food stamp benefits but were not receiving them at the time of the survey. The most often cited reasons for not receiving food stamps were that households said they did not qualify for food stamps at the time of application (51%), their benefits had stopped (30%), or they no longer needed benefits (24%). Of the 204 households who said their benefits had stopped, 150 (74%) were probably still eligible. Of the 158 households who said that they no longer needed food stamps, 101 (64%) were probably still eligible for program benefits and, more importantly, 106 (67%) were found to be hungry or at-risk of hunger.

An analysis was conducted on households with gross incomes less than 130 percent of the poverty line and therefore more likely to be eligible for food stamp benefits. On average, participants were receiving 52 percent of the maximum food stamp benefit level and approximately 11 percent of the participating households were actually receiving the maximum food stamp benefit level. The average dollar value of food stamps per household was $182 per month.

The WIC program, which has proven to be both successful in improving the health and nutritional intake of participants and cost-effective, currently serves just over half of those eligible nationwide. Of the 1,250 low-income families surveyed by CCHIP who were income and categorically eligible for WIC, 55 percent were not receiving WIC benefits. Most important from the CCHIP findings, of those eligible but not receiving WIC benefits, 31 percent were hungry, presumably at dietary risk and in need of the program benefits.

Both the school lunch and breakfast programs are federal entitlements, available to any school district wishing to participate in them. However, less than half of the schools nationwide offering lunch offer breakfast. Within the 2,129 households with school-age children interviewed by CCHIP, 875 (41%) of the children participated in the School Breakfast Program. Fifty-nine percent (1,255 households) did not receive school breakfasts. Of
the 59 percent of those families interviewed by CCHIP whose children did not receive school breakfast, nearly one-third were hungry. For most of the school-age children who did not participate in the School Breakfast Program, the reason that they did not participate was because the program was not offered at their schools.

Children who were eating both school breakfast and school lunch were found to be significantly less likely to suffer from problems usually associated with low energy reserves (fatigue, irritability and inability to concentrate) in the six months prior to the survey than those who were getting school lunch only. As noted earlier, hungry children were more likely to suffer from specific health problems than children from non-hungry families; and children who had a specific health problem were more likely to be absent from school than those who did not suffer from any specific health problems. However, all children were less likely to have increased school absences if they got breakfast at school. In addition, children who were at-risk of hunger had fewer days absent when they got breakfast at school than when they did not get breakfast at school.

The Summer Food Service Program for Children is designed to fill the nutritional gap for children during the summer months when they are not receiving meals in school. Like the School Breakfast Program, it is underutilized. Of the families interviewed by CCHIP, only 22 percent had children participating in the Summer Food Program. Of those families who had never heard of the program or did not participate in it, 31 percent were hungry and 42 percent were at risk of hunger.
Of the 2,335 households with children under 12 interviewed in the CCHIP survey with incomes at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level, 32 percent were hungry. An additional 40 percent of these families were at risk of hunger, one step away from a chronic food shortage problem. Families that experienced hunger suffered from it for an average of seven days per month.

Of the families interviewed by CCHIP (with incomes at or below 185% of poverty), 65 percent had incomes below the poverty line ($12,700 for a family of four in 1990). Hungry households were much poorer than families categorized as non-hungry. The average incomes of the hungry households were nearly 25 percent below the poverty line. While hungry households spent nearly a third of their gross monthly income on food, they were able to spend an average of only 68 cents per person per meal.

Not only were their incomes low, but high shelter costs also consumed a large portion (an average of 54%) of their monthly gross income.

The share (percentage) of income spent on shelter averaged more than 60 percent for the poorest households (those with incomes below 100 percent of the poverty level). This share was substantially larger than the typical (or median income) American household, whose shelter expenses were 22 percent of their gross income in 1987. Thus, the portion of income spent on shelter was three times greater for the poor in these surveys than for the typical American family.

Food share, in this report, is the percent of income spent on food. Post-shelter income refers to the amount of income left over after shelter costs are paid. Food share includes the dollar value of WIC benefits and food stamp allotments for those households participating in each program. The poorest families spent a much higher percentage of their post-shelter income on food than families with higher incomes. Specifically, families with incomes below the poverty level spent, on average, 60 percent of their post-shelter income on food. Nonetheless, this amounted to an average of only $277 per month for food—just 68 cents per person per meal.

The Thrifty Food Plan is a market-basket list of foods developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as its lowest cost food plan. The plan is used in determining Food Stamp Program benefits designed to assist low-income families in purchasing a minimally adequate diet. Yet, the average poor family (with income at or below 100% of poverty) in the CCHIP surveys was able to spend only 77 percent of the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan on food even when using food stamps and WIC benefits.
Upon examining an average monthly budget — including income minus basic expenses — for poor families (with income at or below 100% of poverty) in all CCHIP surveys, we see how this translates into dollars and cents. After paying for shelter and food, poor families were left, on average, with only $185 a month. This remainder, which amounted to $39 per person per month, had to cover all other expenses — shoes, clothing, medical bills, bus fare, the phone bill, and other basic needs.

CCHIP survey results show that living below the poverty line places the family budget in a tight squeeze, forcing untenable choices among competing needs. It is clear that being poor adversely affects a family’s capacity to maintain a nutritionally adequate diet.

According to data from Pontiac, Michigan (where families with incomes above 185% of poverty were also interviewed), if all family incomes were at least twice (200% of) the poverty level, nearly 95 percent of households in this city would no longer be classified as hungry.

Hunger and employment status are strongly linked. Based on CCHIP survey results, unemployed households had three-fourths the average income of part-time employed households and just one half the income of full-time employed households. Unemployed households were one and one half times as likely to be hungry as full-time employed households.
Hunger hurts everybody. As a society, we cannot afford millions of hungry kids, their illness or their illiteracy.

New and creative thinking is needed in our efforts to alleviate hunger and poverty. Of vital importance is the achievement of Food Security — access by all people at all times through normal channels to enough nutritionally adequate food for an active healthy life. The long term solution lies in quality education and training; jobs with living wages; affordable and available housing, child care and health care; and adequate income support for those who need it.

But, kids can’t wait while adults debate.

Successful government programs are in place that, if fully implemented, can alleviate hunger in the United States. In light of the findings from CCHP, the following immediate policy objectives are recommended:

1. Ensure that all eligible, low-income women, infants and children receive assistance through the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

2. Increase the availability of the School Breakfast Program to low-income children across the country and encourage federal, state and local policies to ensure that the National School Lunch Program remains broadly accessible to all such children.

3. Expand the availability of meals for low-income children who are not in school through the Child and Adult Care Food Program and the Summer Food Service Program for Children.

4. Improve access to and benefits from the Food Stamp Program so that low-income families with children have enough to eat through each month.

*Millions of kids are hungry in America. There are solutions.*
The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is widely recognized as the leading national group working for more effective public policies to eradicate domestic hunger and malnutrition. Established in 1975, FRAC today uses a variety of strategies at the national, state, and local levels to bring about an end to hunger in the United States.

• FRAC produces information, training, and leadership to network hundreds of local groups across the country and is coordinating the Campaign to End Childhood Hunger in partnership with those groups.
• FRAC conducts in-depth research to measure the extent of hunger and its causes, as well as the availability of solutions.
• FRAC analyzes federal food assistance policy and serves as a watchdog of regulations and programs affecting the poor.
• FRAC disseminates accurate information on hunger for the news media, public policy makers, and the general public.

Contributions to FRAC are tax deductible to the extent permitted by law.

Photography by Joe Crudeli
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