



Hunger Hurts Everyone

A Look at Hunger's Effect on People

Hunger is defined as a physiological and psychological state resulting when immediate food needs are not met. The U.S. Department of Agriculture

(USDA) reported that 10.5 million households experienced food insecurity in 1998, and nearly 3.7 million of these experienced hunger.

The effects of hunger are both immediate and long-lasting. Hunger can begin to damage life before a child is even born. If a mother is poorly nourished during pregnancy, her health is compromised when important nutrients are depleted to provide for the baby. This depletion can lead to anemia and toxemia. Toxemia, a rapid increase in blood pressure and swelling of tissues due to fluid retention, can kill mother and child.

The babies born to poorly nourished mothers are often low birth weight babies, weighing under five and a half pounds. Low birth weight babies are thirty times more likely to die before they blow out the candle on their first birthday cake than are their normal birth weight counterparts. These small babies are at a greater risk for numerous problems, including infections and mental retardation. In Greenville County, South Carolina, 8.3% of all babies were born with low birth weight in 2001. More than 13% of African American babies were born with low birth weight.

The children who do live through the first year face difficult challenges. Investigators from Harvard Medical School and the National Institute of Mental Health wrote that these children: interacted less with other children their age, were more dependent on adults and were sadder and more unfriendly. They seemed to withdraw from their environment, which was later predicted to have a negative effect on later social and emotional development. In South Carolina, more often than most other states in the nation, babies don't live past their first year. Our infant mortality rate is 8.7 deaths per 1,000—shamefully earning the Palmetto State the 6th worst infant mortality rate in the nation.

Hungry children suffer from two to three as many individual health problems, such as unwanted weight loss, fatigue, headaches, irritability and frequent colds. In addition, John T. Cook, Ph.D. and Katie S. Martin of Tufts University School of Nutrition's Center on Hunger, Poverty & Nutrition Policy, wrote:

Inadequate food energy intake can cause problems with attention, concentration, learning and other important daily activities. For children who have not eaten breakfast, the educational value of a morning spent in the classroom may be lost. Repeated episodes of inadequate food energy intake can lead to cumulative deficits in learning, lower academic achievement, higher rates of school failure and even cognitive impairment.

In Greenville County, 12% of children are assessed "not ready for the First Grade." Nearly one-third of African-American boys and nearly one-fourth of African-American girls are deemed "not ready."

A number of studies have documented hunger's insidious presence in America. The Center on Hunger and Poverty gathered data from more than 50 studies conducted since 1998 in 22 states. They published findings from the compilation in *Hunger in the United States: A Summary of Recent Studies on Hunger and Emergency Food Demand*. The studies found:

- 13 million American children live in homes with limited or uncertain access to sufficient food. The majority of these children are white and have at least one working parent. Nearly half live in two-parent homes.
- Alarmingly, approximately 30% of black and Hispanic children and more than 40% of low-income children live in households that do not have access to nutritionally adequate diets for an active and healthy life.

It is no surprise that children who do not have enough to eat suffer poorer health than their adequately fed counterparts. Studies found:

- Pre-school and school-aged children who did not receive sufficient food had more frequent stomach-aches, headaches, colds, ear infections and other health problems.

- Hungry children under 12 were twice as likely to be anemic than non-hungry children in low-income households.

Hunger is detrimental to our society because hungry children display higher levels of aggression, hyperactivity and anxiety. They have more difficulty getting along with other children and they have an increased need for mental health services. Studies indicate:

- Hungry children have higher levels of destructive behavior. They are more withdrawn and have more distressed behavior compared to other children.
- Food-insufficient teenagers were more likely to report having no friends. Food insufficiency was associated with depressive disorders and suicidal behaviors for 15 and 16 year olds.
- Food-insufficient teenagers were more than twice as likely to have seen a psychologist.
- Food-insufficient teenagers were almost twice as likely to be suspended from school.

Hunger steals potential and robs children of their ability to perform well academically. Evidence indicates under-nutrition can limit a child's ability to grasp basic skills and diminish overall learning potential. Studies have revealed:

- Household food hardships were negatively related to certain test and achievement scores for elementary-aged children.
- Kindergartners from less food-secure households scored lower on math tests taken at the beginning of the school year and learned less throughout the year.
- Children from low-income, hungry households were more likely to experience fatigue and irritability and have difficulty concentration compared to other children.

Finally, the Food Research Action Center states:

Hunger, and insecurity about whether a family will be able to obtain enough food to avoid hunger, also have an emotional impact on children and their parents. Anxiety, negative feelings about self-worth and hostility towards the outside world can result from chronic hunger and food insecurity.

The Local Problem of Hunger

It's not a surprise that poverty and hunger go hand in hand. Low-educational achievement, unemployment and family status play a role in whether or not a family lives in poverty. The Census Bureau estimated child poverty in Greenville County to be 23% in 2001.

Single-parent families are most likely to be poor. In Greenville County, an increasing number of children are living in single-parent homes—26% of all children lived with only one parent in 2000 (16.7% of White children and 52.4% of African-American and Other children). More and more babies are being born to single mothers. In 2001, 15.3% of all babies were born to single mothers (8.8% of White children and 36.9% of African-American and Other children).

A parent's education strongly influences their children's success in school, and low educational achievement is a key indicator of success in life. Unfortunately, many babies are born to mothers who haven't even graduated from high school. In 2001, 19.9% of all babies were born to mothers of all ages who had not completed the 12th grade. In Greenville County, 26.4% of our children do not graduate from high school. This severely limits their economic well-being—and ultimately, their children's future.

According to the Community Food Bank of the Piedmont, hunger affects 175,000 people, including 60,000 children, in the Upstate of South Carolina. The truth is clear. Our neighbors are hungry and we must act to provide additional food resources to people in need or crisis.

1. Bickel, Gary, Carlson, Steven and Nord, Mark (July 1999). Household Food Security in the United States 1995-1998 (Advance Report). Alexandria, VA: Office of Analysis, Nutrition, and Evaluation. Food and Nutrition Service, USDA. Available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/FSP/FILES/foodsec98.pdf>
2. Physician Task Force on Hunger in America. *Hunger in America: The Growing Epidemic*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1985.
3. *Greenville County Kids Count 2003*. Annie Casey Foundation
4. National Education Association. *The Relationship Between Nutrition and Learning*. Washington, DC: NEA, 1989.
5. *Hunger in the United States*. Washington, DC. Food Research and Action Center, 1995.
6. *Differences in Nutrient Adequacy Among Poor and Non-Poor Children*. Tufts University School of Nutrition's Center on Hunger, Poverty & Nutrition Policy, March 1995.