This column started out to highlight hunger in American children. But one quickly finds that you cannot discuss hunger without its partner, poverty, since hunger is principally caused by poverty. We also discovered in 2006 the twenty-first century lexicon term of food insecurity. While hunger in the sense of “the uneasy or painful sensation caused by want of food” (Oxford English Dictionary 1971) is becoming more apparent to many, we are challenged by what many advocates call “an awful and embarrassing situation.” In the richest country in the world by gross domestic product, children live in households where they are unable to consistently access enough nutritious food necessary for a healthy life. Even short-term episodes of hunger can cause lasting child development damage. In 2011, staggering statistics include the following:

1. Fifty million Americans lived in food-insecure homes, 16.7 million are children.
2. Food insecurity exists in every county in America, ranging from a low of 2.4% in Slope County, North Dakota, to a high of 35.2% in Holmes County, Mississippi.
3. The top five states with the highest rate of food-insecure children under 18 are New Mexico (30.6%), the District of Columbia (30.0%), Arizona, Oregon, and Georgia. In addition, 20% or more of the child population in 37 states live in food-insecure households without consistent access to food.
4. Seven states have statistically significant higher household food insecurity rates than the U.S. national average of 14.7%. These include Mississippi, Alaska, Texas, Alabama, North Carolina, Georgia, and California, ranging from 19% to 16% plus (Goleman-Jensen, Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2012; Hunger & Poverty Statistics, 2013).
5. Nearly 14 million children are estimated to be served by Feeding America, over 3 million of which are ages 5 and under (feedingamerica.org, August 23, 2013).

We talk about global hunger and we see little children with extended tummies and sad eyes. But in Somerville, New Jersey, “[t]hat’s not what you’ll see—you’ll see sadness in the children’s eyes. That’s really the worst part for us,” said Marie Scannell, executive director of the Food Bank of Somerset County in New Jersey (Avila, 2011).

Poverty

Some call poverty a puzzle! Its pieces include twenty-first century economic and societal forces, like the collapse of the housing market and rampant job loss. Across the country, nearly 5.5 million children live in families that have lost homes to foreclosures, and eight million children live in families where at least one parent has lost a job, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2013 KIDS COUNT Data Book). Over 46 million Americans are currently poor, and the poverty rate among American children is now 22%. Poverty is invisible to many. In 2011, 46.2 million people (15%) were living in poverty—the largest number in the 52 years that poverty rates have been published (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). The American Academy of Pediatrics calls poverty one of the greatest threats to a child’s health. Studies have shown that even short episodes of hunger can cause lasting damage to child development, and risk of cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and physical problems.

Nationally, one in five children are living in poverty. It is mainly up to states to take care of feeding these children. Recently print media in two states, Arizona and Maryland, highlighted the child poverty issues. One in three children under the age of 18 in Tucson, Arizona, lives in poverty, while the overall state of Arizona rate is one in four. The percentage of children who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch in the Tucson Unified School District grew from 57% in 2006 to 71% in 2013 (Innes, August 4, 2013). In Maryland, there are currently 250,000 children going hungry each day. Families rely on federal food stamp programs, which face huge cuts from Congress according to an editorial by two outstanding concerned chefs. “We are in this fight to speak up for millions of kids and say Protect SNAP today!” (Ford & Kim, 2013). The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps Program) is viewed as a most powerful and effective anti-hunger program for 23 million children nationally.

Curtis Skinner, director of the Family Economic Security Program at the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University, emphasizes the importance of the safety net to vulnerable families: “The federal and state social ‘safety net’ has helped keep these millions of new poor from outright destitution during the recent Great Recession and its aftermath.” Since 2007, participation in the Medicaid public health insurance program has grown by 8.8 million. Participation has risen by more than 18 million in the food stamp program that helps support family food budgets. The number of low-income kids receiving free school lunches has risen by three million (Gundersen, Waxman, Englehart, Satoh, & Chawla, 2013).
International Poverty

More than 800 million people in the world are malnourished, 777 million of them are from the developing world.
1. Today, more than 200 million children are chronically malnourished.
2. Each day in the developing world, 30,100 children die from mostly preventable and treatable malnutrition.
3. The wealthiest fifth of the world’s people consumes an astonishing 86% of all goods and services, while the poorest fifth consumes 1%.
4. Of the six billion people in today’s world, 1.2 billion live on less than $1 per day.

The United Nations Millennium Development Goal #1 is to cut in half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger between 1990 and 2015. Progress on achieving this goal has stalled with the recent food price crises and the global economic recession. Thirty-six humanitarian organizations/agencies, from Action Against Hunger to World Vision, have action agendas versus hunger (Congressional Hunger Center [CHC], http://www.hungercenter.org/policy-advocacy/issues/, August 23, 2013). While there are numerous agencies concentrated on disastrous conditions around the world, especially hunger and poverty, American citizens need to take a parochial view and fix the problem here at home.

U.S. Legislation

Yes, the U.S. Congress passed the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act (Pub. L. 111-296) and President Obama signed it into law. It reauthorized the major child nutrition programs with improvements and expansions, for example, $.06 increases per school lunch with more fruits, vegetables, and whole grain products. While reauthorization had new requirements, as with many government mandates, there was no increased reimbursement for these meals. New also was the After School Supper Programs that are being piloted in 50 states. As barriers to foster children getting breakfast and lunch programs were lifted, advocacy agencies are pushing for the removal of barriers to summer meals programs as well (http://www.hungercenter.org/policy/issues/ August 23, 2013).

The CHC supports the Obama Administration’s goal of ending childhood hunger by 2015. CHC has joined other national anti-hunger organizations in providing recommendations for a Roadmap to End Childhood Hunger. During 2010–2011, many humanitarian organizations supported the Feed the Future Initiative. This document influenced the Obama Administration’s strategy to end global hunger by:

- Requesting strong U.S. bilateral and multilateral funding for agriculture, food security, and nutrition programs
- Ensuring public transparency about program activities so that the American people and Congress can support the results
- Educating Congress so the programs can be authorized
- Focus on protecting and strengthening the SNAP and implementing the 2010 Child Nutrition Reauthorization (Pub. L. 111-296) 

Newer efforts have been introduced in Congress as H.R.2822: The Bipartisan Global Food Security Act by Betty McCollum (D), Minnesota, to establish the U.S. comprehensive strategy for assistance to developing countries to achieve food and nutrition security, increase sustainable and equitable agricultural development, reduce hunger, improve nutrition, and develop rural infrastructure and stimulate rural economies. On July 25, 2013, the bill gained 14 cosponsors: Representatives Schock, McGovern, Clay, Rangel, Moore, Schakowsky, Rush, Garamendi, Honda, Moran, Polis, Kilmer, and Cohen. By authorizing a U.S. food security strategy that emphasizes long-term coordination and multisectoral integration of agriculture, nutrition, and resilience-building programs across all U.S. government agencies, the Global Food Security Act seeks to enhance U.S. leadership on food and nutrition security around the world and hopefully model changes here at home. Learn more about the bill at http://mccollum.house.gov/global-food-security-act-2013. As of July 25, 2013, it was referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Food security is the foundation of all other health, education, and economic development investments we make. We have the tools to end child hunger in our country, for example, Feeding America, SNAP, National School Lunch programs, etc. Strong child nutrition programs give a direct and immediate way to decrease child hunger. The goal of fewer children in poverty, and thus sliding into starvation, is not only the right thing to do but also gives the by-product of a better future for our country and is the smart thing to do. Fewer impoverished children means fewer high school dropouts, decreased crime, and more employed in good jobs. Going forward, advocates should view the six steps a future president could use to launch a strong effective fight against hunger and poverty in America (Berg & Freedman, August 23, 2013, http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org). Now is the time for all concerned citizens to act and keep an eye on proposed federal/state cuts. It cannot be stated too often or too loudly that food is a basic foundation of economic development and sound health. A hungry world will never be a secure world, and it can never be a just world, especially for those too young to voice their pleas for food.
Hunger-focused web sites:
www.bread.org/hunger/us-poverty-solutions/federal-nutrition-programs.html
http://www.nationalantihunger.org/
http://www.snap.org/

Sally Raphel, MS, APRN-PMH, FAAN
Consultant Child Mental Health Policy
Faculty Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing
Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Author contact:
smrraphel@gmail.com, with a copy to the Editor:
kathleen_r_delaney@rush.edu

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