



Hunger in the United States

by Denise O'Brien

One of the most disturbing and extraordinary aspects of life in this very wealthy country is the persistence of hunger. In 2006, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) eliminated references to hunger, utilising, instead, various categories of food insecurity. This did not represent a change in what was measured.

Banking Burden.

A food bank has been serving more and more Americans, especially with the financial crisis. Although donations to food banks have increased by 18 %, the demand has grown to 25 to 40 %.

Photo from Wikimedia Commons

Very low food insecurity (described as “food insecurity with hunger” prior to 2006) means that, at times during the year, the food intake of household members was reduced and their normal eating patterns were disrupted because the household lacked money and other resources for food.

This means that people were hungry, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “the uneasy or painful sensation caused by want of food,” for days each year.

Although hunger in the US is less dire than in developing nations, it is nonetheless quite

serious. Starvation is rare here, but malnourishment is not.

According to the Food Research and Action Center, 36.2 million people lived in households considered to be food insecure in 2007. Of these 36.2 million:

- 23.8 million are adults (10.6% of all adults) and 12.4 million are children (16.9% of all children).
- The number of people in the worst-off households increased to 11.9 million from 10.8 in 2005. This is consistent with other studies and the Census Bureau poverty data, which show worsening conditions for the poorest Americans.
- Black (22.2%) and Hispanic (20.1%) households experienced food insecurity at far higher rates than the national average. These are households headed by a single woman or have incomes below the official poverty line. The food insecurity rate for families with children is double that for adults—15.8 per cent compared to 8.7 per cent.

The concentration of households with the highest food insecurity rates in 2007 were Mississippi, New Mexico, Texas, Arkansas, Maine, South Carolina, Georgia, Kansas, Oklahoma and Missouri. These hungry Americans are more likely to be in cities and live in the Midwest and South.

Use of Emergency Food Assistance and Federal Food Assistance Programmes

There are federal and state programmes that work with families who are poor and food insecure. In 2007, 53.9 per cent of food insecure households received help from at least one of the three major federal food programmes, which are implemented by the USDA — Food Stamps, the National School Lunch Programme and the Special

Supplemental Nutrition Programme for Women, Infants and Children.

- 49 per cent of food stamp recipients are children.
- 51 per cent of client households with children under the age of three participated in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children.
- During the 2007 federal fiscal year, 17.9 million or 62 per cent of all client households with children under the age of 18 participated in a school lunch programme, but only 13 per cent—just under 2 million—participated in a summer feeding programme that provides free food when school is out.

There is a back-up system in the US in ensuring that the hungry would have food. Nearly 3.3 per cent of all households (3.8 million) received help from a food pantry or food bank at least once in 2007. Some of these programmes receive government support but many food pantries and food banks in rural areas rely on the generosity of the general public to remain open.

Spending for government nutrition programmes has for decades lagged far behind the need. Meanwhile, Congress generally responds to increased demand by tightening the eligibility for assistance.

Food banks are a treasured source of aid for millions of needy Americans, but they increasingly face shortfalls in supplies and their ability to help. Nationally, donations are up about 18 per cent but demand has grown to 25 to 40 per cent. As fuel costs increase, food stores stock fewer inventories to reduce shipping costs, thus making them less available to contribute to food banks. Food producers are also cutting inventory with like results while government surplus programmes make far less food available than they did in years past.





Heirloom tomatoes from the gardens of Rochester Roots.

Referred to as heirloom varieties, these produce come from seeds passed on from one generation to another, uncontaminated by fertilisers and inorganic substances.

Photos courtesy of Jan McDonald, Rochester Roots.

Sadly, this results in the nation's food banks having less resource in carrying on their charitable work of combating hunger, even as the demand for their help increases. Feeding America, formerly America's Second Harvest, has a network of 206 food banks. About 70 per cent of new clients are making their first visit to a food bank and many are working at jobs:

- Among members of Feeding America, 65 per cent of pantries, 61 per cent of kitchens, and 52 per cent of shelters reported that there had been an increase since 2001 in the number of clients who come to their emergency food programme sites.
- More than nine million children are estimated to be served by Feeding America. Over 2 million of them are children under five. These more than nine million children represent nearly 13 per cent of all children under age 18 in the US and over 72 per cent of them live in poverty.
- 3.4 per cent of all US households (3.9 million households) accessed emergency food from a food pantry one or more times in 2007.
- In the same year, food insecure households were 17 times more likely than food secure households to have obtained food from a food pantry.
- Food insecure households were 19 times more likely than food-secure households to have eaten a meal at an emergency kitchen in 2007.
- Feeding America provides emergency food assistance to an estimated 25 million low-income people annually, an eight per cent increase from 23 million since Hunger In America 2001.
- Feeding America provides emergency food assistance to approximately 4.5 million different people in any given week.

While work on the Farm Bill is finished, there are other legislative opportunities for addressing hunger, primarily in the US. Child Nutrition Programmes, including the school breakfast and lunch programmes and programmes for women, infants and children will expire soon and must be reauthorised in 2009.

NGO Response to Hunger

Many non-profit organisations are working together to make sure that there are new programmes that address the issue of hunger as well as adequate funding in order to carry out those programmes.

It has been proven that children and low income families are not getting the nutrition that leads to a healthy lifestyle. Many foods that are consumed are high in sodium and high-fructose corn syrup, causing high blood pressure and obesity.

In all of this dire news of hunger and malnutrition, there are a number of bright spots where community-based organisations are creating programmes and activities that help eliminate hunger. Many of these organisations operate under these principles:

- **Community food security** includes a comprehensive strategy to address many of the ills affecting our society and environment due to an unsustainable and unjust food system.
- **Community focus** A community-food-security approach builds the community's food resources to meet the community's own needs. Resources may include supermarkets, farmers' markets, gardens, transportation, community-based food-processing ventures and urban farms.
- **Self-reliance and empowerment** Community food security projects build the abilities of people to provide for their food needs. Community food security

builds upon community and individual assets instead of focusing on deficiencies. Community-food-security approaches engage community residents in all phases of project planning, implementation and evaluation.

- **Local agriculture** Stable local agricultural is the key to a community-responsive food system. Farmers need more access to markets that pay them a decent price for the results of their labour. And farmland needs land-use planning to protect it from suburban development. By building stronger ties between farmers and consumers, consumers gain a greater knowledge of and appreciation for their food source.
- **Systems-oriented** Community food security programmes are typically inter-disciplinary. They cross many boundaries and incorporate collaborations with multiple organisations.

There are over 70 million gardeners in the US and about 25 million people who are chronically hungry, including 9.9 million children.

Plant a Row for the Hungry encourages gardeners to plant an extra row, and donate the produce to local food banks and community service agencies. There is no organisation that oversees this programme but it has taken hold in the US where people are growing food to feed their communities.

In Wisconsin, the Kane Street Community Garden, a part of the Hunger Task Force of La Crosse, aims to eliminate hunger within and by the community. Volunteers plant and harvest the many crops that grow in the nearly two-acre garden. What is not handed out to the public and volunteers are added to the Food Recovery Programme, which goes out to any of the 42 agencies served by the Hunger Task Force.

Also in Wisconsin is Growing Power, a national non-profit organisation and land trust that supports people from diverse backgrounds and the environments where they live by helping to provide equal access to healthy, high-quality, safe and affordable food for people in all communities.

Growing Power implements this mission by providing hands-on training, on-the-ground demonstration, outreach and technical assistance through the development of community food systems that help people grow, process, market and distribute food in a sustainable manner.

Growing Power is a global model for sustainable community food systems, having done outreach trainings in Macedonia, Ukraine, Tennessee, London, Arkansas and

US Farm Bill

The Farm Bill is a comprehensive legislation on agriculture in the United States. Annually reviewed and ratified, the bill sets the government's subsidies to farmers, especially agri-businesses among others. Despite the inconsistency of these subsidies with the rules of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the threat of a veto from then US President George W. Bush, the strong lobbying in Congress managed to reinstate these subsidies.

As US Department of Agriculture Secretary Edward Shafer said, "Today, the United States House and Senate announced the completion of a farm bill that unfortunately fails to include much needed reform and increases spending by nearly \$20 billion."

Estimated to cost the government US\$289 billion in the next five years, the Farm Bill of 2008 earmarked US\$200 billion for domestic food aid; US\$43 billion for subsidies for rice, cotton, corn, soybeans, wheat and other crops; US\$27 billion for conservation programmes; and US\$23 billion for crop insurance.

Sources: Khor, Martin. (19 May 2008). "New US farm bill will anger the world." URL: <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title2/gtrends/gtrends206.htm>; Ryan, Missy. (12 May 2008). "U.S. farm bill could run afoul of global trade rules." URL: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/05/12/business/farm.php>; The Farm Bill of 2008 webpage of the USDA, <http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/farmbill2008?navid=FARMBILL2008>

Budding Bounty

Rochester Roots is among the alternative community-based programmes in the United States. It collaborates with public schools where children are encouraged to tend the gardens especially during summer and taught organic farming, among others. In this photo, three young girls are watering the Clara Barton School Garden.

Photo courtesy of Jan McDonald, Rochester Roots.



other places. Their Farm-City Market Basket (FCMB) Programme is a year-round food security programme that supplies safe, healthy and affordable vegetables and fruit to communities at a low cost. FCMB provides a market for small farmers to sell their food while feeding communities in “food deserts” affordable healthy food.

In New York, Rochester Roots develops self-reliance by providing the education and tools that help low-income people obtain nutritious and locally grown food through the development and marketing of urban produce and products. They strive to achieve this vision through their participation in the local food system and through education and advocacy.

Sharing the Harvest is a programme in which produce is distributed to participating low-income youth and neighbouring residents so

that they feed their families, or for educational purposes in the classroom.

Through their South Wedge Farmers Market, Rochester Roots engages in entrepreneurial activities with vendors, youth and seniors. Rochester Roots also teaches the community how to cook produce into nutritious meals in their Community Kitchen Cooking Class programme and offers teenagers the opportunity to intern with local chefs.

Meanwhile, the Brooklyn Rescue Mission Inc. (BRM) is a community-based organisation in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, New York that develops creative solutions to food justice, community health and the economic challenges their community endures on a daily basis. Its programmes include the Bed-Stuy Farm, the Neighbourhood Farming Institute, the Food Outreach Programmes

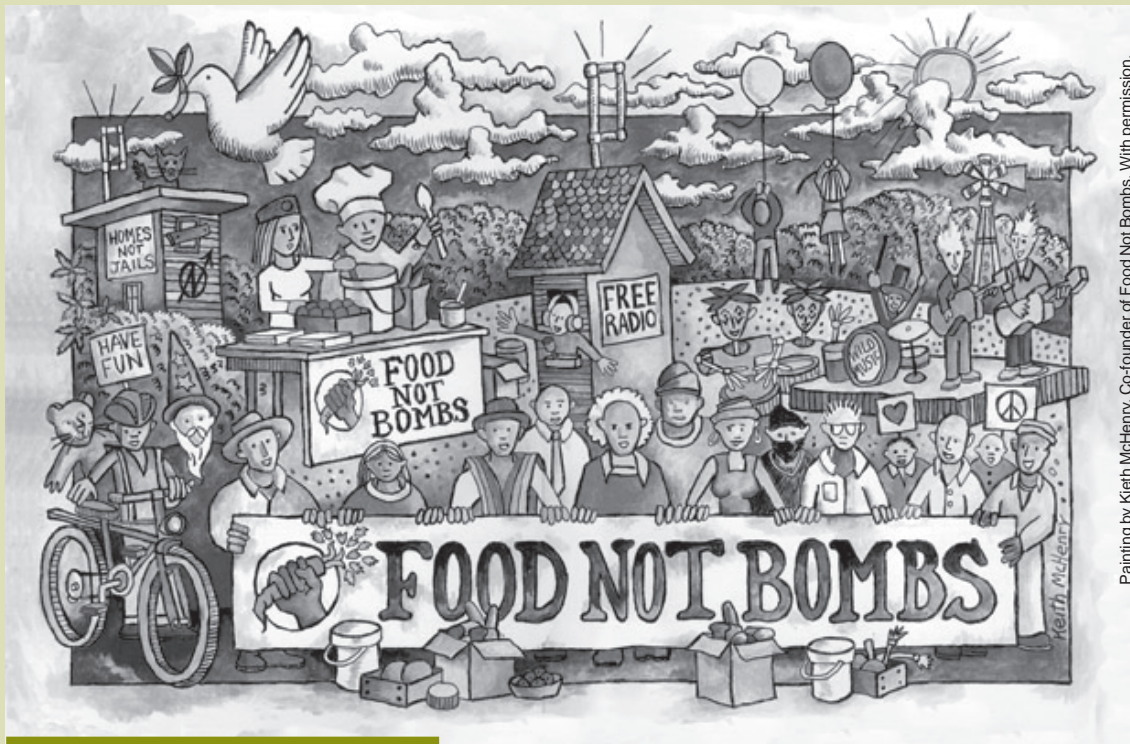
and the Malcolm X Boulevard Community Farmers Market.

In 2007, the Bed-Stuy Farm yielded 7,000 pounds of fresh organic produce, which was distributed to families at risk of hunger through BRM's emergency food programmes. Community education programmes are held at the Farm. These include topics such as nutrition and urban agriculture, entrepreneurship and leadership skills.

Their Neighborhood Farming Institute is a classroom and community center focused

on the Farm while the Food Outreach programme provides weekly food pantry services. BRM also runs the Malcolm X Boulevard Community Farmers Market. ■

Denise O'Brien has been an organic farmer and farm activist for over 30 years. She and her husband ran a dairy farm for 20 of those 30 years. During that time, Denise became interested in agriculture policy that promotes the family farm. She helped start several progressive programs to fight corporate influence in farming. In the 1990's she launched the Women, Food and Agriculture Network — an organisation that supports women in farming.



Painting by Keith McHenry, Co-founder of Food Not Bombs. With permission.

Food Not Bombs

Food Not Bombs is a movement that promotes the distribution of food and other resources over other spending priorities such as warfare. Formed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States by anti-nuclear activists in 1980, Food Not Bombs has been growing, expanding its advocacies as well as bases. While serving communities especially during disasters and tragedies such as September 11 events, the Asian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and also protesters during rallies, Food Not Bombs has also been opposing neoliberal capitalism which has resulted in the current food and financial crises.

Source: <http://www.foodnotbombs.net/story.html>