



Thanksgiving for All Americans

Congress Must Act to End Child Hunger by 2015 and Cut Poverty in Half in the Coming Decade

Melissa Boteach and Jim Weill November 25, 2009

Introduction

As American families sit down for Thanksgiving this year, many will reflect somberly on the economic changes that have passed since last year's family gathering. While 2008's financial crisis precipitated worried conversations last year around many Thanksgiving tables, this year's double-digit unemployment will no doubt be the subject of many a more deeply anxious discussion after the children have gone to bed.

Some will be worried about whether or not their unemployment benefits will run out before they can find another job. Others worry that this will be their last Thanksgiving celebrated in their family home before they go into foreclosure. And rather than giving food to the local food pantry as they've done on prior Thanksgivings, many families will be relying on the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program for food stamp benefits for the first time to make ends meet—or even standing in line at the food pantry themselves.

Even those who used to dismiss poverty and hunger as problems just for people who live on the margins of our society can no longer pigeonhole the problems that way when there is only one job available for every six people looking and many food stamp recipients are working full-time and still not earning enough to consistently provide healthy meals for their families. We must all recognize that hunger and poverty are problems in all geographic areas, all demographic groups, and problems that society must address broadly.

The \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act passed by Congress earlier this year clearly led to stronger economic growth than we would have seen otherwise, but we must take further action to tackle the inter-related problems of unemployment, poverty and hunger. When campaigning for the presidency, Barack Obama set two inter-related goals: ending child hunger by 2015 and cutting poverty in half in ten years. As the

Great Recession gives way slowly and tentatively to renewed economic growth, President Obama and Congress can take several immediate actions to spur job creation and provide relief to those families least likely to benefit first from an economic recovery and which are struggling today against hunger. These same measures can lay a solid foundation for the realization of these ambitious, but achievable targets of ending child hunger and cutting poverty in half in the coming decade.

This memo reviews the latest data on poverty and food insecurity in the United States, describes the utility of national targets to tackle these issues, and makes the case that Congress and the President must act immediately by investing in nutrition assistance as well as a job-creation strategy that lifts up all Americans.

Hunger in America

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's recent [release of the 2008 food insecurity data](#) was a wake-up call for the nation. The report revealed that one in six Americans—49.1 million people—lived in households last year that struggled against hunger, up from 36.2 million in 2007. The number of individuals in the worst-off category—those in households with very low food security—rose at the fastest rate, jumping to 17.3 million in 2008 from 11.9 million in 2007. In the depths of the recession this year, the chances of an improved hunger outlook are dim in 2009.

Food insecurity—or being unable to afford an adequate diet—was especially prevalent among African-American and Latino households, female-headed households, and children. Food insecurity affected 14.6 percent of households overall in 2008, but that portion was 25.7 percent for blacks, 26.9 percent for Hispanics, 37.2 percent for single mothers, and 39.9 percent for children in families headed by a single mom. And the situation almost certainly didn't improve this year.

Nearly one in four children—22.5 percent—lived in households experiencing food insecurity for lack of resources in 2008. This is an experience that will follow them throughout their lives, damaging their performance in school and ultimately their productivity at work. In 2009, when many Americans are concerned about the federal budget deficit, it's important to remember that experts estimate that child poverty alone [costs society](#) \$500 billion a year—or 4 percent of the gross domestic product—in lost productivity, increased health care costs, and expenditures in the criminal justice system.

Allowing hunger and poverty—especially among our children—to continue unabated is neither fiscally prudent nor morally palatable. What's more, these numbers do not even incorporate the unemployment and underemployment data from 2009, when the economy is experiencing the highest jobless rate in 26 years. The USDA numbers released before next Thanksgiving will tell that story, but we cannot wait another year to act.

Ending child hunger by 2015 and cutting poverty in half in 10 years

Then-candidate Barack Obama pledged during his presidential campaign to end child hunger by 2015 and cut poverty in half in 10 years. President Obama reiterated his 2015 commitment in his budget request to Congress, requesting an additional \$1 billion a year for Child Nutrition programs and proposing a number of initiatives to improve support for low- and middle-income Americans vulnerable to hunger. The USDA also is holding hearings and collecting ideas for how to achieve this goal.

The president accomplishes several things by setting a target. First, he transforms the debate by declaring that hunger can be solved if we muster the political will to address it. Second, he breaks down silos across government agencies and engages the private sector and ordinary citizens by focusing everyone on a shared target. Finally, he promotes accountability by offering a deadline by which the federal government will be held responsible for certain outcomes.

Targets are more achievable if we can pinpoint the cause of the problem and identify specific solutions to achieve the goal. In the case of hunger, the problem is not because we produce too little food in the United States to feed all families. It is caused by a lack of access to food, primarily a symptom of a broader problem: poverty.

Indeed, the recently released USDA data are not as surprising in light of the 2008 poverty data released by the Census Bureau in September of this year, which showed that poverty climbed to 13.2 percent in 2008 from 12.5 percent in 2007. That means 39.8 million people were poor in 2008, the highest number since 1960. The 2009 data released next September are expected to be dramatically worse due to this past year's rising unemployment rates. Unemployment averaged 5.8 percent in 2008, but the average rate is expected to top 9 percent in 2009. And this year's poverty data are expected to show that one in four children is poor.

That's why it's critical as poverty rates increase that we take steps toward implementing the president's campaign pledges of ending child hunger by 2015 and cutting poverty in half in 10 years.

Policy recommendations

Any approach to root out hunger must include not only improvements to nutrition assistance programs but also a broader strategy to tackle poverty head-on and create decent-wage jobs.

Center for American Progress—one of the partners of the Half in Ten Campaign—and the Food Research and Action Center have released blueprints to meet President Obama's

hunger and poverty goals. There are many intersections between our approaches, including an emphasis on creating decent jobs and promoting economic security.

We also agree on immediate and specific action steps that Congress can take this year and early next year to begin addressing some of the suffering behind the troubling new hunger statistics for 2008. The recommendations include policies to tackle hunger directly by investing in programs that provide access to nutritious food and policies to alleviate hunger by addressing poverty and unemployment, its root causes.

Nutrition policy recommendations—first steps

- **Strengthen the food stamp program—which is officially called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—as well as income supports for low-income working families.** The food stamp program is the nation’s most important direct defense against hunger and can do the most to directly eliminate childhood hunger. The program is fundamentally strong, but needs to be bolstered by making permanent the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act’s improvements to the program and then building on them so that benefits are adequate for a healthy diet. The monthly allotment should be enough to purchase the government’s “low cost food plan”—a basic diet that’s adequate to sustain health. Congress should also make permanent the currently temporary improvements in refundable tax credits for working families, and then build upon these most recent reforms.
- **Strengthen child nutrition programs.** Congress will soon be reauthorizing child nutrition programs, and should include the following policies to improve access to nutritious foods for low-income children:
 - **Expand the Afterschool Meal Program to all 50 states.** Only 13 states and the District of Columbia can currently receive federal funds to operate a pilot Afterschool Meal Program, which allows afterschool programs to serve a meal to children in their care. Providing all states with the resources to operate this sound investment would ensure that children in low-income communities in every state have access to meals after school while parents work and commute long or nontraditional hours.
 - **Invest in the Summer Nutrition Programs by providing funding for start-up, outreach, and transportation grants.** The [Summer Nutrition Programs](#) are critically important for low-income children, but they serve only one in six of the low-income children who rely on school lunch during the school year. The low participation rate is not an accident. The Summer Nutrition Programs suffered a series of critical legislative blows over the years that have decreased the number of sponsors and sites, resulting in fewer low-income children having access to nutritious summer meals. Making strategic investments in the Summer Nutrition Programs will lead to greater participation by low-income children.

- **Improve the area eligibility test so more communities can operate afterschool, summer, and child care food programs.** The federal afterschool, summer nutrition, and child care food programs allow participating sites such as schools, community centers, and child care facilities to receive funds for meals and snacks based on area income criteria. Fifty percent of the children in an area must be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals for the site to meet the area eligibility test. It was at 33 percent in summer food until conservative budget cuts reduced the program’s reach; and other government afterschool funding streams have a 40 percent cut-off. The “area eligibility” test is very effective in simplifying administrative requirements, but too high a cut-off keeps programs in many communities with very significant numbers of low-income children from qualifying. The 50 percent threshold should be lowered to 40 percent to increase significantly the geographic areas where these successful programs could serve low-income children. All states would see a significant increase in the number of low and moderate income communities where kids can access healthy food.
- **Improve low-income children’s access to school breakfast by funding initiatives to serve breakfast in the classroom and by easing the application process for families and schools.** The benefits of breakfast are well documented, but too many children miss out. Serving breakfast in the classroom is a strategy that’s proven to boost participation in the School Breakfast Program. Congress can support this effort by creating a grant program to provide funds to schools that serve many low-income children. The application process also could be made easier for families and schools. Promoting and expanding the use of direct certification—a process that shares data between state agencies to identify eligible children—reduces paperwork and ensures that more children are connected to the program.

Job-creation and economic security recommendations

High unemployment is one of the leading causes of greater hunger this holiday season. To tackle hunger, we must continue to move forward on a strategy to create decent-wage jobs and ensure that low-income workers have the opportunity to access them. That is why our organizations support the consensus job-creation principles developed by Half in Ten partner, The Coalition on Human Needs. The following policies—developed and/or championed by Half in Ten partners and allied organizations—will promote economic security and help create or save jobs that lift up all Americans.

The first goal should be to ensure that those directly affected by unemployment are able to access the benefits they need to get through tough economic times. This is good for these families, as well as the economy overall. Providing benefits to the unemployed creates a larger stimulus effect, compared to almost all other policy options.

- **Extend unemployment benefits and health insurance benefits for those out of work through the end of 2010.** Recent analysis from the Center for American Progress underscored that unemployment remains a significant problem, particularly among the most vulnerable. In addition, the unemployed are remaining jobless for longer and longer periods, as poverty continues to rise. Analysis by the National Employment Law Project shows that in January 1.1 million workers will lose access to unemployment benefits if Congress does not extend them. Congress should extend the jobless benefits and so called COBRA benefits—which allows workers to maintain health coverage if they are unemployed or between jobs—in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act through the end of 2010. This will not only help the unemployed, but will also help spur economic demand.
- **Increase administrative funding for food stamps.** More and more struggling families that have lost jobs or face reduced hours of work or wages are signing up for food stamps to make ends meet, but there are not enough caseworkers to administer the program on the ground. States are cutting back or furloughing their workforces. People are waiting well beyond the 30 days within which states are supposed to process a food stamp application for enrollment in the program. Congress could meet these needs while creating jobs by investing additional funds in the administration of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP food stamps. The federal funds could help states hire local workers to deal with increased applications, which in turn would further create demand in the economy by giving people the resources they need to purchase food. In fact, according to economist Mark Zandi, every dollar invested in food stamps creates \$1.73 in increased economic activity.

Beyond helping those directly affected by high unemployment, Congress needs to act to ensure that the nascent recovery takes hold and begins to quickly generate new jobs for the nearly 16 million unemployed workers who need them. There are a variety of ways to do this, and the best ideas create or save jobs as quickly as possible:

- **Provide additional aid to states.** At least 42 states and the District of Columbia are making cuts in services that meet critical human needs, including health care, education, and services for the elderly and disabled. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act was a critical step in slowing state and local job losses and mitigating cutbacks in services, but there are still enormous budget gaps. Additional aid to state and local governments would immediately and directly boost employment, preserve critical services in the midst of rising poverty, and save education jobs—an investment that will have effects far beyond the current economic outlook.
- **Invest directly in public-sector job creation.** The Community Infrastructure Program, developed by the Center for Community Change, would create 1 million new jobs that meet community needs while providing jobs and developing skills for low-income workers. The program would provide resources to local governments to create jobs in

the public and non-profit sector, as well as small business that provide public services. Jobs would be subject to non-displacement requirements, which would ensure that new hires would not displace existing workers doing similar work. The jobs would address community needs such as improving infrastructure, providing child care and education, engaging disconnected youth, and cleaning up the environment. The program would be authorized over three years, with a limited set of eligible activities in the first six to nine months so as to create jobs as quickly as possible.

- **Strategic investments in national service to tackle youth unemployment and strengthen non-profits' capacity to meet growing need as poverty and hunger rates skyrocket.** Federal investments in our national service programs are an important way for Congress and the Obama administration to tackle high unemployment and growing poverty across the nation. National service provides a three-fold return on investment. First, it offers short-term employment opportunities for jobless youth. Second, it helps to build the capacity of nonprofit organizations to address growing hunger and poverty. And third, it transforms participants' long-term career prospects. [Recent work by CAP and Half in Ten](#) describes several national service programs—including Youth Corps, AmeriCorps, and the VISTA program—that together could create 100,000 new jobs over the next two years.
- **Other job-creation policies.** [Several initiatives proposed by the Center for Law and Social Policy](#) target people with the lowest skills and work experience. These include transitional jobs, on-the-job training, and extending authorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families emergency fund through 2012 to provide for subsidized jobs and cash assistance for very low-income parents.

Conclusion

Make reducing hunger and poverty a central goal of economic recovery

It's not a coincidence that Half in Ten and FRAC are coming together on policy recommendations to address growing hunger and poverty in America. Similar policies will be needed to end child hunger by 2015 and cut poverty in half in 10 years between 2010 and 2020. Our organizations also know that the fight to reduce hunger and poverty requires the focus and accountability that goal-setting inspires.

Recent economic history teaches us that there is no automatic link between economic recovery and gains for workers and reductions in poverty. Between 2001 and 2007 median income went down and poverty rates when up even as the economy was growing. We cannot afford another recovery that leaves low-and moderate-income Americans behind and struggling.

Yet history also has refuted the myth that poverty and hunger are intractable and proven that with a national commitment we can make significant strides in growing America's middle class. Poverty in the United States fell by more than 40 percent between 1964 and 1973. And it fell by 25 percent between 1993 and 2000. Economic gains were more equitably shared during these periods, and a strong economy was combined with government and private-sector initiatives to lift up all Americans.

Congress and the Obama administration can tackle growing hunger, poverty and unemployment urgently over the coming weeks and months by investing in nutrition programs and creating jobs that meet needs in our communities and that can be filled by the very same people who were left behind in the last economic recovery. We must work hard between now and next Thanksgiving to ensure that the steps we take to rebuild our economy are steps that will promote a shared recovery and put us on a path to achieving these goals.

*Melissa Boteach is the Half in Ten manager at the Center for American Progress Action Fund.
Jim Weill is the president of the Food Research and Action Center.*