



Hunger in America

Suffering We All Pay For

By Donald S. Shepard, Elizabeth Setren, and Donna Cooper October 2011

Introduction and summary

The Great Recession and the currently tepid economic recovery swelled the ranks of American households confronting hunger and food insecurity by 30 percent. In 2010 48.8 million Americans lived in food insecure households, meaning they were hungry or faced food insecurity at some point during the year. That's 12 million more people than faced hunger in 2007, before the recession, and represents 16.1 percent of the U.S. population.¹

Yet hunger is not readily seen in America. We see neither newscasts showing small American children with distended bellies nor legions of thin, frail people lined up at soup kitchens. That's primarily because the expansion of the critical federal nutrition assistance program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, helped many families meet some of their household food needs.

But in spite of the increase in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program funding, many families still have to make tough choices between a meal and paying for other basic necessities. In 2010 nearly half of the households seeking emergency food assistance reported having to choose between paying for utilities or heating fuel and food. Nearly 40 percent said they had to choose between paying for rent or a mortgage and food. More than a third reported having to choose between their medical bills and food.²

What's more, the research in this paper shows that hunger costs our nation at least \$167.5 billion due to the combination of lost economic productivity per year, more expensive public education because of the rising costs of poor education outcomes, avoidable health care costs, and the cost of charity to keep families fed. This \$167.5 billion does not include the cost of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the other key federal nutrition programs, which run at about \$94 billion a year.³

We call this \$167.5 billion America's hunger bill. In 2010 it cost every citizen \$542 due to the far-reaching consequences of hunger in our nation. At the household

level the hunger bill came to at least \$1,410 in 2010. And because our \$167.5 billion estimate is based on a cautious methodology, the actual cost of hunger and food insecurity to our nation is probably higher.

This report also estimates the state-by-state impact of the rising hunger bill from 2007 through 2010. Fifteen states experienced a nearly 40 percent increase in their hunger bill compared to the national increase of 33.4 percent. The sharpest increases in the cost of hunger are estimated to have occurred in Florida (61.9 percent), California (47.2 percent), and Maryland (44.2 percent).

Our research in this report builds upon and updates a 2007 report principally sponsored by the Sodexo Foundation and written by Brandeis University Professor Donald Shepard, the principal author of this report; Larry Brown, who was then on the faculty at of the Harvard School of Public Health; and Timothy Martin and John Orwat from Brandeis University.⁴ That initial report, “The Economic Costs of Domestic Hunger,” was the first to calculate the direct and indirect cost of adverse health, education, and economic productivity outcomes associated with hunger. This study extends the 2007 study, examining the recession’s impact on hunger and the societal costs to our nation and to each of the 50 states in 2007 and 2010. It also provides the first estimate of how much hunger contributes to the cost of special education, which we found to be at least \$6.4 billion in 2010.

The 2007 report estimated America’s hunger bill to be \$90 billion in 2005, sharply lower than the \$167.5 billion bill in 2010. In the pages that follow, we will describe how we calculated our nation’s annual hunger bill. We then argue that any policy solutions to address the consequences of hunger in America should consider these economic calculations. The reason: We believe our procedures for expressing the consequences of this social problem in economic terms help policymakers gauge the magnitude of the problem and the economic benefits of potential solutions.

In this paper we do not make specific policy proposals beyond adopting our methodology for calculating hunger in America, but we do point out that expanding the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to all food insecure households could cost about \$83 billion a year. While we do not recommend this approach, we note that nonetheless it would cost the nation much less than the most recent hunger bill in 2010 of \$167.5 billion.

There are other policy approaches that also could achieve sustained reduction in hunger and food insecurity—approaches that rely on a mix of federal policies to

boost the wages of the lowest-wage earners, increase access to full-time employment, and modestly expand federal nutrition programs. These policies are consistent with the variables used to allocate federal nutrition funding to states under The Emergency Food Assistance Program. In using the state's poverty and unemployment rates, this program recognizes that improved economic conditions reduce hunger and the need for emergency support.

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