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How President Obama Can Reverse America's Worsening Hunger Metrics

Joel Berg February 2013

Center for American Progress



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“We have long thought of America as the most bounteous of nations...That hunger and malnutrition should persist in a land such as ours is embarrassing and intolerable. More is at stake here than the health and well being of [millions of] American children. ... Something like the very honor of American democracy is involved.”

*President Richard Nixon, May 6, 1969, Special Message to Congress
Recommending a Program to End Hunger in America¹*

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Introduction and summary

Domestic hunger, poverty, food insecurity—and, as a result, the use of supplemental nutrition assistance—all soared under the presidency of George W. Bush. In October 2008 then-candidate Barack Obama pledged to end childhood hunger in the United States by 2015 as a down payment on ending all domestic hunger.² At the time he made that pledge, however, he was unaware of the full extent of the economic downturn that he would inherit upon taking office, as well as the extent to which conservatives in Congress would—despite their embrace of corporate welfare—consistently and harshly oppose government efforts to fight hunger.

During the first three years of the Obama administration, the number of children in food-insecure households remained at the very high level of nearly 17 million.³ Although the Obama administration's actions to boost benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, and improve access to other nutrition programs greatly mitigated the extent to which families struggled against hunger,⁴ we are no closer to meeting his goal to end childhood hunger by 2015 than we were four years ago—and we are far further away than we were in 2001, when 4 million fewer children lived in food-insecure homes.⁵

Moreover, food insecurity and hunger are on the flip side of the same malnutrition coin as obesity because healthier food is more expensive and less available in low-income neighborhoods than unhealthy foods. These joint problems harm the U.S. economy, hinder educational advancement, and increase health care spending.

In order to end childhood hunger in the United States, the president and Congress must work together to ensure a full-employment economy with sufficient living-wage jobs available in all low-income rural, suburban, and urban areas nationwide, as well as ensure that federal nutrition benefits are able to sustain families for a full month and that more working families are able to access them.

The president and his administration can take the following executive actions now to significantly reduce child hunger, as well as U.S. hunger in general:

- Sign an executive order directing key federal agencies to create food-related jobs and provide job training and placement services to ensure that low-income Americans are able to obtain and keep those jobs.
- Sign an executive order directing all federal agencies to aid the Department of Agriculture in increasing the participation of eligible children, seniors, people with disabilities, veterans, and working families in federally funded nutrition programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, senior aggregate and home-delivered meals, school breakfasts, and summer meals.
- Direct federal agencies to do more work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to expand urban agriculture and fitness opportunities on both federally owned and federally funded land.
- Host a bipartisan White House Conference on Hunger, either as a standalone event or as part of a broader conference on poverty.
- Lead a public service announcement campaign that features prominent Americans who have personally benefited from federal nutrition support.
- Create a Dole-McGovern White House Prize, which would be awarded to citizens for extraordinary service in fighting domestic hunger.
- Issue a “Call to Commitments” that challenges corporations, nonprofit groups, religious organizations, and state, local, and tribal governments to make formal commitments to reduce hunger and obesity.
- Promote long-term, skills-based volunteer activities to fight hunger and obesity.
- Appoint a public and/or private taskforce to implement and coordinate all of the above.

In his second Inaugural Address, President Obama placed a powerful marker on the need to reduce U.S. poverty, saying:

Together, we resolved that a great nation must care for the vulnerable, and protect its people from life's worst hazards and misfortune. ... We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else.

Not only does childhood hunger inflict great hardship on the most vulnerable, but it also makes it nearly impossible for little boys and girls to grow up to achieve the American Dream. Ending childhood hunger should therefore be the defining mission of the president's second term.

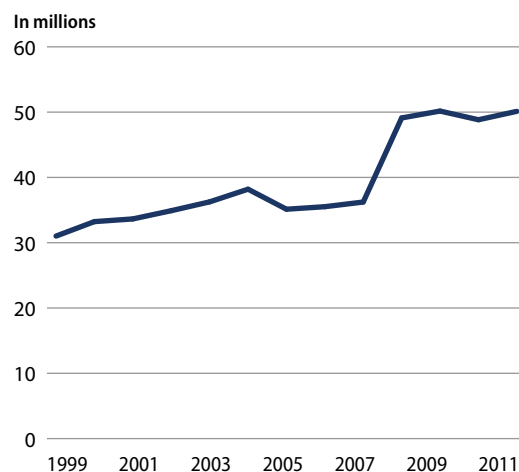
U.S. hunger and food insecurity metrics

Overall food security

From 1999 to 2011 the number of Americans living in food-insecure households—households unable to afford a consistent supply of food—rose by 61 percent, from 31 million to 50.1 million people, due mostly to the Great Recession.⁶ (see Figure 1) This number essentially stood flat, however, from 2008 to 2011—likely due to the large increase in SNAP spending during the same time period, as explained below.

The Department of Agriculture describes households as food insecure if they are “at times, uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food for all household members because they had insufficient money and other resources for food.”⁷ While most food insecurity in America is less severe than the mass starvation found in some parts of the developing world, it still severely hampers children’s emotional, intellectual, and physical development, and it strongly hinders the upward mobility of their parents.⁸

FIGURE 1
Number of Americans living in food-insecure households, 1999–2011



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

“Very low food security”

The Department of Agriculture describes the most severe level of food insecurity as “very low food security”; the federal government termed this “hunger” until the George W. Bush administration. Households that face “very low food security” ration food more frequently, reduce food intake for longer periods of time, and/or go without food entirely more frequently than families who are simply labeled “food insecure.”

Between 1999 and 2011 the number of Americans living in households that experienced “very low food security” rose by 116 percent, from 7.8 million to 16.9 million people.⁹ (see Figure 2) This number fell from from 2008 to 2011, however,

again most likely due to increases in nutrition-assistance spending and the number of SNAP participants.

Children in food-insecure households

From 1999 to 2011 the number of children under age 18 living in households that suffered from food insecurity or hunger rose by 37 percent, from 12.1 million to 16.6 million children.¹⁰ (see Figure 3) The increase in child food insecurity was less than the overall increase in food insecurity, likely because of the great efforts parents go through to shield their children from hunger, as well as assistance provided by the Department of Agriculture's child nutrition and nutrition-assistance programs.

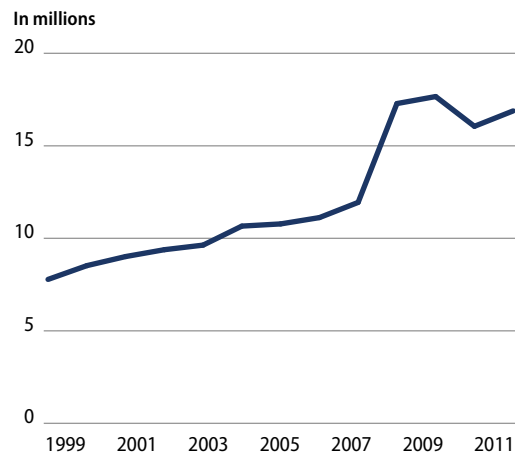
Participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps, provides electronic vouchers to enable low-income households to purchase food at supermarkets, farmers' markets, discount stores, community-supported agriculture projects, corner stores, and other retail outlets nationwide. Between 1999 and 2011 participation in the program increased by 67 percent, rising from 30 million to 50.1 million people.¹¹ In 1999 the number of SNAP recipients was 59 percent of the number of food-insecure Americans; by 2011, however, that number had risen to 89 percent.¹² The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, therefore, was extraordinarily responsive to the economic downturn that occurred during the George W. Bush and Obama administrations.

Access improvements—such as cutting down paperwork for applicants and increasing the ability of working families to obtain benefits—enacted by the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, in conjunction with states, localities, and advocacy groups, were responsible for some of the increased participation. Most of the increase, however, was due to increasing economic need.¹³ In addition, the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations all promoted SNAP

FIGURE 2

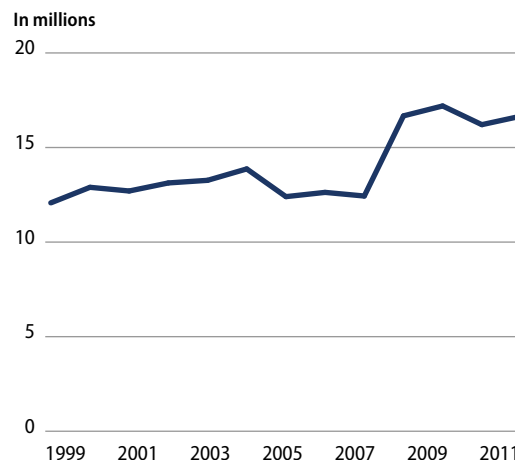
Number of Americans living in households with "very low food security," 1999–2011



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

FIGURE 3

Number of U.S. children in food-insecure households, 1999–2011



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

participation in conjunction with welfare reform,¹⁴ understanding that nutrition assistance constituted “work support” that could supplement earned income and reduce the need of families for income assistance.

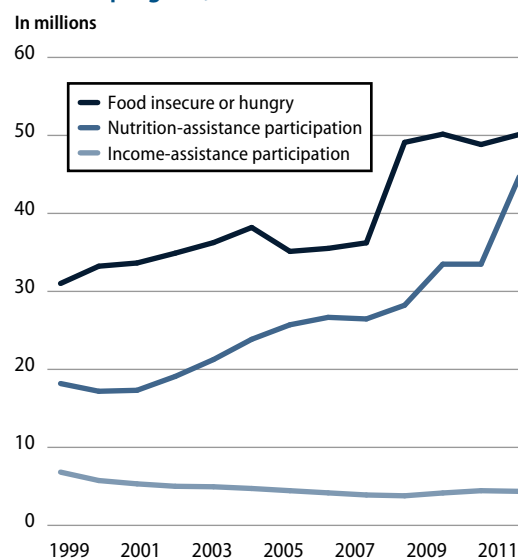
Federal spending on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program increased from \$17.8 billion in fiscal year 1999 to \$75.7 billion in fiscal year 2011—a 335 percent increase when not adjusted for inflation.¹⁵ The increased spending was due to the increased number of families on the program’s rolls, as well as to the increased amounts of benefits as a result of preset formulas and a boost from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, commonly known as the Recovery Act.

In contrast, other federal programs that support low-income families such as Section 8 housing support failed to significantly increase during this period,¹⁶ placing a greater burden on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to not only fight hunger but also to serve as the nation’s largest antipoverty program. During the same 1999–2011 time period, income assistance—formally known as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families—actually declined by 2.4 million people, a 36 percent drop. Moreover, in 2011 only 4.4 million Americans received cash assistance, equaling only 9 percent of those receiving nutrition assistance.¹⁷ This low level of income assistance during deep recession hampered the ability of low-income Americans to pay for housing, transportation, and food.

The drop in the use of public assistance could have been a positive development if it had been accompanied by a corresponding drop in poverty and a significant increase in living-wage jobs in low-income neighborhoods. Lacking those ameliorating factors, however, the reductions in cash assistance likely worsened hunger and homelessness.

Between 1999 and 2009 the percent of eligible people receiving supplemental nutrition assistance compared to those not receiving assistance rose from 61 percent to 72 percent. More than one in four Americans eligible for the program still fail to receive the benefits.¹⁸ Federal law, as well as extra rules piled on by states, counties, and cities, often make the process of applying for supplemental nutrition assistance a Kafka-esque nightmare. Applicants are forced to supply a large amount of supporting documents along with their applications, and many

FIGURE 4
Number of Americans participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program, 1999–2011



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

must suffer through long wait times and humiliating interviews at social service offices, only to have their paperwork lost and their benefits delayed.

School lunch and breakfast participation

Participation in both school lunch and school breakfast programs increased over the past decade due to an 7-million-student increase in the number of students in school¹⁹; access improvements—including more schools serving breakfast—implemented by the federal government in conjunction with states, localities, and advocacy groups; and the economic recession. The percentage of students who receive free or reduced-price school lunches who also receive free or reduced-price school breakfasts rose from 41 percent in 2000 to 50 percent in 2012,²⁰ but half of the children eligible for a free or reduced-price breakfast still fail to receive it. Many suburban and rural schools that serve lunch don't even serve breakfast. In schools that do provide breakfast, it is often served too early or too late, which makes it impractical for students to eat. Stigma is an additional barrier; while most students eat lunch, they know that only their poor peers go to the cafeteria to eat breakfast.

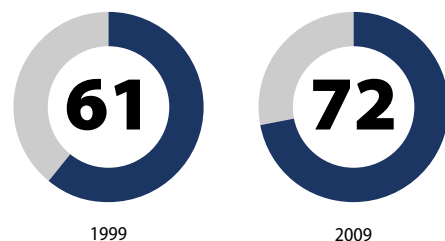
Summer meals for low-income children

The Summer Food Service Program, which is funded and overseen by the Department of Agriculture, reimburses local government agencies and nonprofit groups for providing nutritious breakfasts and lunches to low-income students in the summer months when school isn't in session.

Between 2004 and 2011 the peak July daily participation in the Summer Food Service Program rose by 15 percent, from 2 million students to 2.3 million students.²¹ The percentage of children who receive lunches during the school year, as well as meals during the summer, however, dropped during the same time period—from 11.8 percent to 10.9 percent.²² The rate was 14.1 percent in 1989, meaning that this program has lost ground over the past decade. This is likely due

FIGURE 5

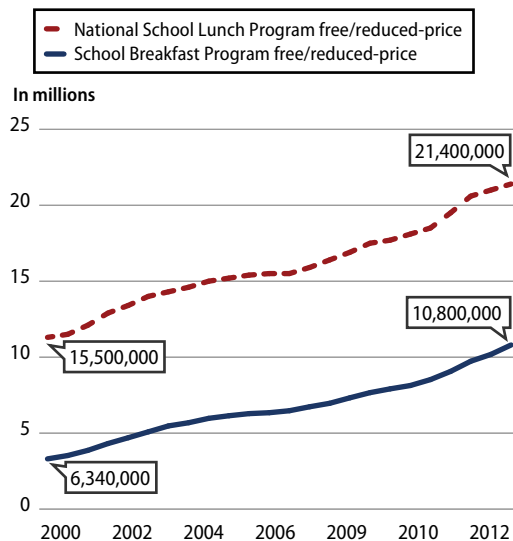
Percent of eligible people receiving supplemental nutrition assistance, 1999 and 2009



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

FIGURE 6

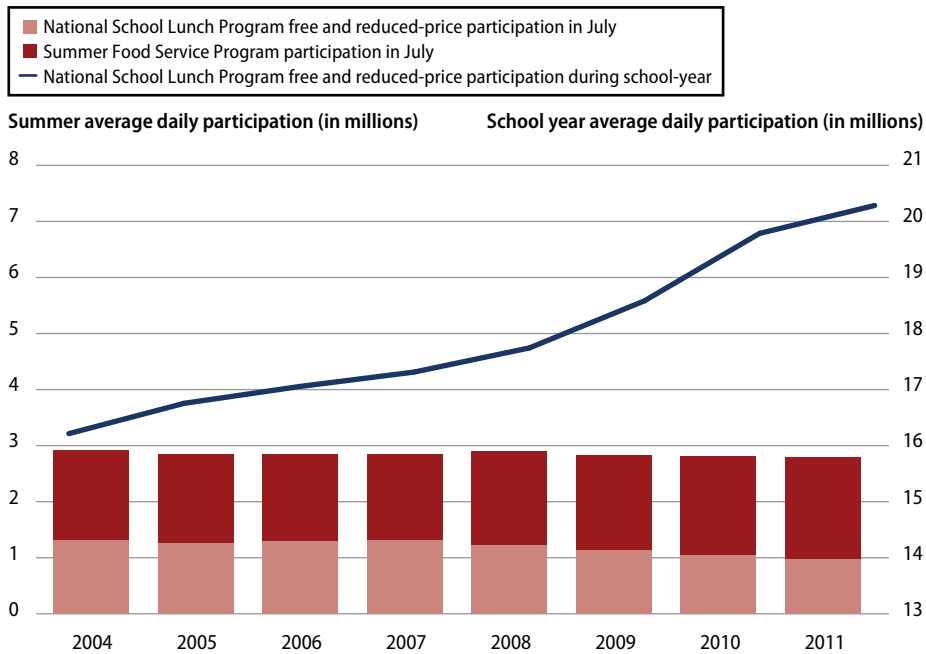
School-breakfast participation and school-lunch participation among eligible students, 2000–2012



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

FIGURE 7

Participation in summer meal programs and school-year meal programs, 2004–2011



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

to state and local budget cuts to host sites at summer schools, parks, recreation programs, and pools.

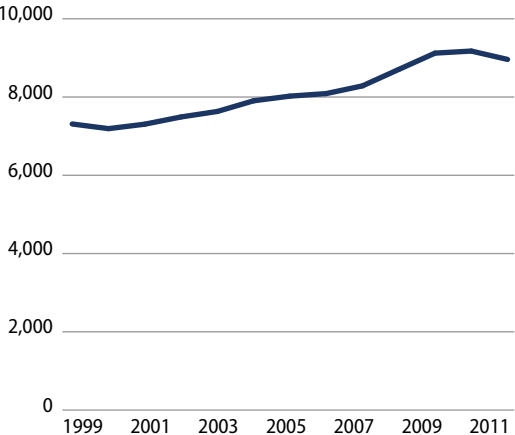
Participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC, provides a monthly package of nutritious food to low-income pregnant women and to children under age 5 who are at risk of poor nutrition.

WIC participation increased by 24 percent from 1999 to 2009. It actually declined by 2 percent from 2009 to 2011, however, despite the soaring need for it. Because it is the only major federal nutrition program that is not an entitlement, it is subject each year to the appropriations process. When Congress and the president limit appropriations to the program—as they have done in recent years—the program is therefore unable to significantly expand to meet the increased need during the ongoing economic downturn.²³

In contrast, because the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is an entitlement, Congress and the president set the general eligibility formulas for the program but don't set annual appropriations for it. These income-based formulas ensure that when the economy is weak, more people are able to enter the program, and spending increases on it. Conversely, when the economy improves, fewer people are eligible for—and thus fewer people receive—benefits, and spending on the program decreases. It is important to note, however, that if conservative proposals to turn the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program into a block-grant system are ever enacted, they would limit the program's ability to respond to changing economic conditions.

FIGURE 8
Number of WIC participants, 1999–2011



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Why we need to end U.S. child hunger

Hunger in the world's wealthiest nation is not only morally unacceptable; it also costs the U.S. economy at least \$167.5 billion per year,²⁴ in large part because of its negative impact on children. Poorly nourished children perform worse in school and require far more long-term health care spending. Hunger also reduces the productivity of workers, which reduces their earnings, which, in turn, reduces their ability to purchase nutritious food for their children. In this vicious cycle, malnourished children do not do as well in school, are more likely to drop out, and are less likely to go to college than children who are properly nourished. Consequently, malnourished children earn less as adults and are less able to help America build a 21st-century high-skills economy. In order for the president to help America build the best public education system in the world, bring down health care costs, and rebuild our economy, he must therefore also address childhood hunger.

Food-insecure children experience a broad range of problems that affect their health, development, well-being, and school performance. Thirteen studies on child health and development outcomes associated with food insecurity and food insufficiency find the following conditions to be more likely for children in food-insecure households than for children in otherwise-similar food-secure households:²⁵

- Poorer health of children, as reported by parents
- More stomachaches, frequent headaches, and more colds among children
- Higher hospitalization rates of young children
- Iron deficiency anemia in young children
- Behavioral problems in 3-year-old children
- Lower physical function in children ages 3 to 8
- Poorer psychosocial function and psychosocial development in school-age children
- Higher rates of depressive disorder and suicidal symptoms in adolescents
- More anxiety and depression in school-age children
- Higher numbers of chronic health conditions in children
- More “internalizing” of problems in children, which makes it difficult for them

to develop the beliefs, attitudes, and values necessary for acceptable behavior

- Lower math achievement and other achievement gains in kindergarteners
- Lower math and reading gains from kindergarten to the third grade
- Lower arithmetic scores

The Nutrition-Cognition National Advisory Committee described the challenges in the following way:

Undernutrition impacts the behavior of children, their school performance, and their overall cognitive development ... Undernourished children decrease their activity levels and become more apathetic. This in turn affects their social interactions, inquisitiveness, and overall cognitive functioning. Even nutritional deficiencies of a relatively short-term nature influence children's behavior, ability to concentrate, and to perform complex tasks ... [Child hunger] is capable of producing progressive handicaps—impairments which can remain throughout life. ... By robbing children of their natural human potential, undernutrition results in lost knowledge, brainpower and productivity for the nation. The longer and more severe the malnutrition, the greater the likely loss and the greater the cost to our country.²⁶

Food insecurity not only reduces work productivity, but it also makes it harder for parents to earn enough money to buy all the nutritious food their families need. Finding and keeping a job is hard enough—it is even harder on an empty stomach. It is no wonder that hunger is so harmful to worker productivity. Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Fogel estimated that 20 percent of the population in England and France was effectively excluded from the labor force around 1790 because they were too weak and hungry to work. Improved nutrition, he calculated, accounted for about half of the economic growth in Britain and France between 1790 and 1880. As a result, he has pointed out that hungry people cannot work their way out of poverty.²⁷ A more recent study of low-income urban women found that, “Food secure women tended to have better employment and income outcomes than food insecure women, and they also tended to be less socially isolated.”²⁸ Since most food for children is purchased with the earnings of their parents, reductions in those earnings mean less food for children.

Ending child hunger, therefore, is a prerequisite for truly fixing the U.S. economy and significantly reducing U.S. poverty. And because food-insecure families are often forced to obtain cheaper food that is less nutritious, hunger and obesity are flip sides of the same malnutrition coin.

Putting an end to childhood hunger in the United States would help the president accomplish a number of his other critical goals, including:

- Enabling the First Lady’s Let’s Move! initiative²⁹ to slash childhood obesity
- Reducing the nation’s spending on health care
- Halving U.S. poverty in the next decade
- Ensuring that the United States has children who are in school and ready to learn, free from the distraction of hunger
- Guaranteeing a broad-based, long-term economic recovery that bolsters the middle class

Executive actions to reduce U.S. hunger

In order to truly end child hunger, the president and Congress must work together to ensure an economy that has employment opportunities and sufficient living-wage jobs available in all low-income rural, suburban, and urban areas nationwide. They also must make sure that federal nutrition benefits are able to last families an entire month and that more working families have access to them.

Benefit amounts should be increased to enable families to purchase a full month’s worth of healthy foods. One excellent way to do so is to enact Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand’s (D-NY) proposal to increase SNAP benefits from the current USDA “thrifty” food plan to the more generous USDA “low-cost” food plan.³⁰ The best way to reduce hunger among working families is to raise the wages of parents, but in cases where this is not possible, we should improve access to nutritional supports such as supplemental nutrition assistance so that no family goes hungry. The president and Congress should raise the eligibility thresholds from the current level of 130 percent of the poverty line to 200 percent of the poverty line so that more low-income working families can obtain this benefit. Some states have used existing administrative flexibility to adopt this higher-income threshold at the state level, but federal law should be changed so that the threshold is enacted in all 50 states. By enabling families to earn a bit more and still receive benefits, the threshold would provide even more incentive for work and encourage families to obtain and maintain employment.³¹

At a bare minimum, the president and Congress must defeat pending proposals to further slash supplemental nutrition assistance and cut nutrition benefits for pregnant women and infants. In the meantime, the president and his administration

can unilaterally take a number of significant executive actions that can significantly reduce U.S. hunger, including one or more of the following.

Sign an executive order directing the Department of Agriculture, the Small Business Administration, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Labor, the Department of the Interior, and the Corporation for National and Community Service to work together to create food-related jobs and provide job training and placement services to ensure that low-income Americans are able to obtain and keep those jobs

Tens of millions of Americans need more nutritious, more affordable food. Tens of millions of Americans also need better jobs. Just as the Obama administration has supported a “green jobs” initiative to simultaneously fight unemployment and protect the environment, it should use this executive order to build on the existing good work of the Department of Agriculture’s “Know Your Farmer Know Your Food” program and the administration’s Healthy Food Financing Initiative to launch an administration-wide “Good Food, Good Jobs” initiative.

The effort could turn more food deserts—areas of the country where there is little or no access to the food necessary to maintain a healthy diet³²—into jobs oases. Given that food jobs can be created rapidly and with relatively limited capital investments, their creation should be one key focus of the administration’s second-term strategy to create jobs and grow the economy. The initiative could bolster food-processing businesses—such as neighborhood food processing/freezing/canning plants; businesses that turn raw produce into ready-to-eat salads, salad dressings, sandwiches, and other products; healthy vending-machine companies; and affordable and nutritious restaurants and catering businesses.

This effort would create new businesses, expand existing ones, and generate new jobs in both types of industries. It would also reduce hunger, obesity, and health care spending by bringing more nutritious foods into low-income neighborhoods. Doing so could provide more and better-targeted seed money to support food-jobs projects, expand community-based technical assistance, invest in urban produce and fish farming, implement a focused research agenda, and develop a better way of measuring the success of food-related economic development projects.³³

The Department of Agriculture could further refocus existing funding and intensify technical assistance to such efforts. The Small Business Administration could target loans and technical assistance to food-related enterprises. The Department of Labor

could focus more job-training funds on food-related enterprises. The Department of the Interior might be able to provide some federal lands for public-private food partnerships; it may also be able to ask food vendors at national parks to purchase food from such enterprises. Finally, the Corporation for National and Community Service could award more grants to AmeriCorps programs—national service projects that support structured service activities by participants who earn living allowances and educational vouchers—to help coordinate nonprofit food enterprises.³⁴

Sign an executive order directing all federal agencies to aid the Department of Agriculture in increasing the participation of eligible children, seniors, people with disabilities, veterans, and working families in federally funded nutrition programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, senior-aggregate and home-delivered meals, school breakfasts, and summer meals

Under this order:

- The Department of Agriculture could take a number of additional administrative steps to increase participation in such programs, many of which would increase flexibility and reduce paperwork for governors and school systems.
- The Internal Revenue Service, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Labor, and the Small Business Administration could launch a coordinated campaign with the Department of Agriculture to work with businesses and labor unions to combine outreach to low-income working families for the earned income tax credit with outreach for federal nutrition programs. The Internal Revenue Service could automatically mail applications for nutrition programs to all households that are income eligible. The Department of Health and Human Services could work to ensure that the newly created health care exchanges mandated under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act³⁵ are used for nutrition program outreach. And the Department of Labor could notify workers whose unemployment insurance is expiring about their likely eligibility for supplemental nutrition assistance.
- The Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Corporation for National and Community Service could work together with the Department of Agriculture and teachers unions, children's advocacy orga-

nizations, and school districts nationwide to launch a targeted campaign to increase participation in school breakfasts, school lunches, summer meals, and afterschool snack and supper programs.

- The Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Agriculture could work together—and in conjunction with national nonprofit organizations that represent older Americans—to launch an effort to increase the participation of older Americans in federally funded nutrition programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Senior Farmers’ Market Program, which gives low-income seniors coupons to purchase extra produce at farmers’ markets.
- The Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development could work together to increase outreach on nutrition benefits to eligible active-duty military personnel and their families, as well as to veterans, with a special emphasis on homeless veterans.
- The Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture could work together to increase program usage by Native Americans through coordinated outreach.

Direct federal agencies to do more work with the Department of Agriculture to expand urban agriculture and fitness opportunities on both federally owned and federally funded land

Under this order:

- The Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior could jointly promote National Park Service and National Forest Service hiking trails near urban areas.
- The Department of the Interior could enable urban agriculture groups to grow foods on less-utilized federal lands.
- The Department of Veterans Affairs could support more gardens and public exercise facilities on hospital grounds.
- The Department of Transportation could promote more exercise trails, as well as urban farms and gardens, on federally funded transportation right-of-ways—lands on which transportation projects take place..

- The Department of Housing and Urban Development could expand efforts to support exercise facilities and food-growing projects in public housing facilities.
- The Corporation for National and Community Service could award more grants for food- and exercise-related AmeriCorps projects.

Host a bipartisan White House Conference on Hunger, either as a standalone event or as part of a broader summit on poverty

Rep. James McGovern (D-MA) and many advocates have urged President Obama to hold the second-ever White House Conference on Hunger and Nutrition.³⁶ President Richard Nixon held the first in 1969, and it catalyzed very significant efforts that almost ended hunger in America. President Obama could sponsor his own conference and use it as a key tool in carrying out his pledge to end child hunger by 2015 and supporting Let's Move!—a comprehensive initiative launched by First Lady Michelle Obama that is “dedicated to solving the problem of childhood obesity within a generation, so that children born today will grow up healthier and able to pursue their dreams.”³⁷

The president could use such a conference to launch new and effective antihunger and antiobesity efforts, including those proposed in this paper. The conference could promote partnerships between government agencies, corporations, non-profit groups, and religious organizations, and first and foremost, it could advance federal initiatives to reduce hunger and obesity. It is important to note that any summit should only be seen as a means toward facilitating concrete actions, and not as an end in and of itself. It must go beyond mere symbolism. Such an event will only be as meaningful as the substantive antihunger steps taken by the White House and its partners before, during, and after the summit.

Lead a public service announcement campaign that features prominent Americans who have personally benefited from federal nutrition support

Stigma continues to be one of the top reasons that eligible people do not apply for nutrition-assistance benefits for which they are legally eligible. A public service announcement campaign could destigmatize the programs and provide information online to enable people to learn more about the programs and apply for them if they are eligible.

Given that President Obama is the first president in history with a parent that personally benefited from supplemental nutrition assistance, it would be particularly appropriate for him to appear in any public service announcement. Other participants could be Nobel Prize winners, scientists, athletes, business leaders, and other celebrities who have personally benefited from federal nutrition programs.

Create a Dole-McGovern White House Prize, to be awarded to citizens for extraordinary service in fighting domestic hunger

Former Sen. Robert Dole, a conservative Republican from Kansas, and the late Sen. George McGovern, a liberal Democrat from South Dakota, worked together in the 1970s to lead efforts to create the modern federal nutrition-assistance safety net. Creating an award in their name would therefore honor their legacies and remind the nation that fighting hunger used to be a bipartisan priority. Award guidelines should place a heavy emphasis on rewarding those who have engaged in activities to improve public policy and increase the effectiveness of government programs that fight hunger.

Issue a “Call to Commitments” that challenges corporations, nonprofit groups, religious organizations, and state, local, and tribal governments to make formal commitments to reduce hunger and obesity

The commitments process could be modeled at least in part on the commitments process of the Clinton Global Initiative, which has proven its effectiveness. A Commitment to Action—the defining feature of the initiative—is a plan for addressing a significant societal challenge. Commitments can be large or small and financial or nonmonetary in nature. Many commitments are the result of cross-sectoral partnerships, with members of the Clinton Global Initiative combining efforts to expand their impact.

The White House could help broker antihunger partnerships between issue experts—both inside and outside of government—and those who can provide food, money, staff assistance, and other resources. The White House could monitor the larger nationwide partnerships to ensure their effectiveness. Governors could also be encouraged to obtain—and then follow through on—partnerships to slash childhood hunger in their home states such as those pioneered by Share

Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign with governors such as Martin O'Malley (D-MA), Bob McDonnell (R-VA), and John Hickenlooper (D-CO).³⁸

Promote long-term, skills-based volunteer activities to fight hunger and obesity

The president could promote tools to help citizens more effectively volunteer to fight hunger, such as HungerVolunteer.org, sponsored by the New York City Coalition against Hunger and ConAgra Foods. Such long-term volunteer activities can include:

- Outreach to increase participation in nutrition-assistance programs
- Skills-based work to build the long-term capacities of antihunger nonprofit groups
- Policy advocacy activities

Appoint a public-private taskforce to implement and coordinate all of the above

The taskforce could include representatives from all key federal agencies, as well as representatives from corporations, nonprofit antipoverty and antihunger groups, farming organizations, and labor unions. The White House Domestic Policy Council could coordinate it, with significant input from the White House and the offices of public engagement, cabinet affairs, faith-based and neighborhood initiatives, and communications.

Conclusion

Many pundits argued³⁹ that President Obama should not have pursued comprehensive health care reform in 2010 while our economy was struggling. They said it was either too expensive, too complicated, or too distracting. The president argued, however, that there was no way to fix the long-term U.S. economy without fixing health care—and the president was correct.

Given that many pundits still insist⁴⁰ that we are living in a time in which society's visions for progress must be constrained, the president will no doubt be counseled again not to take on difficult challenges such as ending domestic childhood hunger. And the pundits will again be wrong.

Yes, ending childhood hunger will require additional government funding, along with dramatically expanded public-private partnerships. But the cost of solving the problem will be far less than the more than \$167.5 billion that hunger already saps from the U.S. economy each year.

No country in the history of the world has remained a superpower while failing to adequately feed its own children. Ending U.S. childhood hunger and U.S. hunger in general is not only the right thing to do—it's the smart thing to do to advance our national interest.

About the author

Joel Berg is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress. He is a nationally recognized leader in the fields of hunger and food security, national and community service, and technical-assistance provisions to faith-based and community organizations. He is also the author of the book, *All You Can Eat: How Hungry is America?* The book challenges the president and Congress to make hunger eradication a top priority—and offers them a simple and affordable plan to end it for good.

Berg has led the New York City Coalition Against Hunger since 2001, which represents the more than 1,100 nonprofit soup kitchens and food pantries in New York City and the nearly 1.5 million low-income New Yorkers who are forced to use them. The coalition recently launched nationwide AmeriCorps and strategic volunteerism initiatives with projects in more than 20 states. The coalition works to meet the immediate food needs of low-income families and to enact innovative solutions to help society move “beyond the soup kitchen” to ensure economic and food self-sufficiency for all Americans. Prior to joining the coalition, Berg served for eight years in senior executive service positions at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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All of the opinions, interpretations, and possible errors or omissions in the paper, however, are solely those of the author.

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