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ELIMINATING HUNGER IN AMERICA

*Ardis Armstrong Young
Washington State University*

Human hunger might well be called the world's oldest sorrow. It denies its victims the ability to think clearly, to produce, to create, to pursue happiness—and, often, to live. Although hunger is the rule in many third world countries, some nations such as Japan and Sweden have nearly eliminated it. At one time the United States was close to being hunger-free. But, since 1981, conditions have constantly worsened, with approximately 9 percent of the population now going hungry. Hunger has re-emerged as a major social problem in America.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly describe the hunger situation in the United States today; to suggest reasons for its re-emergence; and to identify alternatives for public policy education programs to address this problem.

Hunger in the 1980s

Hunger is defined as being chronically short of nutrients necessary for growth and health. In America, the bread basket of the world, at least 20 million people suffer from hunger several days a month. Twelve million of the hungry are children; and in affluent America, poverty—hunger's cohort—takes the life of a child every fifty-three minutes. Ironically, hunger was nearly eliminated between 1961 and 1980 after food stamps, WIC and other supplementary food programs became part of the farm bill. The school lunch program was also expanded at that time, eventually including school breakfasts. Both Republicans and Democrats had presidents in office during that time and administrations of both political parties supported these programs, as the benefits appeared quickly. Public health, social service and educational institutions as well as private charities began reporting sharp decreases in hunger-related diseases and bread lines and both of these symptoms had almost disappeared by the late 1970s.

In 1981, however, the Reagan Administration began reducing its support. Seven billion dollars was cut from the food stamp program

alone. A year later there was an increase in anemia, tuberculosis, poor growth and osteoporosis—all hunger-related problems. The infant mortality rate in the United States, which is an indicator of general health in a country, rose to 11.2 deaths per 1,000 births.

Poverty is directly related to hunger. An estimated 34 million Americans exist at the poverty level or below. This means a family of four lives on less than \$11,000 per year, which at the most is \$7 per day, per person to meet all physical, mental and social needs. Food stamps add 49 cents per meal to this budget. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) *National Survey of Household Consumption* concludes that 80 percent of those eating at food stamp recipient levels is undernourished. It is estimated that 59 percent of the children born after 1983 will live in a single parent family before age 18. These families, usually headed by women, are the fastest-growing segment of the poverty group. Although hunger predominates in nonwhite cultures and within certain family types and social and skill level groups, its direct and consistent cohort is poverty.

As this problem is examined, a very large question emerges. Why do Americans allow people to go hungry when,

- they can grow enough food to feed the world?
- they waste more food than the hungry could eat?
- their professed value system has always been to help a neighbor, feed the hungry, clothe the poor?
- such a large percentage of the hungry and poverty stricken are children?
- being hungry leads to repetitive poverty and often crime?
- hunger is the most brutal difference between the haves and the have nots and leads to social uprisings and war?

Hungry Again—Why?

The re-emergence of hunger is a result, like most public problems, of many interrelated factors, but three seem especially influential: (1) lack of public awareness, (2) conflicting values (3) and “stuck” paradigms.

The decade of the 80s has been very tumultuous. Major industries have changed or gone under, a farm crisis has commanded the energies of rural America, state and local governments are trying to absorb a multitude of budget cuts—and on it goes. With all these emergencies tugging at citizen sensibilities, perhaps the nation has not been aware of the nature and extent of the hunger problem. Despite reports from twenty national studies, all acknowledging that hunger and its effects were increasing, the current administration has denied that a problem existed. Individuals have been preoc-

cupied with managing the many personal and workforce changes taking place. Except for the Physicians' Task Force on Hunger, based at the Harvard School of Public Health, and Dr. Larry Brown, who chairs that task force, there are few champions of the antihunger cause who have been given national attention. Perhaps hunger has re-emerged because the public is simply unaware of its impact.

A second factor in the re-emergence of hunger is the matter of major value conflicts in the social consciences of Americans. The difference between what Americans say they value and what their actions and policies express are value conflicts. The Judeo-Christian ethic on which the United States is based clearly spells out one's responsibility to the poor and hungry. Believers are to clothe and feed them. They are to supply their needs. But when democratic and capitalistic philosophies, which are also extremely important, are overlayed, moral complications set in. The capitalist belief system holds that those who work, compete, and pull themselves up by their bootstraps are those who eat and enjoy the riches of the society. Yet not all members of a society can work. Twelve million of the twenty million citizens who go hungry in our country are children. Many others are elderly and/or handicapped. The concept of competition also clouds the issue. Built into competition is the reality of winners and losers. There always will be those who have plenty, the "successful," and those who have nothing. Those who have achieved a modicum of success might rationalize their good fortunes by pointing out constitutional rights and a democratic governance which all Americans enjoy. That is, everyone has a chance in America. Recent history and the necessary enforcement of many entitlement programs, however, cast grave doubts on that rationale. Few opportunities, even in a democracy, are equal and available to all.

Another aspect of value-driven behavior influencing the elimination of hunger is the insistence on defining the problem as personal not public. Throughout American history, the job of eliminating hunger has been given to the private and volunteer sectors rather than establishing and enforcing comprehensive public policies to supply the needs of our hungry population in an effective way. It seems that Americans like the feeling of giving if they can control it personally. Hence, the food baskets at Christmas, the annual closet cleaning for Goodwill and sending an occasional check to the Salvation Army. What we do not like to see are hard-earned tax dollars going to that nebulous black hole known as welfare. However, the reality of hunger in America is that it is a public problem. The solution then depends on well-funded public policies and educational programs.

The matter of "stuck" paradigms is a third factor in the re-emergence of hunger. Those who could champion efforts to prevent hunger by seeing to it that supplementary food programs remained intact and were well funded, might well be those of us who are clos-

est to “the farm bill.” However, followers of this piece of legislation seem to be stuck on a very narrow interpretation of the bill’s intent. This bill, which is really “The Food Security Act of 1985” is the statement that guides the implementation of hunger-preventing food programs, but most of the educational and lobbying efforts made in its name are directed toward farm production and agribusiness. Farm bill paradigms get stuck on agricultural interests when they might better serve to include an understanding of the food policies that can prevent hunger.

Alternatives for Public Policy Education

I would like to suggest three routes public policy educators might take in addressing this problem. The first is to create an awareness of the hunger situation and its implications at the national level. Hunger exists in nearly every community. There is, or soon will be, a price paid by local citizens if these issues are not resolved. Education materials, such as those now being proposed for other areas of the farm bill, and programs that help students identify alternatives and their consequences need to be developed before a plan of action for addressing attendant issues can be drawn up.

Second, many states are now in the process of revising welfare programs. A great deal of public policy education can accompany the shaping of new policies and practices in these systems. Assuring citizen input, guiding decision-making processes and injecting information on which to base quality decisions are all contributions that can be made by policy educators. Participating in this way will help citizens confront their value conflicts about welfare policy and result in strong support for policy decisions once they are made.

Third is the establishment of a local food policy. Going beyond the boundaries of a national agricultural policy, this is an idea with the potential for providing a sustainable local food supply while meeting the needs of all consumers—including the hungry. Such a program was started in Knoxville, Tennessee. After a needs assessment indicated that many elderly and low income people did not have enough food, a Food Policy Council was formed by the Knoxville City Council and staffed by interagency workers. Its goals were to:

1. insure that an adequate and nutritious food supply was available to all citizens;
2. strengthen the economic vitality of the private food industry;
3. improve the quality of food available to all citizens;
4. encourage citizens to accept and consume nutritious food; and,
5. minimize food-related activities that degrade the natural environment and limit wasteful use of scarce resources needed for food production and consumption.

Extension policy educators, with backgrounds in human development, nutrition or various aspects of food supply, are especially well-suited to helping citizens look at new ideas like this and make well-informed decisions as to what policies and plans of action will best solve several community problems at once.

Summary

The number of people going hungry in the United States has increased dramatically since 1981. The U.S. infant mortality rate—an index of a nation's general health rate status—is high compared to other industrialized nations. Programs that worked to eliminate hunger between 1961 and 1980 have been cut drastically. Although Americans believe people should work to support themselves and feed their families, that is not possible for the many children, elderly and disabled who go hungry. Because Americans also value compassion and have historically developed ways to be both compassionate and economically secure, the challenge to adequately nourish the country's people can be met.

Public policy educators have a role in eliminating hunger. Creating an awareness of the hunger situation, developing educational materials, working with groups to create new alternatives for action and examining their consequences are all vital aspects of the elimination of hunger in America.

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Emerging Resource Issues

