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## The Paradox of Hunger and Obesity in the United States

"Feeding the hungry is a greater work than raising the dead." Saint John Chrysostom, the Greek Father of the Church, was accurate in speaking these words. The interpretation is simple: it is better to help those who are alive, than to constantly mourn for the dead. We as humans are saddened by death; more than by the suffering of others. This is inconsistent with logic. If we could solve the worldly troubles of hunger and obesity, everyone could live longer, healthier lives. Hunger is devastating, dangerous, and unhealthy. It causes a number of nutrient deficiencies and diseases. Most importantly, humans require nutrition to survive. Obesity is sometimes genetic. In other cases, it is a lifestyle. The paradox of obesity and hunger is baffling. A statement which contradicts itself, while still proves true. Why can some be starving to death every second of every day, while others are so overweight it is dangerous to their health? Both groups are consumed by the thought of food. The starving crave and desire the taste of it. Obesity is predetermined by genetics, environment, and lifestyle. No matter how hard they exercise and diet, the results are sometimes irreparable. In 2003, Eric M. Bost said in a testimony before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, "Hunger and obesity co-exist in the United States and are no more mutually exclusive than cancer and heart disease. The Federal government has a responsibility to address both, and we are committed to ensuring access both to enough food and to the skills and motivation to make healthy lifestyle choices." He realizes the magnitude of this problem. Only when our entire government begins to take this dilemma seriously, will it begin to diminish.

Obesity is a rapidly growing problem in the United States. The healthy number of calories which should be consumed daily varies from person to person. According to the body mass index (BMI), the healthiest weight range is a score of 18.5 to 25. The body mass index takes into consideration the weight and height of a person. It does not reflect body fat. If excess calories are consumed on a regular basis, they begin to store as fat. Calorie amount is just one factor in the road to obesity. Genetics play a role as well. People with obese parents are three times more likely to become obese than people whose parents have a healthy weight. (Agras & Rhodes) Genes determine how calories are used. Some people have a higher rate of metabolism compared to others. However, genetics only determines the tendency to become obese.

In the years leading up to 2005, obesity has become a very common condition. In the United States, it has reached a record high. For both children and adults, obesity is increasing. Various explanations could account for this jump. Mainly, major increases in the amount of time children and adults spend watching television. When someone does this for extended periods of time, they are not getting any physical activity. The amount of exercise you get is important. The more exercise, the better. Continuous, aerobic activity is best. The environment in which a person lives must be considered as well. If a child watches television from the time they arrive home from school, to the time they go to bed, the thirty minute exercise recommendation is not met. It is a proven fact that increased television watching is directly related to obesity among adolescents. 40 percent of African American boys and girls watch four or more hours of television per day, compared to 15 percent of non-Hispanic whites with corresponding amounts. Finally, the number of desk bound jobs is at an all time high. Since more people are sitting down during work, obesity has increased. The overall cause of obesity is lack of physical activity. (Crespo & Arbesman)

Lifestyle and environment are directly related to weight gain. Eating habits are a major factor in weight control. Consuming large amounts of calories results in the excess storage of fat. Other factors

may contribute to weight gain, such as eating irregular, small meals, consuming high amounts of fats and carbohydrates, eating quickly, or skipping meals altogether. Family behavior can influence a member's own behavior greatly. If someone is raised in an environment where the surrounding conditions are unhealthy, that person is more likely to display those same traits. Fast food restaurants are growing rapidly in number. Mark Pereira stated, "Fast food emphasizes primordial preferences for salt and fat. This may promote overeating." A fast food meal may contain 1,600 or more calories. People who eat fast food more than twice a week have a 50 percent larger risk of becoming obese than those who do not. All of these components help to determine weight. (Agras & Rhoades)

Looking at age groups is an effective way to break down obesity. The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) was taken from 1999 to 2002. It shows that sixteen percent of children ages 6 to 19 are overweight. This was determined by measuring heights and weights, then calculating the body mass index. Compared to subjects of the previous survey, there was a 45 percent increase in obesity. The number of obese children has not decreased since 1994. (CDC)

Since the 1960s, the number of children ages 2 to 19 who are overweight has risen significantly. In terms of obesity, race is a large factor. For instance, noticeable differences directly related to race can be identified between the 1976 to 1980 and 1988 to 1994 NHANES. Non-Hispanic black girls showed a higher prevalence to obesity than non-Hispanic white girls younger than two years old. The prevalence to obesity is highest among Mexican American boys and African American girls. This number is double compared to non-Hispanic white children. It is uncertain which factors (genetic, lifestyle, environmental, or cultural) account for the differences between races.

Another age group to consider is 18-21. It is common to gain weight during the first year at college. The percentages of males and females who are overweight are not extremely different. Out of persons 17 to 20 who would not qualify for military services, 45 percent of women would not qualify for the US Army, and 35 percent would not qualify for the Marine Corps because of weight. The height and weight acceptance for the armed forces however, is not based on the body mass index. For example, the Coastguard measures wrist size, and examines frame or skeletal build. It is only measured once during their career because these two measurements are the most likely to stay the same. It is uncertain precisely where the cut off is for military acceptance.

Throughout the 60s and 70s, the number of obese adults remained constant. Since then, the percent of obese adults has risen 8.9 percent. Today, three out of every ten adults are obese in the United States. For example, in Iowa the percentages for obese adults were 14.4, 19.3, 20.8, and 21.8 respectively to 1991, 1998, 2000, and 2001. (AOA) Obesity is linked to a number of diseases. Some include osteoarthritis, heart disease, stroke, gallbladder disease, type 2 diabetes, and respiratory problems. Also, doctors have recently suggested that obesity could possibly lead to some cancers such as breast, prostate, colon, and endometrial. Obesity affects more women and minority groups than non-Hispanic white men. However, the percent of Mexican American women is eleven percent higher than non-Hispanic white women. The most uncommon age groups for obesity are 20 to 29 and individuals over the age of 80. It may be quite inaccurate for persons 80 and above, due to the fact that some of the obese have already died. It is obvious that people with the healthiest bodies live the longest.

Social classes are related to obesity. In the United States, the social system is made up of : the upper class, the upper middle class, the middle class, the working class, and the lower class. The upper class, or corporate rich, make up about 0.1 percent of all American families. The children attend private secondary schools or private colleges. The upper class is an exclusive group which marries and socializes within itself. The upper middle class is made up of lawyers, doctors, top engineers, and some top professors. This group most likely attended public schools, and reputable universities. The middle class tend to occupy jobs such as teachers, some farmers, small business owners, and lower level management.

The working class is the strength of the United States. They work in factories, drive trucks, and serve as police and firefighters. The lower class have little education or skills. Most members of this class marry young and become parents. Nevertheless, it is possible to move upwards in class by means of education, advancement in the workplace, and status enrichment. Women who received a high school education and make less than \$20,000 per year are the largest obese group. Similarly, more upper class men are obese than any other class. This may be because they are working at a desk for prolonged periods of time. Unfortunately, obesity is most common among minority groups. This is due to a lower educational attainment. In order to combat obesity, racial and ethnic groups must be given equal opportunities. (Anderson)

Hunger is a growing problem in our world, one which we cannot continue to ignore. Roughly 800 million people are undernourished. It has led to the deaths of 13 million children under the age of five. They died from diseases which were allowed to be contracted due to a weakened immune system. Proper nutrients would have allowed them to survive. One out of every seven people in the United States is hungry. More than 35 million Americans are hungry. 775,000 families go hungry each day. Malnutrition is a cause of low-birth-weight in babies. Low-birth-weight causes growth defects, and the likelihood of getting sick is increased. In women, it can be passed on to their own children. Mainly, these individuals lack iodine, vitamin A, and iron; each causes individual results. Iron deficiency brings about reduced motor development, damage to the reproductive system, and mental injury. 80 percent of the world's population suffers from iron deficiency. This could be prevented by eating foods high in iron such as red meat, bread, cereal, and egg yolks. A shortage in iodine leads to brain damage and reproductive damage. While vitamin A deficiency can actually lead to death; children become more prone to disease. (www.feedingminds.org) B-12 is a necessary vitamin which governs an individual's mood, appetite, sleep and energy levels. B-12 is prescribed by many doctors in order to increase energy. Foods in the United States are fortified with folic acid, such as grains. For expectant mothers, low levels of folic acid can be fatal to unborn children. A study which compared levels of women who had miscarried to those who were healthy showed a noticeable difference. If a level below 4.9 ng/mL have a 50 percent greater risk of miscarriage. If folic acid levels are low, a supplement may be taken to compensate. (Edelson) Rickets is a condition caused by the shortage of vitamin D, calcium, or phosphate. These are found in foods such as fish, liver, and milk. Rickets is a disease which softens bones. Symptoms include bone pains and deformities, tendency to breakage, teeth deformities, and muscle cramps. The best treatment is to replace the vitamins which are lacking. (Goldenring) It is important to eat healthy, so our bodies can absorb all required nutrients.

The United States is known for its rural areas and farmland. Why is it then, that many of the 35 million hungry people in the country are located in rural and farm areas? One factor is that unemployment is more common in rural areas as opposed to urban. Also their earnings are less. In 2000, the federal government classified 11.2 percent of rural families as food insecure. This means they do not have access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources. They turn to food banks for meals. Many rural communities have a sizable elderly population. Usually, their economy cannot support this particular age group. In contrast, urban areas have thriving economies and can support older workers in a variety of occupations. Rural areas also have a higher child poverty rate. This is because there are fewer social service programs in rural areas. All in all, many factors in rural areas outweigh urban areas. Long commutes for work and childcare, absence of public transportation, and fewer jobs share in the issue of rural hunger. (Americas Second Harvest)

In the past years, hunger has grown in the working poor. These Americans have jobs, but cannot always make enough to feed their families. 14,812,000 people are part of the working poor. 37 percent of people helped by food pantries are employed. Over eight and one half million children who are hungry have at least one parent who works. Most of the working poor only obtained a high school education. This accounts for their lack of advancement in the workplace. It is very important for children to eat

healthy lunches and snacks at school. Children need to learn healthy eating habits out of their home environment. With positive reinforcement at school, the habits will overlap into home. Half of the working poor have no health insurance. This sometimes causes families to choose between food and health. (Americas Second Harvest) Having to choose between food and medicine should not have to or need to be a choice in the wealthiest country in the world.

In the 1980s, public welfare programs were cut. This led to a serious demand for food. The Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP) was taken by the Census Bureau to find and record the hungry families with children in America. While conducting this survey, Congress and legislation were monitored. They found it necessary to form a measure of food inadequacy. When the Current Population Survey was conducted, an additional food security survey would be taken as well. The results show that single women are at the greatest risk of hunger. Households with children are two times more likely to be food insecure than those without children. In New York City soup kitchens, there was a 45 percent increase in the number of people served between 2000 and 2002. (Americas Second Harvest) Food insecurity is most common in the Western and Southern parts of the United States.

Food production is at its highest in the United States. 941 million acres are used for the purpose of farming; the average farm consisting of 436 acres. The average number of people a farm can feed has jumped from 20 in 1935, to over 100 in 2002. However, one third of the food produced in the US is exported to foreign countries. (IFIC) In addition, the percent of income that Americans spend on food is declining. On average, the typical person in the United States spends 6.4 percent of their income on food. This number is significantly less compared to the highest. The Philippines sits at 52.9 percent. Higher incomes are emerging in the United States, which lessens the percent of incomes spent on food in return.

Farming took off in the 1860s. The United States government passed different acts to lure potential farmers to the Great Plains. Some include the Homestead Act (1862), the Timber Culture Act (1873), and the Desert Land Act (1877). Farming was very formidable as a result of insects, droughts, and blizzards. Soon, large farming corporations took shape. These are referred to as bonanzas, and still exist today. However, farming has changed dramatically over the past decades. In 1950, labor made up 40 percent of the value of farming resources. In 1993, it had lessened to 9.5 percent. On the other hand, technological innovations have caused machinery and chemical use to increase 18 percent in the same time span. As new farming opportunities arise, it becomes more expensive to stay in business. Costs include seed, fertilizer, land costs, equipment, maintenance, and fuel. Productivity has risen through these innovations, but sometimes the costs outweigh the results. To help farmers, the Cooperative Extension System was created through the United States Department of Agriculture. It helps farmers by educating them on new practices and hands on involvement. (ifc.org) The United States grows a variety of crops including corn, wheat, oats, barley, rice, soybeans, peanuts, canola, cotton, sugarcane, potatoes, citrus fruits, fresh fruits, and various grasses. (www.nass.usda.gov) Nutritious foods are produced and fortified. If they could be made available to all people, malnutrition would not be as widespread. The United States is an agricultural country, and depends upon it for a large portion of industry.

Obesity and hunger are continuous problems in our world. Obesity is related to the number of calories consumed. Even though it varies from person to person, it must be monitored closely. If excess calories are taken in, they will become fat. A diet must consist of high quality foods. Fast food restaurants are not of a high quality. Their foods are filled with salts. I suggest the government put guidelines into place which specify nutrients and vitamins to be included in meals. If the guidelines are closely followed, the percentage of obese food insecure people would decline. Exercise could be incorporated into it as well. A plan could be decided upon for families to follow. Exercise must be included more in the workplace and schools. Thirty minutes is all that is needed out of the day. If this problem is to be solved, everyone must make compromises and work together. It is the role of parents to monitor the amount of television their children watch. To reduce this, parents could limit which shows or

the amount of time spent watching television. By replacing television with exercise, the results would be prime. Since race is also a factor in obesity, more studies should be conducted to pinpoint variations which must be included in exercise and diet plans. We must consider that everyone is different. This is difficult for some situations. For example, the military uses a weight screening process to determine admittance. Some people could lose weight if allowed to enter such military programs. In any case, they are not given the opportunity. Obesity is most dangerous in adults. This is due to the diseases it is linked to: osteoarthritis, heart disease, gallbladder disease, type 2 diabetes, and respiratory difficulties. Furthermore, obesity is most common in adult women and minority groups. Over all, these are the social classes of the United States: upper, upper middle, middle, working, and lower classes. Since large percentages of obese individuals belong to various classes, it can be concluded that food quality plays a larger role than the cost of food. Along with obesity lies hunger. They are connected in the essence that both do not receive the nutrients they need. Hunger leads to malnutrition. This has devastating affects, such as low-birth-weight and miscarriage in women. Rural and urban areas are both plagued with hunger. Again, food quality and access are factors. The government has already taken the first steps to rid the United States of hunger by creating food programs. They need to grow larger and work more efficiently. Food programs need to be established in both large cities and rural communities. School lunches must be included in these food programs. In addition, community gardens, farmers markets, and food stamps need to be easier to get involved in. If the government can establish an efficient screening process, they would be easier to use. Once the countries of the world establish strong food programs, they can begin to work together. The key is to be uniform in procedures. If everyone does things similarly, disagreements can be reduced. It will take a while to solve world obesity and hunger, but as it is reduced it will become less of a problem. As Hilary Clinton once said, "It takes a village to raise a child." Cooperation among cultures and nations will create an atmosphere in which children can grow up healthy and strong.

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