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Poverty and Obesity in America

In the United States, as of 2001, 34% of the population was overweight. (Townsend) Overweight and obesity would seem to be problems associated with the United State's wealth and more than sufficient food supply. Much attention in recent years has been paid to people becoming more physically fit and changing their diets to become healthier. Gastric bypass surgery has become a popular choice for people trying to overcome extreme obesity. The operation limits "food intake by creating a narrow passage from the upper part of the stomach into the larger lower part, reducing the amount of food the stomach can hold and slowing the passage of food through the stomach." (NIDDK) The presence of this emphasis on health and nutrition would seem to be the solution to our nation's obesity problem. However of the population with moderate food insecurity, 52% were overweight. (Townsend) Food insecurity exists when the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain. Over half of the United State's population with a threat of hunger is overweight. Why would obesity be more prevalent amongst this group of people with *fewer* resources?

Dieting and surgery do not address the problems of the economic groups with the most severe weight and nutrition problems. Surgery is expensive, and people with limited resources are not likely to buy expensive health foods when there are cheaper alternatives that satisfy hunger. The "Dollar Menu" at McDonald's is certainly less expensive than preparing a well-balanced meal. Another reason for obesity in lower income groups is a theory called the "food stamp cycle" hypothesis. Food stamps and most paychecks are distributed on a monthly basis, so if a family gets food stamps or a paycheck, the family will use these resources until they run out. Often food stamps can be depleted before the next distribution. When food stamps run out, there is an involuntary restriction of food. The hypothesis suggests that the cycle of food restriction at the end of the month followed by bingeing would promote weight gain. (Townsend) The main reasons for obesity and overweight in low-income groups would be periodic food restriction and a poor nutritional diet due to financial restrictions.

Need

Hunger and obesity affect many different types of people; however, one of the most affected groups is the female-headed family. According to Bread for the World, in 2003, 28% of female-headed families were in poverty, compared to 12.5% of the total population. In 2003, the poverty line was \$14,824 for a single mother with two children; however, this amount was not enough to meet the needs of that family according to a Wider Opportunities for Women estimate. A mother with two young children would need between \$17,713 and \$33,170 in 2003. (Bread for the World) Therefore a huge portion of these families does not have enough money to meet their needs. There is prevalence among this type of family for the mother to be overweight. When incomes get lower and food insecurity increases, "women do more skipping of meals in order to feed their kids."(Olson) In fact even though families above the poverty line, but below the \$17,713 do not have enough resources, they receive very little assistance. Food stamps, for example, are 90% distributed to families living below the poverty level.

According to a survey performed for the US Conference of Mayors, "twenty percent of the requests for emergency food assistance are estimated to have gone unmet," during 2004.

(usmayors,p.3) The survey included food pantries and soup kitchens run by churches and other types of assistance available. In these cities many hungry people are not being provided with the quantity of food needed, but also 19% of the cities in the survey were not able to provide nutritionally balanced food. These people in need are quite often productive members of society. In fact, over one third of the adults requesting food were employed. The problem of hunger in the United States is not a decreasing risk. Requests for emergency food assistance increased by 14% in the last year, (usmayors, p.3) and “officials in 88 percent of the responding cities expect requests for emergency food assistance to increase during 2005.”(usmayors, p.5)

The income gap in the United States is a growing problem. If “minimum wage had grown as fast as the CEO pay in the 1990s, it wouldn’t be \$5.15 now but \$24.13, enough to lift America’s millions of working poor out of their poverty.” “Nearly half of all wealth is owned by the wealthiest 1 percent, while the bottom 80 percent owns only 4 percent.” (Community, p.37) It is a fact that in some states high-income families have increased their income while low-income families have literally seen a decrease in income. (Community, p.39) The disparity between rich and poor is stunning. Economic recovery elicits only an increase in poverty. The poverty rate is now up to 12.7 %. “That’s a nation of poor people the size of Canada or Morocco living inside the United States.” (Alter, p. 44) The problem of poverty in the United States is very unique. The United States poverty rate is double that of other industrialized nations. (Alter, p.4)

Nutrition

The diet of food insecure people tends to be less healthy. Canned fruits and vegetables, which tend to have more salt and sugar, are much less expensive than fresh fruits. Leaner cuts of meat tend to cost more. However, according to Dr. Walter C. Willet, “A calorie is a calorie is a calorie.” (Willet, p.44) Theoretically, no matter how unhealthy a person’s diet, that person can only gain weight from fat by using fewer calories than he or she takes in. The quality of diet would only affect susceptibility to disease and health problems. If this is the case, then how do 52% of food insecure people become overweight? According to Dr. Willet, “people tend to eat similar weights of food, no matter what the energy density.” (Willet, p.46) A person who would eat an ounce of lean meat would also eat an ounce of fatty meat, which has more calories. Protein has about four calories per gram, but fat has approximately nine calories per gram. (Willet, p.46)

People have always craved foods that are high in fat or sugar. Our early ancestors, facing scarcity of food, found that these types of food helped them to survive. Having higher caloric value, these types of food were and still are quick and sustaining sources of energy. These types of food often leave a person satiated when other alternatives do not. (Weil, 72-74) While this type of food was good for hunter gatherers’ survival, today’s impoverished people do not generally use a lot of physical activity for survival, so all of that extra energy is converted into fat.

Another reason for poor nutrition is that often there is very little choice in food. Healthy foods are often more expensive, and there is not very much availability of nutritionally adequate choices.

“Poor neighborhoods often lack large grocery stores that typically offer the lowest prices and greatest range of brands, package sizes and quality choices, and farmers markets that sell locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables. Transportation to these large grocery stores and farmers markets also may be unavailable or expensive. Consequently, many mothers in low-income neighborhoods depend on their corner convenience stores - stocked with mostly high-cost processed, prepackaged foods - to feed their families.” (Bread for the World Institute - Obesity and Hunger in the United States)

Underprivileged children often get only one nutritionally balanced meal a day, that being provided by the free and reduced lunch program. Nutrition is taught in schools and put on food labels, but when people don't have enough money to take these factors into consideration, a balanced diet is impossible. However an unbalanced diet and periodically eating more calories than needed would not completely cause the obesity epidemic of the lower-class.

“Food Stamp Cycle”

The “food stamp cycle” hypothesis is based on the idea that people only spend money or resources when they have them. The Food Stamp program provides about 79 cents per person per meal. (Center on Hunger, p.3) Most people cannot survive on 79 cents per meal, so when food stamps are distributed at the beginning of the month, recipients use the stamps as needed until they are exhausted. Often there are not enough resources, including the stamps, to eat for the whole month, so maybe for the last week of a month, a member of the family restricts his/her eating. When the next round of food stamps arrives, everyone eats again. This theory explains why when about half of moderately food insecure people are overweight, 68.3% of moderately food insecure food stamp recipients are overweight. (Townsend) When a person doesn't eat for a period of time, the body prepares for starvation, “slowing metabolism and promoting storage of calories as fat when eating resumes.” (Weil, p.184) Christine Olson and Caron Bove conducted a study on food insecurity and obesity in rural women. The pattern that they found was that women consider their food needs secondary. Women in the study cut back meals and only ate leftovers when there were shortages in the household. A 36-year-old single mother in the study said, “Usually what I do is I eat what they haven't ate. A lot of times I just skip. If I can't eat for the day, I'll try to get a little toast or something in me.” (Olson) This type of attitude is common. People in food insecure situations move to survival mode, providing for children first, and their bodies do the same by storing energy in the form of body fat for future use. This kind of adaptation to the environment should not exist in a fully developed country. Theoretically food stamps could be distributed more often to reduce the effect, but that does not address the underlying problem. What is to be done in the United States to address the issues of hunger, obesity and poverty?

Suggestions

The United States government needs to address the issue of poverty in the United States. Hurricane Katrina may have done some work to reveal the state of the poor in America. The rest of the country saw the victims who were too poor to evacuate New Orleans. New Orleans has traditionally been one of the best examples of poverty in the United States. In addition to the numbers of poor and in need, two thirds of requests for emergency food assistance went unmet. The impoverished are left in a constant state of food insecurity with barely a hope of help in times of great crisis. There are many in this country who work near a point of slave labor because their pay is not enough to feed them, and there is no other option. These circumstances have been revealed to the nation and must be rectified by the nation that allowed it to happen. Tax cuts to the rich have not greatly improved our economy but have only served to increase the income gap.

That top one percent can afford to be taxed in order to help lift fellow citizens out of poverty. Several Programs that are or have been in existence need to be reinstated or expanded.

The Earned Income Tax Credit program, which provides low-income workers with tax relief, in the hopes of bringing many of the working poor into the middle class, is a savior to

many, but could be expanded. A Clinton era “scatter-site” housing program, which “found homes for the poor in mixed-income neighborhoods” and helped poor children achieve with a healthier peer group could be reinstated. (Alter, p.47) After-school programs could be expanded and better funded. Food Stamps and the School Lunch program help people get the nutrition they need, but the programs are far from perfect. John Edwards has argued that one important step would be to establish bank accounts for people in poverty, so that they could save money and have assets for times of need. Another solution to the poverty question has been presented called micro-credit. Very small loans are made to people without collateral. Banks would not take the risk of a loan without collateral, but a few United Methodist groups have supported these micro-lending programs. Borrowers “used these loans to purchase items that allowed them to become self-supporting and to pay back the loans with interest.” (Community with Children and the Poor, p.32) All of these things would help the poverty situation in America now and give the next generation a better chance of living outside of poverty.

The government also needs to hire an expert on poverty to help address policy issues. John Dilulio was the last expert of this kind, but he left because the Bush administration was not interested in poverty issues. (Alter, p. 44) In order for progress to happen, problems must not be ignored. After all, the first step to recovery is admitting that there is a problem. the United States is the world’s only superpower, but a country cannot stay strong on an international level if it is crumbling from within. If America is going to remain on the international political field, it must improve the status of its own citizens.

In conclusion, there is an ignored minority in the United States. That minority is now about 37 million people strong. (Alter, p.44) That minority is impoverished Americans. This group of people has been ignored by the greater population for years.

While there are many programs established to help the poor of the United States, they are not enough to combat the real problems but are merely temporary solutions. 20% of children are born poor in the United States today. (Alter, p.46) One of the major problems of these poor people is also a trend in the entire nation. That trend is a tendency to become overweight or obese. There are many factors contributing to obesity, but among the poor, they deal with a single issue food insecurity. Because of food insecurity, there is often very poor dietary quality among the poor. Cheaper foods are generally less healthy, and when people are hungry, they want something substantive to eat. Fruits and vegetables are uncommon in diets of the poor. Also, in addition to the plain nutritional facts, there is the factor given the name, “food stamp cycle.” When people are given food stamps at the beginning of a month, they use them to buy food. When a family runs out of food stamps, someone often has to stop eating until the family receives more food stamps. When a person periodically stops eating, the body learns to prepare for it, and so it becomes more efficient at storing fat. This factor is a huge cause of obesity among low-income mother because there is a belief and inherent survival technique that teaches mothers to feed their children first. While this effect is common, many people continue to believe that hunger and obesity cannot coexist. The two nutritional problems can and do quite frequently coexist.

The United States must, if only because of concern for the future begin to take action on the travesty poverty in this country. Perhaps if the whole population began to take concern for the poor and food insecure, then many of the nutritional problems of the general population would begin to be resolved without fad diets or surgery. People who are overweight because of the food stamp cycle could begin to lose that weight if they had a readily available food source instead of a periodically absent one. Once the general population recognizes these problems, solutions will begin to be implimented, but politicians do not institute policies that their

constituencies don't support. Much of the obesity problem of the United States would begin to be solved if the poverty issue was solved.

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