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## *Changing Obesity through Nutritious Food Programs*

### **Introduction**

Hunger and obesity are two epidemics that would seem to have nothing to do with each other. In fact they do, their common denominator is poverty. In the year 2003, poverty affected more than 35 million people in the United States (Time, 630). That is 13 million more than in the year 2002 (Time, 630). With the rise in poverty, there has also been a huge rise in obesity. In America, an estimated 30 million people are obese (Obese, 9). Obesity accounts for 280,000 deaths in the United States each year (Time, 550). If this persists, obesity will become the leading cause of preventable death next to smoking (Obesity, 1). More and more children are becoming obese everyday; today one in every six children is obese (Time, 546). Poverty plays a huge role in why so many people are obese. Inaccurate information also is a contributing factor in the development of obesity. It was once thought, "If people obtained enough energy in their diets, they would obtain enough minerals, vitamins, and other micro nutrients" (Hunger notes, 2). That statement could not be further from the truth. If we revamp programs like school lunch programs, the food stamp program, or the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) Program, then we can hopefully fight off the problems of poverty, like hunger and obesity. One would often think that hunger and obesity could not equally co-exist. While this seems like a contradiction, researchers are now finding that obesity and hunger can co-exist with poverty as the primary contributing factor. These problems have become such serious health risks that obesity is now considered an epidemic. Obesity's highest rates occur among areas that have the highest poverty rates and the least amount of education. (Poverty, 1) They have also found that the high calorie foods are the lowest cost option. It has also been found that the flavorsome food contains higher calories (Poverty, 1). The problem with many fast food businesses is that one meal can contain a high number of calories, and is full of sodium and sugars. Eating fast food almost three times a week can lead to many health problems, one of them being obesity. A fast food meal can range from 400 calories to 1,500 calories (Franz, 5). An increased consumption of snacks, sodas, and fast food by children and young adults has been shown to be linked with obesity and excess weight gain (Obesity, 2). Even though fast food is not the only cause of obesity, it is a contributing factor because of its high fat content and lack of nutrients.

In America, poverty affects many people, especially those with children. In the year 2003, 12.9 million children under the age of eighteen lived within poverty levels (Time, 630). No set family income level is afflicted with poverty. Families with an income of \$21,959 with five or more members were considered living in poverty in the year 2003 (Time, 630). That is a huge difference compared to a similar family in the year 1960, where the poverty level was only \$3,560 (Time, 630). Looking at poverty levels now compared to poverty levels in the 1960's, the difference in poverty level income is due partly to inflation and partly due to the increased cost of living. When looking at poverty levels in 2003, 5.5 million families were living below poverty levels versus the four million males that were living in poverty (Time, 630). When looking at how much they spend per week on food, men spend an average \$52.00 a week versus the \$45.00 women spend (Time, 630). In addition to that 59.8% of females are participants in the food stamp program but only 41% of men participated in the food stamp program.

When making insufficient earnings, it is often hard to buy nutritious foods for one's children. "Supermarket shelves are filled with cheap mass-produced good tasting food, that is packed with calories" (Time, 546). Malnutrition is not only caused by lack of food, but also lack of high quality food such as whole grains, fiber, fruits, and vegetables" (Hunger notes, 3). On the average in 2002, a typical family would spend \$37.50 per person per week. With limited funds and time, there are not many choices other than fast food. Fast food is quick, easy, cheap, and readily available. If this food were not quick, easy, cheap, and readily available, parents probably would not be putting their children at risk for obesity,

heart disease, or diabetes.

The breakfast program is one the most important programs in our schools. The school breakfast program helps families with tight budgets. It also helps busy families who do not always have time to sit down every morning and have a nutritious meal. Having breakfast has been proven to increase reading and math scores (Breakfast, 2). It has been proven that the closer breakfast is to classes and testing time, the better the performance will be (Breakfast, 2). In order to be in this program, a person's income level must be between 130 and 185% of the poverty level which is \$21,900 (Breakfast, 2). To be able to apply for free breakfast, a person would need to make \$28,990. More than three fourths of the schools in America participate in the breakfast program (Breakfast, 1). In the year 2004, 8.7 million children participated in the program (Breakfast, 1).

The school lunch program is basically the same idea as the breakfast program. To be eligible for this program, a person would have an income level between 130 to 185% of the poverty level (Lunch, 1). 95 percent of the public schools take part in this program (Lunch, 1). That means more students consume the recommended nutrients, they will be more attentive in class, and they will have better attendance. It has been proven that eating a nutritious lunch enables students to have better behavior, a better performance in school and a better overall development (Lunch, 1). Schools need programs like the lunch and breakfast programs.

The schools that participate in these programs are giving the low-income students greater opportunities in school, health, and everyday living. These schools can also be hurting the students while helping. Most schools have vending machines and the ala carte line option at lunchtime. The schools are one of the problems in dealing with obesity. When looking at the vending machines, all that is seen is sugary juices, pop, and candy. You see the same thing when you look at the ala carte. Who is going to want to eat school lunches over pizza and candy bars? Not only are schools competing with the alternatives, they are also dealing with long lines and limited eating time.

Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, "provides nutritious foods, nutrition education, and access to health care to low-income pregnant women, new mothers, infants and children at nutritional risk" (WIC, 1). All who participate have seen a great increase in reducing anemia, reducing incidence of low birth rate and fetal mortality, and enhancing the nutritional quality of diet (WIC 1). To be in this program there are four requirements:

1. The participant must be pregnant, just have had a child, or breast-feeding woman, infant, or have a child younger than five.
2. This person must apply in the state in which they live.
3. All participants must have an income below 185 percent of the poverty line.
4. Lastly, the participant must be certified by a professional.

In the year 2002, WIC provided healthful foods and services to 1.8 million pregnant women, about two million infants, and about four million children each month (WIC, 1). (With the food packages, the women, infant, and children give out they heighten the "nutritional quality of the diet of participants through its food packages (WIC, 2).)

There is one basic purpose to the food stamp program and that is to provide low-income families with a higher nutritious diet through coupons. Now they use a system called electronic benefit transfer system, or EBT (Food Stamp, 1). In the year 2003 more than twenty one million individuals participated in the food stamp program (Food Stamp, 1). The government spends more than twenty three billion dollars on the food stamp program (Food Stamp, 1). State government pays nearly fifty percent of the cost and the federal government pays the rest (Food Stamp, 2). There is a process a person must go through to join the food stamp program. First a person must fill out an application form. Then there will be an interview. Lastly they will need to verify the facts. The requirements to being in the program are that a

person must make between 130-100 percent of poverty level (Food Stamp, 2). On average the food stamp program provides 90 cents per person per meal (Food Stamp, 2). While this program has benefits, it also has its flaws. Many people find that they often run out of stamps before the end of the month. Most of these benefits are so low, along with a low income, that it is often hard to obtain adequate nutrition.

Many people who have kids and live below poverty line work two jobs or work all the time. So it is often difficult to find affordable daycare. That is the job of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the CACFP provides snacks and meals to the children (CACFP, 1). Their job is to “ensure that young children in child care have access to a nutritious diet” (CACFP, 2). This program has reached homes, child care centers, and after school programs (CACFP, 1). In the year 2003, CACFP provided meals to 2.8 million children and 80,000 elderly persons every day (CACFP, 1). And in the year 2002, the program has provided more than 1.7 billion meals and snacks all together (CACFP, 1). For the children twelve and under they can receive up to two meals and one snack every day (CACFP, 1). Persons eighteen and under can receive after-school snacks (CACFP, 1). This program has huge benefits for the homeless shelters; all homeless shelters may be reimbursed for three meals a day for persons less than eighteen (CACFP, 1). The CACFP overall has helped children develop fully, allowed students to enter school ready to learn, and helped start good nutrition habits early (CACFP, 2).

These programs are a necessity to ensure that obesity and hunger do not become more severe. For instance, girls who participate in these programs are at lower risk for being overweight. And girls who participate in all three programs were 68 percent less likely to be overweight than girls who did not participate. There is a need to expand these programs so that they can reach more people and more people will be eligible. For instance, increase eligibility from between 130% and 185% of the poverty level to 150% and 205% of the poverty level. This way more people will receive benefits. Other ways the United States can improve is by making living more affordable by increasing minimum wages. Affordable health care is another way of improvement. There are tons of ways the United States can improve. By focusing on some of these programs and looking at other problems, we can find ways to fight off hunger, obesity, and food insecurity. Some ways we can tackle obesity with low income families is to permit doctors at local hospitals to check for obesity and hunger, this way more people will be able gain access to food nutrition programs. Another thing that can be done is to make sure that the vending machines and ala carte in our schools have some substantial level of nutritional quality. In low-income communities, we can make sure that low-income families are able to get high nutrition. Another thing that is important is to be sure that people are able to use their food stamps anywhere, for instance, the farmers market. Lastly, one of the most important things is education emphasizing the importance of eating healthy and maintaining good fitness. Schools can “promote sports and activity programs” to help lower the obesity rates and increase the overall health of children (Link, 2).

## **Conclusion**

Many low income families face problems with eating properly and exercising which are the two main preventions of obesity. Through the lunch and breakfast programs, WIC, and the CACFP low-income families are helped with the problems of hunger and obesity. These programs are vital in conquering obesity due to the fact that they allow the students to obtain higher nutritious food. These programs enable students to live better lives, and become better people. Though it is often complicated to make ends meet and provide nutritious meals, programs like these have made it possible. Obesity has affected as many people as hunger, and through cooperating with programs, it will be possible to help these people. Having good nutrition is very vital for children in allowing them to live productive lives. However, as good as these programs are they desperately need to be reworked so more people are able to give their children the kind of nutrition that children need. These nutrition programs can help set examples for children, and therefore, influence the next generation. Changes in these programs can lower both obesity and hunger rates. It is time to tackle hunger and malnutrition by decreasing poverty and increasing education for parents on the values of good eating habits.

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