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Malnourishment In The United States

An Iowan picks up the *Des Moines Register* and the headline reads, "More Babies, Young Kids Going Hungry in the United States." It is hard to imagine that this headline is accurate. It is hard to imagine that there is hunger in "the bread basket of the world." It is hard to imagine a country with the majority of the population having computers, cars and the latest gadgets sending children to bed hungry. There is a problem in the United States and we, as Americans, need to fix this problem known as malnutrition. Malnutrition doesn't only mean going to bed hungry every night, but ironically it means being obese and over weight. Statistics show that more than one in ten households in the United States experience food insecurities; they lack food or do not have adequate resources to meet individual nutritional needs (Bread Institute n.pag.). Households in the United States are not well educated in the area of nutrition or in the development of a proper diet. According to Senator Elizabeth Dole, "Hunger, a silent enemy, is lurking within too many of today's homes" (n.pag.). This silent enemy is responsible for the hunger problem as well as the obesity epidemic in the non-traditional homes that are most common in the United States. Throughout the United States, Americans are experiencing malnutrition, hunger and homelessness. These Americans are not only adults but sadly there is a large number of children being affected. There are programs for children and adults that help feed the hungry, as well as educating the public on healthy food choices.

Education plays a key role in eating and staying healthy. Education also goes along with fighting the obesity epidemic. There are people who need to be reminded that eating fast food is unhealthy. In the United States, two-thirds of the population is either overweight or obese (Bread Institute n.pag.). The majority of obese people don't believe that their size will affect them later in life. This influences more poor men and women than the general population because they have a lack of funds and end up buying food that is cheaper, and cheat themselves of nutritional benefits. Having these kinds of habits and eating inappropriately can, and will, lead to serious health problems. However, obesity can be controlled with a proper diet and exercise, but what about those who go to bed hungry every night?

In 2002, there were approximately 34.6 million Americans who were going to bed hungry, which was up 1.7 million from 2001 (Dole n.pag.). More than 25% of all families in the United States with children are single parent families, with the majority of these being led by female head of households (Fraser n.pag.). The days of Leave It to Beaver no longer exist. In today's society a typical family structure consists of a single parent household. The poverty numbers are not declining; they are increasing rapidly due to the loss in jobs and the high cost of living. If a person is laid off a job, it is most certain that he or she will not be able to meet the needs of their families. These needs include housing, clothing, and most importantly, three square meals a day. However, many people associate hunger with Americans who do not have a paying job. This is not the case, for hunger is occurring to a number of families who are employed. The number of people affected by hunger is escalating, and at a rapid pace. There are 43,000,000 people in low-income families (Dole n.pag.). That means that millions of those individuals are lining up at soup kitchens, low-priced pantries, and other charitable organizations. This includes both men and women who are working anywhere from one to three jobs, while at the same time raising a family. This simply means that there are children in America who are going to bed hungry every night. In 2003, 11.2 percent of families in the United States experienced hunger,

and the numbers are going up from the previous years (Yahoo Health News n.pag.). Subsequently poverty is a continually growing problem in the United States.

In 2004, the poverty rate in the United States rose to 12.7 percent, making this the fourth consecutive annual increase (U.S. Government n.pag.). One out of every eight people in the United States are living in poverty (U.S. Government n.pag.). This focuses more on the rural population more than the urban population. A family of four, having two children, and obtaining an income of \$19,157.00 or less,

is considered to be living in poverty (U.S. Government n.pag.). An individual sixty-five years old or over and living alone and having an income of \$9,060 is considered to be living in poverty (U.S. Government n.pag.). Child poverty in the United States is due mainly because of the levels of parental work and the high number of single-parent families. Due to the low paying employment options and rising cost of living, more families and individuals are becoming homeless.

In a given year, 3.5 million people, including 1.35 million children, will experience homelessness, which is a temporary situation for many (National Coalition for the Homeless n.pag.). Homeless people are looking for something to eat and will eat anything that they can find in order to satisfy their hunger. In the United States we have a problem on our hands. The late Senator Robert F. Kennedy stated, "Starvation in this land of enormous wealth is nothing short of indecent" (Leinwand 9). Now is the time we must continue to work together and come up with a feasible plan for not only America's hungry but the worldwide population as well. Too many children in the United States are experiencing first-hand what it is like to go without enough to eat causing serious health issues.

Children are the first to suffer from malnutrition. Statistics show that in 2001, 33 million American children did not know when or where they would get their next meal (Bread Institute n.pag.). Since children grow and develop very rapidly, they need a diet to meet these needs. In many cases, they are not receiving the proper nutritional requirements that their growing bodies need. The first year of a baby's life is very crucial (Yahoo Health News n.pag.). The brain size of a baby increases 2.5 times in the first year and if a baby fails to get the nutritional needs that he or she requires, a child can have a life long history of behavior and learning problems (Yahoo Health News n.pag.).

According to Dr. Black, a pediatrician at Baltimore, Maryland, "If a child's height and weight are stunted under the age of two, they are at risk for academic and behavioral problems at school" (Yahoo Health News n.pag.). Malnutrition in the first few years of life can lead to being antisocial and aggressive behavior through childhood. Over time, there is evidence that there is a link between malnourishment and antisocial or aggressive behavior. Nutrition is very crucial to children in growing up healthy and living a healthy life there after. In our schools, the School Breakfast Program (SBP) as well as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) are being offered to families in need, in order to help with the malnourishment that exists in our school age children today. Statistics show that students who eat a nutritional diet, improve their academic performance.

If the government subsidies for our public schools continue, research shows that children who go to school on a regular basis improve their academic performance due to improved nutritional diets. The school lunch programs are the most important targets to help combat hunger

and malnourishment in today's society (Bread Institute n.pag.). Over 27 million students participate in the school lunch program, with over 15 million low-income children receiving lunch for free or at a reduced price (Bread Institute n.pag.). For children, the school lunch program is a critical link to providing food security. Studies have shown that this is the best way to promote encouragement for stronger school attendance, which will help to increase literacy rates, which helps to fight poverty. By educating our children, we may be able to teach a new generation about the proper requirements that are needed for proper nutrition. Promoting school meal programs will educate our children, and in return the children will take this knowledge into their homes.

Supplemental food programs to assist our families, children especially, have been created to help alleviate the hunger in our American families. An estimated 35 million Americans are experiencing food

insecurity (CommonDreams.org n.pag.). The need for such assistance as the Food Stamp Program is being used by 4 in 10 Americans between the ages of 20 and 65 (CommonDreams.org n.pag.). That's 40% of Americans who are experiencing a shortage of food to eat (CommonDreams.org n.pag.). My parents talk about having to feed two growing boys. They say that it takes more to feed a family than it use to only a few years earlier. In my family there are two people holding jobs in order to support a family of four. So how is it that a single parent can earn enough money to feed a family of four? Other programs such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) are aimed at improving the health of low-income children, adults, as well as pregnant and breastfeeding women. Our food banks are having a hard time keeping up with the high demand of people. As America struggles in today's economic hardships, financial donations have dropped off or corporations have scaled back on food donations. The latest figures are showing there are too many people, too little food and the number of people in need is growing.

In 2003 there were at least 23 million Americans who stood in food lines (Dole n.pag.). In any given week it was estimated that 7 million people are served at emergency feeding sites around the country (Dole n.pag.). In specific parts of our country the number of hungry people is just disheartening. Many of the same people are returning for food because they can't find any other means to get fed.

One organization, The Society of St. Andrew, is a group that has been around for twenty-five years and works in the area of "gleaning." Gleaning is where excess crops that would just be thrown away are taken from the farm and used for food to feed the hungry. This process benefits the farmer because he or she doesn't have to haul off or plow under any crops that do not meet exact specifications for grocery chains. Gleaning is not only for farms but also for packing plants and warehouses. In return, it helps to feed the hungry, because they aren't eating just anything, but instead are consuming good healthy foods. Gleaning is like any other humanitarian group that works off of cooperative efforts. Such cooperative programs are being seen in our schools (Dole n.pag.).

Recommendations to help improve the situation of malnourishment in the United States would include continuing with the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP) and the WIC Program. Studies have shown that by intervening at the school level, gains are being made on the student's cognitive performances, and helping to educate

proper nutrition for a new generation. There is also a greater need for groups like the Gleaning Society of St. Andrew. This group plays a very important role in feeding the hungry. Other government programs need to be better scrutinized, as there are too many people who are more than just “needy,” but are becoming “greedy.” There is evidence in my own community that shows too many people have learned how to abuse and beat the system. I know from my own observations, that many of these individuals who are using the system, are very capable of holding jobs. If such individuals did have jobs, there wouldn’t be a reason to have them continue to use the system. This is costly for today’s taxpayers, because the money can only go so far. They are not only robbing from the program but from the intended recipients of this program as well. The system is not only being used but also abused and this is causing more problems for the program to operate more efficiently.

Malnutrition, hunger and obesity are areas that our national government and international organizations need to fight, in order to help safeguard the quality of life aimed towards those individuals in need. Allowing for more educational opportunities in the form of meetings, pamphlets, television and radio commercials would better educate the public on healthier food choices. By eliminating the “fast-food” commercials and replacing them with healthier choices, this would allow for more information to be out in the population. Our food industry also needs to become more aware of health issues. Maybe if

the government would allow these industries an incentive for promoting a healthier food product, it might result in a new healthier food market.

Possible incentives to help promote healthier food may include a reduction on any advertisements that are done, either by the use of television, radio, or other media. Another possible incentive could include a reduced transportation cost, moving their products from point “A” to point “B.” This could be done for imports and exports alike, involving both national and international governments regardless what countries are involved.

The United States is facing a hidden epidemic. The number of hungry people in the United States is now greater than it was in 1996. It is striking all Americans of every age group and culture, whether they are living in cities or rural areas. This hidden epidemic is better known as malnutrition. Malnutrition affects virtually every organ in the body and in every age group, although infants and adolescents suffer the most because of their body’s growth and development. Malnutrition is not always due to the lack of food, but the quality of food being consumed. Children are the most vulnerable to the effects that malnutrition causes during infancy and early childhood. These effects can be seen in behavioral changes, which may include irritability, apathy, antisocial responsiveness, anxiety, and attention deficit disorders. Poor weight gain, as well as slow growth are signs and symptoms of early malnourishment. The prevention of malnutrition needs to start in children with an emphasis on prenatal nutrition and good prenatal care. Health care providers need to educate the public on breastfeeding, which is very important for the first year of a baby’s life. Health care providers also need to educate the public on nutritious and supplemental foods. The government must continue to do this with the school lunch programs and the breakfast programs. By doing so, they are educating the children of today on what a proper breakfast and lunch meals are. These programs are great, but there are people who are taking advantage of them. They have gained food security, but show that they are still hungry and need the assistance. Our busy schedules are causing us to rely on “fast foods,” which are filling, but offer nothing that is nutritionally healthy. People will get full eating hamburgers and fries, but nutritionally, they have gained nothing

beneficial to their bodies. This is the case for so many people who have children that show signs of malnourishment. According to Dr. Black, "In some families, eating junk food means one child is obese while the other is underweight. The first will eat junk food (fast food) and nothing else, the second will eat junk food (fast food) and everything else" (Yahoo Health News n.pag.). Education is one of the most important things that need to get out to the people of the United States as well as the world. There are too many people who just don't understand what a good and nutritious diet consists of. Or some people don't know of some of the programs available to them. As Americans, and as a world, we can help eliminate this terrible epidemic that is robbing our children of proper nutrition. This silent enemy is responsible for the hungry as well as the obese. Through education and more resources that are used according to their purposes we can put an end to the hungry and starving children and adults in the United States.

There shouldn't be any child going to bed hungry at night. In the future our goal is to have an Iowan pick up the *Des Moines Register* with the headline reading, "More Babies, Young Kids Growing up Healthy in the United States."

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