

Emma Braford
Grand Rapids High School
Grand Rapids, Minnesota, United States
El Salvador, Malnutrition

El Salvador: Programming for the Youth Population to Decrease Hunger

In a place where children have to go through their day not knowing where their next meal is going to come from, after school programming is needed the most. Many families in El Salvador can not afford the food to provide balanced nutrition to their children. These families often end up with their kids out of school, instead working to try to put food on the table. After-school programming where a meal would be available for schoolchildren can provide these kids with adequate nutrition, safe food, and a safe environment to develop themselves to be more productive members of their community. Providing a meal to children in a program would reduce some financial stress families face, making more nutritious food more affordable.

El Salvador is a country in Central America with a population of over 6.6 million people. 75.4% of the population is Urban and 24.6% is rural (The World Factbook). The Government is a Presidential Republic (The World Factbook) led by President Nayib Armando Bukele Ortez. The country is 74.7% agricultural land, with their major crops being coffee, cotton, corn, and sugarcane (Economy of El Salvador). The average size of a family farm is about 2.94 acres while the average size of a family business farm is 206.36 acres, which is about the size of 200 football fields (Fao.org). Their climate is moderate with a wet season May through October and a dry season November through April (World Bank Climate Change Knowledge Portal). El Salvador ranks 56th with a score of 64.2 on the Global Food Security Index, 2022, ranking 12th with food availability, but 58th with food affordability. (Global Food Security Index 2022)

The average family in El Salvador has 3.6 people per household. Houses in urban areas are typically made from bricks and cement with an average of 480 square feet, while houses in the slums are typically huts made from aluminum, cardboard, and plastic (Thelwell, Kim). Staple foods in Salvadoran households are corn and beans. (Customs and Cuisine of El Salvador). Families often eat rice, chicken, beef or fish, salad, tortillas, and a soft drink for lunch and eggs, beans, cheese, and plantains for dinner (Popular El Salvador Recipes). A favorite dish is pupusa, a traditional food consisting of a stuffed flatbread made with cornmeal or rice flour. Most families go to the supermarket for food or get their food through wholesalers (El Salvador - Agricultural Sectors). The GDP per capita was \$9,100 in 2021 (The World Factbook) with the most common jobs being in the agricultural or manufacturing sectors of the labor force. Many children end up leaving school to work on sugar or coffee plantations to support their families (Nesrine, Chebbi). As public education is only free through the 9th grade, only 33% of students who are old enough actually attend secondary school (What's Education like in El Salvador?). This is because many families cannot afford the cost of schooling, so teens start working at the age of 15 instead of going to school.

As families struggle to put food on the table, pressuring children and teens to start work at very young ages, many children are not receiving the nutrition they need. Malnutrition is a large factor of food insecurity in El Salvador as 7.7% of children are undernourished, 11.2% are stunted, and 5% are underweight (Global Food Security Index 2022). Currently, these trends are slightly decreasing, except for child stunting. Child stunting in El Salvador has been increasing slowly since 2014. Malnutrition stems from families having low incomes, but multiple mouths to feed. Some families can afford larger amounts of cheap food, but this food is not nutritionally balanced. This causes people not to be receiving the right amount of nutrients in their diet, leading to undernourishment, child stunting, and child wasting.

Malnutrition impacts people across El Salvador. There is more malnutrition in the rural population as this includes slums where most families are living off of less than one dollar a day. In urban areas, there is less

malnutrition, but many people still struggle to suit their dietary needs. Children are more susceptible than adults to be impacted by an improper diet as they are in a development stage where they need a lot of nutrients and energy to keep up with their growing bodies. Over 50% of households in El Salvador experience some degree of chronic food insecurity, which would be levels 2, 3, or 4 of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (El Salvador: Chronic Food Insecurity Situation 2015 - 2020). Level 2 describes households that have the ability to consume an adequate diet but not a diet with quality, while levels 3 and 4 are described as households whose food consumption has an energy and nutritional deficit for at least two months out of the year (El Salvador: Chronic Food Insecurity Situation 2015 - 2020). Families in levels three and four usually have children who suffer from chronic malnutrition as well.

Solutions to the issues El Salvador faces with food insecurity lie within the youth population. As food availability is high in El Salvador when compared to other countries, food affordability is very low. The supply is there, but many families cannot afford the food to provide their children with adequate nutrition. A solution to this is providing opportunities for students to attend an after-school program, which provides a meal and would be essential to social and personal development of students who participate in the program. After-school programming is shown to help children and teens develop a sense of self-worth and help them become more productive members of their community in the future. As participating in after school programming can increase a child's likelihood to succeed, those children will also have a higher chance of being future leaders in El Salvador and may contribute to the food security issues El Salvador faces throughout the future. Another benefit of after-school programming is reducing the chances of a participant becoming involved with violence or substance abuse. Crime and substance abuse are large detriments to the economy and by reducing crime rates and substance abuse, El Salvador would be saving money in the long run and building a stronger community; this means there would be more money available to be directed towards food security efforts and fighting against malnutrition. There are a couple recommendations for how programming could be made accessible to students in El Salvador.

The United States has a program called the Boys and Girls Club (Our Mission & Story), which is an after-school program designed to provide students with a safe environment with adult mentors to help guide kids to reach their potential. In the United States, the Boys and Girls Club has more than 400,000 trained staff and volunteers providing guidance and support to millions of kids and teens across the nation (Our Mission & Story). Mentors are able to delve deep into the personalities of each individual child and can help spark the curiosity of these children and teens and direct them towards a future career field. This program prevents early drug use, encourages kids to attend school and look forward to college, and promotes positive mental health outcomes (Our Mission & Story). Each location of a Boys and Girls Club utilizes a facility or space in which they run their program five days a week. I would recommend El Salvador follows a model like the Boys and Girls Club, though with a few alterations. An after-school program in El Salvador could also provide a meal to its members. As many families cannot afford food, providing a meal each day children attend the program will relieve some financial pressure from their families. The facilities the program can take place in could include schools. Catholicism is a large part of El Salvador culture, so another potential facility to use for programs could be churches. El Salvador's public schooling is free through 9th grade, when students are about 14 years old. 25% of El Salvador's population are children ages 0-14 years old, at approximately 1,676,974 total (The World Factbook). About 82% of these children will make it to ninth grade. (What's Education like in El Salvador?) This comes to a number of almost 1.4 million of these children. Most children in El Salvador do not attend secondary school, due to it being unaffordable to a lot of families. These teens will often end up working to bring in another source of income for their families (Thelwell, Kim). Providing an after school program in secondary school would not only provide teens who already go to secondary school with a meal and personal development, but would also encourage families to send their kids to secondary school, giving more kids the opportunity to reap the benefits of after school programming. The first recommendation for after school programming in El Salvador would be to provide funding for meal costs and additional costs,

such as transportation and the general costs to run a program, to create a new after-school program similar to the boys and girls club in schools across the country.

The second recommendation would be to provide funding for meal costs to already existing after-school programs across El Salvador. This could be done through the already existing CASEProject, where they run sports and education camps in El Salvador (El Salvador). This programming includes the development of skills in various sport activities as well as health, wellness, and teamwork lessons. The project also focuses on developing self-awareness and self-management through movement, nutrition, and community (El Salvador). CASEProject is partnered with Glasswing International Inc for many of their efforts. Creating an extension off of this already existing program, where food can be distributed across CASEProject's events, would knock down some barriers of food insecurity that families of these children face.

The second solution would cost less, as the only cost would be the cost of meals rather than the cost of an entire after school program additional to meals, though, this solution would not have the capability to impact nearly as many kids across El Salvador as providing a new after-school program would. If more people are reached by programming, more families' lives will be changed. The bigger the impact that can be made towards tackling the root of food insecurity, the better. The best way to tackle this problem would be to provide a new after-school program with food insecurity as one of its main focuses. This program would also tackle the root of the issue by developing kids to be more productive community members in the future to reduce food insecurity and malnutrition down the road. One of the largest barriers to this solution is funding, as after-school programming can be very costly. Funding for either of these after school programs, though, could come from El Salvador's Government as their budget for the Ministry of Education will have an allocation of \$1.5 billion for 2023. (Quartucci, Soledad) Funds, budgets, and allocations have already been determined for the fiscal year 2023, though, so funding for these solutions would have to be for fiscal year 2024. A fiscal year in El Salvador is from January 1 through December 31, or one calendar year (The World Factbook). The Salvadoran Government emphasizes public investment, education, health, and security, so looking ahead, we can expect to see a similar budget for the 2024 fiscal year. The plan could be introduced as a bill to the Salvadoran Legislature to appropriate grant funds to schools to implement the plan. A second option for El Salvador to receive funding for after school programming would be to receive foreign assistance. The United States has already provided over \$4.4 billion to El Salvador through USAID and its predecessor U.S. Government programs (El Salvador - Frequently Asked Questions: El Salvador). Seeing as the United States has already contributed funds to the betterment of El Salvador, receiving foreign aid from The U.S. is another option to strive for. The plan would be implemented by schools, though mentors in the program could come from various places. Mentors could be school staff, trusted community members, college students, sports coaches, or anyone qualified to work with children and teens. The model that schools follow for an after school program can be flexible to fit the needs of each individual community, but will be built off of the same framework and will all have to follow the policy that a meal will be provided to students in the program. The facility for the program, as mentioned previously, can also vary from community to community. Some communities may be best accustomed to have the program within a school building, while others may seek to have the program in a church or similar facility. The programming would be available to all grade levels, but breakout groups for different age groups may be necessary to maintain order in the program. These programs could start as a few schools across El Salvador, and as the framework is refined they could spread to more parts of the country. A long-term goalpost would be to develop after-school programming for half of El Salvador's public schools.

To tackle the roots of malnutrition, El Salvador needs to start with their youth population, as these are the people who will define the future of the country. By establishing after-school programming, El Salvador can distribute meals to students, fighting hunger now, while building strong community members that can contribute to decreasing hunger in future generations. The presence of after-school programs in El

Salvador is minimal right now, but over time this trend can change for the better, fighting food insecurity in the process. As El Salvador students are provided opportunities to participate in after-school programs, develop a sense of self-worth and direction, and meet more of their dietary needs, pressures will be let off of families struggling with food affordability. Students may also be more inclined to stay in school due to the benefits of the programs, providing these students with access to quality food. Providing meals in after-school programming is how we assure that children in El Salvador will go through their day knowing where their next meal will come from.

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