



Statement before the House Committee on Agriculture

## Hearing Series: Past, Present, and Future of SNAP

# The National Commission on Hunger

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*The views expressed in this testimony are those of the authors on behalf of the National Commission on Hunger. Institutional affiliations are provided for identification purposes only and do not imply institutional support or endorsement.*

Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Peterson, and other distinguished members of the committee, thank you for giving us the opportunity to testify about the findings of the National Commission on Hunger.

This Commission was created by legislative mandate in the Omnibus Appropriations Bill of 2014, with the following charge:

*To provide policy recommendations to Congress and the USDA Secretary to more effectively use existing programs and funds of the Department of Agriculture to combat domestic hunger and food insecurity; and to develop innovative recommendations to encourage public-private partnerships, faith-based sector engagement, and community initiatives to reduce the need for government nutrition assistance programs, while protecting the safety net for the most vulnerable members of society.*

Congressional leaders from both parties appointed 10 members to the Commission: three each by the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader (John Boehner, R-Ohio, and Harry Reid, D-Nevada, respectively, at that time); and two each by the House and Senate Minority Leaders (Nancy Pelosi, D-California, and Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, respectively, at that time). The Commission members represent government, industry, academia, and non-profit organizations. The biographies of each commission member are included in the appendix.

At the outset of our work together, the commission selected two of our members as co-chairs to guide our work: Mr. Robert Doar and Dr. Mariana Chilton.

Between the two of us, we have over 35 years of experience in addressing poverty and hunger. Robert Doar spent nearly two decades administering many of our nation's major safety net programs in New York City and New York State, and Dr. Mariana Chilton has dedicated much of her academic career to studying hunger, its causes, and its consequences for low-income Americans. We have been honored to serve as co-chairs of this bipartisan commission.

The Commission's goal is to develop recommendations to Congress and the USDA that has the unanimous, bipartisan support of all our members. We are close to completing our report, and are honored to share our process with you.

Over the last year and a half, we traveled to nine cities and heard testimony from 80 invited experts and 102 members of the public who provided testimony and advice during hearings, briefings and site visits. We also observed government and nonprofit programs designed to alleviate hunger. We talked with struggling Americans trying to ensure a better life for themselves and their children. We listened to state officials describe the challenges they face in serving their populations. Through this process, we gained insight into the root causes of hunger in America, why it is such a significant problem, and what improvements can be made.

As is to be expected from bipartisan commissions, sometimes we saw the same things and reached different conclusions about solutions. However, we are working together to put forward a report that gains the unanimous endorsement from our members and presents a full picture of hunger in America. We are confident that consensus will soon be reached and hopeful that upon its release, the report will be considered carefully by Congress.

Today, we will give an update on our findings and the themes at the center of our forthcoming report. We lead with our outline:

- I. Our definition of hunger and its consequences
- II. The root causes of hunger
- III. The populations that warrant specific concern
- IV. Our priorities in recommending solutions and improvements.

## **I. Our definition of hunger and its consequences**

Before we could reach any conclusions about hunger in America, we first had to agree about how to define and quantify it. We chose a measure of hunger called “very low food security,” defined as the disruption of eating patterns and reduced food intake for at least one household member because the household lacked money or other resources for food. As a Commission, we are in agreement that hunger is an important problem. We also want to be clear that the hunger seen in America is not the equivalent of the famine and severe malnutrition found in developing countries. In our judgment, the very low food security measure of hunger appropriately reflects the reality of serious hardship and focuses our attention on the U.S. households where the problem is most severe. By this measure, 5.6 percent of households (6.9 million households) reported hunger in 2014.<sup>1</sup>

This is a troubling statistic because the research shows hunger has far-reaching effects on Americans of all ages. When children experience hunger, their academic performance suffers.<sup>2</sup> Adolescents in families reporting hunger encounter more problems with mental health and thoughts of suicide.<sup>3</sup> Adults that report hunger are more likely to be overweight and have other health problems.<sup>4</sup> For seniors, hunger can lead to depression and reduced capacity to perform day-to-day tasks.<sup>5</sup>

We believe that addressing this problem is a question of values – no one in a country as rich as ours should go hungry. And given these concrete consequences, we argue that reducing hunger should be an urgent priority of Congress.

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<sup>1</sup> Coleman-Jensen A, Rabbitt M, Gregory C, Singh A. *Household food security in the United States in 2014*. Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture; September 2015. Available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err194.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Hickson M, de Cuba SE, Weiss I, Donofrio G, Cook J. *Too hungry to learn: Food insecurity and school readiness, Part I of II*. Boston, MA: Children’s HealthWatch, Boston Medical Center; 2013. Available at [http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/toohungrytolearn\\_report.pdf](http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/toohungrytolearn_report.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Alaimo K, Olson CM, Frongillo EA. Family food insufficiency, but not low family income, is positively associated with dysthymia and suicide symptoms in adolescents. *J Nutr.* 2002;132(4):719-725.

<sup>4</sup> Lee JS, Gundersen C, Cook J, Laraia B, Johnson MA. Food insecurity and health across the lifespan. *Adv Nutr.* 2012;3(5):744-745.

<sup>5</sup> Ziliak JP, Gundersen C, Haist M. *The causes, consequences, and future of senior hunger in America*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky; 2008. Available at <http://www.ukcpr.org/Publications/SeniorHungerStudy.pdf>.

## II. The root causes of hunger

After hearing over 180 testimonies and visiting multiple cities, it is clear to the Commission that there are many factors leading to hunger in America. A simple explanation focused only on low household income or insufficient nutrition assistance ignores other critical causes. For example, underemployment and unemployment are major factors. Underemployment, which includes part time jobs with unpredictable and fluctuating amounts of hours, seasonal work, or very low wages, causes major income instability or sharp income fluctuations, which are associated with increased odds of hunger. Additionally, households without a working adult are disproportionately likely to experience hunger.<sup>6</sup> The 2007-2009 economic downturn led to a more than doubling of unemployed workers, and hunger levels spiked correspondingly.

Six years after the official end of the recession, hunger rates today remain at historically high levels. And the negative impact of labor market forces on hunger is not just cyclical. Due to globalization and automation, our economy has experienced structural shifts over the last 60 years that have led to fewer well-paying job opportunities for Americans without a college degree.<sup>7</sup> Adverse labor market conditions weaken the best defense against hunger: adequate earnings from employment.

Relatedly, we identified a strong relationship between hunger and education that works in both directions. Children experiencing hunger have lower graduation rates, while individuals without a high school degree are more likely to experience hunger than their peers who completed high school.<sup>8,9</sup>

A third critical factor is family structure. Marriage has a significant impact on whether or not a household will experience hunger: The hunger rate for households headed by married couples is 3.2%, yet for households headed by a single mother with children, the rate is four times that at 12.8%. For households headed by single fathers, the rate is more than two times that of married couples at 7%.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, children who grow up in single parent families are less likely to do well in school or graduate high school.<sup>11</sup> The fact that 40% of children in the United States are now born to parents that are not married is a key explanation for the continued existence of hunger.<sup>12</sup>

We also agreed that a full understanding of hunger requires acknowledging the fact that the historical legacies of racism in America and continued racial discrimination today affect access to jobs, home ownership, education, and affordable healthy food. The persistence of racial inequality contributes to

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<sup>6</sup> Coleman-Jensen A. Working for peanuts: nonstandard work and food insecurity across household structure. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*. 2011;32:84–97.

<sup>7</sup> Acemoglu D, Autor D, Dorn D, Hanson GH, Price B. Import competition and the great U.S. employment sag of the 2000s. August 2014. Available at <http://economics.mit.edu/files/9811>.

<sup>8</sup> Alaimo K, Olsen C, Frongillo J. Food insufficiency and American school-aged children's cognitive, academic and psycho-social development. *Pediatrics*. 2001;108(1):44-53.

<sup>9</sup> Coleman-Jensen A, McFall W, Nord M. *Food insecurity in households with children: prevalence, severity, and household characteristics, 2010-11*. Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture; May 2013. Available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/1120651/eib-113.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Coleman-Jensen A, Rabbitt M, Gregory C, Singh A. *Household food security in the United States in 2014*. Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture; September 2015. Available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err194.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> Pruett K. *Father-need*. New York, NY: Broadway Books; 2000.

<sup>12</sup> The vast majority of pregnancies among couples that are not married are unplanned.

hunger rates of 10.4% and 6.9% for African American and Hispanic households, respectively, compared to a 4.5% rate for white households.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, there is a clear link in the research between exposure to violence and hunger.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, it is critical to acknowledge one other key ingredient – the actions of individuals. We agree as a Commission that personal agency, responsibility, and the importance of individuals making good choices play a role in the extent to which Americans are hungry, and any discussion of hunger that ignores the importance of personal responsibility is incomplete.

### III. Populations of specific concern

In our study of this issue, we have discovered that certain groups in our country are particularly at risk of experiencing hunger. For instance, the number of seniors will increase dramatically over the next few decades, and it seems likely that the number of homebound seniors will increase correspondingly. Because this growth will further strain organizations on which many elderly Americans depend, such as Meals on Wheels, seniors will be a group that warrants attention. People with disabilities are also a population of specific concern as 38% of all households experiencing hunger include an adult with a disability.<sup>15</sup>

A third population we want to focus on is America's veterans and active duty military. A 2012 study of veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars found that 12% reported hunger, and approximately 1-2% of active duty military members receive SNAP benefits.<sup>16</sup> While there is little data on the extent of hunger among active duty military and veterans, we agree that this issue deserves careful research and consideration.

Our commission is also particularly worried about the formerly incarcerated, who have difficulty finding jobs, adequate housing and opportunities to re-engage with their families and communities. As previously indicated, single parent families with young children are especially vulnerable to experiences of hunger. And immigrants and American Indians face particular challenges in gaining access to enough healthy food.

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<sup>13</sup> Coleman-Jensen A, Rabbitt M, Gregory C, Singh A. *Household food security in the United States in 2014*. Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture; September 2015. Available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err194.aspx>.

<sup>14</sup> Chilton MM, Rabinowich JR, Woolf NH. Very low food security in the USA is linked with exposure to violence. *Public Health Nutr.* 2014;17(1):73-82.

<sup>15</sup> Coleman-Jensen A, Nord M. *Food insecurity among households with working-age adults with disabilities*. Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture; January 2013. Available at [http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/980690/err\\_144.pdf](http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/980690/err_144.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Windome R, Jensen A, Bangerter A. Food insecurity among veterans of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Public Health Nutr.* 2015;18(5):844-848; and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. *Quick facts: SNAP participation among members of the Armed Forces*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service; February 2014. Available at [http://mldc.whs.mil/public/docs/report/qol/SNAP\\_and\\_Military\\_Quick\\_Facts\\_Feb\\_2014\\_update\\_w\\_2010-2012\\_ACS.pdf](http://mldc.whs.mil/public/docs/report/qol/SNAP_and_Military_Quick_Facts_Feb_2014_update_w_2010-2012_ACS.pdf).

As Congress considers what interventions should be used to reduce hunger, we recommend that these seven groups – seniors, single parent families, people with disabilities, veterans and active duty military, American Indians, immigrants, and the formerly incarcerated – be given special consideration.

#### **IV. Priorities in recommending solutions and improvements.**

In our field visits and hearings, we saw and heard about public and private food programs that were effective in reducing hunger. We encountered research showing that the federal government’s food assistance programs – SNAP, WIC, and school meals among others – are essential tools that effectively target those in need.<sup>17</sup> However, the latest ERS statistics show that hunger remains elevated despite a 171 percent increase in SNAP receipt since 2000. This illustrates clearly that food assistance programs are addressing the problem, but not fully solving the problem, and this Commission believes that, without a focus on root causes and emphasis on work and nutrition, we will continue to fail to end hunger. Our vital safety net programs provide a strong foundation on which to build a more effective approach to fighting hunger.

While we are still working towards consensus on the final specific recommendations, the Commission thinks reforms must speak to the following themes: work, nutrition and well-being, experimentation, and executive leadership. The primary goal of SNAP is to treat and prevent hunger, but it can also serve as a support for families as they enter the job market. We will put forward recommendations designed to help benefit recipients find work, improve work incentives in assistance programs, and encourage policymakers to evaluate the states’ performance in helping employable recipients go to work so they can earn sufficient wages.

We also believe that nutrition programs should be viewed as an opportunity to ensure healthy choices among recipients, and we will endorse evidence-based strategies to encourage good nutrition, promote health, and help recipients make positive choices for their families.

Our commission will also prioritize finding ways to directly improve the immediate well-being of vulnerable Americans. Our recommendations will involve increasing access to and coordination of essential safety nets, improving the support offered to military families, and encouraging civic engagement efforts to provide help to our neighbors in our own communities.

We don’t pretend to have all of the answers to the problem of hunger in America. Instead, we want policymakers at the federal, state, and local level to experiment with new ideas and to advance changes that prove to be successful. We plan to recommend several pilot programs and to encourage rigorous testing and evaluation of these experiments.

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<sup>17</sup> Shafir E. *Invited written testimony to the National Commission on Hunger*. Professor, Princeton University Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. Research Triangle Park, NC: National Commission on Hunger; July 26 2015. Available at [https://hungercommission.rti.org/Portals/0/SiteHtml/Activities/WrittenTestimony/InvitedWritten/NCH\\_Invited\\_Written\\_Testimony\\_Eldar\\_Shafir.pdf](https://hungercommission.rti.org/Portals/0/SiteHtml/Activities/WrittenTestimony/InvitedWritten/NCH_Invited_Written_Testimony_Eldar_Shafir.pdf); and Rachidi A. *Invited testimony before the National Commission on Hunger: Addressing very low food security among American households*. Albany, NY: Research Fellow in Poverty Studies, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research; May 13 2015. Available at [https://hungercommission.rti.org/Portals/0/SiteHtml/Activities/PublicHearings/AlbanyNY/AlbanyNY\\_Testimony\\_Angela\\_Rachidi.pdf](https://hungercommission.rti.org/Portals/0/SiteHtml/Activities/PublicHearings/AlbanyNY/AlbanyNY_Testimony_Angela_Rachidi.pdf).

Finally, while Congress can move forward on many of our recommendations, addressing the root causes of hunger, and ensuring that we protect the most vulnerable citizens of America will also take very deliberate, cross-sector and cross-agency collaboration that is encouraged by Congress and led by the Executive Branch. This will ensure that the relevant agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education, the Department of Labor, the Department of Agriculture, and the Veterans Administration (to name only a few) coalesce around the common cause of ending hunger in America. This type of leadership, collaboration, and commitment will demonstrate to all Americans that ending hunger is an achievable goal.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide you with an overview of our work. We hope that our findings and recommendations prove useful in your efforts to help America become a stronger and healthier nation.

## APPENDIX: Biographies of Members of the National Commission on Hunger

**Mariana Chilton, PhD, MPH** is an Associate Professor at Drexel University School of Public Health and Director of the Center for Hunger-Free Communities. She directs multiple research studies on the impact of public policy on food insecurity and health and wellbeing among families with young children. (Reid appointee)

**Spencer Coates** is President of Houchens Industries, Inc. and serves on its Board of Directors. He joined the Houchens family of companies in October 2003, after retiring from BKD, LLP, a national public accounting firm where he had spent 30 years serving in various capacities. (McConnell appointee)

**Robert Doar** is the Morgridge Fellow in Poverty Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, where he studies how improved federal policies and programs can reduce poverty and provide opportunities for vulnerable Americans. Previously, he served as Commissioner of the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and Commissioner of the New York City Human Resources Administration. (Boehner appointee)

**Jeremy Everett** is the founding Director of the Texas Hunger Initiative at Baylor University, a capacity building project that seeks to develop and implement strategies to alleviate hunger through research, policy analysis, education, and community organizing. (Boehner appointee)

**Susan Finn, PhD** is the CEO of the global consultancy Finn/Parks & Associates and a recognized leader and a respected communicator in the food, nutrition, and health arena. She is a leader in the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and is committed to advancing nutrition research and education. (Boehner appointee)

**Deborah Frank, MD** is a child health researcher and the inaugural incumbent of a newly established Pediatric Professorship in Child Health and Well Being at Boston University School of Medicine. She began working at Boston City Hospital (now Boston Medical Center) in 1981. In 1984, she founded the Failure to Thrive Program, now called the Grow Clinic for Children. (Pelosi appointee)

**Cherie Jamason** is President of the Food Bank of Northern Nevada, a nationally recognized anti-hunger organization and recent Feeding America Food Bank of the Year. She successfully implemented the Nevada Child Nutrition Initiative providing summer food and after school meal programs for low income children throughout Nevada. (Reid appointee)

**Billy Shore** is the founder and CEO of Share Our Strength, a national nonprofit dedicated to ending childhood hunger in America through its No Kid Hungry campaign. He is also the author of four books, including *The Cathedral Within*, and chair of Community Wealth Partners, which helps change agents solve social problems. (Pelosi appointee)

**Russell Sykes** is an independent consultant working on multiple federal and state projects focusing on Job Search in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid Reform, Social Security Disability and workforce engagement. He was the former Deputy Commissioner for New York State's Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance where he was responsible for the administration of SNAP, TANF, welfare-to-work and multiple other public benefit programs. (McConnell appointee)



**Note:** Congressional leaders appointed ten people to the Commission, but one, Ricki Barlow (Reid appointee), later resigned for personal reasons and is not listed above. Institutional affiliations are provided for identification purposes only and do not imply institutional support or endorsement.