



Feeding Opportunity

Ending Child Hunger Furthers the Goal of Cutting U.S. Poverty
in Half over the Next Decade

Joel Berg May 2010

Introduction and summary

Even before the worst of the current economic downturn, child hunger was a serious problem in the United States. In 2008, 16.6 million American children—more than one in five—lived in homes that couldn't afford enough food for their families.¹ The Great Recession has only made matters worse.

Child hunger in the world's wealthiest nation is not only morally unacceptable, but it costs the U.S. economy at least \$28 billion per year because poorly nourished children perform less well in school and require far more long-term health care spending.² Further, food insufficiency severely hampers children's emotional, intellectual, and physical development, and it strongly hinders the upward mobility of their parents.

President Barack Obama and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, or USDA, have set a national goal of ending childhood hunger by 2015. Reaching this goal is critical to cutting poverty in half in 10 years, which is the primary aim of the Half In Ten Campaign, a partnership among the Center for American Progress Action Fund, the Coalition on Human Needs, and the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. Poverty and hunger are interrelated problems, and the steps we take to eradicate child hunger will ultimately lay a solid foundation for realizing the ambitious but achievable poverty reduction target. Likewise, limiting poverty will reduce hunger and make it far less expensive for the nation to end hunger entirely.

CAP's recent paper, "Doing What Works to End U.S. Hunger: Federal Programs Are Effective, but Can Work Even Better," pointed out that due to \$21 billion in additional antihunger spending that was included in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009—the federal stimulus—there is significantly less hunger and food insecurity in America today than there otherwise would have been. Most of this spending went to the SNAP-Food Stamps Program. Since nearly half of all SNAP-Food Stamp recipients are children, one step necessary in reaching the 2015 goal would be to preserve nutrition policies that proved so successful in the Recovery Act.

But we can also build on the success of these provisions. All major federal child nutrition programs are set to be reauthorized by Congress this year by a bill usually referred to as the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act—the Senate version of which is now named, somewhat optimistically, the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010. This bill provides one of the most effective vehicles to reach the 2015 hunger elimination goal and help the nation achieve First Lady Michelle Obama’s goal of dramatically reducing obesity in America.

This paper will discuss child hunger in America, how it functions as both a cause and effect of poverty, and the significant policy reforms Congress can take this year in the child nutrition programs to make a significant down payment on ending child hunger and fighting poverty. The paper argues that to end child hunger federal child nutrition programs will need at least an additional \$4 billion each year, and the nation will also have to strengthen other income and work support programs to tackle the root cause of hunger: not having enough income to purchase nutritious food for your family.

President Obama’s fiscal year 2011 budget proposal includes \$1 billion extra per year for 10 years for the child nutrition bill as a serious down payment on ending child hunger. Congress must invest at least as much as the president’s request in the child nutrition bill to make significant progress, and it will need to undertake other efforts to create jobs and enhance work supports for low-income families.

The paper further argues that to end child hunger by 2015 the government must not only spend more money but make child nutrition programs even smarter through:

- **Reducing paperwork and bureaucracy.** An estimated \$1 billion in tax dollars at the federal, state, and school district levels is spent each year solely on collecting and submitting required forms and daily meal counts for the school meals program (free, reduced-price, and full-price lunch and breakfast). Cutting this paperwork and simplifying applications could save a vast amount of money. And if the money saved were to be pumped back into feeding more children and making meals healthier that would help achieve both the hunger and obesity reduction goals.
- **Expanding access to school breakfasts.** I have previously argued that universal meals should be provided to all students. But policymakers’ concerns about the federal budget may delay such a goal. During this current reauthorization process, therefore, Congress should at a minimum make it a national priority to

provide free, universal, nutritious breakfast to every student in a Title I school, which are those schools with the highest concentrations of poverty in the country. This would eliminate the costs and stigma associated with unnecessary paperwork for these programs and provide each child the opportunity to begin each school day with the fuel needed for effective learning.

- **Improve and expand access to other meal programs.** Children are in school 180 class days out of a 365-day year, and if every student received a nutritious school breakfast and lunch every day that would still equal only about 360 meals out of the 1,095 a child needs to eat each year. We must ensure that more children participate in summer meals, after-school meals, and supper programs so that they get the food they need.
- **Rewarding states for improved performance in reducing child hunger,** USDA should be authorized and funded to provide cash grants to governors to support innovative and effective state efforts such as reducing paperwork in the SNAP-Food Stamp program, serving breakfasts in first period classrooms, or reducing the poverty that causes hunger.

These steps will also have the added benefit of reducing child obesity if they are implemented appropriately with an eye toward making available meals healthier. Ultimately, this would improve children's quality of life throughout their lifetime while also decreasing the amount of money the nation spends on health care and other costs. Taking simple and cost-effective measures could end child hunger in America, and they would be an important down payment toward the Half in Ten Campaign's goal of cutting U.S. poverty in half within a decade.

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