

What does FOOD INSECURITY Mean?

Food insecurity exists when people lack sustainable physical or economic access to enough safe, nutritious, and socially acceptable food for a healthy and productive life. Food insecurity may be chronic, seasonal, or temporary. Nutritional consequences of insufficient food or undernutrition include protein energy malnutrition, anemia, vitamin A deficiency, iodine deficiency, and iron deficiency.

Food insecurity and malnutrition result in catastrophic amounts of human suffering. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 60 percent of all childhood deaths in the developing world are associated with chronic hunger and malnutrition. In developing countries, persistent malnutrition leaves children weak, vulnerable, and less able to fight such common childhood illnesses as diarrhea, acute respiratory infections, malaria, and measles. Even children who are mildly to moderately malnourished are at greater risk of dying from these common diseases. Malnourished children in the United States suffer from poorer health status, compromised immune systems, and higher rates of illnesses such as colds, headaches, and fatigue.

Adolescents and adults also suffer adverse consequences of food insecurity and malnutrition. Malnutrition can lead to decreased energy levels, delayed maturation, growth failure, impaired cognitive ability, diminished capacity to learn, decreased ability to resist infections and illnesses, shortened life expectancy, increased maternal mortality, and low birth weight.

Food insecurity may also result in severe social, psychological, and behavioral consequences. Food-insecure individuals may manifest feelings of alienation, powerlessness, stress, and anxiety, and they may experience reduced productivity, reduced work and school performance, and reduced income earnings. Household dynamics may become disrupted because of a preoccupation with obtaining food, which may lead to anger, pessimism, and irritability. Adverse consequences for children include: higher levels of aggressive or destructive behavior, hyperactivity, anxiety, difficulty with social interactions (e.g., more withdrawn or socially disruptive), increased passivity, poorer overall school performance, increased school absences, and a greater need for mental health care services (e.g., for depression or suicidal behaviors).

Malnutrition and hunger, particularly during early fetal development and early childhood, is the root cause of a multi-generational downward spiral of poor health, poor performance in school and on the job, family stress and instability, lower income and an unsustainable cost to a nation's economy.

In a recent study, commissioned by Feeding America, "Child Food Insecurity: The Economic Impact on our Nation (A report on research on the impact of food insecurity and hunger on child health, growth and development commissioned by Feeding America and The ConAgra Foods Foundation)," the following significant conclusions were drawn:

"The research reviewed here provides evidence that the effects of food insecurity worsen as its severity worsens, and that child food insecurity and hunger are associated with worse consequences than household food insecurity alone. However even at the lowest levels of severity Children's HealthWatch data suggest that, at least for babies and toddlers, household food insecurity is an established risk factor for health and

development. This leads to the very troubling conclusion that for infants and toddlers food insecurity is an “invisible epidemic” of a widely prevalent and serious condition known to exist and to pose serious risks to child health and development, and whose remedy is well-understood and cost-effective, but is being withheld from those at greatest risk. Food insecurity can occur and inflict harm at any or all parts of the life-cycle. However, the particular vulnerability of infants and toddlers ages 0-36 months undergoing especially rapid physical growth and neurocognitive development, provides a special opportunity for protecting and positively influencing the remainder of the life-cycle. Moreover, the apparent heightened susceptibility of older girls to the negative impacts of food insecurity in multiple domains suggests that it is particularly urgent to decrease this risk among those who will become mothers of the next generation of children.

Of the many interlocking forms of deprivation experienced by poor and near-poor children in the United States, food insecurity is one of the most readily measured as well as one of the most rapidly remediable through policy changes. Our country, unlike many others in the world, is clearly capable of producing and distributing sufficient healthful food to all its inhabitants, constrained only by political will. We clearly know how to fix the problem of food insecurity and the harm it does to children, and we have an opportunity now to do that. Food insecurity and hunger damage the architecture of children’s brains, and that makes it extremely difficult for them to ever reach their full potential as effective workers and members of society. As a result of that we all lose. But American business leaders have the means and ingenuity to prevent this from happening. By doing that, and ending child food insecurity and hunger, they can ensure a prosperous future for us all.”

For more information, please visit the website, <http://www.feedingamerica.org>