



Hunger: A Daily Struggle for Children in Need

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Every minute, six children die from a hunger-related disease worldwide (HHAW, n.d.). While many believe that hunger is only a problem in third-world, undeveloped countries, it is still present in the United States today. Forty-two million of our fellow Americans are hungry, and one in five US children are growing up in poverty (HHAW, n.d.). Malnutrition can negatively affect children's health, development, and learning.

Hunger is detrimental to a child's health and development. Homeless children are four times more likely to be sick and suffering from infections of the ears, respiratory system, gastrointestinal system, and have asthma (Firesteel, 2016). Hunger will only worsen these symptoms and limit the immune system's ability to fight the illnesses. Impoverished children are living in extremely high stress environments. They are constantly worried about whether or not they will find food to eat and a place to sleep. Chronic stress can affect the brain's cognitive development. Dysregulation can occur, which is when the stress response system has heightened

sensitivity and difficulty shutting off (Firesteel, 2016). This leads to poor mood regulation, aggression, and instability, which are precursors to a myriad of mental disorders. These health issues can impact a child's ability to learn and concentrate.

A hungry child's learning difficulties become even more pronounced when they begin school. According to the Washington Post, one in five children will go to school hungry because they live in a food insecure family, one that does not have sufficient access to food (Seaton, 2017). The government saw the education system as the perfect way to target impoverished children, and put an end to adolescent hunger. The USDA began the National School Lunch Foundation to assist the growing disadvantaged population. Today, twenty-two million US students are on the free or reduced breakfast and lunch lists (Seaton, 2017). This gives them access to food they otherwise would not have, so school is now the source of many hungry children's only meals. Unfortunately, the breakfast program is not reaching all impoverished students, as only about fifty-six percent report using it (Seaton, 2017). This is most likely because the meal is served before school starts, so some children who cannot be at school any earlier, bus riders for example, fail to be fed. If schools were to continue service further into the school day, this problem could be solved. Perhaps teachers could be given breakfasts to pass out to students in need when they arrive. This would give students a well-deserved advantage in their learning, as studies show that nutrition helps improve knowledge. A 2013 No Kid Hungry study, for instance, found that standardized math test scores were seventeen percent higher for kids with access to daily breakfast (Seaton, 2017). Schools are an important key to ending child hunger.

Thirteen million US households have at least one starving child (Patterson, 2017). While this number is alarmingly high, it is dropping. School breakfast and lunch programs have helped students significantly. Unfortunately, these meals are only available to kids on weekdays during

the school year. On weekends and over summer vacation, these children still continue to starve. We as a nation need to begin searching for alternative programs that can supplement those offered in schools. As individuals, we can donate our unused food to food banks. According to CNN, \$165 billion worth of food, or forty percent, is wasted every year in the US. Twenty five million hungry people could be sufficiently fed with this (Patterson, 2017). Next time you find an unopened can of imperishable food in your pantry that you aren't going to eat, try donating it to your local food bank. It's a win-win situation: you can help out your community while cleaning out your kitchen. It is small acts like this that can lead to a major difference in the lives of impoverished children across the nation.

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