COMMENTARY

Hunger in a “Land of Plenty”: A Renewed Call for Social Work Action
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Over the past three decades levels of poverty in the United States have remained largely stagnant and various forms of social inequality have increased. Simultaneously, social welfare programs to ensure social protection have contracted through conservative political mobilization to “downsize big government.” When the economic recession hit in 2007, Food Stamps (renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Action Program, or SNAP, in 2009) became one of the most important social benefits available to affected individuals and families. By 2009, when President Barack Obama took office, some 32 million individuals used SNAP to meet basic food needs. High unemployment, underemployment, instability in the housing market, and widespread home loan foreclosures have led to unprecedented participation in food assistance programs by low-income or poor individuals and families (Hoefer & Curry, 2012). The rate of households affected by food insecurity in 2012 was 14.5 percent, a significant increase from an average of 11 percent in years immediately prior to the recession (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, & Singh, 2013; Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2008). SNAP usage and expenditures have grown rapidly since 2009 to meet this increased demand. In 2013 more than 47 million individuals, approximately one in six people in the United States, received SNAP benefits, reflecting ongoing economic hardship (Food Research and Action Center, n.d.). SNAP usage and expenditures have grown rapidly since 2009 to meet this increased demand. In 2013 more than 47 million individuals, approximately one in six people in the United States, received SNAP benefits, reflecting ongoing economic hardship (Food Research and Action Center, n.d.).

In this context, rising opposition to the SNAP program and other vital social supports should be cause for action by social work educators and practitioners. In 2013, one member of Congress argued for substantial cuts to SNAP on biblical grounds, citing 2 Thessalonians: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat” (Fincher, 2013). Stereotyping of food aid recipients as loafers or undeserving of government assistance occurs not only in the halls of Congress, but also in conservative news outlets, in which it has reached a fever pitch. And, with little organized advocacy by social work professional organizations, many in Congress aim to transform the federal SNAP program to a block grant, following the model that dismantled Aid to Families with Dependent Children, popularly known as AFDC, in the 1990s.

The Agricultural Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-79), popularly known as the Farm Bill, included changes in the SNAP application process that may result in up to $8.5 billion in cuts to the SNAP program over 10 years, while securing increased benefits to agribusiness (Bolen, Rosenbaum, & Dean, 2014). Thanks to organizing by food justice advocates, some of the harshest proposed changes to who can receive SNAP were not included in the final legislation. Still, there is mounting support in Congress to weaken SNAP and incorporate work requirements and drug testing (already in place in a number of states) as a way “to encourage self-sufficiency and independence” (Sheffield, 2013).

The muted response of the social work profession to the mounting assault on food security is disturbing. Little visible advocacy on this issue has been carried out by NASW at state or federal levels. Efforts to strengthen resources for SNAP and other food assistance programs can mean more than ensuring adequate nutrition for millions of Americans. Indeed, sustained activism also would undermine the ongoing assault on public efforts to address key social problems. In short, this is a critical time for social workers to challenge those who portray
It is our contention that how the profession defines the problem of hunger and food insecurity matters significantly. Hunger received renewed attention in the early 1980s due to the recession and simultaneous Reagan administration budget cuts in food aid and public assistance programs. A concern with increasing hunger led to the formation of a Presidential Task Force on Food Assistance, which issued a report indicating the need to better define and measure hunger in the United States (Task Force on Food Assistance, 1984). Further efforts to assess hunger led to a report issued by the Life Sciences Research Office, which included the conceptual definitions of terms widely accepted and used today: “food security,” “food insecurity,” and “hunger” (Anderson, 1990). Food security is defined as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life and includes at a minimum: a) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and b) the assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Anderson, 1990, p. 1560). Food insecurity occurs “whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain” (Anderson, 1990, p. 1560). Hunger is defined as “the uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food [and] the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to food . . . which may produce malnutrition over time” (Anderson, 1990, p. 1598). Anderson (1990) made the case for this new conceptual framework, indicating that “examining hunger problems in the United States in terms of food security may allow both researchers and policymakers to confront this issue on a more objective basis” (p. 1575); these measures were adopted and remain in place today. The federal government collects annual survey data on food insecurity using these concepts.

Although this framework is useful from an academic and policy perspective, the use of the term “food insecurity” in public discourse arguably diminishes the urgency of this issue. Not only does the social work profession need to play a more prominent role in public policy debates, we must have a central voice in the broader discourse—placing an emphasis on hunger as a major social problem.

As Biggerstaff, Morris, and Nichols-Casebolt (2002) noted more than a decade ago, “the social work profession directs little attention to the issues
of hunger and food assistance programs” (p. 275). This assessment remains true today, with few exceptions (for example, Hoefer & Curry, 2012; Jacobsen, 2007; Kaiser, 2013; Kaye, Lee, & Chen, 2013). It is in this context that the profession should participate in promoting rights-based organizing to address food insecurity and hunger within urban, suburban, and rural communities across the United States (Chilton & Rose, 2009). In the past decade social workers have played key roles in administering the patchwork of 10 federally funded programs that make up the food “safety net.” But the profession’s advocacy on this issue has been limited. One significant action would be to join the small but growing alliance of advocates calling for a national plan to end hunger and food insecurity (New York University School of Law International Human Rights Clinic, 2013). This national strategy would entail creative rights-based policy analysis and efforts to translate findings to broader publics that stress participation of those experiencing hunger and food insecurity. Other steps could include integrating food justice, food policy, and rights-based notions of food and food security into the social work curriculum and to foster research at local, state, and federal levels on the adequacy of current policies and approaches to secure the basic human right to food for all in the United States. Social workers, both as individuals and through their associations, could work more effectively with state– and national-level organizations, such as the Food Research and Action Center. To ensure professional social work involvement in policy evaluation, monitoring, and rights-based reform efforts, social work educational institutions must also initiate innovative field learning opportunities for students, as well as collaborations across professions and with local and state organizations to build capacity for policy change. Community organizers can assist in raising awareness about the reality of hunger and food insecurity in all communities. At the forefront of this effort should be the desire to address hunger and food insecurity, not as a matter of charity, but as a fundamental human right necessary to ensure the dignity and well-being of all individuals. SW

REFERENCES


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