

The Health Gap

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ABSTRACT: *Food subsidies are the primary reason why, over the last four decades, the price of processed foods and industrial meat has gone down 20-30%, while the price of fruits and vegetables has increased 40%. When we subsidize junk food, we essentially force the economically poor to eat foods that are nutritional disasters. This makes it much harder for people who are born into families that are struggling financially to ever rise above poverty, and virtually ensures that cycles of intergenerational poverty will persist. And when a vastly disproportionate share of those who struggle financially are people of color, we've created one of the conditions that, in effect, perpetuate racial health inequality.*

Keywords: *Food, nutritional disaster, stress, nutrition*

INTRODUCTION

While the rich and monetarily poor can both suffer from unhealthy diets, people of color and people in historically marginalized groups tend to face additional burdens of chronic disease from poor nutrition. This is largely because social and environmental factors linked to poverty often make things worse[11].

Diet-related disease is more common among people of color. For example, cancer, type 2 diabetes, asthma, and heart disease are up to twice as prevalent in Black, Hispanic, and Native American populations as in white ones. A representative sample of US adults aged 55 or older found that food-insecure women were more likely than average to experience lung disease and diabetes. And simply being a member of a minority group increased the odds, statistically,

of being food insecure and having diabetes. The vicious cycle between poor health and poverty is an unwanted gift that keeps on giving. Medical debt degrades health and nutrition, both financially and in terms of stress[4,7]. Those laboring under the burden of debt have higher blood pressure, worse self-reported health status, poorer mental health, and shorter life expectancy than those with less debt. And without access to healthier foods, chronic illnesses continue to progress, causing even more economic hardship.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the curses of food inequality and insecurity often get passed down from generation to generation. Just as children of the wealthy inherit stocks, bonds, real estate, and connections, so do children of the economically poor tend to inherit poverty, health problems, and other social harms from their parents and grandparents[3,9]. One of the core principles of the "American Dream" is upward mobility — the belief that if you work hard, follow the rules, and do the right thing, you can achieve wealth and rise above your original station. The reality of intergenerational poverty undermines that aspiration for far too many people. And unequal access to healthy food is a huge contributor to this problem. I share all this not to depress you, but to inspire you to take action. There are things each of us can do to contribute to a just and sustainable solution[2,5].

We must continue to raise awareness about the impact of food on health, wealth, and opportunity — especially in low-income communities — and advocate for a sustainable food system that provides healthy and affordable food for all. When our society is willing to face the shameful reality of chronic malnutrition, we can mobilize the political will to tackle the problem. Think of how we come together to aid those in a disaster zone. How donations pour in to those devastated by a hurricane, or catastrophic flooding[6,10]. When we see people as part of "our community," we naturally reach out to help, and seek to dismantle barriers to well-being. We need to make the consequences of our broken food system as visible as the effects of a natural disaster. And we need to remember to, as Bruce Springsteen sings, "take care of our own."

Modern education and development

Another common sense step is to ban the marketing of junk food to children. Kids don't have the experience needed to evaluate the claims in junk food ads, and these ads often fuel conflict between kids — who may be unfairly influenced by the ads — and their parents and other caregivers. That cereal with a full tablespoon of sugar in each cup is not “great.” That soda full of sugar, phosphoric acid, caffeine, colorings, and chemical flavorings is not “the real thing.” The fast food meal that features a movie superhero toy will not make anyone “happy” for long[5,8,10]. Let's pass laws to protect children from sugar-coated lies that lead to unhealthy habits and outcomes.

We can also support the expansion of nutrition education programs, such as those presented by Food Revolution Network, to local community leaders, activists, and advocates. Another strategy is to focus on teaching nutrition to young children. Kids who learn to try new foods and how to prepare healthy dishes, are far more likely to eat healthier into adulthood. And children who attend schools that have gardening programs have a whole new outlook on food once they've tasted a cherry tomato they've grown themselves[1,2,8].

It may seem obvious, but the less healthfully you eat, the less likely you are to be healthy — and the more likely you are to suffer from debilitating illness, be unable to work, and fall into medical care-induced bankruptcy. And it's hard to quantify the mental and emotional stress that comes from not knowing how or if you're going to be able to feed yourself and your loved ones today.

There's an epidemic of food insecurity today, even in the richest countries on earth. For example, 40% of US households below the poverty line are food insecure. In 2012, that number was a little less than 11 million households. By 2019, it had jumped to almost 14 million. The pandemic and lockdowns then proceeded to make a very bad situation much worse.

Food insecurity is largely tied to low income, of course, but there are other factors that can contribute. Income volatility, housing discrimination, changes in employment, and rising food prices are all associated with not having a reliable supply of food. In neighborhoods known as “food deserts,” a host of interlocking

conditions exist that perpetuate poverty, inequality, and food insecurity. For example, in many low-income urban and rural areas, it's nearly impossible to find healthy food within walking distance[2]. When supermarkets and healthy grocery stores aren't present, inhabitants must make do with convenience stores, liquor stores, and gas station fare, or spend time and money traveling on public transit to get to supermarkets in other neighborhoods. And if they don't have cars to carry their groceries home, they're limited in the number of items they can purchase at one time, necessitating more frequent trips.

In conclusion

Most of us want to live in lands of opportunity, where hard work is rewarded, and people from any background can rise up and improve their lives and their community. As we've seen, however, food inequality and poor nutrition can prevent individuals and communities from enjoying the health, wealth, and opportunity that should be the birthright of every human. As a society, we fail unless we can offer access to healthy whole foods to all our people.

At Food Revolution Network, our mission is “healthy, ethical, and sustainable food for all.” Perhaps if we stand up and speak out, we can contribute to building a healthier and a brighter future for all of us — regardless of our race, economic status, or other demographic factors.

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