

Seniors and Hunger Issue Backgrounder

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Introduction

A Population Growing Older: Overview

The older population¹ stands on the threshold of a boom. In 2003, 35.9 million people were 65 years of age and older in the United States—about 12 percent of the total population (1). According to U.S. Census Bureau projections this number is expected to increase in the 2010 to 2030 period after the first of the Baby Boomer generation turns 65 in 2011 (1). By 2030, the 65 and older population is projected to be twice as large as in 2000, increasing to 72 million and corresponding to nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population (1).

Along with an increase in numbers, diversity of the older population is expected to increase over time. Data from the US Census Bureau from 2003 shows that non-Hispanic Whites accounted for approximately 83 percent of the older population; Blacks, 8 percent; Asians, 3 percent; and Hispanics, 6 percent. It is expected that by 2030, 72 percent of the older U.S. population will be non-Hispanic White. Blacks, Asians and Hispanics will account for 10 percent, 5 percent, and 11 percent of the population, respectively (1).

Poverty in the Senior Population

The poverty rate provides a measure of the proportion of people with a family income that is below the established poverty thresholds (2). In 2005, the poverty rate for people 65 and older remained unchanged from the 2004 rate at 10.1% (2). However, the number of seniors living in poverty increased from 3.5 million to 3.6 million over the course of the year from 2004 to 2005 (2).

Some would argue that since the poverty thresholds used for people over 65 is lower than for those under 65 years, official poverty rates may actually underestimate the needs of the 65 and over set (3). This is because the overall nutrient requirements of those 65 years and older are not lower than for other adults (and with regard to particular nutrients may be higher) and a greater proportion of their budgets are spent on food, health care, shelter, and other necessities than those under 65 (3).

As with all measurements used to guide policy, the proper tool used to measure poverty is a subject of debate. Nevertheless it is generally agreed that data from the U.S. Census show that the economic status of older people has improved over the past few decades. Despite the group's general movement away from the poverty threshold, there are wide disparities in poverty rates among persons 65 and older.

In general, older women are more likely than older men to live in poverty. They comprise a larger proportion of the older population, are less likely than older men to be married and are more than twice as likely as older men to live alone (1, 4). Geographical location is also a general predictor of poverty: In 2000, 13 percent of those 60 and older

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the words 'elderly,' 'older,' and 'seniors' indicate those individuals who are 65 years and older.

were poor in non-metro areas compared with only 9 percent in urban areas (4). Other relevant statistics are listed below:

- In 2003, 4.9 percent of older people in married couple families were in poverty, compared with 13.6 percent of older men living alone and 20.4 percent of older women living alone (1).
- 3.5 percent of older non-Hispanic White married-couple families lived in poverty in 2003 compared with 12.4 percent of older Black married-couple families and 14.7 percent of older Hispanic married-couple families (1).
- In 2003, 10.7 percent of older non-Hispanic White men living alone lived in poverty compared with 26.4 percent of older Black men² (1).
- 16.9 percent of older White non-Hispanic women living alone lived in poverty in 2003 compared with 40.3 percent of older Black women and 40.8 percent of older Hispanic women (1).

As we have seen in these examples, annual U.S. Census data provide a snapshot view of poverty, but do not describe the details of poverty conditions found in the United States nor the change in poverty over time (1). Other studies, such as the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), show the change in income over time, which can illustrate how individuals move in and out of poverty.

For example, SIPP demonstrated that while people aged 65 years and over had a lower probability than children of entering into or being in poverty (3.3 percent vs. 4.5 percent), once they were in poverty, they were less likely to move out of poverty (32.4 percent vs. 47.9 percent) (1). This difficulty moving out of poverty is troubling because there is a strong correlation between living in poverty and being food insecure or hungry (3).

Food Insecurity and Hunger in the Senior Population

Food insecurity is defined as not having access to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members at all times during the year (5). It is a critical issue for a segment of adults 65 years and older because it places them at risk for poor nutritional status and deteriorating physical and mental function (6).

Throughout the year in 2005, 89 percent of U.S. households were food secure (5). The remaining 11 percent (12.6 million households) were food insecure. Rates of food insecurity were substantially higher for households with incomes near or below the Federal poverty line, more common in the South and in rural and urban areas than in the suburbs (5).

According to *Household Food Security in the United States, 2005*, the most recent report on food security from the Economic Research Service, 9.9 percent of all elderly living alone experience food insecurity, and 5.1 percent of all elderly living alone experienced very low food security³ (5). This means that in 2005, 260,000 elderly persons experienced food insecurity and 133,000 experienced very low food security (5).

² No data available for Hispanic men living alone

³ Formerly known as food insecurity with hunger

Other estimates of hunger and food insecurity come from private agencies that provide emergency food relief. In *Hunger in America 2006*, a research study conducted through the foodbank networks within the America's Second Harvest – The Nation's Food Bank Network organization, it was found that:

- Between 23.7 and 27 million people are estimated to be served by the America's Second Harvest Network annually (7).
- Nearly 3 million elderly persons are served by the America's Second Harvest Network per year (7).
- 21.5 percent of client households have at least one member who is age 65 and older, and 52 percent of these are food insecure (7).
- 28.7 percent of client households with seniors indicated that at one point have had to choose between food and medical care (7).
- 31 percent of client households with seniors indicated that they have had to choose between food and paying for heat or utilities (7).

Older Americans report that the predominant reason they have difficulty obtaining food (or low food security) is because of lack of income and other resources for food (3). Many older Americans live on fixed incomes, while food prices continue to rise—as a result Elderly households spend about 15 percent of their incomes on food compared with 12 percent for all U.S. households (6). In addition to having an economic means by which to purchase food, sufficient food intake requires the ability to prepare, gain access to, and eat the food available (3).

As food security relates to issues other than those in the economic sphere, research suggests that factors such as social isolation, depression, attitudes, and lifestyles may affect older American's appetite and thus reduce nutrient intake (6). Many elderly also have functional impairments: limitations on physical mobility, which interfere with the ability of seniors to acquire and prepare food (3). Other issues such as poor health status, poor dentition or reduction in taste or smell may also hinder the older American's access to nutritional foods (3).

Implications of Food insecurity and in the Senior Population

According to the American Dietetic Association, “food is an essential component of quality of life” (8). This is evidenced by study data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES III). After examining the data, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) found that older Americans who are food insufficient⁴ have:

- A lower mean intake of several nutrients (9)
- A lower intake of the vegetable and meat groups (9)
- A lower mean serum levels of certain nutrients (9)
- A higher risk of being underweight and in poor or fair health (9)

⁴ Food insufficiency as defined by NHANES III means that individuals “sometimes or often do not have enough food to eat.”

In summary, seniors who consume diets of poor nutritional quality will have inadequate energy and essential nutrient intakes (8). Because aging impairs some of the body's natural capabilities to digest and absorb nutrients, poor-quality or calorically insufficient diets result in malnutrition (8). Malnutrition has severe implications in this vulnerable population by worsening chronic disease states, increasing the chance of disability and reducing the resistance to infectious disease (3).

In contrast, older Americans who eat a varied diet and one that supplies adequate calories necessary for the activities of daily living are found to have better nutritional status and a higher quality of life (10, 11).

Publicly Funded Nutrition Programs

Older Americans Act

The Older Americans Act (OAA) is a federally funded program managed by the US Administration on Aging (AoA) through the National Aging Services Network (8). It provides grants to support nutrition services that help people 60 years and older throughout the country remain independent in home and community settings (12). The OAA is unique in that it is designed to provide structure and to support a bottom-up, community-based, planning and service delivery system (8). It targets older persons who are poor, who are members of minority groups, and those who live in rural areas with limited access to services (8).

The AoA's Elderly Nutrition Program (ENP) is authorized under Title III, Grants for State and Community Programs on Aging, and Title VI, Grants for Native Americans. It provides services such as nutrition screening, assessment, education and counseling, adult day care and congregate and home delivered meals (12). Meals provided to the Program's 3 million elderly participants (approximately 8.6% of those 65 years and older living in the U.S.) supply an estimated 40 to 50 percent of nutrients required by individuals per day (12).

The services provided by the ENP have been found to effectively target vulnerable populations; provide assistance to individuals and caregivers; and be of high quality in the perception of the service recipient (12). However, 4 out of every 10 of home delivered meal programs have waiting lists (13). Funding for this program falls short of the current need, and demand for these and similar programs is expected to increase as the population grows older (3).

USDA Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs

Falling under the heading of the USDA Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs are the Food Stamp Program, the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (8). Each program functions independently, having its own income, asset eligibility requirements, and may target other populations in addition to older adults (8). However, all of these programs all serve to improve the nutritional status by improving intake and supplying nutrition and food education (8).

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is available to all individuals, regardless of age, who meet need and asset criteria (14). In fiscal year 2005, the FSP assisted 10.9 million households and 24.9 million individuals with purchasing food (14). Of these households, approximately 1.9 million of them were elderly, representing 17 percent of all households in the program (14). Elderly people who received food stamps tended to live alone and received an average food stamp benefit of \$70 per month (14).

Between 2002 and 2005 major changes to the infrastructure of the FSP allowed for more clients to be served (15). Food Stamp participants have reported being better able to purchase needed foods and therefore meet nutritional needs; however, there are barriers to increasing the level of participation among older adults (8). Following past national trends, in 2004 less than one third of eligible elderly adults participated in the Food Stamp Program (16). It has been reported that some may perceive the monthly benefit to be too low and not worth the trouble to apply, there may be a perceived stigma of receiving government assistance, or there may be limited awareness of the Program (8).

The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program awards grants to U.S. states, territories, and recognized Indian Tribal Organizations, which supply low-income older adults with coupons for fresh fruits and vegetables from farmers markets, community supported agriculture programs and roadside stands (17). Among other beneficial results, there is evidence that this program has been successful in increasing fruit and vegetable consumption and providing nutrition information to older adults (8). In 2005, 752,699 low-income seniors participated in the program (18).

The Child and Adult Care Food Program provides enrolled older adults, 60 years of age and older, who are enrolled in participating adult care centers with up to two meals and one snack per day (3). Meals served to adults receiving care are reimbursed at rates based upon a participant's eligibility for free, reduced price, or paid meals (19). In fiscal Year 2006, 59,677,788 meals were served in adult care centers representing approximately 3.3% of all meals served to eligible participants (20).

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) provides nutrition assistance for disaster-affected areas requiring a Federal response. FNS coordinates with State, local, and voluntary organizations (as well as with other Federal agencies) to determine potential nutrition assistance needs of disaster victims (21).

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) annually provides more than 6.4 million food packages for mothers, infants, children and seniors in 32 states, the District of Columbia and 2 Indian Reservations (22). Nationally through fiscal year 2006, the CSFP served 421,465 seniors, approximately 91.1 percent of all CSFP participants (23). Most of the local agencies distributing CSFP product are grassroots community based non-profit organizations. The package is intended to assist in proper nutrition; it is not intended to completely feed a person for a month (22).

Privately Funded Nutrition Programs

Background:

Privately funded nutrition programs (faith, community, or other not for profit entities) act in concert with publicly funded programs by contributing donated funds and resources from the private sector to those in need of nutrition assistance. The following list comprises agencies that collectively act as the National Anti-Hunger Organization:

Alliance to End Hunger	America's Second Harvest
Bread for the World institute	Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
Community Food Security Coalition	Congressional Hunger Center
The End Hunger Network	Food Research and Action Center
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger	RESULTS
Share Our Strength	World Hunger Year

Some of these groups, such as the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, conduct research and analysis to “inform public debates over proposed budget and tax policies and to help ensure that the needs of low-income families and individuals are considered in these debates” (24). Other groups, such as America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest charitable hunger-relief organization, partner with federal, state and private agencies to secure and distribute more than 2 billion pounds of donated food and grocery products annually (25). These and other organizations, not mentioned, also provide nutrition services including nutrition education, disaster relief and nutrition assessment to their clients.⁵

The Sodexho Foundation:

The Sodexho Foundation's programs provide resources to the senior population including the support of partner organization, America's Second Harvest and affiliated food banks and The Campus Kitchens Project, which provides meals for elderly in need.

The Sodexho Foundation Heroes of Everyday Life Program recognizes employees “who invest their time, talent, and service spirit in helping some of the 35 million Americans who are at risk of hunger” (26). Martha Jane Weaver, 2004 Hero of Everyday Life, was recognized for her longstanding volunteer efforts with Meals on Wheels. As part of her recognition, the Foundation provided a grant to Meals on Wheels in her name/in honor of her work (27).

Sodexho in conjunction with MBNA raised over \$500,000 for Meals on Wheels, which helped serve 618,827 meals and 4,300 homeward bounds meals (28).

The Foundation is a non-profit organization as defined by 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Service. The company, Sodexho, pays all administrative costs of the Foundation to ensure that 100% of the money raised goes directly to those in need (29).

⁵ A selection of anti-hunger agencies is listed in the resources section of this paper.

Recent and Pending Legislation

Older Americans Act Reauthorization Bill

On October 17, 2006 President Bush signed the Older Americans Act reauthorization bill, which will play an important part in redirecting America's long-term care system to help older Americans remain active and engaged in their communities (30, 31). Other provisions of this act include (31):

- Enhanced Federal, State and Local coordination of long-term care services provided in home and community based settings
- Support for State and community planning to address the long-term care needs of the baby boom generation
- Greater focus on prevention and treatment of mental disorders
- Outreach and service to a broader universe of family caregivers under the National Family Caregiver Support Program
- Increased focus on civic engagement and volunteerism
- Enhanced coordination of programs that protect elders from abuse, neglect and exploitation

2007 Farm Bill Reauthorization

The 2007 Farm Bill will reauthorize a number of nutrition assistance programs crucial to the health and well-being of some of America's most vulnerable populations including seniors (32). Of critical importance to groups such as the *Anti-Hunger Organization* is a strong nutrition title that reauthorizes and improves the Food Stamp Program and increases the efforts of the emergency food assistance program (32).

Recommendations for Action

Adequate nutrition is important for the health, well-being, and mobility of all people, but for the elderly it is critical because of their vulnerability to health problems including physical and cognitive impairments (33). To help improve the health status and well-being of this population the following recommendations are suggested:

- Increase commodity spending through TEFAP (31, 33). The elderly can benefit from nutritious staples such as meat proteins, fruit juices, and shelf-stable vegetables.
- Promote access to food stamps (31,33). Among the elderly, the food stamp participation rate is lower than for any other group (33). Many are put off by the complex application process, or believe that the Food Stamp Program is geared towards younger families (33).
- Increase charitable giving to meet the needs of this growing population.
- Increase the number of volunteers who work with the senior population.
- Advocate on behalf of seniors through local, state or federal channels.

- Raise awareness about the problem of hunger in the senior population.
- Donate food and food supplies to senior population

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Available at: http://www.secondharvest.org/about_us/
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Available at: <http://www.helpstophunger.org/heroes.asp>
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shondra.jenkins@sodexhousa.com
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Available at: <http://www.helpstophunger.org/pressroom.asp>
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www.secondharvest.org/export/sites/harvest/learn_about_hunger/issue_briefs/issue_senior_hunger.pdf

Resources:

America's Second Harvest
<http://www.secondharvest.org/>

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
www.cbpp.org

Action Against Hunger
<http://www.actioncontrelafaim.org/>

The End Hunger Network
www.endhungernetwork.org

Community Food Security Coalition
<http://www.foodsecurity.org/>

Food Research and Action Center
www.frac.org/

Congressional Hunger Center
<http://www.hungercenter.org/>

MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
www.mazon.org/

Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations
<http://www.fao.org/>

RESULTS
www.results.org

Oxfam America
<http://www.oxfamamerica.org/>

World Hunger Year
www.worldhungeryear.org

Share Our Strength
<http://www.strength.org/>

Alliance to End Hunger
www.alliancetoendhunger.org

Bread for the World institute
www.bread.org