

# 165 million children malnourished worldwide

Jake Dean  
1 June 2013

There are currently 165 million children globally who are chronically malnourished. This preventable condition has affected one in every four children at some point in their lives. A new report by Save the Children, *Food for Thought*, highlights the extraordinary impact that malnutrition has upon a child's cognitive development.

With studies conducted in India, Peru, Guatemala, Ethiopia and Vietnam, the report details the dire consequence that malnutrition has upon children's ability to learn. The study focuses on malnutrition within the first thousand days of life, beginning during the mother's pregnancy, leading up to the child's second birthday, which is a critical time for brain development.

Malnutrition is the underlying cause of death for 2.3 million children per year, an average of one death every 15 seconds.

Carolyn Miles, president and chief executive of Save the Children, stated, "A quarter of the world's children are suffering the effects of chronic malnutrition. Poor nutrition in the early years is driving a literacy and numeracy crisis in developing countries and is also a huge barrier to further progress in tackling child deaths."

A poor diet leads to stunted growth, which contributes to significant cognitive deficiencies. One study cited by the report states that children stunted at age five are 19 percent less likely to read the sentence, "The sun is hot." They are also 12.5 percent less likely to write such a sentence. Children at age eight who are malnourished are 20 percent less literate than their counterparts who have access to a nutritious diet.

The findings in the report are an indictment of the economic system and world governments which have created appalling social conditions for the majority of the world's population. The report found:

- 38 percent of children from the least developed

countries have had their growth stunted by malnutrition.

- Malnourished children score 7 percent lower on math tests and are 19 percent less likely to be able to read by age eight.

- The poorest 40 percent are 2.8 times more likely to suffer long-term effects of malnutrition than the richest 10 percent.

Beyond cognitive problems, other consequences of child malnutrition can include lower self-esteem, self-confidence, and career aspirations. The report noted that children who are malnourished make 20 percent less as adults, amounting to a collective financial loss of \$125 billion.

A separate report released by the International Energy Agency found that many families living in developing countries lack access to any modern form of energy services. Over 1.3 billion people globally have no access to electricity and 2.6 billion do not have clean cooking facilities. Of these people, 95 percent live either in sub-Saharan Africa or developing countries of Asia; 84 percent live in rural areas.

Though much more prevalent in developing countries, industrialized countries have witnessed a staggering growth in poverty and food insecurity in recent years.

In Greece, the impact of ruthless austerity has left the country's working class in ruins. The unemployment rate stands at 27 percent, and youth unemployment stands at an astronomical 62 percent. Impoverished families are struggling with hunger and malnutrition.

UNICEF reported in 2012 that 439,000 Greek children lived below the poverty line, and 26 percent of Greek households with children had an "economically weak diet." Of those children, 37 percent lacked adequate heating, and one in five families were living in "poor environmental conditions." An estimated 10 percent of elementary and middle school students suffer

from food insecurity.

“When it comes to food insecurity, Greece has now fallen to the level of some African countries,” Dr. Athena Linos, a professor at the University of Athens Medical School, told the *New York Times*.

In the United States, a similar social disaster is unfolding. Data released by the US Department of Agriculture this month indicates that in 2011, 21 percent of US households with children were not “food secure,” meaning they did not always have access to adequate food over the course of the year.

Nearly 6 percent of households had “very low food security” in 2011. “In households with very low food security among children,” the USDA report states, “caregivers had reported that children were hungry, skipped a meal, or did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.”

Masses of people have turned to government assistance programs and charities to fill the gap. The nationwide food pantry provider Feeding America serves 3 million people under the age of five. In public schools, 64 percent of students now receive federally subsidized lunches.

A record 47.8 million Americans are now on food stamps, or one in seven Americans. As need grows, the response of the political establishment is to cut emergency food assistance and other social safety net programs.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**