

# Hunger and the social catastrophe facing America's youth

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13 September 2016

Two reports released this week cast a sharp light on the social catastrophe in the United States and its impact on America's youth.

“Impossible Choices: Teens and Food Insecurity in America” (Urban Institute) and “Bringing Teens to the Table: A Focus on Food Insecurity in America” (Feeding America), both based on joint research conducted by the two organizations, detail the widespread hunger and the catastrophic choices young people are making in an effort to feed themselves, their families and their friends.

In 2015, 12.7 percent of US households were food insecure, meaning they had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources. Among these 40 million people struggling to have enough to eat in America are an estimated 6.8 million young people ages 10 to 17, including 2.9 million who have very low food security, according to one food insecurity expert.

The new reports show that in addition to “traditional” coping strategies of skipping meals and eating cheap food, these teens and pre-teens are increasingly forced into shoplifting, stealing, selling drugs, joining a gang, or selling their bodies for money in a struggle to eat properly.

Researchers conducting the study spoke to teenagers in 10 focus groups in low-income communities throughout the country over the course of three years. The young people researchers spoke to—of varying races and backgrounds—live in communities where jobs are scarce, and those jobs available pay low wages, offer inadequate hours, or require skills that the teens' parents do not have.

Due to decades of cuts in social programs and the lingering impact of the Great Recession, many parents struggling to feed their families begin running out of

food by the middle of the month. Under these circumstances, teenagers, especially those with younger siblings, feel a responsibility to help out. “I will go without a meal if that's the case,” a teenager interviewed in Chicago said. “As long as my two [younger] siblings [are] good, that's all that really matters.”

Many of these families face a perfect storm of food insecurity. Grocery stores selling affordable, nutritious food are scarce, and the cost and time of traveling to better stores is prohibitive. Teens must often settle for food at local fast-food restaurants, drug stores, gas stations and convenience stores. “When you're broke, you get the dollar menu,” said a boy from San Diego.

Some food insecure teenagers look for work in order to contribute to the family food budget, but find they must compete with adults for a limited number of low-skill, low-paying jobs at fast-food restaurants or in retail. It is when these possibilities do not pan out that some teenagers turn in desperation to make money “outside of the legal economy,” according to the researchers.

Food-insecure teenage boys interviewed reported stealing and selling drugs as one strategy for earning money to pay for food and other necessities, subjecting them and others to personal and legal risks. “Drugs, alcohol, everything,” said a teenage girl in rural Oregon. “Bad things people used to just do in high school has spread to the junior high and down to the elementary school.”

Food insecure teens, and girls in particular, are vulnerable to another type of insidious risk: sexual exploitation. Teens in all of the study's locations spoke of girls having sex for money to pay for food and other needs.

This often takes the form of “transactional dating,” in

which the teen regularly sees and has sex with someone, usually an older man, in exchange for food, meals, cash or other material goods. “It’s really like selling yourself,” said a teenage girl in Portland, Oregon. “You’ll do whatever you need to do to get money or eat.”

A smaller number of teens resort to the strategy of purposefully getting arrested to ensure continued access to food—in prison.

Drug dealing, stealing, voluntary incarceration, sexual exploitation—these are the “choices” significant numbers of teenagers in America are undertaking out of the material need to put food on the table for themselves and their families. This tragic reality for the generation born in the new century speaks volumes about the violent and socially unequal state of class relations in America in 2016.

In a rational world one would expect banner headlines and a national debate on strategies to combat hunger among young people. But in the current political climate, dominated by the election contest of the two big business parties, it has received scant attention. There is no mention of this crisis by the Clinton and Trump camps, where the social catastrophe confronting the working class in 21st century America is routinely ignored. Nor is there particular concern for horrific circumstances poor girls are forced into from the upper middle class practitioners of identity politics around the Democratic Party.

Indeed, the catastrophic state of social life in the United States—of which the two reports published this week are only a partial snapshot—is the outcome of decades of social counter-revolution carried out by both big business parties. The Clintons bear particular responsibility, as it was the administration of Bill Clinton that gutted the welfare system in the US and ensured a vast increase in poverty and hunger as a consequence.

As for Obama—who has repeatedly proclaimed that life is “pretty darn great” in America—his administration has overseen \$8.6 billion in cuts to the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), the food stamp program. A report earlier this year predicted that 1 million people across the US could lose their benefits in 2016 due to the work requirements for SNAP included as part of the Clinton administration’s welfare “reform.”

Working families are told that there is “no money” to extend food assistance. Rather these and other social programs must be slashed to fund the Pentagon’s war budget, as the US government-military apparatus prepares new wars. Whatever individual occupies the White House following next January, he or she will be dedicated to imposing even deeper social cuts and austerity.

A society should be measured by the health and welfare of its most vulnerable citizens, particularly the young. Children and teenagers in a just society should be nurtured by having nutritious food in adequate supply, a decent roof over their heads, quality education, and the opportunities to explore the arts, sports and other interests as they prepare for their place in the workforce. These are inalienable social rights that should be guaranteed.

While the media and the political establishment choose to ignore this latest study on food insecurity and the suffering and perils it poses to American teenagers, workers and young people need to recognize it as a particularly noxious sign of the outmoded and barbaric capitalist profit system.



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