

Keynote Address, 2nd Annual Anti-Hunger Conference, Baltimore MD, October 16, 2012

In his poem, “Injustice,” the great Chilean poet and Nobel Laureate, Pablo Neruda, wrote

Early on, I discovered the range of injustice.

Hunger was not just hunger,

but rather a measure of man.

Cold and wind were also measures.

The proud man racked up a hundred hungers, then fell.

Today, in the U.S., the richest nation on Earth, and arguably the richest nation in human history, a nation which pays wealthy farmers and agri-businesses *not* to grow food, a nation that distributes millions of tons of grain even to its geopolitical enemies, over 50 million people, one out of every six Americans, experience what is euphemistically called “food insufficiency.” 75 years ago, in his 2nd inaugural address, President Franklin Roosevelt spoke of “one third of a nation ill-clad, ill-housed, ill-nourished.” Because of the work of people like you, we have made considerable progress since FDR gave that stirring speech. Yet, the extent of hunger in America remains a moral stain on our nation.

Hunger in America, however, is not an isolated phenomenon. It is a symptom of larger and more chronic problems that have become far more serious during the past several decades. Foremost among these problems are deep and persistent poverty, structural unemployment, increasing socio-economic inequality, and our failure to confront the widespread consequences of institutional racism. Hunger can only be understood when it is viewed in this broader context and, ultimately, it can only be solved on a permanent basis when its root causes are also addressed. This morning, I would to elaborate briefly on these connections and how we might address them.

The Extent of Hunger

Although the severity of the Great Recession has somewhat abated, the effects of the 2008 financial and economic crisis are still being felt, particularly among the most vulnerable populations in the U.S. About one of seven households, over 50 million people, experience hunger; this is the highest number ever recorded in the United States. One-third of these households, nearly 17 million people, endure what policymakers call very low food security – these are in families whose normal eating patterns are regularly disrupted and whose food intake is below the levels considered adequate by nutritional experts. This figure of 17 million very hungry people represents a 20% increase since 2007 and is nearly double the number in 2000. In Maryland and DC, two of the wealthiest areas in the nation, 1/8 of all households experience food insecurity, an increase over the past decade. For reasons I will soon discuss, African American and Latino households are over-represented in both categories. More than one out of four households regularly lacks sufficient food.

Despite the impression sometimes created by the media, hunger in America is not confined to any geographic region. Although less visible to the public and policymakers, it exists in startling and increasing numbers even in suburbs and rural areas. About 1/8 of suburban households and over 1/7 rural households experience food insecurity; almost 5% experience very low food security. Nearly half of all Americans who receive food assistance live in the suburbs or rural communities. The problem is particularly severe in Southern and Western states.

Adding to our national shame, about one-third of the people who are hungry in America are children. In fact, over 22% of all children nationally live in households that experience hunger. Again, this problem is not confined to any specific region. The proportion of children

who are hungry is over 20% in 36 states. Our nation's capital, the District of Columbia, has the highest rate of children in households without consistent access to food, 30.7%. It is well known that hunger, particularly in the first three years of life, has dramatic implications on a child's future physical and mental health, academic achievement, and economic productivity.

The problem is slightly less severe, but still quite serious, for our nation's elderly. Over 8% of households with one or more elderly Americans experienced hunger in 2011. Seniors are more likely to be food insecure if they live in a Southern state, are younger, live with a grandchild, and are African American or Latino. What is most disturbing is that 30% of these households have to choose each month between food and medical care and that 35% of these households have to choose between buying food and paying for heat/utilities. A significant number of elderly Americans sometimes have enough money to purchase food but do not have the resources to access or prepare food due to lack of transportation, functional limitations, or health problems. As a result, over 14% of those individuals seeking emergency food assistance are over 65. Within slightly more than a decade, the number of food insecure seniors is projected to increase by 50% when the youngest of the Baby Boom Generation reaches age 60. As with our children, hunger among the elderly has significant health consequences and different implications for our policies and services.

Evidence of Hunger

The extent of hunger in America today is reflected in the increased use of both public and private food assistance programs. Last year, nearly 60% of all food insecure households participated in at least one of the three major Federal food assistance programs – SNAP (food stamps), WIC, and the School Lunch Program – and over 5% of all U.S. households accessed emergency food from a food pantry one or more times. The number of Americans receiving

SNAP benefits has increased over 50% since the start of the Great Recession. It now averages about 45 million people each month. Nearly half of all SNAP participants are children and almost one-third of the participants are elderly people or persons with disabilities. In Maryland, over 147,000 persons are enrolled in SNAP.

Over 30 million children participate in the National School Lunch Program, an increase of 20% during the past five years. Of the nearly 9 million people who received WIC benefits each month, over two-thirds are children and infants. In the private sector, Feeding America reports that it now provides emergency food aid to about 37 million low-income people, 46% more than in 2006. Anecdotally, the use of emergency food assistance has particularly increased among households with children.

Poverty and Hunger

As Neruda wrote, hunger is the measure of man. It reflects broader patterns of resource and power distribution in our society and long-standing, deeply rooted issues, such as poverty. Last year, using new methods of calculation, Census Bureau data revealed that almost 50 million people in the U.S. were poor, 3 million more than in 2010. This is the largest number of people in poverty since the U.S. began to measure poverty and the highest poverty rate in a generation.

To put this in another way, in 2011, nearly 16% percent of the U.S. population lived below the official poverty line – which is slightly above \$23,000/year for a family of four. Since 2010, the number and percentage of people in poverty increased in 17 states, including Maryland and DC. Over one-quarter of African Americans and Latinos now live below the poverty line; since 1980, they are 2.5-3 times more likely to be poor than white, non-Hispanic Americans.

As the extent of poverty has increased, so have its depth and chronic nature, particularly among persons of color and female-headed households. More than 20 million Americans and

nearly 12% of African Americans and over 10% of Latinos experience “extreme poverty,” defined as below 50% of the Federal poverty line. Poverty among unmarried female-headed households is nearly 40%. Several factors – race, household composition, education, employment status, and health – are significant predictors of the likelihood a person will be poor.

Children constitute the demographic cohort most likely to be poor, a phenomenon unprecedented in industrialized nations. Nationally, nearly 36% of African American children live in poverty. In Maryland, the data on poverty reflect the sharp disparities that exist in our state. Statewide, less than 11% of Marylanders live in poverty, but more than 1 of 4 people in Baltimore are poor, up 20% since 2010. Statewide, 1/9 of our children live in poverty, but in Baltimore the figure is over 3/8 and in Washington it is 43%.

Women, particularly elderly women and single parents, are also more likely to be poor at every educational level. The U.S. has highest rate of poverty for female-headed households among 22 industrialized nations, about three times higher than average. Like hunger, poverty in the U.S. is no longer confined to depressed inner city neighborhoods or isolated rural areas. It increased recently in all regions, particularly in the South and West, and in the suburbs as well.

These statistics are only a snapshot, however; they do not reveal the long-term impact of an extended spell of poverty. Perhaps the most striking finding is that nearly 60% of the U.S. population and 91% of African Americans will be poor at some time before age 65, especially during childhood and youth. On average, individuals who are poor have a one in three chance of escaping poverty in a given year, although this probability is much lower among African Americans, Latinos, female-headed households, and larger families. Roughly half of those who escape poverty, however, will become poor again within five years. Race, household status, and level of education are the key factors determining whether an individual can permanently escape

poverty. The physical, psychological, and social impact of people cycling in and out of poverty has a profound impact on their lives and the well-being and stability of our communities.

To make matters worse, by some accounts the poverty rate is underestimated by half. It excludes homeless persons, people who are incarcerated, and people “doubled up” and living with family members. Our measurement instruments also fail to consider the high cost of living in many metropolitan areas. Three-fourths of Americans have incomes under \$50,000/year, considerably below what it takes to live a minimally decent life in major cities such as Baltimore and Washington. In addition, since it was formulated a half century ago the official poverty line has not been adjusted to reflect increases in real income and changes in living standards. If our official measures reflected the 30% increase in real household median income since the mid-1960s, many more people would be counted as poor. For example, if the poverty line was raised slightly, to \$25,000 for a family of four, about one-third of the U.S. population (100 million persons) would be considered poor.

Despite recent modest economic growth, the prospects for the future are not encouraging. A simulation conducted by Emily Monea and Isabel Sawhill at the Brookings Institution two years, based on data from the Census Bureau, the Congressional Budget Office, the Office of Management and Budget, and the Economics Intelligence Unit underestimated the projected increase in the overall poverty rate and the child poverty rate. The increase they predicted would occur **by 2016** has already happened. Apparently, they underestimated the impact of structural unemployment and the long-term effects of the recession.

Unemployment

In the U.S, the most common cause of poverty is job loss or a reduction in wages. While the official unemployment rate is just under 8%, estimates of the actual unemployment rate range

as high as 22%. In addition, since the onset of the recession, over half of all workers have either experienced a pay cut or a layoff.

While there is a clear connection between the nation's unemployment rate and the rate of poverty, unemployment rather than poverty is a stronger predictor of food insecurity. Since unemployment is significantly higher among African Americans and Latinos than among white, non-Hispanics, it is not surprising that African American and Latino households are more than twice as likely to experience hunger. African American and Latino children, as a result, are nearly three times more likely to require emergency food assistance. In fact, counties with majority African American populations are disproportionately represented among the top 10% of counties with the highest rates of food insecurity.

Hunger and the Working Poor

The possession of a job itself, however, does not eliminate the risk of hunger in the U.S. According to the Census Bureau, in 2010, 21 million people lived in working-poor families. Nearly 1/10 of all American families living below the poverty line have at least one family member who is working. 36 percent of the households served by the Feeding America network have one or more adults working.

Just as the possession of a job does not guarantee an adequate income or sufficient food, the presence of identifiable and certifiable need does not guarantee access to or receipt of the food assistance programs that are currently available. Problems of access are particularly significant for minorities of color. African American and Latino households, for example, are less likely to receive SNAP benefits although they are more likely to be food insecure.

Impact of Hunger

The Declaration of Independence states that among our fundamental rights is the right to life. It is a truism that a critical component of a healthy life is adequate nutrition. Particularly in the first three years of life, an adequate diet has been demonstrated to have significant implications for a child's future physical and mental health, academic achievement, and economic productivity. Yet, according to the US Department of Agriculture more than one out of five children in the U.S. lives in a household with food insecurity; they do not always know where or when they will have their next meal. The lack of adequate nutrition puts children at risk for illness and weakens their immune system. It has implications not only for their physical and mental well-being but also for the development of healthy behaviors and social skills.

Among adults, food insecurity correlates strong with a variety of negative physical health outcomes, such as diabetes, hypertension, and various cardio-vascular risk factors. There is also a demonstrated relationship between hunger and higher levels of aggression and anxiety.

Pregnant women who experience food insecurity are at risk of premature births, low birth weight babies, and other birth complications. Women who experience hunger may be at greater risk of major depression and other mental health problems. Food insecurity among the children of mothers who are food insecure has also been linked with delayed development, poorer parental attachment, and learning difficulties during the first two years of life.

Children growing up in food insecure households are more likely to require hospitalization, have more frequent instances of oral health problems, and may be at higher risk for conditions such as anemia and asthma. These health conditions hinder their ability to function normally and participate fully in school and other activities. They may also be at higher risk for behavioral issues, such as school truancy and tardiness, and may be more likely to

experience a range of behavioral problems including hyperactivity, aggression, anxiety, mood swings, and bullying. A long-term implication of chronic hunger is that these children are likely to fall behind in academic development, which has clear implications for their ultimate life chances. Because a disproportionate number of African American and Latino households experience chronic food insecurity, health, mental health, behavioral, and academic problems occur more frequently among their children and have lingering effects throughout adulthood.

Why Is There Still Hunger in the U.S.?

In a nation of abundance, it is painful yet imperative that we ask: Why does hunger still exist? Certainly, it cannot be explained by the lack of food. Even in years with relatively poor harvests like 2012, our markets are overflowing and our restaurant portions have gotten larger. It also cannot be explained by a lack of morality in our culture. Virtually every one of our religious traditions emphasizes the importance of caring for the hungry and the poor and uses allegories of food distribution (for example, manna in the Old Testament and the parable of the loaves and the fishes in the New Testament) to underscore these concerns.

Nor can we attribute the persistence of hunger to the absence of guidance from the secular documents that are the political foundation of our nation. I have already referred to the Declaration of Independence in this regard. In addition to the language about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in the Declaration, our Constitution calls on the government to “promote the general welfare.” More recently, the 2nd Bill of Rights proposed by President Roosevelt in 1944 includes the following: the right to a useful and remunerative job; the right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation; the right of every family to a decent home; the right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health; the right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and

unemployment; and the right to a good education. In 1948, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the U.S. signed, stated in Article 25:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

So, we must look elsewhere to answer the question: Why is there still hunger in the U.S.?

While in the past hunger was largely caused by events beyond our control – famine, plague, and natural disasters – today hunger is, to be charitable, the unintended consequence of purposeful policy and political decisions. These can be divided broadly into five categories.

First, there are those policies which are designed to maintain the political, social, and economic status quo: a status quo that, to paraphrase the great sociologist Herbert Gans, has multiple uses for poverty. These are policies that continue to marginalize millions of Americans, fail to provide them with access to basic essentials, and deny them opportunities to improve their lives.

Second, particularly during the past three decades, we have made conscious policy decisions which have produced the widest chasm between rich and poor in our nation's history. These include tax policies that favor the wealthiest Americans, spending policies that underfund education, income support, health care, and social services, and labor policies that resist the payment of a living wage, that create obstacles to workers organizing on their own behalf, and which fail to make our places of work and our communities safer and environmentally healthy.

Third, we have developed a culture in which erstwhile leaders and opinion makers seek to gain political advantage by stigmatizing those individuals and families who must rely on

government assistance to survive. Through the words they use (e.g., “food stamp nation”) and the priorities they promote (the fiscal deficit rather than our social deficits) they try to paint a picture of our society as one divided between “producers” and “takers,” as a nation in which dependency on meager welfare grants and modest food assistance is a reflection of some people’s desire to remain “victims” and their refusal to adopt mainstream values and behavioral norms. Now, the canard that the unemployed do not want to work and that the poor are poor because of their failed moral character has been around for centuries. It persists despite volumes of recent research to the contrary. Lately, however, purveyors of these falsehoods have added a new twist: that people choose to be hungry so that they can continue to collect food handouts. On the face of it, this argument is so absurd it would be laughable – Have you ever met a child who wants to be hungry? Yet, in our divide-and-conquer culture, in which people’s fears and insecurities are exploited, and their anger is misdirected, the idea has gained some traction.

Then, there are policy decisions that reframe the issue and thereby avoid addressing the root causes of hunger and poverty. Since 2006, policymakers no longer speak of hunger, in fact, but of “food insecurity.” We even have created levels of hunger, as if a condition as visceral as the lack of food can be reduced to a dry statistic. How would Neruda’s poem sound if he wrote of “food insecurity” rather than hunger? The line “hunger was not just hunger but the measure of man” would lose its power if Neruda had used the euphemism “food insecurity.” I am neither a poet nor a teacher of poetry but you get my point.

And, finally, there are benevolent policy decisions which often distract us from the core issues and inadvertently perpetuate our longstanding cultural myth that individuals are basically responsible for their own fate. I speak here, with all due respect, of the recent emphasis on obesity. I want to be clear about my point here: I think that obesity and its consequences are

very serious problems that require ongoing corrective efforts. But I also think that focusing to such an extent on the problem of obesity and transforming the discourse about hunger into one about food insecurity reinforces our tendency to individualize our structural problems and to ignore their systemic origins. Obesity is a symptom of hunger, and hunger is a symptom of poverty, and poverty is the result of decisions that maintain and even exacerbate widespread and growing inequality. Yet, our choices do not constitute an either/or proposition. We need to address concrete issues like obesity and food deserts, AND we need to protect and expand the funding for WIC and SNAP and Medicaid and the Earned Income Tax Credit and school breakfast and lunch programs, AND we need to keep advocating for a living wage and a fair tax system. At the same time we must not lose sight of the origins of the needs these policies and programs address and of the importance of reordering of our nation's priorities. Frankly, if we don't see the forest for the trees, the forest will ultimately engulf more and more of us. In order to see both the forest and the trees, we need to hear the voices of those persons who are experiencing hunger and poverty first hand – not merely at conferences like this one, but throughout the policymaking and implementation process.

How can we maintain the energy we need to keep fighting for social justice without overlooking the serious nature of the problems we are confronting? One of my favorite philosophers, Antonio Gramsci, concisely expressed a solution to this dilemma: “pessimism of the mind, optimism of the will.” Gramsci means that we must be rigorous in analyzing the depth and complexity of the problems we face and relentless in our efforts to link these problems to structural and institutional flaws in our society. Yet, we must not lose hope or abandon our belief that through collective effort we can bend the arc closer to justice. Such efforts have in the past and will in the future. Someday, justice, not hunger will be the measure of humankind.