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Promoting Food Security: The Community Food Security Coalition

Food Insecurity in the United States

Food insecurity is a growing socio-economic concern in the United States, perpetuated by rising rents and mortgages, increased healthcare and energy costs, low wages, and lack of jobs. Its most basic definition characterizes food insecurity as a household's limited or uncertain access to adequate amounts of nutritious food; this is distinct from the notion of hunger, an individual-level physiological condition that results from food insecurity (United States Department of Agriculture, 2010b).

Food insecurity has cascading deleterious effects. Households that are food insecure often utilize no- or low-income government assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). In 2009, there were 33.5 million participants in SNAP (formerly the Food Stamp Program), receiving an average monthly benefit of \$125.31 (United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2011c), and 9.1 million participants in WIC, receiving an average monthly benefit of \$42.40 (United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2011d). According to the 2009 Consumer Expenditure Survey, households spent an average of \$312.75 monthly on food eaten at home (groceries) (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011b). Most food stamp households report that their benefits do not last an entire month, and many turn to food pantries and soup kitchens, or deal with intermittent hunger until the next paycheck comes (Food and Research Action Center, 2010).

Food insecurity is associated with lower food expenditures, low fruit and vegetable consumption, and lower-quality diets (Drewnowski and Spencer, 2004). Food cost influences food purchases, and diets

including fresh produce are generally associated with higher food costs. In 2010, the average cost of one pound of apples was \$1.26, one pound of cheddar cheese was \$4.53, one pound of white bread was \$1.38, one pound of iceberg lettuce was \$0.89, one pound of ground beef was \$2.40, and one gallon of whole milk was \$3.30 (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011a). By comparison, for the cost of one gallon of milk, you could purchase a McDouble hamburger, a small fries, and a 16oz. beverage from the McDonald's Dollar Menu (McDonalds, n.d.).

These convenience – or “empty calorie” – foods usually are highly processed with high levels of fat, sugar, and sodium. Diets filled with processed foods lead to obesity and poorer health outcomes, including diabetes, heart disease, and certain kinds of cancer (Drewnowski and Specter, 2004). With the prevalence of convenience foods, it is no surprise that there has been a dramatic increase in obesity in the United States in recent history; in 2010, 27.6% of all U.S. adults were considered obese, with an additional 36.3% considered overweight (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2011). Obesity in children and adolescents has almost tripled since 1980, affecting 17% (12.5 million) of children, age 2-18, in 2009 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

Either as a cause or as a result of this pattern of food consumption, many low-income neighborhoods have become “food deserts,” areas that are devoid of supermarkets or produce stands (Walker et al, 2010). As grocery stores move out, convenience stores and fast food restaurants move in. Convenience stores have fewer healthy food choices when compared to grocery stores and their food prices are generally lower (Glanz et al, 2007). As people make food choices based on the food outlets that are immediately available in their neighborhood (Furey, Strugnell, andMcIlveen, 2001), this system

creates a vicious cycle, resulting in neighborhoods with readily available, relatively cheap high-fat, calorie-rich foods.

Many food insecure families with children rely on the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs to provide the bulk of their children's nutritional needs. In 2010, 20.6 million children received free or reduced-cost school lunches (United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2011a) and 9.73 million children received free or reduced-cost school breakfasts (United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2011b). Although the intended purpose of these programs is to promote food security by decreasing hunger, there is increasing public concern that the quality of food available to schoolchildren may actually contribute to the growing problem of childhood obesity. Critics note that many school lunch programs serve meals that are high in saturated fats and cholesterol, and research shows that children who participate in these programs do not meet the daily-recommended intakes of fruits and vegetables (Robinson-O'Brien et al, 2010). In addition, recent studies reveal a positive correlation between children from households eligible for these programs and increased body mass index, an indicator of childhood obesity and obesity-related diseases (Ji and Hooker, 2010).

These interrelated facets contribute to a crisis of food insecurity in the United States. The U. S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Economic Research Service conducted its first household food security survey in 1995, which found at the time 11.9% (11.94 million) of U.S. households were food insecure (Hamilton et al, 1997, p. 47); by 2009, these numbers had dramatically risen to 14.7% (17.4 million) of U.S. households (Nord et al, 2010, p. 4). Even more striking is the effect on households with children: in 2009, 10.6% of all U.S. households with children (4.2 million households) were food insecure (Nord et al, 2010, p. 11).

Community Food Security

To combat this crisis, a community-level response to food insecurity is underway. According to the USDA's broad definition, community food security is "a prevention-oriented concept that supports the development and enhancement of sustainable, community-based strategies: to improve access of low-income households to healthful, nutritious food supplies; to increase the self-reliance of communities in providing for their own food needs; [and] to promote comprehensive responses to local food, farm, and nutrition issues" (United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2010a, ¶1). Phrased differently, community food security is "a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice" (Hamm and Bellows, 2003, p. 37).

These definitions take into account the many facets of food production, distribution, consumption, and sustainability in community food systems, and a number of nonprofit and government organizations are implementing programs to address these varied attributes, including: Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), farmers' markets, community and school gardens, and farm-to-school and farm-to-cafeteria initiatives. However, at the national level, the Community Food Security Coalition spearheads efforts in working with these organizations, not just toward implementing successful community programs, but also more importantly in advocating for legislative change.

Community Food Security Coalition

The Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) (<http://www.foodsecurity.org/>) is a national nonprofit “dedicated to building strong, sustainable, local and regional food systems that ensure access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food for all people at all times... [They] seek to develop self-reliance among all communities in obtaining their food and to create a system of growing, manufacturing, processing, making available, and selling food that is regionally based and grounded in the principles of justice, democracy, and sustainability” (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.d, ¶1).

Founded in 1994, this membership-based coalition is a network of local and regional organizations that work together to dynamically change the local food system and increase food security in communities across the United States. CFSC’s diverse membership includes more than 500 organizations that address anti-hunger, community development, sustainable agriculture, and urban agriculture/community gardening issues. In 2010, CFSC gained recognition as one of the top nonprofit organizations working towards food security in the United States (Philanthropedia, n.d.). The coalition organizes its efforts along three main tracks: legislative advocacy, technical and training assistance, and research and programming.

Legislative Advocacy

One of the focuses of the CFSC is to support the food security movement through federal food policy advocacy. They deliver coordinated and focused policy tools that encourage community-based initiatives that “strengthen local food systems, increase low-income food security while supporting local farmers, and develop local food planning and policy organizations” (Community Food Security Coalition , n.d.h, ¶1). To achieve this, CFSC develops a policy platform, cultivates Congressional advocates, and organizes individuals and organizations to support the platforms. They also created a *Federal Policy*

Advocacy Handbook (Ebright and Borron, 2007), which contains basic information about the policy process, so that readers become more effective advocates for community food security and related issues.

Farm Bill

One of CFSC's biggest undertakings is developing a policy platform for the Farm Bill, the primary agricultural and food policy tool of the federal government that covers food and nutrition programs, agricultural marketing, rural development, agricultural research, commodity programs, farm credit, conservation, energy, and trade (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.). For the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008, CFSC and their member organizations mobilized to advance an agenda that included:

- helping low-income people get access to fresh and healthy food through the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program, as well as the WIC and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs;
- promoting farmers markets through the Farmers' Market Promotion Program;
- getting more local foods into schools through the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program; and
- supporting community projects that generate jobs and improve food access, with the support of the Community Food Projects grant programs (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.a).

As the U.S. Congress prepares for the 2012 U.S. Farm Bill, CFSC is organizing its policy platform to include the following issues: strengthening local and regional food infrastructure; increasing purchases of local and healthy foods through SNAP; increasing food access and supporting community-based agriculture; and supporting farm-to-school programming (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.c).

Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act

The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, also known as the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, authorizes funding and sets policy for USDA's child nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program and the WIC (United States Department of Agriculture, 2011). For the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, CFSC's agenda included:

- establishing a national Farm-to-School grant program with secure funding;
- increasing federal reimbursements for all child nutrition meal programs, tied to an increase in servings of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains;
- providing non-food assistance grants to schools to purchase food preparation equipment (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.g); and
- increasing the cash value of fruit/vegetable vouchers and requiring that WIC vouchers be redeemable at farmers' markets (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.h).

Training and Technical Assistance

Another mission of the CFSC is to provide training and technical assistance to local and regional governments and community food security organizations, aiming to make their initiatives and programs successful in catalyzing change in the local food system.

Healthy Corner Store Network

Supported by CFSC, the Healthy Corner Store Network (HCSN), “supports efforts to increase the availability and sales of healthy, fresh, affordable foods through small-scale stores in underserved communities” (Healthy Corner Stores Network, n.d.a, ¶1). HCSN provides information about issues and initiatives related to food access issues and health disparities. Additionally, the network shares a toolkit and resources to help implement corner store initiatives, including food environment surveys, educational and promotional material, evaluation and assessment tools, and information on funding sources (Healthy Corner Stores Network, n.d.b). They also provide webinars on related topics.

Food Policy Councils

Food policy councils bring together citizens, government officials, and stakeholders from food-related sectors to examine their regional or local food systems and to develop food and agriculture policy recommendations. The CFSC’s Food Policy Council (FPC) Program supports the organization, development, and operation of FPCs in communities across the nation. Through this service, they provide individualized assistance to help FPCs strategize, problem-solve, plan for shaping public policy, and implementing or coordinating programming. They also organize regional meetings and regular conference calls to bring together FPC organizers to network and share information (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.j). The website provides links to a wealth of information, including: sample resolutions for founding FPCs; information about marketing and media advocacy; and a directory of FPCs with knowledge of various issues (e.g., farmland preservation, farm to school, community gardening, and food assistance).

Community Food Assessment Program

A Community Food Assessment (CFA) is “a collaborative and participatory process that systematically examines a broad range of community food issues and assets” (WhyHunger, 2010, ¶1), in an effort to improve the local food system and implement change to make the community more food secure. The CFSC’s website is a clearinghouse for tools and information related to CFAs, including: a guidebook for planning CFAs; assessment survey tools; information on public policy and FPCs; and links to CFA-related research and data (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.e).

Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program

The CFSC provides one-on-one grant-application assistance for the USDA Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program. These grants are “designed to increase food security in communities by bringing the whole food system together to assess strengths, establish linkages, and create systems that improve the self-reliance of community members over their food need” (United States Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2009, ¶12). Organizations who are interested in applying for one of these grants can work directly with grant consultants to “clarify [Community Food Projects] program guidelines, address technical questions, provide feedback on program plans, review draft proposals, and/or refer you to others with expertise in specific areas” (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.i, ¶13). CFSC provides comprehensive guides on how to develop a strong grant proposal, including addressing issues such as: eligibility, funding, and application writing, as well as application evaluation criteria and common application pitfalls.

Research and Programming

The CFSC plays an important role in research related to community food security issues. The coalition works with partner organizations, including WhyHunger, the Farmers Market Coalition, the Center for Food and Justice, and Food First, to promote research related to all aspects of community food security. Recent research publications include:

- *Real Food, Real Choice: Connecting SNAP Recipients with Farmers Markets* (Briggs et al, 2010), a report highlighting actions farmers markets can take to make fresh, local foods more accessible to government assistance program recipients;
- *Whole Measures for Community Food Systems: Values-Based Planning and Evaluation* (Abi-Nader et al, 2009), a step-by-step guide for planning, developing outcomes, and evaluating community food system development; and
- *Delivering More: Scaling Up Farm to School Programs* (Markley, Kalb, and Gustafson, 2010), a case study of successful farm-to-school programs, and recommendations on how to expand these programs to reach more students and more schools.

CFSC sponsors key national gatherings that have been crucial in creating new programmatic approaches and strengthening networks for those working towards community food security. For example, CFSC holds an annual conference that focuses on bringing stakeholders together to discuss the community food systems movement (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.b). They also organize and host biennial “farm to cafeteria” conferences (ongoing since 2002), and offer a number of other training events related to food policy and community food assessment (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.f).

Conclusion

In its work against food insecurity, the Community Food Security Coalition emphasizes its basic principles of community food security:

- meeting the food needs of low-income communities by reducing hunger and improving individual health;
- building strong local food resources, from supermarkets to farmers' markets, in order to make communities more self-reliant;
- providing opportunities for individuals to provide for their own food needs through education and programming; and
- addressing the multitude of problems affecting the community food system, such as food deserts and disappearing farmland and family farms, by engaging citizens and stakeholders across organizations and government agencies, and implementing policy change (Community Food Security Coalition, n.d.k).

This on-the-ground work by CFSC makes an impact on relevant government programs in the United States. The HCSN works to eradicate food deserts by incentivizing small-scale grocery stores to build in underserved neighborhoods. Successful lobbying for the 2008 Farm Bill and the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act prompted legislative change by: funding farm-to-school programs and implementing the Fruit and Vegetable Program to make produce more accessible to schoolchildren; changing the WIC food packages to include more produce and whole grains; and making it easier for WIC and SNAP recipients to use their vouchers at farmers' markets.

This systematic approach - working to address the multitude of underlying causes affecting food insecurity - makes the efforts of CFSC so vital. By partnering with local and regional organizations and promoting policy change, the Community Food Security Coalition is continuing the fight for community

food security – a guarantee that all U.S. adults and children, regardless of income or status, not only have enough food to eat, but that they have access to nutritious food that will promote long and healthy lives.

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Additional Resources

- Center for Food and Justice, Occidental College
<http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/cfj/>
- Food & Community Program, W.K. Kellogg Foundation
<http://www.foodandcommunity.org/>
- Food First: Institute for Food & Policy Development
<http://www.foodfirst.org/>
- Food Research and Action Center
<http://frac.org/>
- State & Local Food Policy Councils
<http://www.statefoodpolicy.org/>
- WhyHunger
<http://www.whyhunger.org/>