



FOOD INSECURITY

by

Food Insecurity Immersion Team 2022

Steve Bleile, MaryAnn Fatheddin, Simeon Harris, Erica Holmes, Norma Lee, Annette Ross, Stacy Thomas, Julie Timm, Karen Wells

Introduction

Food insecurity. What are your emotions when you speak those words? What communities are impacted by food insecurity? How do we eliminate hunger for our children? Who is responsible for bringing food to every home – and to the unhoused?

Though the US is the wealthiest country in the world, over 38 million Americans are experiencing food insecurity. Our country has the resources to answer the crisis of food insecurity; however, politics, wealth accumulation, and governmental restrictions often take precedent in our policies and regulations and laws. Food insecurity is a symptom of a myriad of unresolved issues: low wages or living wages, unaffordable housing, no transportation, lack of sound leadership in public school leadership at the State and local levels, and lack of empathy in our government policies.

Food insecurity does not discriminate. It impacts all ethnicities, all ages, all communities, all levels of education, and all economic levels. However, due to the compounding issues of historic and systemic policies that have caused African-American communities to be underserved and disenfranchised from wealth building in US history, these communities suffer more than any other group, including those in the brown group, when food insecurity is discussed amongst those who can make decisions about food insecurity.

The complexity of the causes of food insecurity adds to the complexity of a solution: there are as many possible solutions to eliminating hunger as there are fingerprints. Just as every community and everyone in the community is impacted by food insecurity, the solution will only come when every individual takes accountability and responsibility to help. With this in mind, our team's call to action is this: Act. By supporting local organizations in their effort to eliminate food insecurity and hunger, we can all be part of the solution. The following sections capture the scope, journey, findings and themes, recommendations, and call to action of the LMR 2022 Food Insecurity Team.

Scope

In looking at food as a basic human need, our research and interviews exposed the fundamental truth that access to food has developmental impacts on mental, physical, social, and economic health and identity. Through interviews, research, and

discussions, our team gained a deeper awareness regarding the complexity and interrelatedness of food insecurity for all people and communities at all ages.

Our scope broadened to identify the key social indicators of food insecurity as poverty, race, infrastructure, and education. These indicators showed that food insecurity is not just about lack of food, it is a result of lack of access to healthy and affordable food, low income/low wages, limited transportation and mobility, unemployment, lack of affordable housing and other factors that contribute to poverty. Understanding these contributing causes underscores that in addition to the many people experiencing food insecurity already, many more Americans are dangerously close to having no access to food. Job losses and increased food insecurity during the COVID-19 global pandemic brought this truth to light.

Operating under an expanded focus on food insecurity's effect on the community at large, including but not limited to childhood hunger, we were able to complete our interviews and research with informed questions that helped to broaden our knowledge and understanding of the issue as a whole.

Journey

Upon initial consideration of the vast topic of food insecurity, our immersion team agreed to narrow our focus to food insecurity as it affects the lives of children in the Richmond region. This highly focused topic immediately challenged us to explore what childhood hunger meant to each of us, who is impacted, and why. During our initial discussions, this led to impassioned conversations around the injustices of food access that were centered in race and socio-economic status. Our team is made up of vastly different personalities, lived experiences, and professional expertise – many of which were unexpected - and at times these personal stories were uncomfortable to share and to hear with near total strangers. We began to share our truths around food insecurity, and we challenged each other to think, analyze and, at times, even reconsider our positions. This reflection and learning from each other ultimately allowed us to start understanding the breadth and severity of hunger across age, race, income, and education. As we listened to each other, we learned that our seemingly disparate backgrounds regarding the experience of hunger had much common ground.

For our research, we decide to separate into groups of two and three to complete our interviews. This allowed us to schedule our interviews expediently to ensure we gathered as much data as possible from stakeholders within the community who focus on food insecurity. Each group provided recordings of their interviews and shared key findings with the entire group. As we shared our interviews, it became very clear that we could not address childhood hunger in isolation. When children go hungry, parents typically go even hungrier. Each of the experts reinforced the interconnectedness of social issues that create food insecurity as well as the immense complexities in finding a single solution.

Throughout our journey we learned that it's not simply one factor but many that contribute to food insecurity. Though there are differing opinions on how to solve the

issue of food insecurity, it will take a unified effort from many organizations and individuals to truly move the needle. Ultimately, our team journey led us to a better understanding of the multi-dimensional complexities of food insecurity and helped us to broaden our perspectives beyond our individual experiences.

Findings and Key Themes

1. There is no difference between child hunger and adult hunger. Hunger is hunger.
2. Food security is an interconnected social concern. Households that suffer from food insecurity typically also suffer from inadequate housing, health care, transportation, and food where daily decisions are made to spend limited money.
3. The COVID pandemic has seen a significant uptick in the number of households in need.
4. There is a difference between access to food and access to healthy food.
5. Food access is very different between rural and urban communities and availability of cars, buses, and sidewalks.
6. Households who suffer from food insecurity likely also suffer from medical related conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, obesity.
7. Lack of education about nutrition is a contributing factor to healthy eating. We need to teach children to enjoy healthy eating. Adults are less likely to change their behavior – especially when it is engrained as part of their upbringing and culture.
8. Word of mouth is the predominant mode of communication and awareness for food programs and food distribution organizations. With 280 agencies in Virginia, 60,000 servicing the country, we are still not doing a good job leveraging the existing network to get food to families in need.

Recommendations

Through research, interviews, and the journey itself our LMR immersion team became acutely aware of the lack of access to information and the disconnect between food insecurity organizations and the communities they seek to serve. Research led us to “Big Bertha” and other hubs that provide a similar platform for informational resources including food insecurity. Our team recommends greater coordination and communication of available resources through Big Bertha to get resources to individuals and families in need. We also recommend a call to action for volunteer work among LMR participants to make a greater impact towards feeding all our families.