The Paradox of Hunger and Economic Prosperity in America

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It was 1967, and the nation’s growing willingness to acknowledge and attack major social problems had manifested itself in Congress. Republican Senators George Murphy and Joseph Clark joined Democrats Robert Kennedy and Ernest Hollings in forging a bipartisan alliance to craft federal nutrition programs to remedy widespread domestic hunger as reported by investigating physicians and Congressional panels (1).

Ten years later, following expansion of the food stamp and school meals programs, and the creation of elderly feeding programs and the WIC supplemental feeding program for high-risk mothers and babies, researchers returned to regions of the nation where they had discovered severe undernutrition a decade before. Although they still found poverty, they saw that pantries were no longer bare. The poor had food to eat, and teachers no longer reported that children were unable to learn due to hunger. Doctors and nurses in community clinics told the researchers that malnutrition had subsided among their poor clientele (2).

But this good news was to last for little more than a decade. The reappearance of hunger in the U.S. crept back relatively unnoticed until it seemingly burst on the public scene in 1982. In the earlier stages of the problem, churches and social service agencies found that increasing numbers of people were asking for food to sustain them through hard times. Doctors in parts of the nation found growing numbers of patients who did not have enough to eat, and more patients who manifested illnesses associated with hunger.

In late 1982, the bipartisan U.S. Conference of Mayors reported that a survey of major American cities revealed “a most serious emergency” (3). Hunger was widespread and growing, and a number of mayors followed Ernest Morial of New Orleans in asking for immediate federal intervention to respond to the problem. Coleman Young of Detroit went
as far as declaring a state of emergency in his city to help residents there “avoid starvation.”

At about the same time as the mayors’ report, a U.S. Department of Agriculture study noted a sharp increase in the need for emergency food across the nation, concluding that hunger “is increasing at a frenetic pace” (4). In mid-1983, another governmental agency, the nonpartisan General Accounting Office (GAO), underscored the seriousness of domestic hunger by analyzing feeding centers across the nation. The GAO concluded that “in almost all cases the (centers) were serving more today than in the past. Many centers reported that food assistance needs were greater than ever before” (5).

National organizations soon weighed in with further evidence of the problem. The national Salvation Army reported dramatic increases in the need for food among families across the country (6). Bread for the World, an international organization devoted to ending hunger, found that private agencies in the U.S. were seeing a “greatly increased demand” for emergency food, a demand with which they were not able to keep up (7).

The Washington-based Center on Budget and Policy Priorities conducted a random-sample survey of 181 emergency feeding programs in the country and found that four of every five were seeing “significant increases” in hunger in their areas (8). A third of them were seeing annual increases of over 100% in the number of people asking for food to eat.

Perhaps the most widely noted analysis of domestic hunger was the 1985 report by the Harvard-based Physician Task Force on Hunger in America (9). This blue-ribbon panel which included the former Surgeon General, as well as the President of the American Public Health Association, deans of medical schools and schools of public health, assembled evidence for two years through traditional research methods and field-based investigations in twenty-five states.

This national panel estimated that some 20 million Americans experience hunger at least some days every month. Hunger was defined as chronically inadequate nutrient intake as established by the National Academy of Sciences. Moreover, the group termed domestic hunger an “epidemic” in the scientific sense of the term—a widespread and growing threat to human health.

During the past several years still further evidence suggests that hunger is serious and is not subsiding. Some 76 studies now point with remarkable consistency to this widespread—and perplexing—problem in our wealthy nation (10).