

The Great Recession: Still Hungry in America

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CHILD WATCH
Marian Wright Edelman

In 1967, as a young civil rights lawyer in Mississippi, I was asked to testify before the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty in Washington about how the anti-poverty program in Mississippi was working. The Head Start program was under attack by the powerful Mississippi segregationist delegation because it was operated by church, civil rights, and Black community groups after the state turned it down. After defending the Head Start program, I told the committee I had become increasingly concerned about the growing hunger in the Mississippi Delta. The convergence of efforts to register Black citizens to vote, Black parents' challenges to segregated schools, the development of chemical weed killers and farm mechanization, and recent passage of a minimum wage law covering agriculture workers on large farms had resulted in many Black sharecroppers being pushed off their near feudal plantations which no longer needed their cheap labor. Many displaced sharecroppers were illiterate and had no skills. Free federal food commodities like cheese, powdered milk,

no income. Robert Kennedy's pushing, passion, and visibility helped set in motion a chain of events including a 60 Minutes documentary on "Hunger in America" that

led to reforms. But change was slow and incremental. Secretary Freeman did not believe there were people in Mississippi with no income who could not afford to pay \$2 for food stamps and sent his own staff back with Peter Edelman, Robert Kennedy's legislative assistant, to retrace the Senators' trip. A series of reports in ensuing months funded by the Field Foundation and visits by doctors, including Robert Coles, to examine poor children in Mississippi and other southern states documented that hunger was widespread not just in Mississippi but throughout the south and elsewhere in America.

But as more months passed without enough federal response, I complained in frustration during a visit with Senator Kennedy in Washington. When I told him I was stopping in Atlanta to see Dr. King, he urged me to tell Dr. King to bring the poor people to Washington to make hunger and poverty visible since the country's attention had turned to the Vietnam War and put poverty and hunger on the back burner. Dr. King responded positively and immediately and began planning for the campaign. After Dr. King's assassination, the Poor People's Campaign was carried on by his staff and I moved to Washington to help as Counsel and federal policy liaison. It was a watershed coming together of White, Black, Native American, and Latino poor seeking jobs and adequate income and an end to hunger.

Many have pronounced it a failure but I differ and believe it made hunger a national issue and set into motion a number of positive follow on steps that led to major expansions of the federal food safety net programs so many depend on today. After Robert Kennedy's assassination, the bipartisan McGovern committee continued hearings around the country, a range of hunger activists kept pushing the Nixon administration and Congress to improve the nutrition safety net, and President Nixon appointed a task force headed by Pat Moynihan, his Domestic Policy Advisor, which affirmed hunger was a major problem. President Nixon gave a speech saying hunger had no place our rich land. A prod towards these steps was a second quiet Poor People's Campaign delegation which came to Washington in 1969 and met with President Nixon and his Cabinet in the White House. In that meeting, Rev. Ralph Abernathy and other leaders urged action to end hunger and President Nixon kept responding by saying he was seeking peace in Vietnam. A contentious press conference followed and a series of Congressional visits criticizing the President's weak response helped catalyze a series of steps including a White House conference on nutrition and incremental expansions of child and family nutrition programs that made a huge difference for millions until they came under attack from Reagan Administration budget assaults and attempts to eliminate a range of federal safety net programs.

Today, crucial programs like food stamps, the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition program, and school lunch, breakfast and summer feeding programs continue working to combat child and family hunger. Their implementation could be significantly

improved but in the current recession, they have proved to be indispensable lifelines for the millions of jobless families with no cash income in our rich nation—about six million or one in 50 Americans, the New York Times reported in 2010—for whom food stamps are the only defense against the wolves of hunger. Last year more Americans relied on food stamps to eat than at any time since the program began in 1939—46 million. Yet once again some voices are starting to wonder whether we really need robust anti-hunger programs in America,

Jane but very real children like Jane Soliternik, a New York City high school senior and the recent recipient of a Children's Defense Fund's Beat the Odds® scholarship award. Jane has overcome many odds in her young life, including cardiac surgery, her father's death, and poverty—especially after her widowed mother was laid off from her job as a medical assistant during the Great Recession and couldn't find another job for more than two years. When unemployment benefits were exhausted, Jane and her mother lived on the

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and whether there are really so many children out there who might otherwise go hungry. A recent skeptical Wall Street Journal article was titled "The Myth of Starving Americans."

The safety net has indeed made it harder to find starving children with bloated bellies like those Senator Kennedy met in Mississippi in 1967—thank God. But the quiet pangs of hunger and the documented signs of chronic malnutrition are still here, from rural Mississippi to inner cities to middle class suburbs where families have fallen on hard times. Hungry boys and girls are not imaginary figures like the fictional Dick and

Social Security payments Jane received following the death of her father. Jane was already facing multiple challenges, and then hunger was added to the list: "There were some times where, you know, we wouldn't have that much food, and I would tell my mom, 'I'm not hungry, don't worry about it,' and I lost a lot of weight. I remember I used to be a size five, and I went from a size five to a size zero. So, you know, I try to not eat too much. I try to eat in school. They give me free lunch in school."

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flour, and peanut butter were all that stood between them and starvation. I invited the Senators to come to Mississippi and hear directly from local people about the positive impact the anti-poverty program was making. They did.

I testified again with local community leaders in their subsequent hearing in Jackson—again sharing the desperate plight of hungry people and urged the Senators to visit the Mississippi Delta with me to experience for themselves the hungry poor in our very rich nation, to visit the shacks and look into the deadened eyes of hungry children with bloated bellies—a level of hunger many people did not believe could exist in America. "They are starving and someone has to help them," I said.

Senator Robert Kennedy responded as did Senator Joseph Clark and Republican Senator George Murphy. So in April 1967 they visited homes in Cleveland, Mississippi, asking respectfully of each dweller what they had had for breakfast, lunch, or dinner the night before. Robert Kennedy opened their empty ice boxes and cupboards after asking permission. I watched him hover, visibly moved, on a dirt floor in a dirty dark shack out of television-camera range over a listless baby with bloated belly from whom he tried in vain to get a response. He lightly touched the cheeks, shoulders, and hands of the children clad in ragged clothes outside who responded to his question "What did you have for breakfast?" saying "We haven't had breakfast yet," although it was nearly noon. And he tried to offer words of encouragement to their hopeless mothers.

He kept his word to try to help Mississippi's hungry children and went immediately to see Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman the next day and urged him to get some food down there and to eliminate any charges for food stamps for people who had

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