

WHY ARE MORE AMERICANS GOING TO BED HUNGRY?

By Matt Herfield

Around the world, America is considered one of the richest and most powerful countries -- where opportunities loom high and possibilities are only dwarfed by the limits you place on your own imagination.

So you might ask, why is it that, in one of the wealthiest countries, the number of people who go hungry each night is on the rise? There is no shortage of food on store shelves and as one writer points out, cheap food is everywhere, *"there are 99 cent stores and value meals at fast-food chains."* Go to any restaurant on any given night and you can see just how much food we throw away. Still in all, nearly 50 million Americans struggle each day to put food on the table. For almost 17 million kids, food insecurity is a very real concern, and those numbers are going up.

It would surprise many of us to know just who the real face of hunger belongs to. The image of hunger is not confined to one segment of the American population, or to the rural areas of our country. According to organizations like [Feeding America](#) and its Food Banks, many of the millions at risk of hunger, *"are often hard-working adults, children and seniors who simply cannot always make ends meet."* They are our neighbors. They are part of our communities.



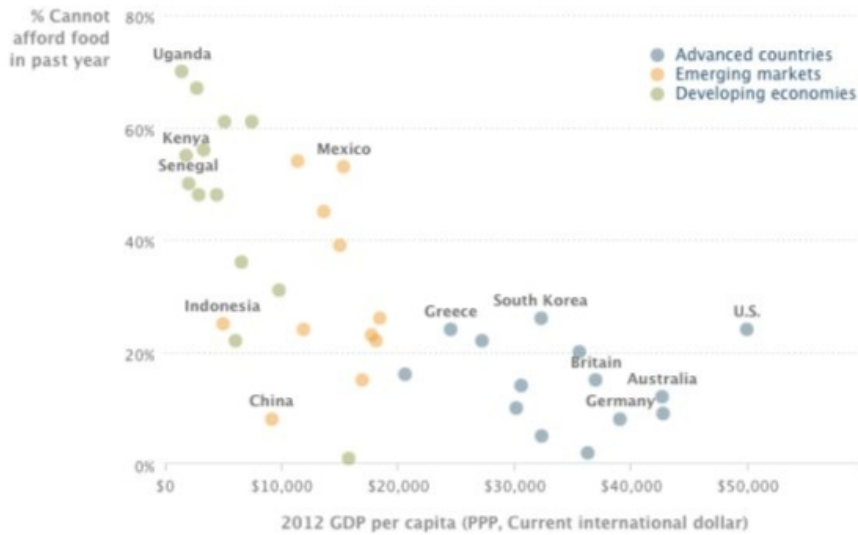
Photo courtesy Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma City

Hunger has real consequences beyond the impact on individuals and their families; it takes its toll on the overall U.S. economy. The cost comes from related health care issues that tax an already taxed health care system. Those living in households where hunger is a concern struggle with depression and believe it or not, obesity. Poor food choices add to further health risks – diabetes and heart disease, which are among the leading causes of death in the country.

A study by the [Sodexo Foundation](#) in 2007 estimated that the monetary cost to the U.S. was, *"more than \$90 billion, far more than it would take to ensure that no citizen is at risk of hunger."* In 2010 that figure was up to \$167.5 billion as published by the [Center for American Progress](#), in their 2011 report.

Hunger influences the future of our children and the future of our economic strength – a child who is hungry will have difficulty keeping up. If they cannot learn, the options are obvious. This loss is reflected in the future of our workforce. Ultimately it is a cost to all of us and we are already a tax-burdened society.

Many in Developing Nations Struggle to Afford Food



Source: GDP per capita (PPP) from IMF World Economic Outlook Database, April 2013. Data not available for Palestinian territories.

Pew Research Center

([Pew Research Center's chart](#) above – U.S. stands out as a rich country where some can't afford food)

With the latest round of Congressional cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the (abrupt) end of unemployment benefits, those already facing hunger have been placed in an untenable position. Further complicating matters has been the extreme weather. The deep freeze has meant that families already strained are having to make decisions between heating their homes

and buying food. Community food pantries like the Food Banks and soup kitchens are themselves feeling the pinch, as empty shelves become a reflection of increased need.

The 2010 *Feeding America* Hunger Study revealed that more than a third of the people helped by Food Banks choose between putting food on the table and getting the medicines they need. Two years ago, this was the impetus for Watertree Health to create a Prescription Discount Card Program that provides a dual benefit to our partner Food Banks. We provide Cards to the Food Banks to give to their clients, which help create healthier communities by providing access to affordable prescription medicines. At the same time, our partner Food Banks receive a steady stream of unrestricted donations from Watertree Health for each discounted prescription under the Program.

The Food Banks are an important lifeline for many hard working families, individuals and most especially children and seniors living in fear of not having enough to eat. It has often made a difference between skipping a meal, substituting low quality food or falling further behind on essential bills.



Many of the programs that help to stave off increased hunger among America's most vulnerable depend on public and private donations. It becomes even more compelling when so many factors come together to increase demand for these services and programs.

Food insecurity can lead to a cycle of serious health concerns and can play a role in *“perpetuating the cycle of poverty in the U.S.”* Combating hunger in America should remain a major focus for everyone and that includes organizations like Watertree Health, which can create programs to support services like the ones provided by the Food Banks and other community initiatives helping those in need.

NOTE: To help fight hunger, consider making food donations to your neighborhood Food Bank, soup kitchen and other organizations.