

for life but there is no reason for people to go without it. This belief put the problem of hunger on the international agenda in 1933 and led to the development of food assistance programs in the United States during the Depression, when agricultural surpluses and hunger coexisted.⁷

Although food security issues in one form or another have been around since the beginning of time, contemporary approaches to food security emerged during the world food crisis of the early 1970s when the price of staple foods skyrocketed. The term *food security* was introduced in 1974 at the United Nations World Food Conference, though the change in discourse was not intended to diminish hunger as a problem—quite the opposite. Food security became a clear and central policy goal of most developing countries as the World Food Conference proclaimed people’s inalienable right to freedom from hunger and resolved to eliminate hunger and malnutrition completely.⁸ As poverty increased in the United States during the 1980s,⁹ the US government also adopted the term *food security*, defining it as “a condition in which all people have access at all times to nutritionally adequate food through normal channels.”¹⁰ However, the United States did not adopt a statement about the inalienable human right to food.

In the 1990s, changes in economic and ideological conditions spurred new efforts to conceptualize food security. At the international level, this led to attempts to expand and deepen the concept of food security. The 1996 World Food Summit paid increased attention to the right to food. It also broadened the scope of the analytical unit used to measure food insecurity and for the first time considered not only the quantity but also the quality of food.¹¹ But it became clear that defining food security on a national or global scale resulted in aggregate measures that missed instances of food insecurity within households, communities, and regions. New approaches were needed to address these problems.

The combination of deteriorating food security conditions, the insufficiency of private and public efforts to combat hunger, and the conceptual innovations at the international level led in the United States to the development of the concept of *community food security*. Within this context, the food-system vulnerabilities revealed in Los Angeles following the Rodney King verdict in 1992 prompted a group of environmental justice students from the University of California at Los Angeles, led by Robert Gottlieb, to assess the core issues facing the South Central Los Angeles community.¹⁴ What they discovered was that people’s greatest concerns centered on food access, quality, and price. Of course, many people had been working for decades to improve local food security, but the group’s study, *Seeds of Change: Strategies for*

Food Security for the Inner City, provided a catalyst for taking food security work to a new level.¹⁵

In 1994 thirty organizations and individuals hoping to influence upcoming farm bill legislation (which authorizes funding for food and agriculture programs in the United States) met to discuss new approaches to food security. This group developed the 1995 Community Food Security Empowerment Act, which proposed community food security as the conceptual basis for solving food-system problems. Endorsed by more than 125 organizations, the act defined community food security as “all persons obtaining at all times a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through local non-emergency sources.”¹⁶

A new social movement was born. The national Community Food Security Coalition was established in 1996, and it continues to grow (the number of participants at its annual conference has increased from a couple hundred to more than one thousand in 2006). Part of what makes community food security so compelling is that it is an integrated approach that focuses not only on meeting people’s food security needs in the present but also on a broad range of food-system issues, including farmland loss, agriculture-based pollution, urban and rural community development, and transportation. The goal is to work toward the systematic and long-term elimination of food insecurity.

This approach has been supported by the USDA, which responded to the movement by establishing the Community Food Projects Program in 1996. Congress authorized a program of federal grants to support the development of community food projects. Under this legislation, *community food security* is defined as “all persons obtaining at all times an affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate diet through local, non-emergency food sources (or through normal economic channels).”¹⁷ The USDA and the Community Food Security Coalition are working together to build collaborative relationships.

This partnership was the latest chapter in the story of food security in the United States—until the USDA’s November 2006 announcement, that is. Until then, the trend had been to expand and deepen the concept of food security, in both public and private efforts. But the latest iteration of the USDA’s fight against hunger in America—its call for the elimination of hunger as a category—works against all of these efforts.

The Violence of Science in Measuring Hunger

As I previously noted, the motivation for eliminating *hunger* from the USDA vocabulary had more to do with statistics than politics. I do not mean to imply that science and politics are

separable; they aren't. I mean that the decision was probably *not* made in an overt attempt to hide a politically unpalatable situation. Yet the redefinition damages the struggle against hunger by swaddling the issue in the cloak of science, which serves to make the semantic choice seem rational, sensible, even common sense, and not cruel or mean-spirited at all. The new USDA terminology eliminates a crucial rhetorical weapon of the weak—the word *hunger*—in their fight against injustice and makes it seem as though this choice is the only reasonable one for educated, scientific people.

Indeed, an editorial in the *Washington Post* makes precisely this point in its criticism of editorials that had appeared earlier in the newspaper. Herb Reed writes that, "The USDA made this change for scientific reasons based on advice from the Committee on National Statistics of the National Academies. The National Academies are made up of the top scientists in the United States...Who is more qualified to advise on how to write scientific reports, *Post* editors or top US scientists?"¹⁸ The message is that you have no right to an opinion if you are not a scientist. Since chronically hungry people are unlikely to be scientists, the implication is that they have no right to claim they are hungry or to seek political redress for hunger.

This attempt to scientize hunger takes us back to an earlier time and seems to negate whatever progress has been made in the intervening period, such as the expanded definition of food security and the USDA's cooperation with the community food security movement. Indeed, the USDA has come full circle since it began collecting data on hunger. When government food-assistance programs were instituted in the 1960s, hunger was medicalized and defined in clinical terms in order to facilitate measurement techniques that would "presumably provide the hard evidence from which to draw conclusions about the incidence of hunger."¹⁹ This measurement approach was criticized during the 1980s as having little policy relevance, because by the time hunger is clinically detectable, the damage may be irreversible.²⁰ Additionally, it was recognized that hunger is a community and household problem, not just an individual one.

The 1994 President's Task Force on Food Assistance included two definitions of hunger. One was clinical and related to nutritional deficiencies; the other was social, whereby *hunger* was defined as the inability to obtain sufficient food and nourishment. While the United States did not embrace the international efforts in the 1990s to assert food as a human right, it did move away from a strict physiological definition of hunger. Since then several national studies, such as the Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP), have estimated the extent of hunger.

In their efforts to document hunger, statisticians have been frustrated by the use of inconsistent measures in different research instruments, as well as by the use of proxy measures of hunger, such as poverty. Recently, the leaders of two USDA agencies, the Economic Research Service and the Food and Nutrition Service, requested that the Committee on National Statistics (CNSAT) of the National Academies review the USDA's measurement methods for food security. There is nothing necessarily sinister in this request. Reviews of statistical methodologies are conducted regularly, as all researchers want to be sure that they are using accurate terminology for what they are counting or describing.

However, the way in which issues are framed determines the importance attached to them and how they are addressed; data defines and delimits the problem. Essentially, because hunger is not assessed in the USDA's food security survey, the CNSAT decided that it does not exist. Criticisms of this methodological change point out that this shift does nothing to actually make the problem of hunger go away; hunger is still with us. However, in a very real sense, it does exactly that—eliminate hunger. If hunger is no longer an analytical category, how does one talk about it or advocate for its elimination? How does one make policy claims about something for which there is no data and which, therefore, does not exist in policy science terms?

The discursive shift from *hunger* to *very low food security* also takes away the sharp edge of the word *hunger*. As the report states,²¹ "Hunger is a very politically sensitive word." *Food insecurity*, on the other hand, sounds less urgent, less important, less shameful, and less embarrassing. When advocates don't have the word *hunger* in their arsenal to fight against it, the suffering of those who are, in fact, hungry is diminished. The violence of hunger is compounded by the violence of a science that claims hunger does not exist.

This is not to say that we don't need conceptual clarity in solving social problems. But we have to ask what is to be gained by working to create more accurate and precise measures of hunger. True, programs and policies need to be targeted toward those who need them, and in ways that are most effective. We already know, however, that far more children than adults are food insecure. We know that far more African Americans and Latinos are hungry than European-Americans. We know that there are many, many people who don't have enough or the right kinds of food to eat.

What the USDA's statistical shift does is make hunger disappear from the public agenda and give people the impression that it no longer exists in the United States. It also trivializes the experiences of the hungry. What it does

not do is contribute to resolving food security problems, even though that is the USDA's goal.

The disappearance of hunger may simply be an unfortunate product of the distant gaze of experts who are far removed from the situation they study. Certainly, government statisticians can have only a partial and privileged perspective on food insecurity. The voices and experiences of the hungry must be included in any determination of the USDA's food security programs, measurements, and methods. Otherwise, the statisticians should meet with food-insecure parents and their children to explain to them why they are not hungry. In the meantime, the rest of us can do our part to make food justice issues visible, audible, and palpable. Solvable. ☺

NOTES

1. "Hunger by Any Other Name: Government Shouldn't Sugarcoat 'Involuntary Lack of Food,'" *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, 24 November 2006, 218.
2. "Mumbo Jumbo," *Winston-Salem Journal*, 30 November 2006, 210.
3. Rhonda Chriss Lokeman, "Leave It to Bureaucrats to Desensitize Hunger," *The Augusta Chronicle*, 29 November 2006, 205.
4. Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001); Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006); Greg Critser, *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003); Morgan Spurlock, *Supersize Me* [video recording], presented by Roadside Attractions, Samuel Goldwyn Films, and Showtime Films, produced by M. Spurlock and The Con (New York: Hart Sharp Video, 2004).
5. An exception is a chapter on working conditions in Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*.
6. Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, *Measuring Food Security in the United States: Household Food Security in the United States, 2005* (Washington, D.C.: US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2006).
7. At that time private organizations protested the League of Nations' decision, despite widespread hunger, to cut back on food production and destroy surpluses in its attempt to resolve the international economic crisis. See Michel Cepede, "The Fight Against Hunger: Its History on the International Agenda," *Food Policy* 9, no. 4 (1984): 282-290.
8. Anthony H. Chisholm and Rodney Tyers, "Food Security: An Introduction and Overview," in A.H. Chisholm and R. Tyers, *Food Security: Theory, Policy, and Perspectives from Asia and the Pacific Rim* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1982).
9. For example, between 1989 and 1993 there was a 26 percent increase in the number of children living in families with incomes below 75 percent of the poverty line. See Cheryl A. Wehler, Richard Ira Scott, Jennifer J. Anderson, and Lynn Parker, *Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project: A Survey of Childhood Hunger in the United States*. (Washington, D.C.: Food Research and Action Center, 1995).
10. US House of Representatives. *Food Security and Methods of Assessing Hunger in the United States*, Serial 101-2 (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1959).
11. Kerstin Mechlem, "Food Security and the Right to Food in the Discourse of the United Nations," *European Law Journal* 10, no. 5 (2004): 631-648.
12. *First World Hunger: Food Security and Welfare Politics*, ed. Graham Riches (London: Macmillan, 1997).
13. Janet E. Poppendieck, "The USA: Hunger in the Land of Plenty," in *Ibid.*
14. In April 1992 four European-American Los Angeles Police Department officers were acquitted of charges of committing assault in the process of arresting African American motorist Rodney King. Within hours after the verdict was announced, a civil disturbance was in full swing.
15. Southern California Interfaith Hunger Coalition, *Seeds of Change: Strategies for Food Security in the Inner City* (Los Angeles: Southern California Interfaith Hunger Coalition, 1993).
16. Community Food Security Coalition, *A Community Food Security Act: A Proposal for New Food System Legislation as Part of the 1995 Farm Bill* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Food System, 1994).
17. US Congress, House of Representatives, *Review of the Administration's Proposals to Reform the Food Stamp and Commodity Distribution Programs*. 1st session, 8 June 1995, Serial No. 104-16 (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1995).
18. Herb Reed, "The Problem is Greater Than a Word," *The Washington Post*, 25 November 2006, 219.
19. Peter Eisinger, "Toward a National Hunger Count," *Social Service Review* 70, no. 2 (1996): 218.
20. Linda Neuhauser, Doris Disbrow, and Sheldon Margen, *Hunger and Food Insecurity in California* (Berkeley: California Policy Research Center, 1995).
21. Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, *Measuring Food Security in the United States: Household Food Security in the United States, 2005* (Washington, D.C.: US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2006), 33.