

Understanding Childhood Hunger:  
A Qualitative Look at the Issues Hindering Progress in the United States

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This thesis examines childhood hunger as roughly 1 in 5 kids live in households that struggle to put food on the table. These children experience physical problems as a result of their food instability, but this problem is connected to other personal and societal issues, such as poor education. To understand how hunger affects children, this study began with a historical analysis of the past 60 years of government supported programs and policies, such as the school breakfasts and summer lunch programs. Four interviews were conducted with different experts in the field, specifically three individuals from a prominent national non-profit organization and the director of a local summer meals program. Major findings from the interviews and research suggest that childhood hunger is still a very significant issue today. In 2013, 8.6 million children lived in households that reported being food insecure. One of President Barack Obama's campaign promises was to end childhood hunger in the United States by 2015. The current programs, such as breakfast in the classroom, summer lunch, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, are helping but there is still a lot of work to be done. More research and funding should be put towards the summer lunch program and non-profits in order to be more effective, because this research suggests that programs that assist children outside of the home are most helpful. In order to make progress towards ending childhood hunger we need to form a more united front among all participating parties so that best practices and resources can be shared.

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## CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

More than 16 million kids in the United States today live in households that struggle to put food on the table, which is the same as one out of every five children (Share Our Strength 2014). In an affluent nation that is constantly helping other countries around the world one would assume that only a small percentage of the population are living on means day to day. Our country has progressed significantly since the 1960's when the civil rights movement and the space race were in full swing; however, hunger in the United States has been an underlying issue since then and it has spread and grown into a more complicated issue. In 1966, 1 million households participated in the Food Stamp Program, now called The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, but by 2013 participation was 44.7 million (USDA 2013). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) uses household size to determine the number of people (adults and children) living in a home under the individual applying for SNAP benefits. According to their data, 8.6 million children lived in food insecure households in 2013. In fifty years, there have been different policies and programs, none of which have had permanent success in ending childhood hunger in this country. This thesis aims to understand how and why childhood hunger has continued to impact the health of this country. In order to answer these questions, this thesis will start by defining some key terms and then giving a detailed history of the relevant trends, issues and policies pertaining to hunger since the 1960's. The remainder of the thesis will analyze the current

approach to childhood hunger and propose possible solutions while addressing the importance of prioritizing this issue today.

## **1. Key Definitions**

When addressing childhood hunger there are certain terms that are come up more frequently than others. Looking through the literature over the past fifty years, hunger, food security and the poverty threshold are key concepts that are used often. Therefore this section of the thesis will define each of these terms in the proper context to better understand the history.

### **a. Hunger**

Hunger is defined as an inadequate amount of food intake due to a lack of money or resources that creates unhealthy mental and physical conditions (Lewit and Kerrebrock 1997:129). In the media hunger is often displayed as a problem elsewhere. When searching the internet, the majority of the results will be images of African children half dressed with protruding stomachs, defined ribs and empty faces. This is not the complete picture, because it is a global issue. In 2011-2013, 842 million people or an estimated 1 in 8 people in the world were experiencing chronic hunger (FAO 2013:2). As a societal issue, hunger is everywhere in different forms. A majority of the victims of hunger will experience some form of the detrimental health effects. Hunger is a physiological experience that comes from not having enough food to eat (Nestle 1999:261). The body reacts in a specific way when it goes without nutrients (especially without the proper nutrients) for a significant amount

of time. According to the Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHP) from the Food Action Research Center (FRAC), victims of childhood hunger experience headaches, weight loss, irritability, inability to concentrate and occurrence of frequent colds. Iron deficiency anemia and increased likeliness of certain chronic and acute diseases are possible (Hunger Action Network of New York State 2009). Two of the larger issues that hunger and poor nutrition can cause for children are wasting and stunting. Wasting occurs when an individual goes without food for a short period of time while stunting occurs when an individual experiences prolonged inadequate food intake (FAO 2013:3). According to The Food Agriculture Organization of the United States (FAO), wasting is weight loss associated with recent starvation that is characterized by low weight for height while stunting is characterized by low height for age because of continuous and repeated periods of under nutrition. These types of hunger account for differences in the manifestation of hunger nationally and internationally. Regardless of our perceptions, hunger is a serious global and national issue today.

**b. Food Security**

At the 1974 United Nations World Food Conference the term food security was introduced, adding another term to the list used to explain hunger (Allen 2007:21). The addition of this term was meant to make food security a more centralized issue in the eyes of government officials and to hopefully end this issue completely (Allen 2007:21). In the 1980's the United States defined food security as "a condition in which all people have access at all times to nutritionally adequate

food through normal channels” (Allen 2007:21). Food security appears in many different forms and according to The FAO, it ranges depending on four characteristics, which are accessibility, access, utilization and stability of food for an individual (FAO 2013:3). Today the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) measures food security and insecurity by categorizing it as high security, marginal security, low insecurity or very low insecurity (Coleman-Jensen and Gregory 2014). Throughout this thesis food security and food insecurity are used when talking about the condition of hunger in the United States today. Professionals in the field the official term use food security, but there are some circumstances when food insecurity fits better. The two words are related but not interchangeable and food insecurity is more often used to describe the specific condition people are experiencing while food security describes the overall issue. The first type of food security, *high food security*, is defined as no reported indications of food access problems or limitations. The second type, *marginal food security*, is “one or two reported indications, typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house but with little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake” (Coleman-Jensen and Gregory 2014: 1). This second type means that individuals or households have worried about not having enough and or not having good quality food to feed themselves or others, yet they have not actually experienced this. If “reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet with little or no indication of reduced food intake” exist, then the case is classified as *low food security* (Coleman-Jensen and Gregory 2014: 2). Finally there is *very low food security* defined by “reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced

food intake” (Coleman-Jensen and Gregory 2014: 2). Food security has become the more common term to be used today and because of its defined categories it allows more people to be included in the government assistance programs.

In the fall of 2006, the USDA made a public announcement that forever changed how the world talked about hunger nationally and internationally. The USDA decided to take hunger out of its assessment of food security in the U.S. and chose to replace it with the term “very low food security” (Allen 2007:19). The USDA did not expect that changing how hunger was defined would make as much of an impact on the issue as it did. As Patricia Allen says in her article in *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies* (2007), “data defines and delimits the problem” (19). The USDA said the change was made to start to redefine hunger as a more physiological condition and food security as more of a social condition, but more than that happened (Allen 2007:19). With the word hunger out of official discussion, people began to interpret this issue as less important and serious, when no significant decrease in the number of cases had occurred. The word hunger has been viewed as a “sharp edged word” and a “politically sensitive” topic; however, food security is a newer concept that appears at different levels based on specific qualifications as described, therefore there is far less stigma attached to the word (Allen 2007:19).

### **c. Poverty Threshold**

Another important concept to consider when talking about child hunger and food security is the poverty threshold. The poverty threshold is the federal measure

of poverty that was originally designed by Mollie Orshansky in the 1960's. Mollie Orshansky was a food and family economist who grew up in poverty and went on to work for various government agencies including the USDA (Fisher 2008:79). Shortly after Johnson declared the War on Poverty in 1964, Mollie's supervisors at the Social Security Administration (SSA) requested she analyze the poverty thresholds for the whole population. Her analysis and definition from this report became the federal government's official statistical definitions of poverty (Fisher 2008:80). Every year the Census Bureau reassesses the poverty threshold from the year before to make adjustments and changes for the new year. According to the U.S. Census Bureau website, there are 48 different poverty thresholds that each person or family is assigned to based on size of the family and age of the family members. Each threshold is only a "yard stick" to measuring family or individual situations. Other personal and situational factors are taken into account, as well. The poverty thresholds help assesses the fluctuations in the economy, which trickle down to the individual level. The poverty threshold is adjusted annually for inflation, and enables officials to collect a more accurate total number in poverty (Rosa, Shiyin, Ranji and Lockheart 2005:971). While the threshold is always changing there are still guidelines set every year for the appropriate income levels that allow families to get the necessary food, shelter and clothing they need. These guidelines ultimately place people (and families) above or below the threshold (see chart below).

Poverty has a direct impact on hunger and food security in the U.S. and the poverty threshold helps us understand this relationship. In fact, the relationship is so intertwined that the poverty threshold is constructed using the federal Economic

Food Plan, which determines the minimum cost of food required for a family of a specific size (Rosa et al. 2005:971). The poverty threshold is officially defined as “an income level below which it is deemed impossible in a specified setting to meet basic human needs for food, shelter, clothing, and support of dependent family members” (Last, 2007:361). Despite being a concept the government uses when referring to poverty, it is not required of states to use the poverty thresholds for eligibility criteria for government programs (Rosa et al. 2005:971). While this absolute measure of poverty is helpful to determining aid and eligibility for government programs, there is still some push back because like any set of numerical data it can not take into account other situational or specific factors that can not be measured. The table below shows the 2013 Poverty guidelines for all states and the District of Columbia, but not Hawaii and Alaska because their cost of living differs significantly from the other 48 states. The poverty guidelines are shown for families of one person to families of eight people because as the number of family members increases the poverty guidelines increase as well.

**2013 Poverty Guidelines**

Total Number in family/household	Poverty guideline
1	\$11,490
2	15,510
3	19,530
4	23,550
5	27,570
6	31,590
7	35,610
8	39,630

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## **2. Causes**

In 1939, The Food Stamp Program, which is now called The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, was created. However this program ended in 1943 because analysts saw patterns implying that hunger was no longer an imperative issue in the U.S. It was not until 18 years later in 1964 that the government realized hunger was still an issue requiring serious attention. Over the last fifty years, there have been periods of growth and setbacks, which this section will attempt to address. The purpose of going through the history of hunger in the U.S. with a specific look at children is to better understand where our country is going. Learning from the failures, successes and mistakes of the past should help improve the future outlook.

### **a. 1960-1980**

In order to understand the issues surrounding childhood hunger today as well as future problems, it is important to look closely at the history of the issue. Hunger has been an issue in the U.S. for decades but its importance and support has wavered, economically and ideologically. Since the early 1960's hunger in the U.S., especially among children, has been a constant issue regardless if government policy or aid programs focused on it. The early 1960's into the 1970's were seen as a time of rapid growth and prosperity for some of the nation but for others it was a difficult time financially (Ehrlich 1971:295). John F. Kennedy created the first Department of Agriculture task force when he entered office in 1960 (DeVault and Pitts 1984:547). The task force was originally formed to focus on creating a proposal for a new food stamp program. In 1962, Michael Harrington published the

book *The Other America* and it opened the nation's eyes to realize that many families were silently struggling to live every day (Pringle 2013:ix). This book shocked the nation and changed societal views on poverty and of those who were suffering (Pringle 2013:ix). Harrington's book was eye opening mostly because he was one of the first people to bring the facts into the public's view. The numbers used in his book were public information from the Federal Reserve Board and the U.S. Commerce Department, but they had been misinterpreted and ignored by other poverty experts (Isserman 2000:179). The current belief at this time was that poverty did affect a small percentage of the population and this group was shrinking; however, Harrington strongly contradicted this with the idea of the culture of poverty (Isserman 2000:180). The culture of poverty means that poverty is a distinct sub culture and those individuals have a different way of life that is reinforced by government assisted housing and other aid people rely on (Isserman 2000:181). Harrington saw poverty as a cycle. He said, "the poor will remain with us, through cycles of boom and bust...their way of life will perpetuate itself, to their own hurt and the great damage of our own society" (Harrington 59: 27). This cycle leaves families stuck in poverty for generations and while they receive aid and government support they do not escape poverty because there are deeper societal issues failing to be addressed. This concept was important to Harrington and he hoped to get across to people that "there was another America made up of 40 to 50 million inhabitants" who were living off of very little resources (Isserman 2000:195). Harrington wanted to stress that poverty is not disappearing and people should not believe that this will ever happen because there is not "any ground to

hope for an easy, automatic amelioration of it” (Harrington 59: 25). Harrington’s book brought a new view to poverty, impacting the middle class and politician’s views as well. Following the publication of his book he was called by many major newspapers to be interviewed, through which he got the nickname “The Man who discovered poverty” (Isserman 2000:207). All this attention eventually made its way to the White House where President Kennedy, three days before he was assassinated, told one of his advisors, Walter Heller, he wanted a new anti-poverty program, one that was not “piecemeal” (Isserman 2000:208). Heller had read Harrington’s book so he suggested Kennedy’s team get in contact with Harrington to use his innovative ideas in creating new policies (Isserman 2000:208). Kennedy was assassinated before he could go through with plans for new programs; however, Heller made sure to inform Lyndon B. Johnson of the prior President’s thoughts on a new program (Isserman 2000:208).

Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Food Stamp Act in 1964, allowing more people who could not afford enough healthy food to get the nutrients they needed by providing permanent legislative authority to the program (Mogull 1972:162). This permanent legislative authority officially allowed the FSP to be permanent after being a pilot program since 1961. He also promised to eliminate poverty in his State of the Union speech earlier that year (Mogull 1972:162). But participation in the program was not mandatory for states and they could choose between using the food stamp program or the surplus commodity distribution program (Lynn 1977:75). The surplus commodity distribution program is when the government collects extra agricultural commodities through surplus removal and direct

purchase from domestic markets and then distributes the commodities to communities and state governments through the USDA (NDA 2014). According to the USDA, the goals of the program are to improve the health of low-income individuals who qualify by providing them with healthy USDA foods that are typically missing from many participants diet's (USDA Food Nutrition Service, 2015). Organizations involved in the Commodity Supplemental Food Program distribute the food to participants and in some cases offer nutrition education. While this program is a good alternative to the Food Stamp Program is does not replace it entirely so states that relied on this program over the food stamp program were not helping their population to the best of their ability. The purpose of creating the food stamp program was to help all people living in the United States who were struggling, not just those on welfare. Anyone whose income was "determined to be a substantially limiting factor in attainment of a nutritionally adequate diet" could be in the program by applying to his or her local welfare agency for stamps (Lynn 1977:75). Once the households had applied, the agency would assess each case individually, determine a more adequate budget, and give out the appropriate stamps (Lynn 1977:76). The 1964 act ultimately caused more problems than it solved because it gave states the option to participate, which meant not every person in need was accounted for or received assistance. Most southern states did not have welfare, but some used the surplus commodities program and others incorrectly used the FSP (DeVault and Pitts 1984:549). The improper use of the Food Stamp Program was seen in some counties in the south where certain individuals, mostly blacks, had to get "approval" from a boss or "responsible figure"

in order to participate (DeVault and Pitts 1984:549). Elsewhere distribution was put on hold or shut down to drive the poor out of areas where they were not welcome anymore (DeVault and Pitts 1984:549). This inconsistency in government aid was dangerous for the “invisible poor” Harrington had introduced in his book as those who were continuing to fall through the cracks. In 1969, 414 of the 3,129 independent cities and counties in the nation were not involved in either program (Lynn 1977:77). The FSP program of 1964 still was not mandatory in 1971, but Congress did change some qualifications and rules of the program that year. Congress made sure no families were spending more than 30 percent of their income on food, that the stamps provided nutritionally adequate diets, and that there were annual cost of living adjustments (Lynn 1977:77).

In 1969, the Business Labor Statistics reported that 39 million people in the United States were living in poverty (Ehrlich 1971:300). Poverty had declined since the late 1950's but certain groups such as women, children and the homeless were still struggling to get by. Regardless of what people chose to believe, a majority of the poor were struggling not due to unemployment, but due to receiving very low earnings (Mogull 1972:165). Because this issue was around wages and not unemployment it was difficult to generate substantial support from those in the population who were not experiencing the low wages. This situation was hard for the other socioeconomic classes to relate to because they assumed being employed meant a household would not be deep in poverty, but this was not the case. The government was allocating some funds at this time. The federal budget for the fiscal year in 1970 spent 5.2 billion dollars on ammunition for Vietnam, compared to 5

billion in the fiscal year budget for the Food Stamp program in 1975 (Lynn 1977:77).

The discussion that began with Harrington's book in 1964 continued throughout the decade. Harrington, who had been a close advisor and supporter to the president, helped push hunger and poverty onto the minds of politicians and the media. In 1968 CBS aired a recently filmed documentary, *Hunger in America*, and it showed communities in Texas, Virginia, the Southwest and Alabama seriously struggling with hunger (Food Research and Action Center 2013:14). The documentary brought a universal approach to this issue since each community it profiled was of a different background. This TV report showed children in U.S. hospitals experiencing serious medical conditions; boney arms, legs and faces, wrinkled skin and babies who could not talk or cry (Food Research and Action Center 2013:14). These medical issues were hard to look at and even harder to accept that they were because of the hunger and poor nutrition of people in our country. Attitudes towards poverty and the U.S. government at this time were very mixed. However most people were partially blind to any social or economic inequalities going on at the time.

*Hunger U.S.A.* was published in 1968 and like the documentary, *Hunger in America*, it was shocking and poignant. The book placed some blame on the southern states for consciously not providing for their people and saving federal funds in order to protect state government profits (DeVault and Pitts 1984:551). In 1969, the chair of the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture, William R. Poage, contacted government marked "emergency hunger" counties and asked health

officials what they saw as the main issues in their communities (DeVault and Pitts 1984:552). The general conclusion made was that most people lacked any knowledge on how to eat healthy (DeVault and Pitts 1984:552). This research started a discussion on education over direct assistance in relation to ending hunger. This early realization however did not get put into use until later on, as aid programs continued to be the main solution. In 1973, the Food Stamp program from 1964 was made mandatory for all counties, but still in 1975 not every county was participating (Lynn 1977:77). By 1975, between 19 and 20 million people were receiving food stamps, which was a significant increase from about 633,000 recipients in 1965 (Lynn 1977:77).

Hunger during the 1960's was shocking and seemed only temporary to most people who were not experiencing it. The food stamp program seemed to fit two different problems facing the country, a large surplus of food and a section of the population who could use some assistance. The general consensus was that the food stamp program would serve as a temporary system to help families and individuals get back on their feet after experiencing setbacks (DeVault and Pitts 1984:546). The creation and authorization of the FSP during the 1960s and early 1970's led to the idea that the problem was solved, which continued into the 1980s (DeVault and Pitts 1984:545). People failed to realize that there was more to the issue than this, and policy, research and exploration should not stop because of small successes. The programs were aimed at helping the disabled, elderly and unemployed, thus reinforcing the idea that assistance was only temporary, situational and circumstantial. Regardless of the issues relating to the policies, the changes still

worked because according to the Census Bureau, between 1959 and 1973, the percentage of poor people in the country went from 22.4% to 11.1% (Peterson 1994:132). More people were also getting assistance as a result of the program changes in fiscal year 1965, when only 633,000 were on food stamps (Lynn 1977:86). By 1969 the number of recipients increased to 3, 224,000 and then to 13, 536,000 in 1974 (Lynn 1977:86). Clearly the policies and programs put in place during these years did help the nation, but these improvements were only temporary, as various budget cuts were soon approaching. From 1960 until 1980, a lot of policies and programs were created and executed, some of which did have an impact on hunger in the nation. In general, more people were being helped because of the changes made; however, the issue continued to exist, even though many suffered in silence. These silent victims of hunger helped created a facade that hunger was no longer a serious issue and programs could be scaled back.

**b. 1980-1990**

In the 1980's some significant policy changes were made, which affected funding for those governmental aid programs. Under President Ronald Reagan, The Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act (OBRA) was created in 1981 and as a result many people in the U.S. suffered serious consequences. OBRA created substantial changes in the program Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) because it imposed limits on reimbursable work and child care expenses and placed a ceiling on the amount of earnings allowed, which forced families to be even more careful of their spending (Moscovice and Craig 1984:49). These changes meant that families

could lose eligibility if their total household earnings exceeded 150 percent of the their states' specified need (Moscovice and Craig 1984:50). In addition, in some states, moms with one child could be eliminated from the program entirely if she worked full time at minimum wage (Moscovice and Craig 1984:50). Roughly 400, 000 families were cut from welfare and 299,000 had their benefits reduced because of OBRA (Stoesz 2000:145). In addition, thirty five percent of adults who had been working while on public assistance were cut from the program (Stoesz 2000:145). All of these cuts and changes significantly affected the lifestyle of those already living in poverty who depended on the programs being cut or altered. The Reagan administration wanted to decrease welfare and AFDC to make them more of something that only the "truly needy" use and act as a safety net and not a guaranteed way of life (Moscovice and Craig 1984:50). After the cut backs, spending on groceries increased by about ten dollars or about five percent than what it was before the cutbacks for families on AFDC (Moscovice and Craig 1984:56). In addition, after the cuts from January of 1982 until July of 1982, 46 percent of survey respondents on AFDC were unable to purchase sufficient food at some time during the six-month period (Moscovice and Craig 1984:57).

In 1984, 20 years after Michael Harrington published his successful book *The Other America*, his second book, *The New America*, was published. In his second book, Harrington discussed the changing meaning of poverty. He proposed that the culture of poverty is multidimensional and always changing as society changes (Peterson 1994:131). He observed poverty in the 1950's, 60's, 70's and 80's and saw how each decade brought new and different issues (Peterson 1994:131). Harrington

also found that finding a solution to poverty required policies and funding based partially on the fact that government spending on the poor is typically “one fourth as large as the social insurance programs that are not targeted specifically at the poor” (as quoted in Peterson 1994:132). This conclusion was important to understanding why people were still struggling to get by, after a lot of money had been spent creating new programs in the 1960’s and 1970’s. One reason was that the programs provided temporary solutions and could not address new issues that arose. President Reagan’s Task Force on the food assistance programs in the United States, created in 1981, found that when talking about hunger, poverty and unemployment were always mentioned in the discussion as well (Wunderlich and Norwood 2006:23).

A report from the mid-1980’s, compiled by a group of physicians, defined hunger as a condition where people are at risk if their income falls below the poverty line or if they did not have enough food assistance benefits (Nestle 1999:260). This connection of hunger and poverty supported earlier conclusions, while also bringing attention to both ongoing issues. In 1983, the Food Action Resource Center (FRAC) announced that hunger was a quickly growing issue that needed to be addressed and that the food stamp program that existed was not helping the cause (Physician Task Force 1985). Additionally in 1983, eight out of the ten government assistance programs operating reported having serious increases in number of people who needed assistance (Physician Task Force 1985). According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 1970 roughly 26 million Americans were in poverty and in 1980 about 32 million were and then three years later in 1983, 35

million were. This increase in poverty rates led to an increase in demand for assistance services, which put significant stress on the individual programs, ultimately making the entire process more difficult.

The number of working poor, the individuals who work full time or part time but still are below the poverty line, also grew during the 1980's (Peterson 1994:153). Because so many individuals who were employed and relying on governmental assistance programs still were quietly struggling to get by these years were called by some the silent depression. In 1985, about 1 in 10 workers who were employed full time and year round, did not earn enough money to raise a family of three and live above the poverty threshold (Levitan and Shapiro 1994:6). Besides the working poor, the unemployed were also struggling during this time period. The unemployment rate during the 1980's was higher than the rate in every decade prior since the Great Depression (Levitan and Shapiro 1994:6). Homelessness also became an increasingly important issue during the silent depression; it was not even addressed in the 1964 War on Poverty speech by President Johnson (Peterson 1994:167). Homelessness, which used to be thought of as just an issue with alcoholics, changed during the silent depression to include anyone shaken by job loss, family death, divorce or other circumstances. In 1989, only fifteen percent of homeless single people in the nation received food stamps and only ten percent of them received any assistance from a government-subsidized program (Peterson 1994:169). Without substantial money people cannot purchase the food and necessities needed. By not being able to provide substantial nutrition, individuals cannot eat properly thus making it difficult to perform at top physical or mental

capabilities. Teachers who have students who experience hunger lack the ability to concentrate, have poor academic performance and complain of frequent headaches and stomach aches (Share Our Strength 2014). Thus, adequate nutrition is essential to breaking the cycle of poverty (Boehm, Knutson and Penn 1983: 304).

Food assistance programs actually changed their priorities around this time, shifting from using the food programs and surplus disposal to income supplements and nutritional health improvements for the participants. States were relying less on substitutive programs and more on institutional changes that were aimed at getting to the root of the issues. As poverty increased in the 1980's the United States defined food security as "a condition in which all people have access at all times to nutritionally adequate food through normal channels" (Allen 2007: 21). The nutrition component is something that is still focused on today and the realization of its inclusion was important to improving the health status of the nation. The cuts made at the beginning of the 1980's were harmful to the poor; however, there are lessons to be taken away from this ten-year period. From 1980 through 1990, hunger, food security and poverty did increase, but with these increases came increased discussion from organizations like the Food Research and Action Center on the issues. Coming out of this decade, poverty and hunger were persistent issues that did not go away quickly or easily, which is an important lesson that can be learned from these years. Overall 1980-1990 is time period that analysts today should be closely examining to learn from past mistakes.

**c. 1990-2008**

The cuts that President Reagan made in the early 1980's created issues for many people relying on food assistance and other government aid programs. In 1990, almost 1 out of every 5 children was living in poverty (Peterson 1994:135). Also, in 1990 children made up 26.2 percent of the total population, but 40 percent of all the people living in poverty (Peterson, 1994:135). Most children cannot provide for themselves and they are completely dependent on their caregivers until they reach a certain age. Children also cannot directly receive assistance or aid. Their only access to aid is from their caregivers who receive the aid and then are given the freedom to use the aid to buy basically any food they want. There are not many regulations on what can be bought so many people try to get the most food they can, which often results in purchasing the less healthy options. Related to this, the feminization of poverty started being discussed during the late 1980's, because women were starting to make up a larger percentage in poverty. For example, in 1990, 75 percent of all people in poverty were part of families and 50 percent of those people were living in households run by women (Peterson 1994:138). Being a single mom was becoming more common, which was only more difficult during this time because of the changes the program cuts of the 1980 left behind. The program cuts from the 1980's decreased the amount of governmental aid for single mothers, who are the only earner in the household, thus they were relying on even less money to provide for their children. The fact that more single mothers were living in poverty and experiencing food insecurity suggests that this section of the population was experiencing new struggles as poverty changed. With this additional section of the population suffering one would expect the government would try to assist them.

During his campaign, democratic Presidential candidate Bill Clinton promised to put an end to welfare and in some ways he accomplished this with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) implemented a five-year limit on welfare to solo parents and some serious restrictions on Food Stamps (O'Connor 2002: 396). In office he worked on fulfilling his promise to end welfare by going against traditional Democratic ideas towards welfare. Clinton adopted the German progressive concept of the Third Way movement, which was a bridge between conservatism and social democracy (O'Connor 2002:397). The Third Way is focused on going beyond liberalism and strengthening its presence. It was considered a set of policy principles and an election strategy to bring both sides together. Clinton described his welfare strategy as “no more something for nothing” such that the reforms in 1994 provided job assistance training in order to get people off welfare for two years only (O'Connor 2002:400). However it was often the case that after the two years had passed many individuals who had received the training were still unemployed because there simply were not enough jobs available (O'Connor 2002). The Third Way was one of the ways Clinton and his administration looked at policies, which can be helpful in understanding Clinton's welfare cuts or The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA) of 1996 severely restricted food stamp requirements and put a limit on welfare to single parents (O'Connor 2002:396). Critics of Clinton said he was too narrow and limited in his policy decisions and he failed to support his liberal roots when he created

PRWOA (O'Connor 2002:403). Clinton's healthcare plan collapsed in 1994 so the government turned its attention to welfare reform. Since 1997, the Department of Agriculture noted that on average three percent of households have experienced food shortages in any given year (Bernel, Edwards and Weber 2007:581).

Starting in the early 1990's, the U.S. Department of Agriculture began research on developing a solid measure of food security and hunger and by 2000, their model was almost complete (Bernel et al. 2007:579). This measure has helped researchers uncover important trends in regional and state differences in food insecurity, but they have not been able to explain why these differences exist (Bernel et al. 2007:579). Various researchers have found a connection between quality of life, public health issues and hunger (Bernel et al. 2007:579). However as of 2004 poverty rates have not been as accurate predictors of hunger rates in some states as they used to be. For example, some states in the northwest experience high rates of hunger and food insecurity, but low rates of poverty (Bernel et al. 2007:583). This inconsistent relation suggested that poverty was not the only contributing factor to hunger in the United States and there were other issues going unaddressed. Poverty was still a contributing factor to hunger and food insecurity in the United States but it was no longer the main reason households is food insecure. At this point in time not much research had been done to discover what the other major contributing factors to hunger and food insecurity were. Like in previous decades, this time period was not important because of any improvements, but because of the additional issues that were found. While solving the issues of the

current time is important, discovering what the new problems and obstacles are is also key to understanding how these issues change with time.

**d. 2008-Present**

When Barack Obama was elected into office, there had not been much change in the food insecurity numbers; roughly 36.2 million people lived in food insecure homes in 2007 (Weil 2010:16). During his campaign, Obama pledged to end childhood hunger by 2015. While this was a lofty goal, it seemed reasonable at the time and now in the first few months of 2015, we know this goal was not reached, but his goal still benefited the nation and the issue of hunger. When Obama entered office in 2008, the issues that had been developing for the past decades around poverty and food insecurity began to get some attention because of his campaign promise and the food-related work of Michelle Obama. One way in which people benefited was with the stimulus bill that included tax cuts and government spending, which Obama signed in February of 2009 (Pederson 2009:98). The bill had 20 million dollars directed at the Food Stamp Program and 25 additional dollars per week for each individual receiving unemployment benefits (Pederson 2009:99). Another important goal he made was to strengthen policies for schools and other institutions so that they could better feed their children (Weil 2010:16). This goal has been accomplished throughout his time in office. Slowly but surely more states are offering breakfast in the classroom before the school bell along with free or reduced lunches. While Obama has made some changes that will help in terms of ending childhood hunger, there are still other social, political and economic issues in

our country today that must be addressed in order to see serious change for children. There is not one specific solution to end to childhood hunger, but based on past trends there is a connection between hunger and poverty and children today may be feeling the effects of this stronger. Attacking this connection is the best way to end childhood hunger as seen by work of childhood hunger focused non-profits in the past ten years.

The recession of 2007 supposedly ended in 2009, but the poverty rate increased from 2008 to 2010 by 1.9% to 15.1% (Whitley 2013:36). As the poverty rate increases, more people are turning to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP) and to food pantries and shelters to fill in the gaps. With increased numbers at food pantries and other emergency services, the food pantries and donation programs start to feel the stress by not being able to feed or assist everyone who comes to their door. Thus, it is clear that the issues come full circle very quickly and easily. This circle needs to be broken in order for childhood hunger to end completely in the United States.

### **3. Conclusions**

After my analysis of the past 50 years in policy, economic and social trends in the United States and their relationship to hunger I have reached some definitive conclusions. Since 1960 there have been many different types of policies, programs and initiatives to attempt to end childhood hunger, but it was not until recently that the government began to understand what would and would not work. Temporary aid programs and emergency assistance programs that were popular in the 1960's

and 1970's are not the solution. Fundamental changes to our political system and social programs are much more efficient. This thesis will analyze the current policies and programs in order to determine what is working today and what is not. Past policies will also be compared to current ones to clearly identify what lessons have been learned so far. In addition, key leaders in the field of childhood hunger will be interviewed to understand their opinions on the issues and challenges ahead. By looking at the solutions in place now I hope to discover the best plan to end this issue for good.

## **CHAPTER 2: METHODS**

### **Research question**

The purpose of my study was to provide insights into childhood hunger. I chose to interview individuals who have dedicated their careers to working on this issue through local and national organizations. By interviewing representatives from local and national anti-hunger organizations I gained a better perspective of the deeper issues at hand and the success and failures of the current policies and programs. I also wanted to learn more about where our country stands today regarding the reality of ending childhood hunger. The interview data was synthesized with research on the related policy changes by the Obama administration and on current work by key players in the field of childhood hunger to draw up conclusions from this work.

### **Population and Procedures**

This thesis entails case studies of two different non-profit hunger aid organizations: Share Our Strength and Schenectady Inner City Ministry. I first learned about the work of Share Our Strength during the summer of 2014 while I was the communications intern in the main office in Washington, DC. Additional research was conducted in December of 2014 and early January of 2015 in preparation for conducting interviews with organizational staff. Background information on Schenectady Inner City Ministry (SICM) was collected online via a research project for the D.C. internship and also in person through conversations in

preparation for a documentary showing in October of 2014. Formal interviews were conducted from the 20th-23rd of January 2015 over the phone with representatives of Share Our Strength and in person with representatives of SICM.

Upon receiving approval from the Human Subjects Committee, I secured dates and times for the formal interviews to take place and sent the subjects the informed consent forms to be signed. When I called them, I explained the purpose of the study again, and clarified all procedures. For example, I explained that they were allowed to skip any question or to end the interview at any time. There were four subjects interviewed for this study, three from Share our Strength and one from SICM. From Share Our Strength I interviewed Tom Nelson, the president, along with Duke Storen, Senior Director of Partner Impact and Advocacy and Jillein Mier, one of the No Kid Hungry Senior Program Managers. The three were recommended by my main contact within the organization, Billy Shore. The fourth participant, Rachel Curtis, is the director of the Summer Meals Program in Schenectady for Schenectady Inner City Ministry. I spoke with her previously when I organized an event at Union College in October 2014 to benefit Share Our Strength. It is important to note that I received approval to include their name, position and organization on the informed consent form prior to starting the interview. This allowed me to provide specifics of their jobs and their organizations.

The interviews with Share Our Strength representatives occurred on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> and on January 21<sup>st</sup> with SICM's representative. The interviews entailed minimal risks, and when the interview was over I debriefed them (see Appendix A). All participants were asked the same general set of questions. I began

the interview by asking them the questions pertaining to their position, organization and background (see Appendix A). Then there were a series of questions based on the issue of childhood hunger, such as the significance, areas of weakness of current solutions, important strategies and predictions for the future. The next section of questions was directed toward the participant's organization and how the participant is involved in addressing the issues and any obstacles they face. The individual from SICM was asked an additional set of questions asking her to recall specific stories and examples from her work, because SICM is a local non-profit and she has more direct contact with the population (See Appendix A). Following the completion of each interview I sent all participants a note via email thanking them for their time and cooperation with my study.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed by compiling responses from each participant for all the questions together on slides of a PowerPoint presentation. Then each slide, which contained the responses of all four participants for one question, was looked at on its own to find commonalities and differences among the responses. After looking at each question individually, questions on similar topics were grouped together, and again I looked for common patterns and key differences. The outline was organized by common themes of responses and from there the writing process began. The next chapter explains my findings.

## CHAPTER 3: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews conducted throughout the month of January in person or over the phone were completed with much success and produced thorough responses to the proposed questions. Interviews of experts in the field resulted in both similarities and differences among the respondents' answers to questions on the issue, including how it relates to other social issues and what the current areas of weakness are. The responses are divided up into sections based on if they relate directly to the issue, to either organization, to policy/program weaknesses or to recent progress on the issue. The responses were detailed, insightful and useful for the researcher to continue on with the study.

### **The Issue**

When prompted to talk about the significance of childhood hunger in society today each respondent agreed that this is an extremely significant issue, but his or her specific explanations differed slightly. Duke Storen had a lot to say about the significance of the issue and began by commenting on the language of the question. As mentioned in Chapter One, the USDA recently changed the wording used when describing childhood hunger in the U.S., from hunger to food security. Duke explained that food security is now preferred over hunger because there is no way to actually measure hunger. Food security, however, can be measured by using health level and socioeconomic status of the head of the household. "When we talk about hunger, we do not know how many [suffer]. We use food insecurity because

we have [these measures].” Despite being the preferred term, there are still some limitations to the newer concept of food security. As of 2004, poverty rates have not been accurate predictors of hunger or food insecurity rates in states. For example, some states in the northwest experience high rates of hunger and food insecurity, but low rates of poverty (Bernel et al. 2007:583). As a result, it cannot be guaranteed that every hungry child is accounted for and receiving the services they need. While no measure is perfect, the changes that Storen says are being played out might help the existing programs be more effective. Tom Nelson, the president of Share Our Strength, had similar opinions on the issue’s significance. Nelson explained why this is such a significant issue stating, “there are hungry kids in every county in the country. This is not just a rural or urban issue.”

Rachel Curtis from Schenectady Inner City Ministry agreed that this is a significant issue. Having worked directly with children and adults in a city of roughly 65,902, with 23.9% living below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, 2013), Curtis concluded, “never ever have so many Americans used food banks, food stamps, food pantries and soup kitchens. The problem of childhood hunger is so significant that Obama initiated a promise to end childhood hunger by 2015 in 2008” (Curtis, 1/21). The increase in number of those using the programs speaks to the trends that have been observed over time. As mentioned in the literature review after the recession of 2007 the poverty rate increased from 2008 to 2010 by 1.9% to 15.1% (Whitley 2013:36). An increase of that size requires people to rely more heavily on government programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP), food pantries and food shelters, as Curtis

noted. However, Curtis has not seen much change in the past year at the ground level even though efforts have been more united. The united front has been seen as a larger community initiative from other community organizations that “are willing to volunteer, help out or want summer lunch at one of their summer programs.” Storen and Curtis each had their own perspective on the significance of this issue, based upon working at the national vs. local level.

All of the respondents brought up the connection between childhood hunger and larger social issues, such as poverty. Jillien Meir, an important food policy expert, spoke on similar topics, pointing out that people are slowly coming to understand the connection to poverty and the best way to “effect sustainable change”. Mier sees that “childhood hunger is a symptom of a larger problem”, because “when you combine all the costs of living no one can survive on minimum wage.” This shows the limits of Mollie Orshansky’s work in the 1960’s creating a poverty threshold for the federal government. (Fisher 2008:80). Orshansky’s work created the guidelines used today to determine the total population living in poverty and what income levels provide families with the necessary food, shelter and clothing. It would have been impossible for Orshansky to make accurate predictions of how poverty would play out fifty years later, but that does not mean her suggestions cannot be adjusted and still used today. However similar to relying on a definition to determine what type of food security a family experiences, using numbers to determine one’s position in society can be inaccurate. There are unpredictable life circumstances; divorce, death, illness or misfortune, that make it even more difficult to live off of minimum wage. Like Mier, Curtis describes the

connection to other issues as a cycle; she sees poverty as the main cause of hunger. Hunger then leads to obesity and poor physical health, which leads to poor emotional and mental health, which ultimately increases likelihood of crime, drug abuse, prostitution and low educational rates.

Also, the participants stressed a connection between hunger and education because it leads to failure and not success, which explains why a majority of the work at Share Our Strength is focused in schools. Nelson, for example, pointed out that the inability to feed our children means they cannot succeed in school and cannot move forward. Nelson adds, a good education and good job are the only way to completely escape poverty, which is basically impossible growing up as a hungry child. The participants all hinted that hunger is so significant because it is an issue which does not exist on its own.

When specifically asked about other health issues, Curtis and Nelson mentioned the relationship and how they impact one another. Nelson explained it well when he said “hunger and obesity are two sides of the same coin,” because people often live in areas where they do not have access to healthy foods so hunger and obesity can be in the same family and the same person. This finding makes sense considering the USDA’s official definition of food security, which is broken up into four levels; high security, marginal security, low insecurity or very low insecurity (Coleman-Jensen and Gregory 2014). Each level has qualifications that divide individuals into different groups. One of these qualifications is not having enough food or not having good quality food (Coleman-Jensen and Gregory 2014). The lack of access to healthy food and adequate nutrition has been an important

part of government programs since the 1980's, when food security was defined as "a condition in which all people have access at all times to nutritionally adequate food through normal channels" (Allen 2007:21). The reason access to healthy foods is not easy for everyone is because of food deserts and current prices of health foods. A food desert is defined as "parts of the country that do not have access to fresh fruit, vegetables or other healthful whole foods usually found in impoverished areas" (Gallagher 2011:1). More research needs to be done on this topic in order to discover the actual relationship between prices of food and access to food.

Storen said there is a "hierarchy of issues, and on the bottom of that is childhood hunger." With healthcare costs becoming a concern "proper nutrition connects to lower health care costs" overall. As mentioned earlier, proper nutrition increases the likeliness of good overall health, which cuts back on medical bills and expenses that come with poor nutrition and obesity. Another way to look at the issues is to think simply of the victims of hunger themselves, children. Storen makes this clear stating, "You can't blame a kid for where they live, what's happening to them or what's going on in their community." This is strong justification when discussing and deciding where the nation's priorities should be. Storen confirmed what the other three respondents said, hunger does not stand-alone. This concept of innocent children is one that could be relied on more to increase awareness. It was successful in the 1960's when the CBS documentary *Hunger in America* aired and showed images of many communities in the United States battling hunger (Food Research and Action Center 2013:14). This television report showed children in U.S. hospitals with boney arms, legs and faces and wrinkled skin (Food Research and

Action Center 2013:14). Therefore a similar outcome could be expected when more non-profits increased their focus on children. For example, Share Our Strength initiated their campaign No Kid Hungry in 2010 .

As mentioned above, the connection hunger has to other issues in society was discussed in all four interviews. Jillien Mier took the next step, connecting hunger's relationship to an increasing discussion of hunger in the news. Advocacy organizations have been making an effort to show how this is just not an issue about food, but about health, safety and the future of our country. Mier also mentioned that advocacy organizations have tried to put in a concerted effort to increase visibility of the issues. As mentioned earlier the media can be a great tool to increase awareness of these issues as seen in the 1960s. Because hunger cannot exist in a world without poverty or inequalities, an increase in one results in an increase of the other. Similarly an increase in attention to one resulted in an increased discussion of the other. The participants' response that hunger is a universal issue and connected to other social issues reaffirms points covered earlier in the literature review. In 1962, when Michael Harrington came out with his book, *The Other America*, the nation's view of poverty and hunger changed and slowly the issues were seen as more related. While Harrington's book had an impact on society in the 1960s, today it seems not all of society is aware of the inequalities that still exist. Hence why Mier's comment on increasing the discussion of these issues in the news and media makes sense. Much of what advocacy organizations are doing today relates to this goal through work such as the partnerships with The Food Network, celebrities like Jeff Bridges and Public Safety Announcements (PSA) in popular

media publications. Given the media focused society we live in today it only makes sense that increased publicity of the issues and their supporters will increase funding for the solutions and awareness of the issues.

### **Case Study: Share Our Strength**

Advocacy was stressed as an important part of the process towards ending childhood hunger in the U.S. With the current issues that exist in terms of programming, policy and the population, there are many different suggestions that experts in the field have; however, before discussing them, it is important to understand how the support network functions. All four interviews went into greater detail of what exactly their specific organization did.

The three participants from Share Our Strength were Jillien Mier, Tom Nelson and Duke Storen. Share our Strength is a registered 501(c)(3) private non-profit organization. Founded by siblings, Bill and Debbie Shore in 1984, Share Our Strength was created in response to the Ethiopian famine. It started as an international organization, but over time Bill and Debbie refocused their goals to make it a national issue. They decided that they could make the most impact by focusing on childhood hunger in the U.S. and devoting their time, money and ideas on that.

Over thirty years later the organization has gone through many changes and experienced both some ups and downs, yet one thing has remained the same, the commitment to the cause. The mission of Share Our Strength is to end childhood hunger in the U.S. by connecting kids and families with healthy food where they live,

learn and play through their national campaign No Kid Hungry. The focus is important but relatively different in comparison to how the issue has been handled over the prior 60 years when the attention was mostly on the food stamp program and commodity distribution. The approach by the national non-profits like Share Our Strength has been on reaching children in any area where they spend time outside of their homes. In the past, the food stamp program was the main way to help hungry children, but it had its faults because it left parents in control and it could not be insured that children were given the necessary nutrients. Food stamps cover the food being eaten at home, but the exact purchases made by every food stamp participant is completely dependent on the adult in control. Thus there is no guarantee that the food children are eating at home is healthy and appropriate. But, by bringing the food to the children, health and nutritional guidelines can be insured.

The organization is made up of a few key moving parts or teams that focus on increasing support from politicians, increasing the discussion of current programs and creating new innovative solutions. These key programs are government-funded programs such as Breakfast in the Classroom and the summer lunch program. Two of the main initiatives at Share Our Strength are focused on providing breakfast in the classroom and summer meals for every kid in the U.S. Jillien Mier is a policy expert who works in the Center for Best Practices. She has been perfecting and adjusting the programs Share Our Strength supports and the ones they have created on their own, as well as building materials and resources for consumers, partners and others involved in the field to use. Duke Storen is the Senior Director of Partner

Impact and Advocacy at Share Our Strength, where he manages the center for best practices, engages in state and federal advocacy and builds the relationships with federal and national agency partners. Duke previously worked at the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service where he was the Chief of Staff for the Special Nutrition Programs. Tom Nelson is the President of Share Our Strength and while his responsibilities are numerous, he involves himself in every aspect of the organization.

As a national non-profit, Share our Strength is very successful, but there are still some areas they are trying to strengthen. First, political will is one of the major issues that Share Our Strength deals with as a non-profit. Despite connections to Capitol Hill, they are still trying to get Congress to make changes to the food service program and increase political will so that the decisions will be seriously implemented and the successful programs receive more support. Second, another area Share Our Strength needs help with is figuring out how to get food to middle to high-income communities. Some food insecure children do live in these areas, but they cannot get the proper help because of program qualifications for breakfast in the classroom for schools and school districts. In order for a school district to qualify for the breakfast in the classroom program at least 75% of their student population must be considered low-income students (FRAC 2011). The program require that Third, Storen was specific in saying that budget and funding is not the main problem, but a reorganization of funds would be beneficial to making serious improvements. He believes that the resources currently do exist, but they are not being utilized in the best way possible. Meir and Nelson did not have any specific

issues that differed from overall challenges, which come with fighting childhood hunger today, but they did say eliminating obstacles and increasing innovation were important things that need work. The obstacles that Mier and Nelson were focused on included summer lunch issues such as safety for children traveling to and from meal sites. Summer lunch programs also must remain onsite for a certain amount of time unless they have approval to be a mobile site, which is difficult to achieve. Therefore it is hard to really feed as many children as there are in need. These are just some of the issues Mier and Nelson mentioned as needing innovative solutions. As new problems are solved, other ones come up, which is part of the problem when handling such a complex social as childhood hunger.

### **Case Study: Schenectady Inner City Ministry**

Schenectady Inner City Ministry is an ecumenical partnership, which was founded in 1967 for ministries of social service and social justice. As an organization fully dedicated to helping the community, Schenectady Inner City Ministry (SICM) helps individuals with hunger, poverty, homelessness and job searches. Schenectady is ranked 13th nationally in terms of childhood poverty rate and 50.8% of children in the city are living in poverty (Stanforth 2012). SICM is the only organization in the city of Schenectady to administer the federally funded summer lunch program, which offers a midday meal to any child who visits a meal site in the summer. SICM had 36 summer meal sites last summer with 24 fixed sites and 12 mobile sites. SICM receives funding from the New York State Department of Education Child Nutrition Department, which is in turn funded by the USDA or the Federal's Summer

Food Service Program, as well as small grants from other non-profit congregations and community organizations.

As a small but average size city in the U.S., Schenectady can be viewed as a microcosm of the countrywide rates of hunger and poverty among children. Schenectady Inner City ministry is servicing the local population, which basically mirrors the experience of the country; so SICM is an important example in understanding typical issues, which local organizations face. When prompted to talk about food insecurity and how it is being handled, Rachel Curtis, the director of the summer lunch program had a lot to say. The summer food service program in Schenectady reaches roughly 25% of the 8,000 food insecure children in the city on an average day in the summer. Nationally about 1 out of 7 children who receive free or reduced meals during the school year also receive free meals during the summer time (Food Research and Action Center, 2012). While there are more children who are receiving summer meals in Schenectady on an average day than in the whole nation, both rates are low. Since neighborhoods and homes are closer together in a city, it is easier for non-profits in Schenectady to create enough sites to serve a majority of the population. When examining the whole nation and the proximity of sites in every state, Mier noted that there are many states where children have to walk miles just to get to the closest site. However Curtis deals with plenty of other issues prior to the summer months and during them that make feeding the hungry kids of Schenectady a challenge.

Some of the issues that Curtis mentioned were funding and program logistics. SICM itself is a small organization that has multiple programs. Although

Rachel Curtis spends most of her time on the Summer Lunch program by herself, she also gets called into meetings for other programs and has other responsibilities. Curtis said if SICM had more funds they could hire additional staff to help her work on the Summer Lunch program year round. During the summer SICM hires a handful of people to help run the meal sites, but the rest of the workers are unpaid volunteers. Curtis mentioned that it is hard to hire quality staff to work for just a few months during the summer. In addition to funding concerns, the summer lunch program has many logistical and technical issues that slow down the process. There are very specific rules that must be followed when serving food to the children. For example, the children must eat the food at the site and cannot under any circumstance take it to go, which sometimes causes issues when a parent says “my kid must go now”. Another issue is that there is no way to predict the number of children who come to each meal site. So one day they might have enough lunches at a site and then the next day they might have too few, and it falls on Curtis to coordinate getting meals from one site to another.

The issues that Curtis sees are all related to the summer food service program, since that is what her knowledge and experience is based on. She witnesses a big stigma attached to going to a summer lunch site, which is not part of a camp or serves another purpose. Accordingly, she and those involved in the summer lunch program are working to create activities and reduce this stigma. Then the “kids can say ‘oh I’m going to paint a picture, not I’m going to get free lunch’, because even if you come from poverty it is hard to accept help.” Because of the stigma, it is difficult to spread the word to all the families in the city who need

assistance. This then makes it difficult to be effective when there are large sections of the population being missed. Money and human power are the basic obstacles smaller nonprofits like SICM run into when trying to reach their goals. SICM is lacking both of these, which holds them back from helping all the children in the community to the best of their ability. As mentioned in the literature review, some work has been done to help the summer lunch program and other related programs, but most small non profits have not felt any effects from Obama's 2008 campaign pledge to end childhood hunger by 2015. The poverty rate actually increased from 2008 to 2010 by 1.9% to 15.1% and because of the direct connection, we know hunger increased as well (Whitley 2013:36). This explains why Curtis and others feel that they are not helping as many people as they would like. There are clearly issues and obstacles with the current program, but at the same time the rates of poverty and food insecurity are not decreasing, which means more people need and are searching for government services.

As individuals who directly interact with the community, Curtis and the other employees at SICM have an up close account of what poverty and food insecurity in the U.S. is really like today. Throughout her time at SICM Curtis has learned that "poverty is real. Its not something people use to get a free handout, and it goes along with being hungry and not knowing where you are going to get your next meal and if you will get evicted or not." However she has also seen that the poor have a different sense of community than the other social classes do, "People work together more and help each other out more and are very savvy when it comes to getting things they need." The work Curtis is involved in has given her a lot of respect in the

community, because at the end of day “those left behind impact the well being of the overall community.”

### **Programmatic and Policy Weaknesses**

Despite the increase in discussion of childhood hunger, each respondent noted that there are areas of weakness that need more attention. When prompted to discuss problems, respondents quickly spoke on the programs not getting enough attention and funding.

All of the respondents stressed that feeding kids in the summer is one of the biggest issues that comes up every year. When school is not in session the infrastructure does not exist to easily get food to kids because programs are only located in certain areas and adding more sites is expensive. Curtis noted that the work of organizing and carrying out the summer meals programs falls for the most part on the non-profits in each community. Mier added that the reason the summer programs do not have as much success is because they are “administratively burdensome.” There are many forms and documents to fill out and get approved before setting up a summer lunch program or adding a new site to an existing one. These processes can seem very overwhelming for small non-profits or community organizations who already have a lot on their plate.

However, Share Our Strength and other advocacy organizations are looking to focus on in this year’s Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act by working on a universal method for a school/nonprofit/community organization to apply to be a summer meal site or provide after school meals or be part of any of the other

government nutrition programs. The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act is an act that occurs every five years or so and it renews the programs that currently exist, while also making any changes requested by those who administer the programs. Of all the children eligible, only 15% are getting fed during the summer time so the vast majority, 85% of eligible children, is not receiving regular meals in the summer time. As the director of the summer meals program in Schenectady, Curtis experiences a lot of the stress trying to provide for the community on a very tight budget, which stretches almost every resource they have. In addition to the administrative issues and tight budgets, which lead to cutting corners, the problems in getting summer meal programs up and running are even more complicated. In order to have summer meals programs in a community, 50% of the kids must be low income. However one-third of low-income kids do not live in communities, which qualify under the 50% low-income level. This adds a new challenge to the current boundaries, which is something that the literature review did not have, since it was a new problem that has not been studied yet.

Despite the fact that there are areas struggling and many children slipping through the cracks, there are still reasons to have hope for the future. All the respondents agreed that ending childhood hunger in the United States is possible and will be accomplished during their lifetimes. Storen and Nelson see the end coming in the next 10 to 20 years, but they believe a lot of work and dedicated efforts are needed before this goal is met. Ending childhood hunger means improving measurement and identification of childhood hunger, and tailoring the programs to meet the needs of the nation. While Curtis believes the end is possible

she is less optimistic than the others. She thinks the upper class needs to be more involved stating graphically, “the sad fact is there are some kids who do not know where their next meal is coming from and then there are some people who eat caviar for breakfast.” There must be a big push on behalf of the ground workers to change and reorganize existing resources to put an end to these issues. There is hope that changes can be achieved through a complete concerted effort from all parties.

In 1964 the Food Stamp Program was made mandatory and the general consensus was that it would serve as a temporary system to help families and individuals get back on their feet after experiencing setbacks (DeVault and Pitts 1984:546). Poverty and hunger appeared to be issues that certain sections of the population were temporarily experiencing and not an overwhelming issue affecting all of society, like it is today. Michael Harrington’s second book *The Other America*, published in 1984, began to get to the idea that poverty impacts all of society and not just one group (Peterson 1994:131). Now it is known that poverty is not just a temporary one-class issue so the programs with a lot of support aim to help *all* children from the day they enter school. However in 1983, the Food Action Resource Center (FRAC) announced that hunger was a quickly growing issue that needed to be addressed and that the food stamp program that existed was not helping the cause (Physician Task Force 1985). This acknowledgement suggested that the current programs were working not and month-to-month assistance was not necessarily helping people get back on their feet. As we have seen before, programs aimed for temporary assistance do not actually serve that purpose. For example

Clinton's welfare strategy in 1994, which he called "no more something for nothing", led to serious reforms, providing a limit of two years of job assistance training in order to get people off welfare, but often when two years had passed individuals were still unemployed (O'Connor 2002:400). Clearly these programs were not working which is why attacking the issues outside of the home has shown to be an effective strategy.

### **Recent Progress**

The respondents were quick to discuss the areas of weakness in current policy and program efforts, and they were not shy commenting on what is working and what should be done. The suggestions and discussion topics can be divided into three categories; breakfast in the classroom, the summer meals program and Obama's efforts.

First, the breakfast in the classroom program is a crucial aspect of efforts to end childhood hunger today. There has been more support for the breakfast in the classroom and there are more school districts involved in BIC than in the summer lunch program. Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC) has a "proven track record" and it takes away stigma, removes the process from before school and out of the cafeteria, according to Nelson. Share Our Strength is a big supporter of BIC, and unlike the other nutrition programs, there are fewer administrative issues. For example, organizing BIC for a school district is easier because schools already have the resources and staffing since breakfast programs and cafeterias already exist in most

schools. Therefore, first implementing BIC is much simpler compared to first implementing summer lunch.

Despite the benefits that the breakfast in the classroom has had, Curtis does not believe that Breakfast in the Classroom is the best solution. Curtis believes that breakfast in the classroom does not reach the root of the issues and that a solution with a focus on expanding and improving the nation's nutrition programs while also bolstering the economy and helping out working families would be better. Curtis said while this program is great, it cannot end childhood hunger alone. However, the community eligibility provision option for the city of Schenectady has been an important improvement and a positive change for dealing with hunger during the school year. The community eligibility provision option was established with the passing of the Healthy Hunger Free Child Act in 2010 and it allows universal free breakfast and lunch to schools at no cost to all students without having to fill out paper work for "identified students" (Share our Strength, 2014). Without the community eligibility provision, certain students who are considered "identified" because their families rely on government assistance or the child is homeless, migrant, in foster care or a run away, will get free meals after completing the necessary paper work. With the community eligibility option, identified students no longer need to fill out paper work and there is also less paperwork for the schools to complete.

Second, the summer lunch program is very important to ending childhood hunger in the U.S. today. All four subjects stressed the importance of focusing more time, money and energy on this program in order to reach their goals. There are

issues with the logistics of the lunch program, including making sure kids arrive safely, eat the food at the meal site, and have enough food for all the kids who show up. As mentioned earlier, balancing the right amount of food each day, while also making sure each child follows the rules of the program, can be difficult. In addition, some states have an issue reaching a majority of the children because they live so far from the sites and it can be unsafe to walk alone in the summer.

The sense of community among the lower class has also been important in making summer lunch programs effective. Curtis has noticed a strong sense of community and support networks among the community she works with. She has noticed that those in the lower class work together more, help each other out more and are also pretty savvy because they know the resources available to them very well. Because this atmosphere fosters a tight community who watches out for one another, it is promising that the summer lunch program will continue to grow and be effective.

Third, there has been significant work on these issues throughout the duration of Barack Obama's presidency. Specific research was conducted to understand his key policies, programs and changes that occurred throughout his two terms. At the beginning of his campaign Obama made some specific promises related to ending childhood hunger. In 2008, Obama pledged to end childhood hunger by 2015, and the First Lady said she would make ending childhood obesity one of her priorities while in office (Haveman, 2011: 203).

On December 13th 2010, The Healthy Hunger Free Child Act was signed authorizing child nutrition programs until September 30th 2015 (Steisel and

Wengrovius, 2014). The Healthy Hunger Free Child Act also implemented changes to the school breakfast and lunch programs including a 6-cent increase in budget per meal, the first increase in 15 years, and new nutrition qualifications for schools to meet in order to get complete reimbursement (Steisel and Wengrovius, 2014). The changes also increased the number of children who were eligible by using Medicaid data and census data (Steisel and Wengrovius, 2014). There were also changes to the summer meals program, which eliminated eligibility rules for nonprofits and public sponsors, and no longer limited the number of meal sites a non-profit can sponsor (Steisel and Wengrovius, 2014). Since 2010 approximately 115,000 new students have been added to the school meal programs (Steisel and Wengrovius, 2014).

Other policy changes included The Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which included \$275 million from the Treasury to support private sector funding of health food options and resources in distressed and rural areas. The USDA's 2011 budget allocated \$50 million to support health and food dessert related programs (Office of Community Services, 2011). The Agricultural Act of 2014 allocated 80% of its funds towards nutrition, which caused multiple improvements in SNAP, such as increased training for SNAP workers and increased funding for the program (Claassen and Effland, 2014).

Reflecting back on the last six years, hindsight is 20-20, but some are critical of the work that President Obama has or has not done. The interviewed individuals had a range of opinions on the Obama administration's commitment and actions. They viewed The Healthy Hunger Free Child Act as a very exciting addition, because

kids could now get meals after schools, on spring break and even on the weekends. This Act also brought the appropriations act into action, which tested the innovative ideas that Mier and Nelson mentioned were in need of solutions for summer meals programs. Yet, some saw Obama's contribution as hopeful but lacking in action, commenting that the promise while great, had no follow up plans, no metric of progress and all suggestions from the USDA to the White House were essentially ignored. The Healthy Hunger Free Child Act did have some benefits such as improved nutrition qualities, but overall there has been a lack of significant action to match the promises made. In short, they saw the attention Obama gave as positive and helpful towards bringing attention to the issues, but besides the attention that was brought to the issues, there was not much chatter after the initial discussion. This was a sign that not much would come out of the initial work. As an individual on the ground witnessing the struggles of the poor and hungry, Curtis saw the little changes that were happening "in terms of Obama's promise to end childhood hunger by 2015. I mean it is 2015 and childhood hunger is still going strong and I think that was a good idea but in 2010 it only gave us five years and I don't think that was a realistic timeline" (Curtis, 1/21).

The point of these interviews was to gain a deeper understanding of all the issues related to ending childhood hunger today. The research conducted previously provided a solid understanding, but many questions were still left unanswered. Interviewing individuals from different organizations who approach the issues from different perspectives collected a significant amount of new information. With these four interviews completed and summarized, the next chapter focuses on

recommendations for the next steps our country should take. It is with great respect and admiration that respondents' thoughts, ideas and personal experiences are included in this study.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

The future of this nation is dependent on the children. They are tomorrow's politicians, lawyers, doctors, police force and social activists that will move our country forward. In order to have faith that the current elementary and middle schoolers will be able to successfully take control we need to know they are all getting the best education. The best teachers can be hired and city governments can budget more funds to schools, but if students cannot pay attention during class, these efforts will be pointless. These results clearly suggest attention in school is connected to food insecurity, and food insecurity is connected to poverty. Tom Nelson, president of Share Our Strength (SOS), pointed out that they found a connection between hunger and education achievement when SOS partnered with Deloitte to examine their student's test scores. Lower educational attainment is just one outcome of hunger though. A majority of the results imply a cycle of social issues that are all related; each one affecting another. The results pulled from the thesis can each be directed to different aspects of the issue; policy, programming, funding and publicity.

Other important findings include the specific obstacles individuals at the national and local level reported. For the most part the programs that exist are working well and doing what they were created to do. But, as the respondents suggested, there is a need for innovation in the current programs and for the creation of new ones. Innovation is an important part of solving this problem

because with each victory we find another new problem in need of a solution that was not clear before. In the 1960's solving this issue was just about getting children food, but today we worry about providing the right types of food and distributing the food in a safe environment. Many children are still slipping through the cracks, and a majority are going without food on the weekends and during school vacation weeks. Both Rachel Curtis and Jillien Mier noted the administrative work required for the summer lunch program creates issues for smaller nonprofits responsible for setting up and running the program. The improvement of the relationship and communication between those at the local level, those at the national level and those in government must be strengthened in order for innovation to occur. The cooperation of these groups would allow for collaboration among all the people that witness these issues at every level. A third party person would also be helpful in finding creative solutions that maybe those who work on the issues every day might not see.

Non-profits are also in desperate need of more funding in order to carry out the programs that are currently in place. Asking for more money would be ideal in this situation; however, the reallocation of funds would also be beneficial such that more financial support could be directed at assisting the groups who carry out the governmental programs. The smaller non-profits are responsible for the logistics of the government support programs like the summer lunch program but they cannot successfully help their communities on their own and the help from larger national non-profits or the government would be beneficial. As mentioned earlier, not one group can solve this issue alone, cooperation is key to success. After comparing the

literature review with the interview results, it is clear that deep rooted societal changes are needed most in order to effect sustainable change. This is a large goal but one that can be reached by helping children as soon as they enter the system (i.e., day care, preschool or elementary school). As much as the SNAP program helps families, my research suggests that more focus should be placed on programs that are directed 100% at children. This is something that is hopefully slowly coming to the surface with the changes waiting for approval in the upcoming Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act. The nature of SNAP is to help struggling families; however, the power lies in hands of the parent or legal guardian thus it cannot be guaranteed that SNAP is completely benefiting the children. Overall, we should start by considering expanding the summer lunch program and then finding ways to better allocate the funds that currently exist while continuing to push more school districts to adopt the breakfast in the classroom program and working on changing the policy guidelines so eligibility is not as hard to achieve.

In order to make effective policy changes, research must increase and we must let the programs and new ideas run their course in order to find out where the new areas of weakness will be. The best way to improve policy is through research, which requires increased funding. Publicity is a huge part of this and as we have seen in the past, increasing the discussion around these topics is a successful way to increase funding and support. Increased public symbolic support from the government such as more promises like the one Obama made during his campaign would be a helpful form of publicity. In addition continuing the conversation on the news with the well-known celebrity supporters is a good way to increase awareness

of the issues. Society as a whole must come together to change the way we deal with poverty and food insecurity, yet there are still many individuals in the United States who do not see the importance of this issue or are completely blind to it.

The success of this study is in part due to the powerful connections made and depth of knowledge gained from my summer internship at Share Our Strength, but there were many other individual interviews that could have been included for this thesis. Additional interviews with school administrators would have been great assets to this thesis; however, I was not able to schedule them with the time available to complete research for this thesis. Other individuals I would have wanted to interview included parents, teachers, students and possibly an individual who works for a non-profit in another city or town. It also would have been helpful to have been able to observe the programs in action because seeing the breakfast program, the summer lunch program, SNAP or the commodities program would have expanded my understanding of them.

Reaching children through the school system has proven to be an effective solution to the current issues, but as the respondents all said, this approach does not fully deal with the deep-rooted issues. More policy research could be done to monitor new programs and to see what further changes would be effective. Despite these limitations, this thesis shows childhood hunger is a significant issue because of the number of children who are affected and the difficulty in solving this issue. Therefore future research must continue to examine this persistent problem in order to help our children

## APPENDIX A

### **Section 1: The Issue**

How significant is the problem of childhood hunger in the United States today? Have you seen any changes over time? Please explain.

How do you think that this issue relates to other health and social issues in our country?

What do you see as the largest area of need related to these issues in our country today? What programs need more support?

What are the most important strategies for addressing childhood hunger in your opinion? What is your opinion on breakfast in the classroom and summer meals specifically? What do you think we can learn from past strategies?

What is your opinion of the Healthy Hunger Free Child Act and Obama's promise to end childhood hunger by 2015? Have you seen progress toward this goal? Please explain.

Do you think there will be a time that childhood hunger will be no longer an issue in our country? Why or why not?

Why do you think this issue has grown in the news recently?

### **Section 2: The Organization**

How does your organization address childhood hunger in the United States today?

Do you receive any funding or support to help carry out your work?

Why did you choose to get into this area of work?

Have you had the opportunity to interact with children, teachers or other community leaders directly involved?

Have you noticed any recent changes in the children or communities you work with?

Please explain.

How does one measure success on this issue? Where is the country having success related to this issue?

What are some of the obstacles your organization faces?

How do you justify that childhood hunger is and should be a top priority for our nation?

What does the future of childhood hunger in the United States look like to you?

### **Section 3: Questions Specific to Local Organizations**

What does hunger look like in your local community? Have you seen any changes recently?

What types of interactions do you have with other nonprofits? With the local government? Please explain.

What do you see as the number one issue facing your community in terms of hunger related issues?

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