



Occam's Press

Food Insecurity Worldwide: A Teaching Guide

As a companion to Occam's Press articles on food insecurity, this helpful guide discusses the problem of food insecurity as a global issue. In "A Parlous Cascade," we present the problem of food insecurity in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya. The article, "In the Last Place You Look" reminds us that food insecurity is truly worldwide, even in the richest nations on Earth.

How to Use this Guide

The primer provides an overview of the topic. The articles provide an in-depth illustration, complete with profiles of those impacted by food insecurity. At the end are discussion questions.



Photo by Dulana Kodithuwakku on Unsplash

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Primer: Food Insecurity Worldwide

Definition and key concepts

- Food insecurity refers to the lack of consistent access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets individuals' dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life.
- The key dimensions of food insecurity include availability (adequate food supply), accessibility (affordability and physical access to food), utilization (the ability to effectively use nutrients), and stability (consistency in access to food over time).

The global state of food insecurity

- Hunger globally rose to 828 million people in 2021, which is 150 million more since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Women are slightly more likely than men to be food insecure: in 2021 - 31.9% of women in the world were moderately or severely food insecure, compared to 27.6% of men.
- Food insecurity affects every continent, with the most severe cases found in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.
- Climate change, conflict, economic inequality, and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated food insecurity, making it an urgent global challenge.

The impact of food insecurity on individuals and communities

- Food insecurity can lead to malnutrition, stunted growth, and weakened immune systems, increasing the risk of illness and even death.
- In children, it can hinder cognitive development, affecting their ability to learn and succeed academically. Worldwide, an estimated 149 million children under the age of five had stunted growth and development due to food insecurity.
- At the community level, food insecurity can contribute to social unrest, crime, and reduced economic productivity, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and inequality.

The relationship between poverty, inequality, and food insecurity

Poverty, inequality, and food insecurity are closely interconnected. Poverty limits individuals' ability to purchase nutritious food, leading to food insecurity. In turn, food insecurity exacerbates poverty by affecting health and educational outcomes, reducing individuals' earning potential. Inequality further compounds food insecurity, as wealth disparities can lead to unequal access to resources, including food, agricultural land, and technology. Addressing poverty and inequality is therefore crucial in tackling food insecurity.

Food insecurity in wealthy countries

Although less prevalent than in low-income nations, food insecurity in wealthy countries is a major problem. Food insecurity is often driven by a combination of factors, including:

Income inequality and poverty

Despite their overall wealth, developed countries can have considerable income disparities, leading to pockets of poverty. People with limited financial resources often struggle to afford nutritious food, leading to food insecurity.

Food deserts

Food deserts are urban or rural areas where access to affordable, healthy, and fresh food is limited. In these areas, people often rely on convenience stores and fast-food outlets, which offer less nutritious options. Food deserts are often found in low-income neighborhoods, exacerbating food insecurity among vulnerable populations.

Food waste and overconsumption

Wealthy countries often have high levels of food waste due to overproduction, consumer preferences, and inefficient supply chains. At the same time, overconsumption of unhealthy foods contributes to obesity and related health issues. Both food waste and overconsumption divert resources from providing nutritious food to those in need.

Climate change and natural disasters

Wealthy countries are not immune to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters, which can disrupt food production and distribution. Droughts, floods, and extreme weather events can result in reduced crop yields, higher food prices, and increased food insecurity.



Photo by Markus Spiske on Unsplash

How can we end food insecurity?

Ending food insecurity globally is a complex and multifaceted challenge that requires a combination of short- and long-term strategies. Here are some strategies:

Strengthen local food systems

Investing in small-scale, sustainable agriculture can help improve food security by increasing local food production, creating jobs, and reducing reliance on imported food. This includes

supporting local farmers, providing access to credit and resources, and promoting agroecological farming practices.

Improve agricultural productivity

Enhancing agricultural productivity through the introduction of better farming techniques, improved seeds, and sustainable practices can increase crop yields and help meet the food demands of growing populations. Additionally, investing in research and development can lead to innovations that address climate change and other challenges faced by farmers in poor countries.

Build resilient infrastructure

Developing and maintaining adequate infrastructure such as roads, storage facilities, and markets can help reduce post-harvest losses and improve access to food. This also facilitates the movement of food from surplus areas to deficit regions, ensuring more equitable distribution.

Social protection programs

Implementing social protection programs, such as cash transfers, food vouchers, and school feeding programs, can provide immediate relief to vulnerable populations and help mitigate the effects of food insecurity.

Education and empowerment

Promoting education, particularly for women and girls, can help address food insecurity by empowering individuals to make informed decisions about their nutrition and livelihoods. Education also contributes to better farming practices and improved household income, leading to enhanced food security.

Addressing conflict and political instability

Ensuring peace and stability is essential for food security, as conflicts and political unrest can disrupt food production and distribution. Efforts to promote peace, good governance, and the rule of law can create an enabling environment for addressing food insecurity.

Climate change adaptation and mitigation

Implementing strategies to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change is crucial for ensuring food security in poor countries. This includes promoting climate-resilient agriculture, improving water management, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

International cooperation and aid

Collaborative efforts between governments, international organizations, NGOs, and the private sector can provide vital resources and expertise to address food insecurity. This includes financial assistance, technical support, and capacity-building initiatives.

Addressing food insecurity in wealthy countries

This requires a multifaceted approach, including:

- Reduce income inequality
- Improve access to healthy food
- Minimize food waste
- Promote sustainable agricultural practices
- Raise public awareness of the issue
- Encourage responsible consumer behavior.

Sources

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Kimani-Murage, Elizabeth W., Lilly Schofield, Frederick Wekesah, Shah Mohamed, Blessing Mberu, Remare Ettarh, Thaddaeus Egondi, Catherine Kyobutungi, and A. Ezech. "Vulnerability to

food insecurity in urban slums: experiences from Nairobi, Kenya." Journal of Urban Health 91, no. 6 (2014): 1098-1113.

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Photo by Andreea Popa on Unsplash

Articles in Occam's Press

A Parlous Cascade

From election violence to hunger in the slums of Nairobi



Photo by Hanna Morris on Unsplash

“I can tell you there are many people here who sleep on porridge only,” said an older man from a Nairobi slum.

“You find that they drank porridge in the morning, never had anything at lunch time and then in the evening they make the same porridge.”

Eating the same food over and over – not because of choice, but because there are few other good options – is food insecurity. A food insecure household has food, but it is of low quality, or there is little variety of it, or it is unhealthily disagreeable. As a result of food insecurity, people living there will change their eating habits: they eat less food than what is recommended, or they eat intermittently, or too often they choose unhealthy options.

Who is food insecure, and why?

In 2010, public health specialist Dr. Elizabeth W. Kimani-Murage led a group of researchers to investigate who is food insecure and why in the cities of Kenya, Africa. Kenya is home to the mighty Mount Kenya, to a mangrove coast on the Indian Ocean, and to a variety of inland climates that oscillate between heavy rainfalls and no rainfalls. Most Kenyans work in agriculture. In 2008, as the stock market was crashing in America and Europe, Kenya was suffering from an historic drought. That drought followed five consecutive years of smaller-scale droughts.

To cause food insecurity, Dr. Kimani-Murage and her colleagues reasoned that adverse geography matters. And those most gravely impacted by adverse geography are the urban poor.

To find Kenya's urban poor, the researchers went to Nairobi. Downtown Nairobi is home to multinational businesses and the Nairobi Stock Exchange. Seeking to study the most food insecure, the researchers focused on the slums and shanties at the city's outskirts. About 10 kilometers from downtown lay two such: Korogocho and Viwandani.

Slums and Shanties

All slums are in or near cities, but they can differ in the particulars. A slum can have houses that don't protect against the weather. That house could have more than three people sharing a room. It can be unsanitary, meaning an unreasonable number of people who share the same toilet. It can have no access to clean and affordable drinking water. Its residents can be under

constant threat of eviction. A slum can have just one of those problems, or it can have all of them.

Slums and shanties are related. A shanty is an illegal construction built from blueprints and materials unsanctioned by the city government. In a shanty, people looking to live near the city – to access the jobs and services that cities have in abundance – built what they could from what they could afford. A slum is not necessarily a shantytown, but it could be.

In the slums of Nairobi, most folks are day laborers. The men work on constructions jobs. The women are domestic workers, cleaning homes and offices, or they do nanny work. In slums and shantytowns, there is high unemployment, an immoderate level of physical danger, and many folks in poor health.

The Survey Says

Dr. Kimani-Murage and colleagues surveyed the slum residents. They asked about their food situation, such as:

“In the past 4 weeks, did you or any household member go a whole day and night without eating anything because there was NOT enough food?”

They also asked about how many people live in the house, how many dependents they have, and the sources of their income. They asked about “shocks:” “fire, floods, mugging/stabbing, burglary, eviction, property destruction, rape/ sodomy within the last 4 weeks of the interview.”

The survey says that both slums suffer. The slums were starkly insecure but differ slightly in magnitude: a third of the households of one slum and two-thirds of the other report severe food insecurity. One out of every five households report that the people living there had either one or no meals the previous day. Formal employment is rare. Most depend on casual labor, self-employment, or remittances. About eight percent of all households say that, in the last month, they had been mugged or otherwise robbed.

Bad Things Snowball

Surveys are helpful, but to get a deeper story, the researchers also interviewed and convened focus groups with slum residents. Some of what the researchers found was terrible, but not graphic. They found that the food insecure overly depended on maize and kale. They considered meat a luxury. Street food was common, cheap, and unhealthful.

Other stories were terribly graphic and point to how one existential threat leads to another. One such story starts with the violence that erupted after the 2007 election. In 2007, Kenya went to the polls to elect a president. A winner was announced, but the challenger said that the election was a fraud. Many of the post-election protests were non-violent, but some were very violent. In this time, over eleven-hundred people died. In 2008, UN President Kofi Annan brokered an uneasy peace and power-sharing deal between the two presidential candidates.

Bad things snowballed.

The result of the violence, and, in 2008, the historic drought, disrupted road access to villages and towns. No access meant people in those towns could not get to their jobs. It meant that food and other needed resources could not get to the slums. People got frustrated and blamed each other. They attacked other people.

The violence mushroomed.

Traders couldn't open their stalls for lack of foodstuffs and fear of the violence, and of the looting, and of the arson. The violence disrupted transports of maize and other food staples. Slum residents struggled to find fresh vegetables. The food that did arrive was expensive. And since slum residents were poor day laborers, most did not have a store of foodstuffs in their homes.

The result was rampant food insecurity.

“We experienced severe hunger because maybe you have money in your pocket but you could not buy food...” an older man said. “There was too much hunger such that people would attack a cow; there were some men who used to rear cows here, they would attack a cow and cut it into pieces alive (even without slaughtering it). Even the pigs; there was no chance of slaughtering; just cutting them and running away with the meat... If you had money in the bank, the banks were closed.”

“That was hunger,” he added.

In the slums of Nairobi, droughts and floods and violence are not only existential threats—they are of a parlous cascade that leads relentlessly to further grim and unpalatable options.

Notes

This was written by Josh Dubrow based on the article by [Elizabeth W. Kimani-Murage](#), Lilly Schofield, Frederick Wekesah, Shah Mohamed, Blessing Mberu, Remare Ettarh, Thaddaeus Egondi, Catherine Kyobutungi, and A. Ezeh. “[Vulnerability to food insecurity in urban slums: experiences from Nairobi, Kenya](#),” published in 2014 in the *Journal of Urban Health* (91, no. 6): 1098-1113. To understand what food insecurity means, I consulted the above article by Elizabeth W. Kimani-Murage and colleagues (p. 1110) and the [USDA’s Definitions of Food Security](#). For definitions of slums and shanties, I consulted the UN’s “[Slums: Some Definitions](#)” and “[The Challenge of Slums](#).” For Kenya’s post-election crisis, I consulted [Karuti Kanyinga](#) and James D. Long’s “[The political economy of reforms in Kenya: the post-2007 election violence and a new constitution](#),” published in 2012 in *African Studies Review*.

“I can tell you...”p. 1106.

[Nairobi](#) is Kenya’s largest city. It has a population of about four and a half million.

The researchers conducted a large, multi-year research project. The focus groups and other interviews were in 2010. The survey was conducted 2011 and 2012 in three rounds with a total of over 3000 respondents.

“In the past 4 weeks...” p. 1111. This survey question is from the [Household Food Insecurity Access Scale](#) (HFIAS) administered by the research team.

“shocks...” p. 1102.

The survey says... p. 1103.

The result of the violence... p. 1107.

“Eleven hundred people died...” p. 32, from Karuti Kanyinga and James D. Long. “The political economy of reforms in Kenya: the post-2007 election violence and a new constitution.” *African Studies Review* (2012): 31-51.

“We experienced severe hunger...” p. 1107.

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In the Last Place You Look

Food insecurity in wealthy countries



Anna is 51, has a young daughter, and was a successful entrepreneur. When Anna developed anxiety and depression, she stopped working. Money ran low and food became scarce.

“Our eating is far more inconsistent with the way that we have to buy food now,” Anna said. “So we’ll maybe have a healthy week but then we’ll maybe have quite a poor nutrition week.”

Anna started to buy more packaged food and less fresh. “I’m not unintelligent,” Anna said. “I know what I need to keep my levels going, I know what I need for my diet but it’s hard to keep that going when you’re left with eating just bread with maybe a chocolate spread on it cos that’s all you’ve got left for that day.”

Anna lives in the UK.

In the long aftermath of the Great Recession, millions across the United Kingdom and the United States became poor and food insecure. A food insecure house has not enough food or little variety of food, or the only options are unhealthful food. As a result, people choose not to eat, or they eat less often than they would like, or they often eat that unhealthful food.

In the world’s richest nations, how do folks become food insecure, and how do they reconcile being food insecure with living in one of the world’s richest nations?

Visits

In bad economic times and good, the hungry can turn to foodbanks. Foodbanks are charitable organizations that collect food. Some distribute that food directly to those in need. Some provide food for other organizations to give away. In the UK, there are “emergency” foodbanks where, during a crisis and for a limited time, one can get and redeem a voucher for food.

To understand who uses foodbanks and why, in 2013, social scientist [K. A. Garthwaite](#) and colleagues researched a foodbank operated by the [Trussell Trust](#), a respected charitable organization. The foodbank was located in [Stockton-on-Tees](#), a town of 85,000 that lay in the northeast of England. Nearly a million people in the UK got emergency food from the Trussell Trust in 2013 alone.

The social scientists volunteered at the foodbank: they prepared and distributed food parcels; they administered food vouchers. All the while, they wrote down numerous observations and countless conversations and interviewed several dozen foodbank visitors and fellow volunteers.

The UK social scientists found that many who visited the foodbank had health problems. Prior to their foodbank visit, some had been traumatized by violence and most had lost a job. Some lost their job because of mental health issues and others suffered from these issues afterwards. Some had physical ailments that led to mental ailments. They all suffered from food insecurity.

Much of the food that the foodbank provides – “cereal, tinned soup, tinned vegetables, pasta sauce, long life milk, tea or coffee, pasta, rice, juice, and other basic staple items” (39) – has wheat and dairy. They are filling, but for folks with wheat or lactose allergies, the choices are costly. The foodbank visitors supplement, when they can, with the cheapest foods from local supermarkets.

Naomi is one such foodbank visitor: 36, with a series of physical and mental health problems – Irritable Bowel Syndrome and anxiety among them – and had struggled with heroin addiction. She receives welfare. When there’s

money, there is not a lot of it, and she uses it to buy some food and make hard choices.

“Well we normally what we do in the first week, we fill up our cupboards like with tinned stuff, noodles, things like that, fill up the freezer with like chicken, there’s always meat, vegetables, chips, stuff like that...” Naomi said. Soon, the money runs out. “When you get to the end of the week you see it all go,” Naomi continued. “All the fresh stuff’s gone and it’s really hard to keep some money in your account for the following week.”

The combination of food insecurity, food allergies, and physical health problems make it hard to find food that will agree with them. Naomi, for example, is allergic to white wheat. “I can’t eat anything fried, spicy and a lot of cheap food is the type of food that I can’t eat,” Naomi said, “but when you’re hungry you’ll eat anything and I suffer the consequences afterwards.”



Photo by Aaron Doucett on Unsplash

What Hunger Is

Across the pond, in the United States, [Mohan Jyoti Dutta](#) and colleagues were also concerned about foodbank visitors. To hear their voices, in 2012, the US researchers volunteered in food pantries (a type of foodbank) and similar organizations in Tippecanoe County, Indiana. Tippecanoe is home to the city of Lafayette, to Perdue University, and to 170,000+ souls. They interviewed 18 of them.

The food pantry visitors said that hunger is deep – it affects the body and it makes it difficult to think.

Chris visited the food pantry. He has a job, but not enough to eat regularly and also pay for the roof over his head. He told the social scientists what hunger is. “There was a time when I was so hungry that I could not even think straight because I’m trying to find my next meal,” Chris said. “I want to get something in my stomach and the hunger pains be so painful.”

The food insecure of Tippecanoe finds it difficult to manage the welfare bureaucracy. For instance, there are troubles and delays in getting an identity card, and in waiting for the process of getting that card, the person goes hungry. Like others, Chris tries to get welfare but is stymied by the regulations. “I don’t know what all things I need to bring to the office,” Chris said. “They keep telling me I need this and I need that. I have gone so many times and then turned around.”

Downhill, with an Audience

Food insecurity is tied to poverty and unemployment. It happens to those who suddenly find themselves living in the margins of society, for long or short periods of time. It can happen to anyone.

When bad things snowball, life can go downhill, fast. One gets an illness or a divorce, loses a job, and money becomes scarce. Healthful food is difficult to afford. Extended family say that they got troubles of their own.

Problems that could happen to anyone become a parlous cascade of personal troubles connected to public policy.

As with the UK's food insecure, American food pantry visitors can feel shame and humiliation. The shame is born of a culture that prioritizes money over kinship and demonizes a plea for help – it is a fear of a financial plight made public. “You can't understand,” said a man. “My younger brother is an accountant and he is very comfortable, and my other brother the same, and here I am the first struggling to get food from the pantries.”

They find themselves in one of the richest countries in the world, falling on hard times and struggling to get up.

They find themselves in the last place they would look.

“I know how I looked at those people,” a woman said. “The ones who stood in line [in tears] at the food pantry. I felt pity for them. I wondered, how is it that they can't work to meet their basic needs. I guess, I never thought that this could happen to me. If I worked hard enough, I would be able to pay for the basics.”

“And here I am.”

Notes

This was written by Josh Dubrow based on K. A. Garthwaite, P. J. Collins, and Clare Bambra. “[Food for thought: An ethnographic study of negotiating ill health and food insecurity in a UK foodbank](#),” published in *Social Science & Medicine* 132 (2015): 38-44; and Mohan Jyoti Dutta, LaReina Hingson, Agaptus Anaele, Soumitro Sen, and Kyle Jones. “[Narratives of food insecurity in Tippecanoe County, Indiana: Economic constraints in local meanings of hunger](#),” published in *Health Communication* 31, no. 6 (2016): 647-658.

“Our eating is far more inconsistent...” UK, p. 41

“I'm not unintelligent...” p. 42

In the [UK emergency system](#), people can get a “red voucher” that allows for three visits within a time of “crisis.”

Some interviews were at the foodbank and others at the respondent’s home. (pp. 39 – 40)

Prior to their foodbank visit... p. 41

“Well we normally what we do...” p. 41

“I can’t eat anything fried...” p. 42

The US social scientists named their project the “[Voices of Hunger](#).”

“There was a time...” US, p. 655

“I don’t know what all things I need...” p. 653

“You can’t understand...” p. 654

“I know how I looked at those people...” p. 654

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Discussion Questions

Food insecurity worldwide

1. How do the causes and consequences of food insecurity differ between poor and wealthy countries?
2. What role do government policies and international trade play in perpetuating or alleviating food insecurity in both poor and wealthy nations? Discuss the advantages and drawbacks of various policy interventions.
3. How can we address the challenge of food waste in wealthy countries while simultaneously improving food access and availability for those experiencing food insecurity in poor countries?
4. In what ways can local and global initiatives collaborate to tackle food insecurity in both poor and wealthy countries?
5. How does climate change contribute to food insecurity in poor and wealthy countries, and what strategies can be employed to enhance the resilience of food systems in the face of these challenges?

Food insecurity in poor nations: “A Parlous Cascade”

1. How do the living conditions and employment status in the Nairobi slums contribute to food insecurity among residents?
2. How did the 2007 post-election violence and the historic drought in 2008 impact food insecurity in the Nairobi slums? Discuss the connections between political unrest, environmental factors, and access to food.
3. Based on the survey conducted by Dr. Kimani-Murage and her colleagues, what specific challenges do residents of the Nairobi slums face in terms of food security?
4. What role does the urban environment, including factors such as housing, sanitation, and access to resources, play in the food insecurity experienced by residents of the Nairobi slums?
5. In the article, the food insecure residents of the Nairobi slums were found to overly depend on maize and kale and consider meat a luxury. How might this limited diet impact the health and wellbeing of residents?

Food insecurity in wealthy nations: “In the Last Place You Look”

1. In the article, Anna's experience with food insecurity is linked to her struggles with anxiety and depression. Discuss how mental health issues can contribute to food insecurity, and consider potential ways to address these issues to improve food security for affected individuals.
2. Foodbanks play a critical role in providing food for those in need. However, the article mentions that some of the food provided may not be suitable for people with specific dietary needs, such as wheat or lactose allergies. How can foodbanks better cater to diverse dietary needs, and what challenges might they face in doing so?
3. Both the UK and the US are considered among the world's richest nations, yet food insecurity remains a significant problem. Discuss the factors that contribute to this paradox and explore potential policy changes that could help reduce food insecurity in these countries.
4. The article highlights the difficulties some individuals face when navigating the welfare system, which can exacerbate food insecurity. What improvements can be made to the welfare system to make it more accessible and efficient for those in need?
5. Food insecurity is often accompanied by feelings of shame and humiliation. How can society work towards destigmatizing the use of foodbanks and other forms of assistance? Discuss potential strategies to change public perceptions and support those facing food insecurity.



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