

Hunger and Food Insecurity

The Position of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Council of the United States

January, 2022

A Message from Our President

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me... in prison and you visited me... Amen I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me. (Mt 25:35-36, 40)

Dear Vincentian Friends,

Members of The Society of St. Vincent de Paul confront food insecurity every day. We carry food to those in need on home visits. Our pantries help hundreds in our communities. Vincentians serve a countless number of meals each year in our many dining rooms and shelters. Food insecurity in America manifests itself in many ways. Hunger affects the health and productivity of workers with inadequate nutrition, elderly pensioners scrimping to get by, and families choosing between food and rent. Children experiencing poor nutrition are affected with poor concentration,

behavior difficulties, and low achievement during the school day. For all too many, school meals provide their main source of nutrition, leaving them hungry on weekends, holidays, and over the summer. With adequate nourishment, serious physical, mental, and developmental consequences can be prevented.

As followers of Jesus, the words of our Savior make obvious our responsibility to those who hunger and thirst. Our Society must be a voice with, and for, those we serve, making sure they are adequately fed and nourished so that they can thrive, not just survive.

Yours in Christ,

Ralph Middlecamp
National President,
Council of the United States

What We Believe

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Made in God's image, every person needs proper sustenance. Adequate food and safe drinking water to nourish the body are basic rights that are essential to the dignity of the human person and to life itself. Studies continue to show that proper nutrition is not simply a necessity to prevent hunger. Malnutrition causes long term physical and cognitive developmental challenges. No person should suffer. Addressing systemic causes of food insecurity is the foundation of our poverty reduction efforts.

Government assistance programs cannot be replaced by private sources. Organizations like ours can fill gaps, but we can only provide a small fraction of the nutritional needs of our citizens. Public programs must enhance the common good. They must not penalize people because of geography, status, or past sins. They must help foster self-sufficiency, not dependency. We support efforts to make public nutrition programs more efficient and effective.

"The fight against poverty and hunger must be fought constantly and on many fronts, especially in its causes."

Pope Francis, Address to Congress, Sept. 2015

Food insecure households may not know how they will provide for their next meal. As defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), food security refers to the household-level economic and social condition of reliable access to an adequate amount of food for an active, healthy life for all household members. A household is food insecure if, in the previous year, they experienced limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

1. Sign up for VoterVoice (<https://votervoices.net/SVDPUSA/home>) to receive legislative alerts.
2. Urge Congress to support the strongest possible funding levels for critical programs that help provide nutrition and alleviate hunger; and to strengthen access in underserved communities, enhancing the use of technology to make it easier for families to enroll in programs.
3. Educate your parish about the needs in your community using the Food Access Atlas (<https://tinyurl.com/p8psm759>) & Food Research Action Center (<http://www.frac.org/research/resource-library/take-action-snap-challenge-toolkit>).
4. Dig deeper into the reasons these “food deserts” exist. Find ways to help neighbors increase access to fresh and locally grown foods.

CATHOLIC TEACHING RELATED TO FOOD AND HUNGER:

Protecting Human Life and Dignity – The Right to Food

The Catholic Church proclaims the central truth that every human person is sacred. The right to a truly human life logically leads to the right to enough food to sustain a life with dignity.

The Common Good

The human person is not only sacred but also social. Each person lives and develops in community. Our inherently social nature makes pursuit of the “common good” an important goal and measure of society.

Option for and with the Poor and Vulnerable

While Catholic teaching calls us to seek the common good of the entire human family, Scripture and our Catholic tradition also call us to a priority concern for the poor and vulnerable. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus calls us to care for the powerless and those on the margins of society.

Contributions of Structural Racism to Food Insecurity

“... the experiences of Native, African, and Hispanic Americans demonstrate how, as a nation, we have never sufficiently contended with the impact of overt racism. Nor have we spent the necessary time to examine where the racist attitudes of yesterday have become a permanent part of our perceptions, practices, and policies of today, or how they have been enshrined in our social, political, and economic structures.” **United States Conference of Catholic Bishops** (2018). [*Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*](#).

As it relates to hunger, this historical exclusion is seen in decades of disinvestment in communities of color that leads to food deserts and malnutrition, as well as depressed wages and unjust hiring practices that lead to an overreliance on public benefits.