

McSilver Institute
for Poverty Policy and Research

NYU SILVER SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Testimony of **Gary Parker, MSW, Deputy Director**

McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research

before the

New York City Council General Welfare Committee

regarding

Hunger in New York City

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250 Broadway
New York, NY 10007

Good morning and thank you Council Member Levin and members of the General Welfare Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research on the topic of hunger in New York City.

Housed in the Silver School of Social Work at New York University, the McSilver Institute oversees applied research studies to address the root causes and consequences of poverty and to inform policy and program solutions. McSilver's work is defined by partnerships with policy makers, service organizations, and community stakeholders both in New York and globally. An understanding of the links between individuals, families, and communities to their external environments, as well as the interrelatedness of race and poverty, guides our efforts.

Food Insecurity

This testimony will focus on the McSilver Institute's projects examining issues related to food insecurity in order to provide an evidence base for family-centered policy and programmatic solutions. Before I describe our research, I'd like to briefly discuss the concept of food insecurity and the data describing how it currently impacts children and families living in New York City.

Food insecurity is a measure of food deprivation defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a "household level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food."¹ Families and individuals are considered food insecure if they have limited or uncertain access to adequate food that is nutritious and safe, or if they have limited or uncertain access to food in ways that are considered socially acceptable². For example a person who must rely on food pantries, steal, or beg for food or funds to purchase food is considered food insecure. Food insecurity is associated with hunger, the physical discomfort of not having enough food to eat.

Food insecurity increased across the U.S. and within New York City following the 2008 economic recession.^{3,4} According to the New York City Coalition Against Hunger's 2013 Hunger Report, in 2010-2012, an estimated average of between 1.3 and 1.4 million New York City residents were food insecure. That number, which represents one in six New Yorkers, includes an estimated average of 406,260 children, or 21.85 percent of the city's children. The coalition notes that it also represents a 200,000 person increase from 2006-2008.⁵ These data were collected prior to the Federal government's approximately \$5 billion cut to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, "Definitions of Food Security." Accessed November 23, 2014 <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>.

² Life Sciences Research Office, S.A. Andersen, ed. Core Indicators of Nutritional State for Difficult to Sample Populations, *The Journal of Nutrition* 120:1557S-1600S,1990.

³ Coleman-Jensen, A., Nord, M., Andrews, Singh, A. Household Food Security in the United States in 2012, ERR-155, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, September 2013.

⁴ Food Bank for New York City, Fact Sheet: "NYC Hunger Experience 2009: A Year in Recession." Accessed November 23, 2014.

<https://www.foodbanknyc.org/files//dmfile/NYCHungerExperience2009FACTSHEET.pdf>

⁵ New York City Coalition Against Hunger, "Superstorm of Hunger: *Lingering Shortfalls Expose A Tale of Two Food Cities*," November 2013.

Program (SNAP), which took effect on November 1, 2013, reducing the benefit for nearly every SNAP household⁶ and putting more New Yorkers at risk of food insecurity.

Correlation between Food Insecurity and Children’s Educational Performance

The McSilver Institute recently studied the link between economic hardship, food insecurity and school performance by examining data drawn from the 2011 administration of the National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH). The NSCH is a cross-sectional survey sponsored by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the Health Resources and Services Administration that collects data about the physical and emotional health of a nationally representative sample of children, ages 0-17 years of age.⁷

Our analysis of a subsample of families living under the federal poverty line, including all families that would be eligible for SNAP, found that children in families experiencing severe economic hardship completed less homework, were more likely to miss 11 or more days of school, cared less about doing well in school, and were more likely to repeat a grade. We found that a significant association between family difficulty affording basic necessities – including food—and failing in school persisted, even when holding constant the number of children and adults in the household, single parent household status, and race/ethnicity. However, when families participated in SNAP, McSilver found there was no longer a significant association between difficulty affording basic necessities and repeating a grade.⁸

Food insecurity has also been shown to impact mental health and family functioning. Children experiencing severe hunger have been found to have experienced more stressful and traumatic life events when compared to children not experiencing severe hunger. Mothers of children who reported severe hunger were more likely to have a lifetime diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder or substance abuse, and anxiety.⁹

Analyses of the data on food insecurity reveals its devastating impact on children’s well-being. Childhood food insecurity is associated with poor health, emotional distress, and mental health challenges.¹⁰ Research has shown that children who are food insecure experience psychosocial difficulties and are less likely to establish and maintain social relationships, particularly in adolescence. And alarmingly, children who are food

⁶ USDA Blog, “Helping SNAP Recipients Prepare for November 1st Benefit Changes,” October 23, 2013. Accessed November 23, 2014, <http://blogs.usda.gov/2013/10/28/helping-snap-recipients-prepare-for-november-1st-benefit-changes/>.

⁷ National Survey of Children’s Health (2011), Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative.

⁸ McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research, “*Food Matters: Supporting Poverty Impacted Children’s Educational Success*,” May 2014.

⁹ Weinreb, L., Wehler, C., Perloff, J., Scott, R., Hosmer, D., Sagor, L., Gundersen, C. Hunger: its impact on children’s health and mental health. *Pediatrics*. 110(4):e41, October 2002.

¹⁰ Cook, J., & Frank, D. A. (2008). Food security, poverty, and human development in the United States. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1136 (1), 193.

insecure are less engaged in school, score lower in math and reading, and are more likely to be absent and experience school failure.^{11,12,13}

Family and Food Matters – Examining the Relationship between Caregiver Stress, Family Functioning and Food Insecurity

In order to fill a gap in the literature and services on the relationship between caregiver stress, family functioning and food insecurity, the McSilver Institute has initiated a program called Family and Food Matters. Researchers from the institute are currently investigating the challenges facing food insecure caregivers in New York and Dutchess counties with children ages five to twelve who use food pantries to supplement their family's nutrition. Reliance on informal sources of support such as food pantries and soup kitchens has become more prevalent in New York City in recent years. Demand increased by 10 percent in 2013, which followed increases of 5 percent in 2012, 12 percent in 2011, 7 percent in 2010, and 29 percent in 2009.¹⁴

The McSilver Institute's research is exploring experiences of food insecure households with children, addressing issues including caregivers' participation and experience in the SNAP program; reasons for lack of participation in the SNAP program among those who are living in food insecure households; the various forms of emergency food services and informal sources of support that families seek to combat food security; the buying, cooking, and eating patterns within families; the areas of overlap between family functioning and food insecurity (e.g. sharing meals together, stress, relationships, etc.); and families' thoughts around family and food security services.

Findings from this study are intended to inform the development of a service curriculum aimed at reducing food insecurity among children and families in New York City that is being devised by the McSilver Institute with partners including City Harvest, the Urban Institute, The West Side Campaign Against Hunger and the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. Data analysis is expected to be completed by January of 2015 and the pilot program informed by the findings is expected to be initiated in the spring of 2015.

Implications for Policy Makers

There are many issues related to New York City's food insecurity crisis that will be discussed at this hearing which should impact the city's policies to reduce hunger among all its residents going forward. In light of our research focusing on children and families, the McSilver Institute urges the city to 1) immediately implement the mandatory

¹¹ Alaimo, K., Olson, C. M., & Frongillo, E. A. (2001). Food insufficiency and American school-aged children's cognitive, academic, and psychological development. *Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, 108(1), 44.

¹² Ashiabi, G. (2005). Household food insecurity and children's school engagement. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 11 (1), 3.

¹³ Jyoti, D. F., Frongillo, E. A., & Jones, S. J. (2005). Food insecurity affects school children's academic performance, weight gain, and social skills. *The Journal of Nutrition*, 135 (12), 2831.

¹⁴ New York City Coalition Against Hunger, "Superstorm of Hunger: Lingering Shortfalls Expose A Tale of Two Food Cities," November 2013.

provision of free, federally-funded school breakfasts for all public school students in their first-period classrooms; 2) fund a universal free school lunch program and increase funding for informal supports such as food pantries, “pay what you can” community cafes, and soup kitchens; 3) consider the strong implications the association between food insecurity and educational achievement may have for clinical practice as well as prevention efforts in child-serving outpatient clinics 4) seek a greater understanding of the relationship between caregiver stress, family functioning, and food insecurity; and 5) increase support services for families who use informal and formal supports, such as food pantries, SNAP and WIC, in order to decrease food insecurity while increasing family functioning.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony and your commitment to the welfare of New York City residents.