

# Hunger grows in atlanta

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First it was a drought of biblical proportions, now it is hunger. Is there divine wrath directed at atlanta? Is there a hardening of heart in atlanta? Is it best to repent before more woes befall atlanta?

Atlanta

On some days, Taquana Spicer admits, she skips breakfast and lunch to make sure that her three kids – Nakhema, 11; Isaiah, 7; and Jahsir, 2 – have enough to eat.

Ms. Spicer's bouts of hunger, she says, are tempered by another decision she made: to raise her children in the suburbs rather than in the kind of rundown projects where she grew up.

"It's a sacrifice, a choice. I won't just move anywhere," says Ms. Spicer, who lives in Riverdale, Ga., outside Atlanta. "It's like either do I live out here and juggle my bills, or do I live in the projects and risk their life every day?"

As Spicer's plight indicates, hunger remains a complex problem in America, fraught with issues of personal responsibility and even upward mobility. The issue is getting renewed attention this week as Congress considers new food stamp rules that would allow recipients to make larger income deductions to qualify for more aid. It's prompting debate over who is going hungry, who is not, and what the word means in a country where the poor, on average, weigh more than the rich.

"Being hungry is a subtle, personal, chaotic, unpredictable, but often systematic experience," where welfare policies may provide a meal but don't go far enough to help poor Americans rise above welfare says Amy Glasmeier, director of Penn State's Center for Policy Research on Energy, Environment and Community Well-being in University Park, Pa.

Some 35.5 million Americans are food insecure, or have cupboards that are sometimes bare, according to the US Department of Agriculture's household food security report released in November. Of 115 million US households, 230,000 reported children going hungry at some point almost every month; 115,000 households, or 0.1 percent of all US households, reported that a child had not eaten all day at least once

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during the year.

But some say these numbers don't reveal the full picture. It "is made difficult by the fact that there isn't any common language for specific levels of food stress," says Mark Nord, a USDA sociologist and chief tracker of hunger trends. "The best popular description for food insecure households are those having trouble at times putting enough food on the table. Many avoid being hungry ... by cutting down on quality, variety, desirability of diets, and perhaps by getting assistance here and there. It's certainly wrong to characterize all of the people who live in those houses as hungry."

These statistics undercount the number of Americans who have experienced hunger in a given year, says Kathleen Gorman, director of the Center for a Hunger-Free America in Kingston, R.I.

For one, America's 744,000 chronically homeless are not counted in the food security survey, and neither are people living on Indian reservations. Hunger among the elderly may also be underreported, experts say, in part because of how older people experience and explain the physical effects of hunger.

Surveys among school nutritionists in Appalachia show that, in some districts, children come to school in the fall weighing 10 percent less than they did when they left school for the summer. "These aren't small groups of people going hungry. These are big groups of people," says Christine Olson, a human ecology professor at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

The varied reasons of those who admit to going hungry are difficult to package neatly into a lobbying call.

David Gilman, an out-of-work auto mechanic plucking a half-empty can of cat food out of a garbage can near downtown Atlanta, says he's gone hungry "many times" in the past 15 years. What does hunger feel like? "It's like when you're sent to bed without dinner as a kid if you misbehaved," says Mr. Gilman, who says he struggles with drug addiction.

New research also shows that food deprivation has a powerful psychological impact – a key reason why poorer Americans are more often overweight than wealthier ones. Those who don't always know where their next meal is coming from tend to eat cheaper, more calorie-dense, and less nutritious foods when they do have a meal in front of them, according to recent surveys by Cornell University.

But some analysts disagree. "Whether it's the elderly or families with young kids, people in trouble in this country, they get taken care of, and they're not just left to starve in the street," says Lew Rockwell, president of the Ludwig von Mises Institute, a libertarian think tank in Auburn, Ala.

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Some states, however, are seeking to educate others and help solve the problem. In Rhode Island, advocates play "Food Stamp Bingo" with groups of elderly to break down the stigma around the program, and in Georgia, a "Hunger 101" curriculum published by a local food bank uses the board game "Feast or Famine" to engage young people. Illinois is using church members, not bureaucrats, to sign people up for food stamps. In upstate New York, the United Way plans to hand out backpacks stuffed with food to students who aren't getting enough to eat at home.

Such efforts, some experts say, indicate that the hunger problem is spreading into middle-class America.

"The nature of the people that we are feeding through our food banks is changing dramatically," says Bill Bolling, CEO of the Atlanta Community Food Bank. "The majority of people who are coming and asking for food are working. They have a job, and that's not the image most people have of the hungry."