



## Activity #3

**\*Appropriate for 5th grade and above- can be adapted for younger audiences.**

### Defining Hunger, Food Security, and Poverty

#### **Description:**

An activity to clarify terms and define hunger, food security and poverty

#### **Objective:**

Participants develop understanding of what the Atlanta Community Food Bank and other hunger fighting organizations mean when referring to hunger, food security and poverty. Participants will examine how these words can be interpreted in different ways and how they relate to one another.

#### **Materials:**

- Smart board, white board, or flipchart with markers
- Paper and pencils for group breakout session.

#### **Time:**

15-20 minutes

#### **Activity Directions:**

- Provide paper and pencils to small groups.
- Ask each group to write a definition of *hunger, food security and poverty*.
- Have each group share their definitions.
- Compare the definitions for *hunger, food security and poverty* with *American Heritage College Dictionary* and *Merriam Webster* (see below).
- How are the group's definitions similar to the definitions provided below? How are they different?
- Explain how we measure poverty in the United States (see below).

- You may wish to use the questions at the end of the activity to help clarify the definitions and guide the discussion.

## What is hunger?

While people have an idea regarding the definition of hunger, when we try to quantify or describe the experience of hunger, the definition can greatly vary. Below are some examples of different attempts to define hunger.

**The American Heritage College Dictionary's definition:** Hunger is the strong desire or need for food.

**The Merriam Webster Dictionary's definition:** Hunger is a craving or urgent need for food.

### Here are additional definitions brainstormed by graduate nutrition students:

- A condition in which people do not get enough food to provide the nutrients (carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins, minerals and water) for fully productive and active lives
- The uneasy or painful sensation caused by lack of food; the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to food

In fact, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has also struggled to define "hunger". A panel convened by USDA recommended that the word hunger:

*"...should refer to a potential consequence of **food insecurity** that, **because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation.**"*

The USDA stated that while this is how they would define hunger, that because there is no good way to measure that definition, they would instead create measurable “**food security**” categories.

## What is Food Security?

The USDA panel referenced above recommended that USDA make a clear and explicit distinction between **food insecurity** and **hunger**.

- **Food insecurity**—the condition assessed in the food security survey is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food
- **Hunger**—an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity

The USDA defines food security for a family as:

Access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum **(1)** the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and **(2)** an assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (that is, without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies).

The food security status of each household lies somewhere along a continuum extending from **high food security** to **very low food security**. This continuum is divided into four ranges, characterized as follows:

1. **High food security**—Households had no problems, or anxiety about consistently accessing adequate food.
2. **Marginal food security**—Households had problems at times, or anxiety about, accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety, and quantity of their food intake were not substantially reduced.
3. **Low food security**—Households reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.
4. **Very low food security**—At times during the year, eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money and other resources for food.

Since 2006, the USDA has used these categories to conduct a national annual survey of 50,000 households to measure the number of people living with marginal to very low food security.

## **What is Poverty?**

It's impossible to talk about hunger and food security without talking about poverty. Hunger and food insecurity are primarily consequences of poverty, and the three are inextricably linked. Like the terms "hunger" and "food security", what we mean when we describe someone as poor, or living in poverty, can be interpreted in different ways. It is very important that we understand how we measure poverty because it has a direct impact on the services available to these individuals and families.

### **The American Heritage College Dictionary's definition:**

1. The state of being poor; lack of the basic material goods.
2. Deficiency in amount; scantiness.

**The Merriam Webster Dictionary's definition:** lack of money or material possessions; want.

## **How is poverty measured in the United States?**

The current federal poverty guidelines in the United States are delineated by family size. The methodology used to determine these guidelines has not been changed since they were developed in the early 1960's. These guidelines were never meant to be the official measure of poverty, but became just that in the late 1960's. When the guidelines were developed families spent about a 1/3 of their income on food; there were typically no childcare costs, and families spent far less on housing. Many economists believe that if we changed the methodology to reflect these changes in our current expenditures - many more people would be considered poor.

Below are the 2011 Poverty Guidelines. Typically, these guidelines are adjusted annually.

## 2012 HHS Poverty Guidelines<sup>1</sup>

<b>Persons in Family</b>	<b>48 Contiguous States and D.C.</b>	<b>Alaska</b>	<b>Hawaii</b>
1	\$11,170	\$13,970	\$12,860
2	15,130	18,920	17,410
3	19,090	23,870	21,960
4	23,050	28,820	26,510
5	27,010	33,770	30,100
6	30,970	38,720	34,490
7	34,930	43,670	38,880
8	38,890	48,620	43,270
For each additional person, add	3,960	4,950	4,550

There are many consequences of poverty. The Food Bank is particularly interested in one of the most basic of those consequences – hunger. These guidelines are used to determine whether individuals and households are eligible for government responses to hunger. If you earn over a certain percentage of the above guidelines for example, you will not be eligible for public benefits like SNAP (formerly known as Food Stamps) and/or WIC (Women, Infant and Children).

Learn more about poverty guidelines: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/faq.shtml>

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<sup>11</sup> *Federal Register*, January 26, 2012. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/12poverty.shtml>

## Discussion Questions

- How did the group's definitions of *hunger*, *food security* and *poverty* compare with the official definitions? Were they similar? Different? If they were different, in what ways?
- What do you think some of the challenges are to accurately measuring household food security in this country? *Currently, food security data is collected by survey's done by the US Census' Population Survey's completed each year. A representative sample of the population is asked questions about their food security.*  
<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/>
- How could we do a better job of measuring poverty in this country? What types of questions could we be asking of families and individuals, to gain a better understanding of household income needs and expenses? Based on what we've learned about how poverty is defined in this country, be sure to participate in Module 2, Activity 1 - Family Budgets - to gain a deeper understanding of working poverty and some of the challenges inherent in our poverty measure. (*Family Budgets activity is on page 18*)

How might redefining who is considered poor alter our response to poverty in this country?