

The National School Lunch Program: Fighting Child Hunger

The childhood hunger epidemic is something that has plagued our nation since its formation, and it is not something that will go away on its own. Statistics from a Mashable article say: sixteen million American kids struggle with hunger each year. Despite our nation's constant efforts to establish proper home environments for children, one in seven kids still live in homes where they will not have access to an adequate diet. In light of these issues, our government has begun taking steps towards providing accessible meals to children in their school environments, as well as in residential child care institutions. By launching programs like the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), our government hopes to fight the appalling starvation rates in children and distribute meals through school systems where home environments are simply unable to provide. It is essential that we, U.S. citizens, understand the importance of the NSLP and how we can work to fight this plague.

Before any effective action can be taken, we first need to understand the severity of this issue. The Select Panel for the Promotion of Child Health says, "Children are one-third of our population and all of our future." The upbringing of a child is one of the most influential things that will determine their entire life. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), hungry children are seven to twelve times more likely to exhibit symptoms of a conduct disorder. Studies by the same organization have also suggested that children who go hungry are more likely to need mental health counselling than children who have their nutritional needs met. But the mental health effects are not the only thing we have to worry about. According to the APA, dealing with hunger while you are a child increases the risk of chronic health conditions, psychiatric stress, mental health disorder, and *homelessness*. With child hunger rates through the roof, we can expect nothing less than the homelessness to follow. Not only does this affect the individual, but according to an article by OFHSoupKitchen (and confirmed by the US

Secretary of Housing and Urban Development), the government spends about \$40,000 per homeless person per year. Homelessness also promotes the spread of diseases and causes crime rates to skyrocket. This can be damaging to society as a whole. No matter how much societal havoc this epidemic ensues, we cannot turn a blind eye to the baseline behind it all. This year, 150,000 children under the age of 5 will *die* due to a lack of food, and 3.1 million children of all ages. Without the support of schools around the nation, we can only assume these rates would be much higher. Childhood hunger does not only affect the child, but it can lead to detrimental side effects that can alter society as a whole. As a nation, it is our job to hear these voices. It is our job to see the problem and provide relief as well as solutions to this basic, fundamental need. The question is, how?

In 1946, the National School Lunch Act (NSLA) was passed and signed by President Truman, requiring that low-cost or free school lunches and breakfasts be provided for students who meet specific financial qualifications. This was then followed by the Child Nutrition Act (CNA) of 1966, which expanded the NSLA to homeless, migrant, and runaway children. These all fall under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), perhaps our government's main weapon in the fight against childhood hunger. The NSLP, run by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), is a program established by the government that aims to provide lunches for qualifying children all over the nation. They do this by distributing low cost, and often free lunches to underprivileged children in their school cafeteria. This all led to the government spending *18 billion* dollars on the NSLP in 2019 alone. To provide for this extreme cost, the program runs on a reimbursement basis. Agencies participating are reimbursed by the USDA based on the number of meals served. Every year the president writes the budget, which is then approved by Congress, and as of July 1st, 2022, the reimbursements school receives for each meal served will increase by about \$0.68 for each free/reduced lunch, and \$0.32 for each

free/reduced price breakfast. Not only that, but the NSLP also works hard to establish specific meal plans that are based on the age of the child being served in order to provide the students with meals to not only keep them alive but to help them thrive in their academic journey since malnutrition has been proven to promote growth inhibitions and brain damage (PubMed). This is all the more necessary because 20% of food insecure families are not eligible for government assistance. It helps to ensure that even if a family is not eligible for government assistance programs such as food stamps, the children within the family are still provided the food they need.

For all this work and monetary investment, is the program even effective? According to the APA, more than 31.8 million children get their lunch through the NSLP in a year. That is 31.8 million kids who do not have to go hungry. The NSLP is slowly chipping away at the horrific reality that 16 million kids will struggle with hunger in the year 2023 alone. By providing simply one free meal a day, an extra 800 calories, the United States government is able to aid in diminishing the risk of food insecurity in children. As a result, the NSLP is helping to prevent the proven side effects malnutrition has on mental health and behavioral issues. With suicide rates rising more than 30% in half the states since 1999, it is more important now than ever that we do absolutely everything we can to eliminate one of the driving forces in this tragedy. While we may not be able to tackle these hunger issues as a whole, the most important step is the first one. This is the NSLP.

The childhood hunger epidemic still continues to torment our nation more than we can imagine, but we do not stand helpless against this issue. By supporting our government in providing programs like the NSLP, we are able to reduce the rates of malnutrition in children, and provide what may be the only meals children have all day. As a society, it is not only out of our desire to do what is morally good for others, but good for our community as a whole by

preventing mental health and behavioral issues caused by childhood starvation. However, the government cannot stop this on their own. Though not everyone has the freedom to donate money to nonprofit organizations, we can still vote for politicians that will shine a light on these issues. We can volunteer our time and any materials we can in order to support this fight. It will take every person in our society to combat the reality of food insecurity, and bring the 10,000 kids who die of hunger daily, down to zero.

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