



AMERICAN CHILDREN...



DON'T LET THEM GO HUNGRY



BLACK YOUNGSTERS— POOR, HUNGRY, SICK

- Black people are 11 percent of America's population—but 30 percent of all its poor people.
- Black unemployment nationwide is 9.8 percent and still soaring.
- One out of every three black teenagers is unemployed.
- The median black family earns slightly more than half of what is earned by the median white family.
- Almost half of all black youngsters less than 18 years old live in poverty.
- The price of a bare subsistence diet for a family of four has risen more than 40 percent—but federal food stamp benefits have increased by only 34 percent.
- Poor, malnourished parents have a disproportionately high number of low weight, premature, and malnourished babies.
- Of the 50,000 infant deaths in the United States each year, 70 percent are low birth weight babies.
- A U.S. Senate committee estimates that of all mentally defective and retarded children born each year in America, as many as 85 percent come from poor, hungry families.



Through Malnutrition, Wasting Human Resources—Babies Hunger's Lifelong Effects

The "proven reserves" of a nation's human resources are babies. Yet, when some babies and their mothers are hungry and malnourished, part of the resource is being wasted, and that, according to a recent staff report from the Senate's Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, is what is happening in the United States.

The discussion is both humanitarian and pragmatic. A hungry baby is heart-breaking when there is no food to give him. But to leave him hungry for months or years may be to mar him for life.

The reason is that the period of fetal development and the first year-and-a-half after birth are crucial for the physiological growth of human beings. Human brain cells multiply most rapidly in the fifth and sixth months of pregnancy, and progressively slower after birth. By the time he is 18 months old, a baby has all the neurons, or brain nerve cells, he will ever have. If a baby has been starved of protein, the building block of body tissues, during the critical period immediately before and after birth, there may be no way of undoing the damage to his brain.

Even without postulating such severe physiological damage, current statistics demonstrate that malnutrition is the common denominator of a series of major health problems. They also show that disease and social deprivation are concomitants of destructive effects on mind and personality, and that malnutrition and poverty are inextricably linked. The Senate committee report, for example, estimated that 75 to 85 per cent of the approximately 150,000 reported mentally defective and retarded children born in the United States each year are born in poverty. In 1970, according to the United States Census Bureau, the number of families at poverty level (\$4,900 or under) with retarded children under 18 was 3,490,419.

Just how many of the reported cases of defective and retarded children are direct results of poor nourishment of the growing child, and how many the result of social deprivation, is not known. But in one important sense, it makes little difference. As Dr. Charles U. Lowe, chairman of the Committee on Nutrition of the American Academy of Pediatrics, put it a few years ago: "There is no evidence that feeding people makes them smart. But it is indisputable that hunger makes them dull."

Among the findings of recent scientific studies on infant and maternal nutrition are:

- Mothers who are poorly nourished during pregnancy are likely to give birth to low-birth-weight, or premature, babies. Researchers have also found evidence that suggests that a mother who was herself poorly nourished as a child may not be able to provide the nourishment the baby in her womb needs. And if such a mother is not properly fed while she is pregnant, her baby's potential handicap is even greater.

- Low-birth-weight babies are more likely than other babies to die at birth or during the first year of their lives. The American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Nutrition has estimated that 70 per cent of the at least 50,000 infant deaths reported in the United States are deaths of low-birth-weight babies.

- The survivors who have been poorly nourished before birth are more likely to suffer from physical and behavioral problems. If they are themselves deprived of a proper diet, their problems are accentuated. According to the American Academy on Pediatrics Committee, a significant number have demonstrable intellectual or behavioral deficits by the time they reach school age. Growth retardation and susceptibility to infectious diseases are also considered by some experts to be malnutrition based.

How severe does malnutrition have to be to cause irreversible damage? Research in rats, for example, has proven that severe malnutrition during pregnancy means that mothers produce young whose brains not only have fewer nerve cells than normal, but also are smaller than normal. Studies of gravely malnourished human babies who have died during infancy have shown the same thing.

Disagreement on Effects

In scientific terms, there are three degrees of malnutrition: severe, moderate, and mild. Experts have argued about the extent to which the findings in severely malnourished animal and human populations, such as Chile or Biafra, can be applied to the moderate and mild degrees of malnutrition generally found in the United States, where the material standard of living is the highest in the world. Statistical comparisons of infant mortality and mother and infant malnutrition rates don't give the answer because few countries' (including the United States') records are complete, and most countries maintain their records in different ways.

Scientists also disagree about how permanent the effects of moderate and mild malnutrition might be. Conceivably, the damage might not be entirely irreversible.

But few argue with the fact that whatever the degree of malnutrition, it wastes lives, or at least portions of them, and in a tragic and expensive fashion. And almost all agree that in the United States, malnutrition is not only almost totally preventable, but prevention is cheaper than coping with its after-effects. A supplemental feeding program funded through the United States Department of Agriculture that provides families with checks for use in retail food stores started operation April 19, in Newark, N. J. It is expected to serve about 7,000 people and cost \$1.6-million a year. Total Federal funding for similar programs is \$35-million for the current fiscal year. Four years ago, New York State alone spent nearly \$126-million on the 26,459 mentally retarded children and adults in the 14 public institutions for their care.

While scientists continue to work on the exact degree to which the three classes of malnutrition affect mental retardation, nutritionists, and the Senate select committee's report, argue that there is no need for the Government to wait for the conclusive answer to justify providing mothers and babies with good food.

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