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Fellowship Capstone | Policy Brief

The Intersection of Food Waste & Insecurity in America

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I. Executive summary

Throughout the hearts of Texas, Louisiana, and Arizona, the hunger crisis has rampaged cities, and clung on to the lifelines that hold up the societal framework of small towns. Paralleling the devastations of the over 18 million households living in hunger, almost a half of the food supply in the United States goes to waste annually (Martin, 2025; Goodwin, Lipinski, 2024.) This brief will touch on the intersection at which hunger and food waste meet, and how reducing waste can have positive implications for families experiencing hunger, nation-wide.

II. Overview

Food deserts, poverty, and low-wage jobs are the main contributing factor to hunger in America. Those who have been affected by these circumstances find it difficult to consume nutritious meals, if they have access to affordable food at all. While around 47 million people face food insecurity in the United States, there is a large percentage of people outside of this demographic who routinely practice food waste (Rabbitt, Hales, 2025.) This is a common occurrence in households, whether by overestimating ingredients for a meal, or simply making a larger batch than can be consumed. In schools, there is an astounding 530,000 tons of food annually— most of which are unopened milk cartons, and fruits, which remain edible (Gingerella, 2019.) Collectively, when including grocery stores, homes, schools, and restaurants, it can be estimated that over 1.3 billion pounds of food waste is accumulated annually- However, rather than these foods going to landfills, they could be going to hunger relief organizations to be distributed among those who need it ("How Food Waste Affects World Hunger.") From this, it can be said that there is a parallel relationship between reduction of food waste and an increase in hunger relief.

A. Relevance

Food waste doesn't just strip away a much needed resource from the food-insecure, but has a major economic impact on those who waste. Almost ⅓ of the world's food supply is wasted annually, which adds up to $218 billion in the United States alone in annual costs, accounting for 1.3% of the GDP ("International Efforts on Wasted Food Recovery.") By reducing food waste, businesses would be able to save money in regards to disposal and procurement costs. However, food waste isn't just detrimental to the economy, but is an issue that permeates across the sectors of society, environmental sustainability, and humanitarian efforts. By combatting food waste where it is most prevalent, (restaurants,

grocery stores, schools, agricultural facilities) and conducting efficient food distribution efforts, these foods can be redirected from landfills to hunger relief shelters, into the communities of people who need them.

III. History

A. Current Stances

With the industrial revolution of the 1800's, the mass production and distribution of affordable packaged food led these goods to be bought off shelves in large numbers. Rather than Americans directing their attention to local sources when in need of produce, they were able to look for a convenient way of obtaining resources for their daily meals, which overtime contributed to the shift in attitude when it came to food conservation and buying practices. When tracking the changes and developments of food waste over time, the main factor to look at is major events that pivot the mindset of Americans and their view of food. During the Colonial era, agriculture was the main source of food for Americans. They lacked the proper innovations to preserve food for long periods of time, and stuck to the processes of salting, drying, fermentating, and smoking. And based on social classes, the definition of food waste remained malleable, with individuals with higher social status, being more willing to dispose of food that did not meet their standards, while lower classes were more reluctant to discard foods, since they were in higher need of it. These social classes represent a main challenge of the 1600's in regards to societal attitudes towards food waste, but wasteful practices wouldn't really pick up until the 1800's, as new wars, technologies, and media happenings came into play (Ramsey, 2024.)

IV. Policy Problem

A. Stakeholders

Those who hold little power to inflict change on food waste & hunger policy would be the stakeholders here. Stakeholders would include those who are most affected by the implications of indifference towards the hunger crisis, like students on the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) or Community Eligibility Provision (CEP,) families whose income falls within or below the poverty line, and residents of food deserts, which are towns with limited access to nutritious meals, often in low-income neighborhoods. These are groups that would be negatively impacted by provisions and steps not being made to increase the availability and distribution of healthy food where they live.

B. Risks of Indifference

By staying ignorant to the rising rates of hunger insecurity, the climate crisis continues to grow. An important distinction to make is the difference between food loss and food waste; food loss is when food gets damaged as it moves through the food chain, and is subsequently not consumed. Food waste is when food that is still high quality & edible is thrown away by businesses or consumers. However, both of these can be detrimental to the ecosystem. According to the World Food Program USA, if food waste stopped, global emissions would be reduced by 8 percent. All the rotten food that gets disposed of instead of eaten contributes to the three billion tons of greenhouse gases like methane, carbon

dioxide, and to a lesser extent nitrous oxide after decomposition in landfills, which escalates the climate crisis ("Food Waste Index Report.")

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

1) **Decrease in obesity**: Increasing access to nutritious foods can reduce obesity in food deserts and impoverished neighborhoods— Coinciding with the hunger crisis in the United States, the rates of obesity have continued to increase. With complex factors like socio-economic status and location playing a large role, researchers have discovered a link between obesity and poverty, a topic that has been thoroughly dissected since the early 2000's. According to Michigan State University, there have been significant health disparities in regards to families that have immigrated from another country, families that come from a historically marginalized racial/ethnic group, and families that live in poverty. These populations experience higher rates of obesity, and a large contributing factor is the lack of nutritious food resources near them, and their limited access to healthy meals due to rising costs.

The American Academy of Pediatrics outlines social determinants of health & obesity, which are defined as the conditions that affect a person's ability to access healthcare, education, and job opportunities, with a major factor of a child's development being toxic stresses in utero as an associated risk that comes with living in poverty- these stresses can result in adaptations that heighten the risk of becoming obese. If food waste was reduced and distribution efforts were made across the United States, this could ultimately lead to a reduction in childhood obesity and food insecurity, as there would be better access to nutritious meals for those in impoverished communities. (Yusuf et. al 2019)

2) **Financial Security for farmers and cut back on business costs**: By utilising more of the food that they buy, businesses would be able to cut down on excess costs, and save more money. However, the issue remains more complex, due to the factors that influence businesses decisions to waste in the first place- these include overstock, overproduction, and expiration dates on food.

But despite these, there are many businesses that have been combating waste through means like converting waste to fertilizer and sustainable feed, donating waste to local food banks, and using waste to amplify farmers' yields. Not only do these strategies help businesses, but reducing food waste also improves the income of farmers. When more money is being spent on technologically improved farming equipment, farmers can harvest crops in a more time efficient manner with higher quality, thus selling crops that are likely to last shorter periods in grocery stores, and earn them more money (McGuckin, Sarma, 2024.)

3) **Reduction in hunger nationally**: Through proper distribution efforts, food that initially would have been directed to landfills can instead land in the communities of the food-insecure. This would improve the issues of climate change and economic unproductivity, and simultaneously feed the millions of Americans living in poverty.

V. Tried Policy

A recent bill that was introduced was the School Food Recovery Act, which was a bipartisan legislation that provided grants to carry out food waste reduction projects in schools. Although it wasn't passed in 2021, it is slated to be reintroduced in the current congressional session. This bill would have been pivotal to reducing food waste in schools, by funding up to 75% of the costs needed to implement these projects, and encouraging healthy habit building through education, training, and conservation.

Proposed for 2025-2026, the NO TIME TO Waste Act was drafted by Congress, with the intention of funding technology development to expand food loss and waste research, and start a public educational campaign led by the USDA addressing these issues. Alongside raising awareness, an Office of Food Loss and Waste would be established to monitor progress on the U.S's goal of reducing the food waste & loss by 50% by 2030 ("School Food Recovery Act" (2021-22 Congress.))

VI. Policy Options

Developing a circular economy

The United States has a linear economy, which is also known as a "take-make-waste" economy, where products are created from raw-materials, and are then disposed of. A circular economy would maximize the use of resources, which would in turn limit the amount of food going to landfills. In a circular economy, material is never wasted, and are instead kept in circulation through the processes of reuse, maintenance, composting, and recycling. Developing a circular economy could single-handedly reduce the production of waste, due to the continuous rotation & reuse of materials. ("What is the linear economy?"; "What is the meaning of a circular economy…")

Implement school lunch donation programs

According to the School Nutrition Association, school cafeterias waste 530,000 tons of food annually, which amounts to 3.7 billion dollars lost each year. (Steidinger, 2023) In schools across the US, a potential policy could be developed that offers block grants to schools that donate excess cafeteria lunches that are not consumed. Currently, there are schools in Loudoun County, Virginia that donate left-over food to the local food bank, and for students it can be as simple as dropping uneaten packaged food in a box to be donated at the end of the week. By implementing this system in schools, and providing the incentive of grants, food waste could be cut down by thousands of pounds and these food items can be redirected to those in need.

Expansion of funding and eligibility for food support

Currently, in 2025, the guidelines to be eligible to receive support from the SNAP program is for a household's average income to be below 130% of the poverty line, where the poverty line is calculated to be $2,221 a month for a family of three for fiscal year 2026 ("A Quick Guide to SNAP Eligibility…") By expanding the eligibility to receive support from federal programs like SNAP, more Americans will be able to access the

vital aid they need in times of difficulty, and can rely on the government to provide them with the necessities they need during unexpected hardship. Food distribution & donation programs could also receive heightened funding in order to improve distribution efforts and utilize technologies needed to make progress possible.

VII. Conclusions

This brief has covered the myriad of factors that play into the escalation of food insecurity in the United States, and how efforts to decrease food waste in communities, schools, and public facilities can be a pragmatic solution to make strides towards the development of a more food-secure nation. Out of the policy proposals discussed, the school lunch donation programs may be the most advantageous, due to the easy implementation, and the widespread impacts it can have in all 50 states. However, work should continue to be made to get closer to developing a more circular economy, and larger budgets should be put forward to help develop and prosper federal food programs made to tackle hunger insecurity.

Food waste and insecurity remains two of the most pressing issues in the modern day, both of which can be effectively resolved with proper food distribution efforts, community education & implementation projects, and effective discourse in households and schools. Although often separately discussed, food waste and insecurity go hand in hand, and in order to solve one, it is imperative to find solutions to the other. Globally, over 1.3 tons of food waste is accumulated annually. 122 million people face hunger daily ("International Efforts on Wasted Food Recovery.") But when communities work together to focus on these issues, the world gets a few steps closer to ending the disparities, and creating systemic change.

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