



**We are
Called**

TO HEAL. TO UNITE. TO JUSTICE.

Team Reflection

No. 17 – Food Insecurity and the Pandemic

Claudia worked for several years at the local food pantry. Every Wednesday afternoon she assembled bags of fresh produce and non-perishables. She handed them to the people who came, many of whom she knew by name along with stories about their families. Claudia never imagined that one day she would be in need of these bags herself.

The pandemic outbreak and its economic shockwaves thrust nearly a quarter of U.S. households into experiences of food insecurity. Millions more children experienced insecurity. Researchers found between 28 to 30% of households were food insecure. The USDA's research reflects higher rates of food insecurity among Black and Hispanic households. About 6% of the population live in a food desert, and 87% of U.S. counties with the highest rates of food insecurity are rural. [17.1] Food insecurity also impacts immigrant populations and persons with disabilities. Along with economic factors, food insecurity exemplifies one social factor that contributes as much as 40% to a person's overall health.

Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways. [17.2] Many people with food insecurity also experience underlying health conditions with related medical expenses. Added medical expenses cut into funds that would otherwise be used for household needs, including food. This contributes to a cycle of food insecurity and chronic disease, lower disposable income and decreased employability. The interconnected realities of this dimension of individual health can be difficult to balance and overcome.

Food is so connected to human health – certainly physically, but also spiritually. The world's major religions all have connections to food. Buddhist monks, for example receive much of their food in alms given to them, and they offer food on an altar to connect to the spiritual world. Hindus regulate their food as it is a gift from God. Many are vegetarian, as food impacts the person's body, mind and spirit. The three Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity – share stories about food in common, like that of the prophet Abraham. The scriptures recount his wife Sarah feeding hungry visitors with bread, curds and beef (Gen. 18:6-8). The prophet Isaiah

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foresees an action by the Lord who swallows up death forever and wipes away tears from faces against the backdrop of “a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear” (Is 25:6).

Before his own death, Jesus gathers at table with his friends to share the Passover meal. After his resurrection, the Gospels often depict Jesus with food. The disciples on the road to Emmaus felt their hearts burning when Jesus shared stories with them and broke bread at table (Lk 24:13–35). Other disciples recognized the Risen Lord along a shore where he cooks fish and breaks the fast with them (Jn 21:9). God is often encountered in mealtime rituals, but the meaningfulness of the encounter is difficult to honor if you are struggling to have enough food to begin with. Perhaps this is why Jesus says, “whenever you gave food to the hungry or drink to the thirsty, you did this to me” (Mt 25:31–45).

Consider

- Do you know of a story from your hospital’s namesake or from a heritage sponsor which recalls that individual providing food or drink for another? (e.g., a St. Joseph food table; a religious sister known for taking food to people in their homes).
- What food rituals are common in your family or faith tradition?
- What does your ministry do to identify food insecurity among those we serve or among staff? And are those needs met, and how do patients, or others, connect with resources in your local community?

Let us pray together words from the hymn *All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly*

All who hunger, never strangers,

Seeker, be a welcomed guest.

Come from restlessness and roaming.

Here in joy, we keep the feast.

We that once were lost and scattered

in communion’s love have stood.

Taste and see the grace eternal.

Taste and see that God is good.

- Sylvia G. Dunstan, GIA Publications, Inc.

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[17.1] <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/27/912486921/food-insecurity-in-the-u-s-by-the-numbers>

[17.2] <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security/>