

spotlight on
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Ending Summer Hunger

Diana Aviv, Feeding America

Thirteen-year-old Avery is a typical American teenage girl. She works hard in school, enjoys time with her friends, and plays the trumpet. She loves her brothers, Cody and Collin, and enjoys playing games with them in the backyard. Avery is also among the one in five children across the nation who are food insecure. This term, used by the US Department of Agriculture, means not having reliable access to sufficient quantities of affordable, nutritious food.

Avery's parents, Samantha and Cornell, earn \$22,000 annually. During the school year, the family of five struggles to make ends meet. Summers are extra difficult because the children no longer benefit from free, nutritious breakfasts and lunches at school. Money is also tight because Samantha is a school health aide and, like many public school employees, she doesn't get a paycheck in June, July, or August. Covering the rent and utility bills as well as feeding three kids is an epic struggle, one that's all too familiar to families across America.

During the school year, 22 million youth receive free or reduced-priced meals nationwide. When school is out, the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) kicks in. This federal program provides kids age 18 and younger with access to healthy, balanced meals. But in the summer months, only 18 percent of all children who receive free or reduced-price school lunches during the school year get summer meals. Hunger can have a lasting effect on kids' physical, cognitive, and behavioral development. Without ample food and proper nutrition, kids can't learn or play and often struggle to achieve their full potential.

What drives summer hunger among children? One big reason is a lack of access to meal sites. Some kids don't live near a bus or rail system; others might be too young to cross a busy highway alone. Still others may have nowhere to go because the only meal site nearby is the local school, which is closed during the summer. Few working parents can drive long distances for lunch in the middle of the day. And finally, extreme weather sometimes prevents kids from reaching a meal site. Even an adult would find walking a few blocks difficult in 100-degree heat. Imagine a child attempting such an undertaking.

We can fix this problem. First, we need to change current federal law that rigidly requires that children consume meals at specific locations. In rural sites and other hard to reach areas, the program should allow schools, nonprofits, community centers, and other approved agencies to bring meals to kids. Second, we should allow states to provide low-income families with a summer electronic grocery card to purchase food for their children when school is out.

The USDA has tested both of these initiatives. They have proven to be efficient, safe, practical solutions that maintain strong national standards and accountability.

Fortunately, Congress has the power to implement these changes. Every five years, it must re-assess a package of anti-hunger programs, including summer meals. Our lawmakers are reviewing this legislation now. We should remind them that ending childhood hunger is a national imperative – not a partisan issue. Our comprehensive research, the [Map the Meal Gap 2016 study](#), found that food insecurity exists in every single county of America.

Avery is among those affected. She volunteers in the pantry at the Rising Hope Mission Church and helps her Mom grow vegetables in their garden. Even so, she knows her family struggles to put food on the table. She also knows not to expect presents for her birthday. It falls in August, when there is little money for food, much less items like birthday gifts.

A hallmark of a successful society is how well we care for the next generation. America, one of the most prosperous countries in the world, shouldn't allow millions of kids to go hungry each

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summer. You can help by urging your elected official to close the summer meal gap for Avery, her brothers, and all of our children.

Diana Aviv is the CEO of Feeding America, the largest domestic hunger-relief organization in the nation. Feeding America provides meals to 12 million children every year through a nationwide network of 200 local food banks. Feeding America food banks helped distribute more than 10 million meals to children at more than 5,000 sites this summer. To learn more about how you can help nationally, visit: www.feedingamerica.org.

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