

Hunger relief authority speaks at Loaves & Fishes

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Dr. John Cook speaks to board members and supporters of the Loaves & Fishes Community Pantry in Naperville, August 12, 2013.

Jon Cunningham/For Sun-Times Media

The way Dr. John Cook sees it, the return to a booming U.S. economy may not be all that complicated. But the nation can't expect to see its best days, he said, until its people are securely fed.

A leading authority on hunger relief, Cook spoke to board members and staff at the Loaves & Fishes Community Pantry in Naperville Monday evening, pressing the case that the societal costs of failing to feed people sufficiently, especially children, are far greater than most Americans realize.

Cook, an associate professor of pediatrics at Boston University and a researcher specializing in food, energy and housing insecurity, discussed in depth the interconnections among well-being, economic power and the health of the population, in particular its youngest members, in "Child Food Insecurity and the Economic Impact on our Nation."

The principle of feeding people who can't afford enough food is a moral and ethical matter, Cook said. "It calls to mind our concern about fairness, generosity and caring for our neighbors," he said.

But it's also an economic security issue.

"I firmly believe ... that children are the primary engine for economic growth in our society," he said. "And if they are not able to remain nourished, the engine falters."

Positive partnering

Statistics suggest that, thanks to public and private response, kids are eating a little bit better than they were when the economic downturn began to hit home.

Defined as not having enough for all household members to be happy and healthy, food insecurity — "what we used to refer to as hunger," Cook said — increased among adults in DuPage County from 2009 to 2011, but it went down among children. Cook attributed the shift to the combined impact of the federal Supplemental

Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly called food stamps, and private food assistance, such as food pantries. Nearly two-thirds of the households fed by Loaves & Fishes last year have kids under age 18.

“Essentially, in very, very hard times, our social service agencies responded,” Cook said.

Charles McLimans, Loaves & Fishes’ executive director and CEO, credits the generosity of the community in which the pantry does its work. “Compassion allows Loaves & Fishes to exist,” said McLimans, who is certain that resource availability is not the reason food insecurity persists. “There is only a lack of compassion.”

Ripple effect

The local response has broad benefit. Cook noted that when people have money they don’t have to spend on groceries, they have it available to meet other household needs.

“It’s money back into the economy,” he said.

And the relief provided by food stamps is crucial, Cook emphasized. More than 50 million people were food-insecure in 2011; the SNAP program grew in response to the increased hunger, as it is designed to do.

“It’s not that suddenly we have this huge bulk of lazy, shiftless people in this country,” he said.

Very low food security affects only about 1 to 2 percent of kids, Cook said, but it’s more prevalent among children of color. And it is certain to increase across the board, he said, if proposed steep cuts in the SNAP program are approved. The U.S. House wants to reduce spending on the program by \$4 billion. A Senate proposal would cut the expenditure by \$400 million.

“It’s in the hundreds of thousands of families that will lose their benefits,” Cook said, adding that many others will see reductions. “The point is, it will hurt us all. It won’t just hurt ‘those people.’ There are no ‘those people.’ It’s all of us.”

Early start

Underscoring the need to do a better job of feeding children is recent research showing it needs to begin before conception.

When a woman is malnourished when she becomes pregnant, development of the embryo’s brain and central nervous system is hindered, as are its physical growth and the establishment of its immunities. After birth, kids can fall into a cycle of poor nutrition and infection that affects their long-term wellness and hampers their attentiveness and exploration of the world, “which is the way children learn,” Cook said.

Chronic food shortage can result in toxic stress, an inescapable state. In kids younger than 3, what researchers call “brain architecture” exhibits the impact, resulting in insufficient school readiness and slow development of cognitive skills, and sometimes psychosocial and behavior problems.

New findings show that brain architecture is driven by the development of the 100 billion nerve cells in the human brain — all of which continuously interconnect to create an environment for the storage of information, memory and language development.

“Every part of that cell is affected by what the child eats,” Cook said.

If food insecurity is a constant, by the time kindergarten begins, the child’s prospects for success and prosperity are much reduced.

Cook said researchers have found that greater focus on early childhood development is by far the most effective approach, likening the idea to keeping a hinge well oiled, as opposed to dealing with a rusty one. “It would be much, much less expensive (to) avoid the problem to begin with,” he said.

Meter running

The costs of a poorly fed child population can add up fast.

While evidence of a connection between inadequate nutrition and childhood obesity so far is inconclusive, Cook said the link is well established in adults, especially women. A collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts yielded the Health Impact Project, a report released in July that asserts a reduction in food stamps wouldn’t simply aggravate hunger: one of the proposals in Congress, the researchers said, would cause medical costs for diabetes alone to rise by \$15 billion over 10 years. And given the impact of food insecurity on children’s future success, the added costs would extend to areas such as law enforcement in increased incarceration, Cook said.

“We can’t afford to let this continue,” he said.

A change of mindset would help, he said.

“We are an extremely inventive and creative and generous people,” Cook said. “We can solve this problem, and you shouldn’t let anyone tell you that we can’t.”

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