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# 'Witnesses to Hunger' Take You to Places Where Food Is a Luxury—in the USA

Scores of low-income mothers are focusing cameras on their children to bring the reality of America's hunger crisis home to the well-fed masses.

By [Allan MacDonell](#)

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'Every day all your money is going toward things you need, things for your children. You don't get money to save. But I need for them to learn that there is more out there than life on the streets.' (Photo: Christina K., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, [Witnesses to Hunger](#))

Anyone who sees the new Participant Media documentary *A Place at the Table* will be alternately dismayed and amazed. Dismayed that such a solvable issue as hunger should be unsolved in the United States (especially since the problem was solved as recently as the late 1960s), and amazed by the resilience of [America's food-insecure population](#) and the inspired improvisation of educators, activists and community volunteers who are attacking the issue.

Mariana Chilton Ph.D. is one of the forceful anti-hunger activists who infuse *A Place at the Table* with the sense that no-nonsense non-defeatists are at work to put food on the table of every American—rural, urban, mother, child, working or unemployed.

Chilton is the driving force behind [Witnesses to Hunger](#). Part research project and part advocacy exhibit, Witnesses to Hunger places digital cameras into the hands of Chilton's research partners (not *subjects*, a crucial distinction) and asks those partners—inner-city mothers who are struggling to keep their children fed—to point and shoot at the issues that most impact them day to day.

The resultant photos are assembled into exhibits that travel to the halls of Congress and to seats of state governments across the country—accompanied by the Witnesses who took those photographs.



'My daughter said, "I am tired of waiting." You go to the doctor's office, and you wait hours to be seen. They give you an appointment at eight o'clock. At twelve o'clock, you might be sitting in that same spot.' (Photo: Crystal S./ [Witnesses to Hunger](#))

A legislator or policymaker may be able to factor away raw statistics and analyzed findings, but it's entirely more difficult to deny the reality of a woman who is resolutely in that lawmaker's face, demanding acknowledgement and redress of the insane merry-go-round of circumstances and statutes that makes it virtually impossible for her to provide adequate nourishment for her children.

That in-the-flesh exchange is one distinguishing aspect of Chilton's research: Her work does not stop at compiling numbers, assessing risk factors and calculating individual and societal consequences—it pushes for change.

Mariana Chilton took time out from her duties as associate professor at Drexel University School of Public Health and director of the Center for Hunger-Free Communities to speak with TakePart about research *partners*, the entrepreneurship of the poor and why domestic violence is a prime factor in America's hunger equation.

**TakePart: What is the benefit of "advocacy" or "direct service" research?**

**Mariana Chilton:** *Participatory* research is a way of working with people—who would normally be called human subjects—as partners. With Witnesses to Hunger, the women are our partners in helping us to learn more about the ideas and issues that are important to them.

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The women talk a lot about hiding how bad things are—from their pediatricians, from caseworkers, from social workers. They hide it very well. So if you come in like, “We don’t know you; we really want to learn more,” you get into the communities and into the homes of the participants. It allows the woman to show you how far she’s willing to take you. You can get to the real depths of the issues.

When we went out to the ladies of Witnesses to Hunger, we had an idea of what the major issues were, but we wanted to make sure that the women had the opportunity to frame the issues. That’s why we gave them the camera. It literally allowed them to frame the most important issues for them.

**When you deal with people as partners rather than as study subjects, do they lead you to findings beyond what you had presumed?**

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The other thing we learned is that the women really wanted to talk about having been exposed to violence, about not having been treated well by their intimate partners.

**How does domestic violence contribute to hunger?**

It’s actually really central to the experience of hunger. [Violence against women and girls](#) drives poverty around the world. The U.S. is no different.

When we gave the women the cameras, one of the most important issues the women really wanted to show was their exposure to violence, as children and as adults—and that they are trying to break the cycle of violence: “The violence makes me depressed and anxious and worried and therefore I have a hard time keeping down a stable job. I have a hard time keeping good and safe relationships because of this violence that I’ve experienced. And I want it to stop.”

Hunger is a little bit different. You can be stably housed and still be hungry, but hunger is not happening in a vacuum. You’re falling behind on your housing payments, on your utility bills.

But a lot of the reason that the women I’m working with are falling behind is they couldn’t do well in school, because they were in homes where there was domestic violence. They have a really hard time concentrating.

What makes the women so powerful in Witnesses to Hunger is they recognize that violence is at the center of it, and you see them actively trying to break that cycle.



I took pictures of the signs because

there are not enough positive things being shown. That's all that's being shown in our neighborhood, and that's all we have to see.' (Photo: Crystal R./[Witnesses to Hunger](#))

### **How was Witnesses to Hunger created?**

In the quantitative research we do, we ask this whole battery of questions: Did you not have enough money to [afford a nutritious diet](#) or a healthy meal? Were you behind on your rent? Did you get a shutoff notice? We put a little check box, and we put it into our computers and analyze it. Then we can understand the risk: If a woman is behind on her bills and can't afford enough food, her child is more likely to be hospitalized, is more likely to be underweight—those kinds of things.

When we testified before Congress, I recognized that while the legislators respond to the data and the science, they cannot relate to it in any kind of emotional way. I was relating with the women in a very emotional way in their homes. I was in their kitchens, and I could feel it.

I wanted to find a way to make sure the legislators could feel as if they were in a woman's kitchen. That's why I gave the cameras to the women. To have them teach us what we are supposed to be paying attention to, what the depth of it really is, and how they felt that they could get out.

### **How is Witnesses being moved forward, and who is moving it forward?**

The Witnesses themselves are moving it forward through their brilliance. We are playing a supportive role in that. A lot of organizations around the country have recognized the power of this particular model and continue to invite the women and the men—we have men now—of Witnesses to their public forums. We now have sites in Boston, in Baltimore and in Camden, New Jersey. We have sites across the state of Pennsylvania, and we are looking to start new sites across the country.

### **What does a site look like?**

By a site, I mean the women—and men—have cameras. They decide on the issues that are most important to them. They develop an exhibit. They decide who should come to their exhibit, which local legislators,

which national legislators, and the other audiences that should come and view the photographs and hear their stories.

The photographs, while they give you a sense of intimacy and engagement, are really opening the door for the woman herself.

Some people say Witnesses is all about the faces of hunger. No, it's not just a disembodied face. These are full human beings with a history and a life and with friends and struggles.

And they are really, really smart and brilliant—and people get so surprised. “Oh, I didn’t realize they would be so smart.”



He was asking the case worker for

something to eat. I was thinking, “I’m not going to lie to you, miss, he’s hungry.”’ (Photo: Imani S. [Witnesses to Hunger](#))

### **I’ve heard you talk about the entrepreneurship of the poor....**

Because the food stamp program is not enough, and because [their wages are so low](#), women need to find other ways to pull in some income. So the women are very savvy and will launch a little side business. She may call it a hustle. She might be selling pies that she makes off of her front stoop, or making dinners and selling them from her front stoop.

But the women often have to hide this type of extra income. They have this fear that the case manager is somehow going to report them, or they might lose their benefits if they just make an extra \$50 or \$100.

It’s not like these women are raking in the dough here. They’re just getting needed cash for some sneakers or cash for diapers.

So we were seeing an extraordinary amount of savvy entrepreneurship in the neighborhoods that was completely unrecognized, and was in many cases criminalized by our public assistance programs.

That's the kind of thing we should be working to bring to light and to help. We need to be investing more into that entrepreneurial spirit, and rewarding it.

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These brave women live their lives one paycheck—and one photograph—at a time.

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#### **What will it take to end hunger in America?**

Really, a housing subsidy is an anti-hunger program. Energy assistance is an anti-hunger program. If we really expect to make an impact, school breakfast is not going to change some of these issues; nor is food stamps. It will help to alleviate it, yes, and you hope that through alleviating some of the stress and the depression and the poor nutrition, you might help some women to break the cycle.

**To our readers: Have you ever gone hungry? Tell how you broke the cycle in [COMMENTS](#).**

TakePart's parent company, Participant Media, presents *A Place at the Table* in theaters and available on iTunes and On Demand March 1, 2013.

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