

## To View, To Eat, Per Chance to Not

By Mark Winne

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November has always been a confusing month for me. Traditionally, it is the time when we Americans give thanks to a mixed bag of things from the bounty of the autumnal harvest to the blessings of that new flat-screen TV that now adorns the living room wall. It's also the time of year when the U.S. Department of Agriculture issues its annual hunger count, known officially as the report on "Household Food Security in the United States." By asking 40,000 of us a series of questions concerning our ability to purchase food, USDA's researchers can determine with a reasonable degree of statistical certainty how many of us are, in the nomenclature of the Department, either "food secure," "food insecure," or, to avoid using the "h" word, have "very low food security."

What did they find for 2007? Well, if you're a hedge fund operator who bet on growth in food insecurity, you'll be reaping the rewards of your wager this holiday season. Compared to 2006 when 35.5 million Americans were either food insecure or suffering from very low food security, 36.2 million or 12.1 percent of the population fell into those categories. And with the economy swirling down the toilet, well-honed research skills are hardly necessary to project that 2008 will be far worse.

Dig a little deeper into the numbers and you find that 691,000 U.S. children went hungry in 2007. Based on my research, that's about the same number of flat-screen TVs of 40 inches or more in width that are sold every month in the land of the free. At about \$1,000 per TV (my sources tell me that the price is coming down, thank God), you'd generate about \$10 billion a year that could feed all those hungry children and probably take a big bite out of food insecurity for everybody else. The Food Stamp Program, for instance, provides its recipients, on average, a whopping \$1.12 per meal. With a record 28 million people in that program, a \$10 billion boost could, well, you can do the math yourself to get the high-definition picture.

I've always found the timing of the hunger report a curious contradiction. Why would the USDA choose to draw attention to scarcity just before our national day of abundance? Are we supposed to feel guilty and incur additional intestinal discomfort from that second helping of pie? I know the food banking community is using this information to try to leverage their overtaxed donors to prevent their food shelves from running bare. In a press release from the nation's food bank network now known as Feeding America, a name that bears an unsettling resemblance to "CAFO," the acronym for concentrated animal feeding operation, CEO Vicki Escarra said that "food banks are desperately in need of relief from Congress...to allocate dollars for the purchase, storage and transportation of USDA Commodities...to continue feeding people...."

State and regional food banks are using USDA's data and the growing demand for food to pump up their capital campaigns and once again expand their warehouses. On a recent trip to Oklahoma I toured the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma which is adding 36,000

square feet to their already enormous facility. The Capital Area Food Bank of Washington, DC is well on its way to raising \$36 million for a “state-of-the-art,” 125,000 square feet (nearly three acres!) expansion that will double the size of their existing warehouse. Even in my home state of New Mexico where we have the second worst level of food insecurity in the country, our statewide food bank is negotiating for enough new warehouse space to house a good size bomber squadron. And in New Jersey you know things are bad when the Community Food Bank runs a New York Times ad with a totally hot picture of Bruce Springsteen telling us that, “We can’t let this bank fail!”

Now anybody who knows me knows that I love the Boss more than God, but come on Bruce! We all know that more food for food banks and more money for construction projects, and even more money from Congress to buy food for food banks aren’t going to get us out of this jam. The numbers that the USDA released this month, although showing more Americans food insecure and hungry than ever before are, as a percentage of the total population, not much different than they have been for the last 12 years.

When USDA began measuring food insecurity in 1996, it found that about 11 percent of the population was hungry or food insecure. While an increase (or decrease) of a percentage or so can mean millions of people, today’s figures compared to those of 1996 suggest that we have made terribly little progress. Whether we add a few bucks to the food stamp program or build several million more square feet of food banks every year, we seem to end up in the same place.

Here are the “ways” that the government recently advised the food insecure to cope: eat a less varied diet (more Ramen Noodles?), obtain food from emergency kitchens or community food charities (they are running out of food!), or participate in a federal food assistance program such as food stamps (line up for your \$1.12 per meal). Though a barely adequate recipe for survival, there’s nothing in these “ways” that provide a long term solution. Neither do food bank expansions, nor star-studded appeals for more charitable largesse. To do something other than beg the government and our neighbors for more food would require that we recognize poverty as the cause of hunger, and in turn recognize our low-wage economy and enormous wealth disparities as the cause of poverty. To do these things would of course imply a wholly different political strategy on the part of anti-hunger advocates and a different role for government other than recommending that the poor go to under-resourced food pantries.

At about the same time that the USDA staff was stapling together their 2007 hunger report, a party of 12 was enjoying a truly spectacular meal at Chicago’s premier Italian eatery, Spiaggio’s. Recently made famous as Barack and Michelle Obama’s “special occasion” restaurant, Spiaggio’s is the kind of place that can set you back a pretty penny, if indeed you worry about that kind of thing. The party of 12 (not associated with the Obamas, or Jesus’ disciples for that matter) shared a meal that night that came to a cool \$18,000. Using USDA’s food stamp math, that amount would have fed 16,071 low-income people that evening.

How do we reconcile the seeming anomaly of hunger in the land of plenty, of children without enough to eat, with such things as our appetite for high-end consumer goods and frightful displays of conspicuous consumption? Will hunger in America be resolved by more food banks, more food stamps, and more Wal-Mart jobs? The food crisis at hand should make us pause on Thanksgiving Day, not to give thanks for what we have or to remember those who are needy, but to express a hard-edged determination to hold our government accountable for the elimination of poverty that will, in the long run, put an end to USDA's hunger reports.

*Mark Winne is the author of "Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty." For more information, go to [www.markwinne.com](http://www.markwinne.com).*