

— conversations on —
FOOD JUSTICE

A series hosted by
Share Our Strength and Food & Society at the Aspen Institute

SUMMARY TO ACTION REPORT
SESSION #5

SESSION DESCRIPTION

On June 25th Share Our Strength, in collaboration with Food & Society at the Aspen Institute, hosted the sixth session of **Conversations on Food Justice**, a series examining the roots and evolution of the food justice movement and how it intersects with race and class, as well as health, educational, and environmental inequities. “Food Insecurity and Mental Health: The Silent and Devastating Impacts on Children and Families” featured speakers Dr. Kofi Essel and Susana Martinez, and was moderated by Dr. Cindy Leung. The panel explored how chronic stress, stigma, and the multi-faceted impacts of hunger on a person’s mental and emotional wellbeing - and highlighted how key investments in social determinants of health could make it easier for people struggling with mental health challenges to access life-sustaining resources and help address the deeply-rooted traumas associated with the experience of food insecurity.

FEATURED PANELISTS

Dr. Kofi Essel

Community Pediatrician and Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at Children’s National and The George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences



Dr. Kofi Essel is a board-certified community pediatrician at Children’s National Hospital in Washington, DC. He also serves as Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, the Director of the George Washington University School of Medicine’s Community/Urban Health Scholarly Concentration, and the Director of the Clinical Public Health Summit on Obesity. Dr. Essel has dedicated his career to advocacy and research around healthcare training, health disparities, and community engagement, with expertise and national recognition in the areas of addressing obesity and food insecurity in families. He is Principal Investigator of a multidisciplinary population health initiative

that aims to strengthen community-clinical ties to address diet related chronic diseases in marginalized settings in DC. He earned a BS from Emory University, and his Medical Degree and MPH in Epidemiology from GWU. He completed pediatric residency and General Academic Pediatric fellowship training at Children’s National. Follow Dr. Essel on Twitter @DrKofiEssel

Susana Martinez

Chief Strategy Officer and National Director of the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC)



Susana Martinez became LAYC’s national director of the *Promotor Pathway*® in 2016 and chief strategy officer in 2017. She is responsible for the national expansion of *Promotor Pathway*, an intensive case management model for disconnected and disengaged youth. Susana was a key member of the LAYC team that first developed the *Pathway*, and served as director during the model’s external evaluation as part of the Social Innovation Fund investment. Susana is a licensed independent clinical social worker (LICSW) who has worked with Latino communities in Texas and DC, and has expertise in providing clinical and case management services to immigrant

families, victims of domestic violence, and youth and families within the child abuse and neglect system. Susana has over 15 years of experience in the fields of youth development and program management. She

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received her BS in psychology from Georgetown University and her MSW from the University of Texas at Austin. Follow the Latin American Youth Center on Twitter @THELAYC

Dr. Cindy Leung

Nutrition Epidemiologist and Assistant Professor, Department of Nutritional Sciences, University of Michigan



Dr. Cindy Leung is an Assistant Professor of Nutritional Sciences at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. Trained as a nutrition epidemiologist, her research focuses on the experience of food insecurity and its negative influence on health across the life course. In particular, her research combines qualitative and quantitative research methods to investigate the role of chronic stress as a novel mechanism underlying food insecurity and diet-related health outcomes in children, adolescents, college students, adults, and older adults. She is especially interested in using this research to inform the development of federal programs and policies to help alleviate

food insecurity and promote good health for vulnerable populations. Dr. Leung holds an adjunct appointment at the UC Berkeley School of Public Health. She earned her BA and MPH from UC Berkeley and her ScD in Nutrition and Epidemiology from Harvard University.

SUMMARY AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

The cumulative impact of poverty, food insecurity and inequality can have a devastating impact on mental health. According to The American Academy of Pediatrics, children experiencing hunger are more likely to experience chronic stress, anxiety and depression. Hunger in adolescents is also associated with higher rates of depressive disorders and suicide. The impact on parents is especially staggering: mothers with school-aged children who face severe hunger are 56.2% more likely to have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and are 53.1% more likely to have severe depression.¹ Families can experience different stressors in their lives but, as panelist Dr. Kofi Essel noted, the experience of relentless food insecurity can contribute to toxic stress. Chronic, toxic stress can harm development and can change the neurological architecture of the brain and central nervous system².

The economic and social upheaval caused by the recent pandemic has exacerbated the issue and has caused millions of new Americans to go hungry - leaving an indelible mark on the mental health of children and families. In April 2021, Children's Hospital Colorado saw a 90% increase in behavioral health services due to COVID-19 stressors³. Based on increase demand the hospital declared a "state of emergency" in youth mental health. Likewise, even the World Health Organization recognized the mental health impacts of the pandemic: stress, anxiety, loneliness, depression, and suicidal behavior⁴.

A research report from BMC Public Health found that families experiencing inequities are more vulnerable during the pandemic, noting these families "often travel longer distances to acquire food and rely heavily on public transit, which has become limited or impossible due to the shutdown measures. With school

¹ Weinreb, L., Wehler, C., Perloff, J., Scott, R., Hosmer, D., Sagor, L., & Gundersen, C. (2002). Hunger: Its Impact on Children's Health and Mental Health. *PEDIATRICS*, 110(4). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.110.4.e41>

² Feeding America. (2021). *Children and Families*. Hunger and Health. <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/explore-our-work/programs-target-populations/children-and-families/>.

³ Children's Hospital Colorado. (2021, May 25). *Children's Colorado Declares 'State of Emergency' for Youth Mental Health*. Children's Hospital Colorado. <https://www.childrenscolorado.org/about/news/2021/may-2021/youth-mental-health-state-of-emergency/>.

⁴ World Health Organization. (2021, June 29). Mental health and COVID-19. <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/publications-and-technical-guidance/noncommunicable-diseases/mental-health-and-covid-19>.

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closures, low-income families with children that rely on school meals are at a higher risk of experiencing hunger.”⁵ Federal nutrition assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, National School Lunch Programs, and School Breakfast Programs are designed to help during times of economic hardship. Panelist Susana Martinez explained there is a stigma and shame felt by some families for participating in food assistance programs and receiving food from food banks. Parents did not want others to feel that they were neglecting their children by not being able to provide food for them.

Every effort needs to be made to lower the barriers and stigma of participating in nutrition programs. We need to ask families what is best for them, and assess what would help reduce the barriers of access, language, and stigma. With the significant correlations between hunger and mental health, it is critical to ensure families and children have adequate resources to purchase food. Advocating for programs like SNAP, breaking stigma and shame around food insecurity, improving social and economic resources and reducing deterrents to healthy behaviors are all examples of ways to support the economic livelihoods of families.

RESOURCES

Report: [A Framework for Increasing Equity Impact in Obesity Prevention](#)



One of the most pressing unmet challenges for preventing and controlling epidemic obesity is ensuring that socially disadvantaged populations benefit from relevant public health interventions. Obesity levels are disproportionately high in ethnic minority, low-income, and other socially marginalized US population groups. Current policy, systems, and environmental change interventions target obesity-promoting aspects of physical, economic, social, and information environments but do not necessarily account for inequities in environmental contexts and, therefore, may perpetuate disparities.

Article: [For Children, Food Insecurity Means Not Only Hunger But Also Stress, Sadness](#)



A new study led by University of Michigan researchers shows that children know more about food insecurity—the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food—than their parents give them credit for.

Toolkit: [Screen and Intervene: A Toolkit for Pediatricians to Address Food Insecurity](#)



Pediatricians can play a critical role in addressing food insecurity, a health-related unmet social need with harmful impacts on child health, development, and well-being.

Article: [Hunger: Its Impact on Children’s Health and Mental Health](#)



Hunger, with its adverse consequences for children, continues to be an important national problem. Previous studies that document the deleterious effects of hunger among children cannot distinguish child from family hunger and do not take into account some critical environmental, maternal, and child variables that may influence child outcomes. This study examines the independent contribution of child hunger on children’s physical and mental health and academic functioning, when controlling for a range of environmental, maternal, and child factors that have also been associated with poor outcomes among children.

Article: [The Association Between Food Insecurity and Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)



Explores the association between food insecurity and mental health outcomes among low-income Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Article: [Children’s Hospital Colorado declares mental health state of emergency as suicide attempts rise](#)



Highlights the growing adolescent mental health crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁵ Fang, D., Thomsen, M.R. & Nayga, R.M. The association between food insecurity and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BMC Public Health* 21, 607 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10631-0>

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CALL TO ACTION LIST

Interested in learning more about how you can help? Our panelists came up with several suggestions for getting involved in your community:

- Break the stigma around food insecurity! Connect those in need directly to food. Help them [find their local food pantry or share resources on the federal nutrition programs](#).
- [Advocate for bolstering SNAP, and other nutrition assistance programs](#), for families.
- Normalize discussions of mental health. Everyone deserves to have mental health, no matter the person!

We hope you will continue the conversations in your organizations and in your community! Please do not hesitate to let us know how you are keeping the conversations going or if you have thoughts or topics you would like to hear in the future. Reach out to us at foodjustice@strength.org.

The Conversations on Food Justice series will be taking a brief summer break, but look out for updates for when we will return in the fall. Learn more about the initiative or listen to previous sessions at <https://www.shareourstrength.org/program/food-justice-series>



Share Our Strength is ending hunger and poverty – in the United States and abroad. Through proven, effective campaigns like No Kid Hungry and Cooking Matters, we connect people who care to ideas that work.

<https://www.shareourstrength.org>



Food & Society at the Aspen Institute brings together public health leaders, policymakers, researchers, farmers, chefs, food makers, and entrepreneurs to find practical solutions to food system challenges and inequities. The common goal is to help people of all income levels eat better and more healthful diets—and to enjoy them bite by bite.

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/food-and-society-program/>