TEENS & FOOD INSECURITY IN AMERICA

IMPOSSIBLE CHOICES

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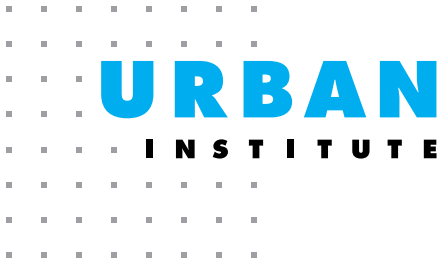

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ABOUT FEEDING AMERICA

Feeding America is the nationwide network of 200 food banks that leads the fight against hunger in the United States. Together, we provide more than 3 billion meals to more than 46 million people through 60,000 food pantries and meal programs in communities across America.

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In addition, we recognize the hard work and dedication of our Urban team who facilitated and coded interviews and lent their valuable insights to the framing and presentation of the sensitive topics presented in this report: Sade Adeeyo, Abigail Baum, David Blount, Brittany Murray, and Priya Saxena.

Lastly, we are grateful to all the teens who shared the stories about their communities. It is our privilege to help give voice to their keen insights and passion for change.

Some teenagers are reluctant to go to food pantries when they struggle with food insecurity. They could be under the impression that they aren't old enough to receive food in such places. While some pantries do have age restrictions, most don't. Making pantries more accessible to teenagers should be prioritized. Photo Source: Matt Johnson / Urban Institute

/ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The past couple of decades have been difficult for low-income families. Family poverty has increased, real wages have stagnated for low-income workers, and cash assistance has radically declined (Edin and Shaefer 2015). The Great Recession only exacerbated this hardship, causing the number of food insecure households—those without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food—to spike and remain stubbornly high years into the recovery.[1] Within these distressed households live an estimated 6.8 million food-insecure young people ages 10 through 17, including 2.9 million with very low food security and another 4 million living in marginally food-secure households (Gunderson 2016).[2]

Yet we know very little about how these young people experience hunger at this pivotal time in their lives. In this report, we present findings from a new study that uses qualitative methods to shed light on the unique ways that food insecurity affects teens (box 1). Though this study is small and exploratory, the stories we heard from youth who participated in the 20 focus groups across the 10 communities were remarkably consistent. The findings from this research paint a disturbing picture of ways that food insecurity may affect American youth and threaten their well-being.

In diverse settings, we heard many of the same themes:

- **Teen food insecurity is widespread.** Even in focus groups where participants had little direct experience with food insecurity, teens were aware of classmates and neighbors who regularly did not have enough to eat.
- **Teens fear stigma around hunger and actively hide it.** Consequently, many teens refuse to accept food or assistance in public settings or from people outside of a trusted circle of friends and family.
- **Food-insecure teens strategize about how to mitigate their hunger and make food last longer for the whole family.** They go over to friends' or relatives' houses to eat; they save their school lunch for the weekend.
- **Parents try to protect teens from hunger and from bearing responsibility for providing for themselves or others.** However, teens in food-insecure families routinely take on this role, going hungry so younger siblings can eat or finding ways to bring in food and money.
- **Teens would overwhelmingly prefer to earn money through a formal job.** However, prospects for youth employment are extremely limited in most focus group communities—particularly in those with the highest rates of poverty—and teens often cannot make enough money with odd jobs to make a dent in family food insecurity.
- **When faced with acute food insecurity, teens in all but two of the communities said that youth engage in criminal behavior,** ranging from shoplifting food directly to selling drugs and stealing items to resell for cash. These behaviors were most common among young men in communities with the most-limited employment options.
- **Teens in all 10 communities and in 13 of the 20 focus groups talked about some youth "selling their body" or engaging in "sex for money" as a strategy to make ends meet.** However, these themes came out most strongly in high-poverty communities where teens also described sexually coercive environments (Popkin et al. 2016). Sexual exploitation most commonly took the form of transactional dating relationships with older adults.
- **In a few communities, teens talked about going to jail or failing school as viable strategies for ensuring regular meals.**

This exploratory research suggests that teen food insecurity is an issue that requires urgent action. The most risky behaviors are by no means typical of all teens, even in the most distressed places; however, the report illustrates the lengths to which some of the most desperate and food-insecure youth are willing to go to survive when there are few options available to them. It is important to remember that, throughout this report, we are talking about adolescents (those ages 13 through 18), who are extremely sensitive to the judgment of their peers. It also means that, realistically, their employment opportunities and earning power are limited. Because of their age and very real need, they are uniquely vulnerable to exploitation—from gangs or crews who want boys to sell drugs or girls to traffic or from adults who want to "date" teens.

The story that emerged from our conversations with these teens is one of limited options that leave them with impossible choices. In this report, we use teens' own words to tell this story and draw on our findings to make recommendations for policy and practice.

/ BEHIND THIS REPORT

Work around teens and hunger emerged from the Urban Institute's work on the Housing Opportunity and Services Together (HOST) demonstration, a project that explores the potential for using housing as a platform for providing intensive, whole-family services to stabilize vulnerable families.[3] We knew from a survey we conducted in the three HOST sites (Portland, OR; Chicago, IL; and Washington, DC) that rates of food insecurity were very high and rates of employment rates very low (Scott et al. 2013), but we also knew that these families received housing subsidies, and most also received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. However, our work in our DC HOST site, which included an effort to work with residents to co-design a program to address adolescent sexual health and safety, raised our awareness about the kinds of risky behaviors teens might be resorting to in order to cope with food insecurity.

Interested in further exploring how teens were experiencing food insecurity, the Urban Institute research team connected with the research team at Feeding America, a nationwide network of food banks. As an organization, Feeding America has long had a focus on ending child hunger, but the child hunger programs operated throughout its network tend to reach younger children better than they reach youth and adolescents.

With support from the ConAgra Foundation, Feeding America agreed to partner with the Urban Institute team to explore three key questions:

- How do teens experience food insecurity in their families and communities?
- What coping strategies, including risky behavior, do they use to survive?
- What are barriers to teen participation in food assistance programs and how could teens be better engaged?

We conducted the first phase of this research in 2014, holding six focus groups in the three HOST sites. Although the project originated from the adolescent sexual health and safety work in DC, we expanded the scope of our exploratory work to gain a broad understanding of all the ways food insecurity might be affecting teens and undermining their well-being, which in turn could be used to inform programs and strategies to better serve food-insecure teens. Findings from our first focus groups suggested that even these stably housed teens were painfully familiar with what it meant to not have enough food for themselves and their families. The teens spoke poignantly about the stigma of being food insecure and about feeling the weight of adult worries and responsibilities. They also talked about the ways that food insecurity can drive teens to desperate choices—skipping meals, working under the table, dealing drugs, and engaging in exploitative sexual relationships with people who could provide needed resources.

In the second stage of this project, we took our research "beyond public housing," talking to teens in other types of low-income communities for several reasons. First, we hypothesized that these teens might experience even more acute food insecurity than those whose families receive deep housing subsidy. Second, we wanted to make sure our exploratory research was more representative of the low-income teens and to avoid stigmatizing teens from public housing communities. We also wanted to further explore potential solutions that would reflect teens' special needs (see box 2 in Implications for Policy and Practice section).

Teens from the New Columbia mixed-income neighborhoods set up tables of fresh food to be handed out at a monthly food distribution event. They aim to reach their peers who may be struggling with food insecurity. Photo Source: Matt Johnson / Urban Institute

Our continued partnership with Feeding America, as well as new funding from the ConAgra Foods Foundation and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, allowed us to expand our research in 2015 to seven more communities with strong service provider partnerships and capacity for organizing focus groups on teen food insecurity. The final mix of 10 communities reflected a substantial degree of diversity in terms of the communities themselves and the types of youth who shared their perspectives (see the Methodology section for an in-depth description).

With the additional support of the Ford Foundation, we present our findings in this report and in *Bringing Teens to the Table* (Waxman, Popkin, and Galvez 2016). *Bringing Teens to the Table* explores how teens view the food environment, their experiences with food insecurity in their households and communities, and the barriers to participating in food assistance programs. This report, *Impossible Choices*, provides a deeper look at the coping strategies teens use when faced with food insecurity, including those that may put them at long-term risk.

/ METHODOLOGY

In 10 communities across the country, we partnered with a housing authority/HOST service provider, clinic, community-based organization, or school to recruit participants ages 13–18 for two focus groups, one for girls and one for boys. To ensure that participating youth were likely to be able to speak to issues of food insecurity, they had to be receiving free or reduced-price lunch at their school or living with a family who had received SNAP benefits or charitable food assistance from a pantry or feeding site sometime in the past year. Partner organizations carefully screened for these criteria during the recruitment process. Participants' parents had to provide informed consent for their teens to participate in the groups; each youth participant also had to give verbal assent and each received a $25 gift card to thank them for their time.

Table 1 provides an overview of the 10 communities where we held focus groups, including county-level information on child food insecurity from Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap project and zip code–level statistics on poverty, receipt of SNAP benefits, and unemployment.

The final mix of communities reflected a substantial degree of diversity, spanning five states, public and market-rate housing, large and small urban areas, and urbanized clusters located out in more rural parts of the country (table 1). Half of the communities were located within counties with child food-insecurity rates at least 2 percentage points higher than the national average. Moreover, 9 out of 10 communities registered higher than average family poverty and unemployment rates. And all communities demonstrated relatively elevated rates of SNAP participation.

In all, 193 young people took part in the research team's conversations about teen food insecurity, across a total of 20 focus groups (table 2). We administered brief questionnaires after each group to gather information on basic demographics and food insecurity. As table 2 shows, our strategy resulted in a diverse set of teens participating in the groups; eight groups were majority African American, five were majority Latino, four were majority white, and the remaining three were mixed. Although all participants met the basic prescreening criteria, postgroup questionnaires also indicated significant variation in self-reported food insecurity using the six-item, 12-month US Department of Agriculture household food-security scale. Nearly half of the focus groups were conducted primarily with food-insecure teens, five included a minority of food-insecure teens, and six consisted of a more mixed group of both food-secure and food-insecure participants.

The parents of all participants gave written consent for their teen to participate, and all teens gave their written assent after being informed of all the topics that would be discussed during the focus group and of the research team's protocols for ensuring the anonymity participants. Participants also were advised that any information they shared would remain confidential except in cases where teens indicated imminent risk of harm to themselves or others.

During the focus group, trained researchers asked youth participants a number of questions about teen food insecurity in their communities (the focus group protocol is in appendix A). While some young people did share their own first-hand experiences, it is important to note that teens were not asked to share their personal experiences but rather their observations of teen food insecurity in their schools and neighborhoods. The focus group questions explored many topics like neighborhood context, how young people get food, use of SNAP and charitable feeding, barriers to food access, hunger and nutrition, the role of young people in their families, youth employment, and risky behaviors like stealing, dealing drugs, and inappropriate sexual relationships. In 18 of the focus groups, facilitators asked teens specifically about risky sexual behavior; in the remaining two, the issue surfaced organically from the teens themselves without direct questions.

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Because of the sensitivity of the questions, the researchers tried to ensure the teens were in supportive environments that encouraged open discussion. For example, focus groups typically included at least one break to allow any emotions and tensions to settle, and facilitators were prepared to provide access to support for teens if the discussions triggered any feelings of trauma. The research team either identified these resources before going on site or had an established relationship with a practitioner who would assist in this regard.

Urban Institute researchers recorded all of the focus groups, and these recordings were professionally transcribed to provide the best-quality record of the conversations. Urban staff then used NVivo, a qualitative database package, to code major themes in the transcripts and classify focus groups by prominence of food security in the groups, gender, and location. These themes were then examined to identify subthemes and analyzed by the characteristics of the focus groups themselves. The major themes constitute the chapters of the report and the subthemes help structure each of the chapters.

Within the text, the authors relied heavily on the teen's own words, using quotes extensively to tell these stories as directly as possible. We employed standard conventions to edit the quotes in the most responsible way. Ellipses were used shorten quotes when intervening text was repetitive or went off topic. Brackets were used to clarify things that were said referencing earlier parts of the transcript (i.e. subjects of pronouns, times of day, unfamiliar local terms or slang), as well as to fix subject verb agreement and to indicate where we filled in our best guess where the audio recording was not understandable. These edits helped make all quotes easier to understand while safeguarding the integrity of the teens' words.

TABLE 1

Overview of Communities

Community	Public/ subsidized housing	Type	Child food insecurity rate [a]	Poverty rate for families with children [b]	SNAP receipt households with children [b]	Unemployment (age 16+) [b]
Chicago, Illinois	Yes	Large urban	Medium	High	High	High
Eastern Illinois	No	Urban cluster	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Champaign metro (IL)	No	Small urban	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low
Los Angeles, California	No	Large urban	High	High	Medium	Medium
Greensboro metro (NC)	No	Small urban	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Rural North Carolina	No	Urban cluster	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Eastern Oregon	No	Urban cluster	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
Portland, Oregon	Yes	Large urban	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
San Diego, California	No	Large urban	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Washington, DC	Yes	Large urban	High	Medium	High	High

Note: We use stand-in names for some of the sites to minimize potential stigma for youth in smaller communities.

a. Based on county-level child food-insecurity statistics from Map the Meal Gap 2015. Communities rated "high" have rates exceeding the national average by 2 percentage points or more; communities rated "medium" have rates within (above or below) 2 percentage points of the national average. All data are estimated for 2013; in that year, the national child food insecurity rate was 21.4 percent.

b. Based on zip code–level 2010–14 American Community Survey five-year estimates. Communities rated "low" have rates lower than the national average, "medium" have rates less than two times the national average, and "high" have rates more than two times the national average. The national average for poverty among families with children was 18 percent, for SNAP receipt among households was 22 percent, and for unemployment (age 16 and older) was 9 percent.

TABLE 2

Overview of Teen Focus Groups and Participants

			Group Race/Ethnicity [a]				Group Food Insecurity [b]		
Community	Total youth	Total groups	Black	White	Latino	Mixed	Minority food insecure	Mixed food security status	Majority food insecure
All	193	20	8	4	5	3	5	6	9
Chicago	21	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Eastern Illinois	14	2	0	0	1	1	1	0	1
Champaign metro (IL)	23	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	0
Los Angeles	20	2	0	0	2	0	1	1	0
Greensboro metro (NC)	23	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	0
Rural North Carolina	15	2	0	2	0	0	1	1	0
Eastern Oregon	17	2	0	2	0	0	0	1	1
Portland, Oregon	22	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
San Diego, California	20	2	0	0	2	0	0	1	1
Washington, DC	18	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	2

a. Groups were classified by what race/ethnicity constituted 50 percent or more of the focus group participants. Groups with no absolute majority were classified as "mixed."

b. All focus group participants answered a six-item set of questions to measure their food-security status over the past 12 months. Groups classified as "minority currently food insecure" were ones where a third or less of participants were food insecure, "mixed" a third to two-thirds, and "majority currently food insecure" more than two-thirds. The original three HOST community focus groups in Chicago, Portland, and Washington, DC, did not administer the official scale but were assigned "majority" values because of the highly elevated levels of family food insecurity identified in the HOST baseline survey.

BOX 1 The Research Experience

Teen food insecurity is a relatively new research area for the team, and the process of talking to vulnerable youth about food insecurity was often unsettling for both the teens and researchers.

It has been challenging to balance the goals of highlighting these troubling stories in order to bring awareness to teen food insecurity and of exercising caution to avoid appearing to generalize behaviors—particularly risky sexual behavior. It is often difficult to disentangle risky behavior specifically in response to food insecurity from that by teens in low-income settings generally. At the same time, the team wondered the extent to which the teens underreported food insecurity and unhealthy behavior. Focus group facilitators were told troubling stories from teens after tape recorders were turned off or focus groups were over, and suspect that for each example like the ones noted below, others went unspoken.

This experience has led us to take great care to note frequently that results are not generalizable, that findings are exploratory, and that not all teens or all sites reported the same types or severity of food insecurity or behaviors. We also highlight the words of teens themselves as much as possible, to draw attention to this underresearched aspect of poverty through the teens' own lens. This work is an entry point into this research area, and not conclusive—as researchers, the team continues to develop the right tone and vocabulary to discuss this work. But these discussions with teens have left us with a new awareness of the need for additional work directly with teens and the challenges and limitations of our research approach.

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"SHE [MY FRIEND] ALWAYS BEG FOR OTHER PEOPLE'S STUFF, BUT EVERYBODY PUSH HER AWAY BECAUSE LIKE WHEN I GOT CHIPS, THEY LIKE, 'OH, HERE SHE GO.' BUT I BE FEELING LIKE SHE... **ALWAYS SEEMS LIKE SHE HUNGRY BECAUSE SHE DON'T EVER HAVE ENOUGH TO EAT."**

GIRL, CHICAGO

EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY AS A TEEN

Despite their many differences, most study communities had one thing in common: poverty. The family poverty rate exceeded the national average of 11 percent in all but one community, and it registered at more than twice that rate in half of the focus group communities (table 1). In our discussions, teens expressed their belief that parents in these communities do their best to keep their families afloat, but many struggle to keep food on the table.

In many of the focus group communities, jobs are scarce and the jobs that are available often pay too little, offer too few hours, or require skills and education that struggling parents do not have. Wages and benefits together are often insufficient to pay rent, utilities, transportation, and food expenses for a given month, particularly for large families. "It's enough to survive, but it's not enough to live, basically," said one Portland girl. Unfortunately, federal safety-net benefits fail to fill the gap. In Los Angeles, with its large immigrant populations, the gap may be more about eligibility and enrollment: rates of SNAP receipt among families there are actually lower than family poverty rates.[4] However, even in places like eastern Oregon or Washington, DC, where SNAP receipt is high relative to rates of family poverty, the benefit is not enough to stave off hunger.

As a result, many families start running out of food midmonth. Teens talked about the strategies that local families used to fend off hunger. In places like the Greensboro metropolitan area, families either do not have kitchen appliances or do not use them to save money on utilities. Families also stretch SNAP benefits as far as they can and meticulously ration low-cost and often low-quality food. One Chicago teen boy noted, "They're stretching the food, yeah. They eat one pack of noodles a day." Limited resources steer families toward less healthy options. "You can go to McDonalds," a teen girl in eastern Oregon explained, "and buy like a happy meal for a dollar or a few dollars and get a whole bunch of food. But you go to the grocery store and try to pick something healthy and it takes like $5 for not very much because it's so expensive and they can't afford it."

Despite these efforts, families often start cutting the size of their meals and skipping meals altogether. A San Diego teen boy said, "There's a few people I know, they really struggle to get food. Or get money so they can buy the food. So they have to go through a starving period where they have to cut down on how much they eat." Teens in most groups agreed that parents were the ones who cut back their meals the most so that their children can eat. "Adults might think, well the kid needs it more, so they'll eat less" (Girl, eastern Illinois). However, teens in food-insecure families sometimes do the same thing to make sure there is food in the house for other family members, often younger siblings. "I will go without a meal if that's the case," said one girl in Chicago, "as long as my two young siblings is good, that's all that really matters to me."

Teens in many communities openly discussed strategies that they and their peers used to skip meals. One girl in Portland noted, "Breakfast really isn't, like I'd rather save my food so that I can eat, so I can actually sleep, because I can't sleep when I'm hungry." Other girls in places like eastern Oregon talked about holding on to their school lunch to get themselves through the weekend. "I don't always skip lunch, but if I don't have money or am almost out of money, I just don't eat lunch at all…because I don't have enough food at home and save it until after."

Teens often notice when their peers are hungry, particularly in communities with high rates of family poverty. A boy in rural North Carolina related how hunger affects young people's outward behavior, "By the end of the month you can tell by how the kids act. The kids might be aggravated. You can tell, they're depressed. You just know. It's hard to explain. You notice them going to the store a lot at the beginning of the month, but at the end of the month they get mad when

you bring up food." Boys in Portland agreed that hungry teens often act out or are angry. As a girl in Los Angeles said, "You kind of have to go with the flow of it because you can't get through the day without eating because it totally throws your whole day off." In some cases, teen hunger is more obvious. "Some kids rush to the lunch line because they don't have food for breakfast" (Boy, San Diego).

However, many food-insecure teens may actually go unnoticed by peers and caring adults because of the great efforts they make to hide their hardship. A boy in eastern Illinois recounted how one of his friends covers up that he's hungry: "Some people don't show it. It's like it's their stuff. They don't want people to look at them. [My friend]'s the kind of person who's always bragging about he has this and he has that. He's like, 'Can you buy me something to eat?' And I'll just buy it because I know that he says stuff just to make himself feel good. But that's really not him." The boys in San Diego explained, "Teens feel more bad about [hunger] because they have more insecurities about themselves;" and "the poor kids are the outcasts basically… People [are] nasty to you. [They] look at you like you drunk." A girl in eastern Illinois also volunteered that some teens hide their hunger because they fear exposing their family to child welfare involvement: "I've heard some people can get their families taken away if they can't afford to care for them, so you have to be careful."

Consequently, teens keep their problems under wraps. "We keep it quiet," said one Greensboro girl "It's a small town, and if anyone knows, everyone will know." Outside of a very small and trusted circle of family and close friends, hungry teens often turn down help. As a teen girl in eastern Illinois explained, "Sometimes the teens don't want to take the food from other people because they don't want to show that their family's struggling. …They'll hide symptoms of not having enough to eat." This often includes forgoing offers of assistance from teachers, neighbors, and other well-meaning adults.

Other charitable feeding options may also not seem like an option for teens (Waxman, Popkin, and Galvez 2016). In addition to their reluctance to seek help because of the potential stigma they could experience, teens are often unaware of the places in the community they can get food. Sometimes teens also have misperceptions about their ability to access these services on their own, or they think that food programs are only for younger children. These misunderstandings prevent teens from getting food from feeding sites that potentially would serve them. Further complicating these perceptions is the lack of programs specifically tailored to teens. Only teens in rural North Carolina talked about a school-run pantry to help meet their needs.

Instead, hungry teens largely rely on a relatively close circle of family and friends. "I'm going to try to call my dad. If he says no," one girl from Chicago explained, "I'm going to try to call somebody else. And if that's not good enough, then, okay, well, then try my friends or something that live close by, see if I can get at least like two packs of noodles or something so we can all split it or something." Teens in multiple communities talked about showing up at a friend or neighbor's house to eat. Other young people ask trusted neighbors for basics they need to make food at home, like this girl in Los Angeles: "I actually remember when my mom started working … [my siblings] would get hungry… and I would actually go to a neighbor and ask them for ingredients for a recipe I could borrow. And I would take it from them and make something at home for [my siblings]." In extreme cases, as one boy in Chicago described, "It gets so bad that some people that I know, like they send their kids to live with [their] relative that they know that had more."

Some teens also try to extend help to each other as much as they can. In addition to inviting friends over to their houses to eat, teens in many communities give away their own food to others who seem to need it more. A girl in Portland remembered, "I gave away at least 30 lunches last summer to some little kids that needed it… Like me, I can get by, *barely* get by, but I can get by, so sometimes I give away my lunches to littler kids that need it." But at the same time, teens often feel overwhelmed by the responsibility. "One time my little brother woke me up and asked me fix something for his friend. I don't know how to feel about that. It made me feel really bad to have my brother tell me that the kid needed food," recounted a girl in the Champaign metro area. Another boy in eastern Oregon agreed, "If I see someone who kinda looks hungry I'll give them a little bit of food, but I won't sit with him and figure out what's going on, [because] there's never really a fix for the problem." And in all reality, teens and their families sometimes just do not have the resources to keep providing food for other hungry kids in the neighborhood, as one girl in Chicago explained, "[M]y friends, they're staying over here a long time…most of the time I'm like 'my mama will let you'…she be cooking and we be having a lot of food in the house. But there be sometimes we don't."

/ BEARING THE WEIGHT OF ADULT RESPONSIBILITIES

Teens in most of our focus groups across the 10 sites felt that parents do everything they can to try to shield their children from hunger. "With my neighbors, when they're running out of food," described one San Diego girl, "the mom's the one stressing, and she will ask the neighbors for money." Parents often try to hide family problems from their teens so that they will not be adversely affected. A girl in eastern Illinois related, "When my parents talk through it, they tell us to go upstairs. They worry that we'll stop eating, so try to hide it, so that we'll eat it." Other teens in other communities agreed: "Adults tend to not show it to not scare the kids or get them worked up about it. They would rather handle the situation themselves." (Boy, Champaign metro). At the end of the day, even parents in food-secure families do not want their children to worry about adult problems. A Chicago girl explained, "I'm at an age where I can work already, but my mom doesn't ask me to. Like my mom wants to concentrate on school, and she wants me to make it through high school. And my mom wants me to go to college, and that's like a dream for every parent."

"IF A KID SEES HIS OWN FAMILY STRUGGLING, THEY HELP OUT. **THEY HAVE TO BE THE MAN OR WOMAN OF THE HOUSE"**

BOY, EASTERN OREGON

However, a small number of youth talked about how struggling parents sometimes pressure their children to start taking on economic responsibility. "Basically [those parents] are saying, 'Get up and do something productive to help your family out, don't just watch [us] struggle,'" explained a young man in San Diego. This expectation can start as early as age 13, with parents suggesting that these youth look for a summer job, and it only intensifies as teens near adulthood. By the time they reach 18, some teens in food-insecure families feel they have little choice but to start supporting themselves and/or their families at home or move out on their own, which can be a terrifying prospect for a young person. One boy in rural North Carolina described being "scared that once we move into our apartment, a little while later food is going to be gone instantly because of bills." Nevertheless, in some places, "a lot of kids just live homeless and leave their families" (Boy, eastern Oregon).

Even when parents do not explicitly pressure their older children to help, many participants in our groups said that teens in poor families start helping to provide for themselves and their families on their own initiative. Some young people do this as part of a growing sense of responsibility they feel as well as out of loyalty and appreciation for their parents. Others start observing, listening, and better understanding their families' material hardships and internalizing the stresses. As a teen boy in Portland confided, "Like you start to like get worried...like your family is in danger...they won't have enough food, or they won't have enough...to live. And they [teens] start to worry, and like they want to, they start to want to get jobs to provide for basic needs."

When faced with acute food insecurity, many teens begin to feel the weight of adult responsibilities. Teens who are the oldest in their families or have single parents, multiple siblings, or children of their own may be more motivated than their peers to find every way possible to help cover the cost of food, rent, and other basic expenses. One Chicago girl recounted the experiences of young girls in her neighborhood: "The[ir] parents [are] never home. They sacrifice to work all night, leave they kids in the house. They make sure they tell them, don't . . . let nobody in and all that stuff or whatever. But if you, if there is no food in the house... and [they] don't get off work until 12:00 in the morning... people going to have to do what they got to do."

A group of teenagers harvest vegetables at a farm on Sauvie Island, just miles outside Portland, Oregon. Through their employment with Food Works, teens are able to help contribute to their families' collective incomes, gain job experience and leadership skills, and bring food home. Photo Source: Matt Johnson / Urban Institute

Teens talk about their perceptions of their financial responsibilities in different ways. Most young people said teens often work to provide for their own needs, including basic food, clothes, and school supplies. In food-insecure households, their earnings free up resources for their families to spend on other essentials. Teens earn money, a Washington, DC, boy said, "…so they [parents] don't have to buy you nothing. You can buy your own stuff and…money they had they could spend on you, they can use for…the needs in the house, and they'd have more money for [them]." Regardless of the level of necessity, however, earning money also helps young people experiencing economic hardship acquire the things that make them feel "normal"—shoes, clothes, computers, and school activities.

Most food-insecure teens who take on early economic responsibility also explicitly share their resources with other important people in their lives. Often this includes buying or sharing food or clothes with siblings or friends who are also struggling. One teen boy from Portland told us about his experience: "I was like, okay, I'll buy myself some school clothes. So I went to the store, bought me some school clothes, and then I helped my little brother and sister, and I bought them some uniforms." Other times, teens pass money directly to their parents. A small number of teens talked about formal understandings about sharing all or a particular amount or portion of their earnings up front to pay for food, rent, utilities, gas, or other essentials. More commonly, teens said they address their own needs first when they have money in hand and then offer whatever is left to their parents.

/ FINDING A JOB

Youth in all but two of the focus group communities—Chicago and Portland—brought up formal employment as teens' preferred way to help make ends meet. But the reality is that the kinds of jobs most teens can get are service-sector jobs that only offer minimum wage, like working in fast food restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, drug stores, or clothing stores.[5] And we know from youth unemployment statistics that it is difficult for teens in most of the communities to find a job at all. Unemployment for youth ages 16 to 19 exceeded the national average of 27 percent in all but eastern Illinois and Champaign.[6] In four communities—Chicago; rural North Carolina; Greensboro, North Carolina; and Washington, DC—youth unemployment topped 50 percent. Given that context, it is not surprising that many of the participants in our focus groups in both large urban areas and smaller communities lamented the lack of opportunity in their neighborhoods, citing long-term disinvestment, and the closures of anchor businesses and, in one case, a nearby military base.

"IT STARTS OFF TRYING TO FIND A JOB AND WHEN THAT DOESN'T WORK OUT, **YOU FIND A QUICK HUSTLE LIKE CUTTING GRASS…"**

BOY, RURAL NORTH CAROLINA

Further, in most communities, teens find themselves competing directly with older youth and adults for the same low-skill jobs. "Yeah, it can be difficult. People [employers] really wanted experience but we don't have experience. No one is willing to give it to us and it's hard to get a job when all they want is experience," volunteered a young man in Los Angeles. Teens also pointed out that state laws and child protection regulations can create additional hurdles, as one girl in eastern Oregon noted, "Most of the time you have to be 18 or 16. Legally you can get one at 14. But people don't want to hire 14 year-olds."[7]

Trying to balance work with school can also make it more difficult for teens to compete with older workers for scarce jobs. Employers increasingly want maximum flexibility from workers to respond to flexible scheduling (Henly, Shaefer, and Waxman 2006; Lambert 2008). Young people who can find alternatives do, but when school-schedule friendly options are not available and families are in great need, some teens drop out of school altogether, at least temporarily. A girl in a Los Angeles told the story of a friend, "He would give enough to help out and save money. Once he saved enough [some time later] he was able to go back to school and just focus on school."

In addition, participants in a number of our groups thought that employment opportunities were particularly limited for young men. These low expectations may discourage boys from trying to find a conventional job. As one San Diego teen boy put it, "Some managers are sexists and hire girls because they're prettier." Girls also saw boys as less likely to try to find work. One young woman in eastern Illinois bluntly stated, "Girls will put in multiple applications for jobs and call to follow up. Boys don't." Other girls in the rural North Carolina and Washington, DC, communities echoed this sentiment.

When they cannot find regular jobs, some youth work "under the table" for local restaurants, corner stores or swap meets (flea markets), or participate in subsidized youth employment programs run by the city or a local nonprofit. Portland boys worked at the community gardens, where they could take home food that they grew in exchange for the hours they put in cultivating the plants. In Washington, DC, girls participated in the summer employment program to find a placement, despite the fact that positions were short term and paid less than minimum wage.

Photo Source: Shutterstock

Next, teens try odd jobs. We heard about a range of informal jobs. Boys were more likely to mention physical labor, like working on someone's lawn and outdoor area (e.g., mowing lawns, raking leaves), washing cars, carrying groceries, shoveling snow, taking out trash, and doing home maintenance. Girls were more likely to report doing hair, babysitting, dog walking, and sometimes getting paid to do homework for other people.

Young people in nearly half of the communities also talked about teens turning to hustles, like selling small items to neighbors and other children at school to make ends meet. For example, a girl in Washington, DC, told us, "I had to sell candy at the age of 11 just to provide for myself." Other youth in Los Angeles, the Champaign metropolitan area, and San Diego described how their peers sold everything from gum to fruit cups, spray-painted T-shirts, air fresheners, and music CDs to raise money for basics or extra things they needed at school.

And when families fall on really hard times, young people might even try to sell their own possessions. In the Chicago focus group with young men, one boy recounted the plight of one of his neighbors, "There's a dude who lives on my block, whatever, and I guess he was trading something . . . his game. . . [to get] some money because, you know, they were struggling [and]. . . could use some bread. . . . [When it's hard young people] try to sell their game or their shoes or clothes or something."

/ SELLING DRUGS AND STEALING

When teens cannot find formal employment or make enough money from odd jobs, focus group participants across the sites told us about peers turning to dangerous and risky strategies to get the money they need to meet their basic needs. Notably, in the three focus groups with mostly African American young men, none of the participants shared stories about their own or their peers' formal work experiences.[8] Neither did any of the teens—boys and girls—in two of the three public housing sites, where physical isolation and stigma may limit employment opportunities for youth. Instead, the discussions in these groups segued directly to odd jobs and hustles and then pivoted to illicit activities.

"PEOPLE HAVE TO DO OTHER THINGS, **THEY DO WHAT THEY HAVE TO DO TO SURVIVE** BECAUSE NOT EVERYONE CAN GO OUT AND GET A JOB."

BOY, EASTERN ILLINOIS

In the study communities with the highest poverty rates, desperation can drive both girls and boys to steal food and other basics from local stores for themselves or to share with their families. A young man in Chicago described it this way, "I ain't talking about robbing nobody. I'm just talking like going there and get what you need, just hurry up and walk out, which I do ... They didn't even know. If you need to do that, that's what you got to do, that's what you got to do." Other youth in San Diego described stealing in this way, but they also described a different strategy: going through the self check-out and just not scanning all of the items.

In Portland, teens discussed stealing food and basics as a normalized behavior. According to our participants, some kids—both boys and girls—start doing it early, when they are as young as 7 or 8. And multiple local businesses accept it and work out ways for teens to work off the cost of what they steal. "It's like funny, because I know lots of people that got caught stealing," one teen girl remarked, "and they don't tell their parents, of course, because they [store staff] discuss with them, they're like 'why are you doing this?' And ... most of them are like because we need the food. I'm really hungry... [The store] just let them work there, and they're like, 'here,' and then sometimes they even give them like cans of food and stuff, like so they can take home if they really need it."

Some food-insecure youth also engage in other illegal behavior as a way to earn money. Regardless of the level of neighborhood poverty, teens in our focus groups said that strategies like selling drugs were common among food-insecure boys. "A lot of kids at a young age will sell drugs to get money for their families. People think it's good but it messes you up," confided a boy in Los Angeles. In part, selling drugs is a relatively easy option, given the reported prominence of gangs and drug use among teens in most of the study communities. And it is not only young people in large urban areas who are affected; these issues came up even in the smaller communities. A girl in eastern Oregon explained, "Drugs, alcohol, gangs, and everything they bring from middle school, the elementary school, and they come to high school. And bad things people use to just do in high school has spread to the junior high and down to the elementary school. I've been watching it and seeing it and hearing it."

In about half of the study sites, teens in our groups also talked about boys stealing items they could then turn around and sell to get the cash they need. According to our participants, boys mainly steal things like phones, shoes, jewelry, or bikes from other youth. A girl in the Champaign metro area focus group related that she had been a victim of this kind of theft, but felt sympathetic to the boy who stole from her, "The kid who stole my phone, he'd been reported a

Photo Source: Shutterstock

bunch of times. He had so much pressure on him. That was the easiest way to get the money." In addition, in places like eastern Illinois and Washington, DC, teens talked about boys stealing items off the street like bikes, car parts, or radios to make money.

Gambling was another strategy that came up in the boys groups in eastern Illinois and Washington, DC, with participants describing young men in their communities who bet what money they have on sports games or shoot dice to try to make more. According to a boy in the group in the Champaign metro area, "Some gamble for their money, put in a dollar and try to get more, or they go out and take what they're not supposed to, just trying to make it by."

All of these behaviors—selling drugs, stealing, gambling, and shoplifting—pose substantial risks to teens, not only in terms of potential incarceration, but also in terms of how having an arrest record might affect their future employability. Girls in two of the communities with the highest concentrations of poverty pointed out that young people's experiences with the criminal justice system can make it nearly impossible for them to find traditional jobs. A teen girl in Portland described, "They're like, 'I need to get my stuff like back on track, I need to start doing stuff.' But after they want to start doing something, [the employer] won't hire them because they got arrested like when they were 14 [for shoplifting]. "

/ RUNNING THE RISK OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Even under the best of circumstances, teens are under tremendous pressure to engage in sexual activity at an early age (Zweig et al. 2013). According to the most recent statistics, about 41 percent of all high school students report having had sexual intercourse (CDC 2015). Almost all teens in our focus groups talked about how the social climate at school and on social media raises the stakes. "Social media fuels it—Facebook, Snapchat," one boy from Greensboro said. Boys and girls are exchanging explicit pictures; and boys are pressuring girls to have sex and share nude photos; girls, whether they comply or refuse, are subject to public shaming. Boys call the girls *hoes*, *sluts*, and *bitches* and often repost pictures that were meant to be private. "Some girls get peer pressured into doing sex and stuff," a girl from rural North Carolina related, "and I know that for a fact because girls get peer pressured into anything. They get scared and then just do it."

"IT'S REALLY LIKE SELLING YOURSELF. LIKE YOU'LL DO WHATEVER YOU NEED TO DO TO GET MONEY OR EAT"

GIRL, PORTLAND

Further, teen girls in the communities with the highest rates of family poverty, like San Diego, described highly coercive sexual environments, with men and boys actively approaching and harassing young women in their neighborhoods. One girl said, "It's a lot… there's… catcalling that goes on, and a lot of strange men that walk up to you." Another explained, "You can't even walk down the street to like Jack in the Box [restaurant] without like hearing something from somebody." Teen girls in Portland identified the same kind of behavior, including "guys… creeping in your window at like 11:00 [p.m.]" and stalking young girls. As a teen describes, "I remember one time I was outside doing chalk with my niece… and just like all these guys try to drive by… and just started whistling. And I'm like, you know, it's like pretty foul. It's like disgusting."

The toxic combination of peer pressures, social media, and coercive sexual environments may make hungry teens in a wide variety of communities vulnerable to sexual exploitation when their options are limited. Teens in all 10 communities and in 13 of the 20 focus groups talked about "some girls selling their body" or "sex for money." Teens often related these stories with distaste, but with a clear recognition of why teens—mostly girls—might feel pressed to go to these extremes to get the resources they need to meet their basic needs. Reports of this behavior were much rarer among boys, only surfacing in the girls' focus groups in Chicago and Greensboro metro.

Although teens across the sites brought up sexual exploitation, their openness to discussing the topic as well as level of detail they were able to provide varied substantially across communities. In focus groups where a smaller proportion of the participating youth had recently experienced food insecurity, there was less frequent mention of these issues. This variation across the groups may well reflect a lower frequency or visibility of sexual exploitation, but there may be other reasons as well. In a more mixed group, youth who have witnessed these kinds of experiences might not have felt comfortable raising them in front of peers who might judge them. Further, youth who do not have firsthand knowledge of or experience with these matters may not be able to distinguish between more typical teen risky sexual behavior and sexual exploitation.

Identifying sex as a coping strategy for teen hunger may be particularly difficult because the great majority of teens talk about it in terms of ongoing, transactional *dating relationships*. As a teen boy in rural North Carolina explained, "When you're selling your body, it's more in disguise.

Like if I had sex with you, you have to buy me dinner tonight… that's how girls deal with the struggle… That's better than taking money because if they take money, they will be labeled a prostitute." Despite the outward appearance of a dating relationship, youth in Portland were quick to point out, "You're not even dating… They'll be like… 'I don't really love him, but I'm going to do what I have to do.'" These kinds of relationships become a key survival strategy for some young women, particularly ones who already have kids of their own. As one girl in eastern Oregon explained, "[This girl I know] doesn't have a lot of money… so she goes out and mingles with the guys and that's how she feeds her family, by doing that."

Both boys and girls often commented on the age difference between the girls and the men with whom they have these transactional dating relationships. "Some young girls give sex to older guys to get things," volunteered a teen boy in the Champaign metro area. A girl in Washington, DC gave the example of 17-year-old teen girl who was dating a 40-year-old, "He a[n] old man. He got money. So they, so she do what she got to do." Boys in San Diego unanimously agreed, though in other groups, like the girls in Portland, thought it was more about who has money and resources, including relatively young teen boys in the neighborhood who are selling drugs, stealing, or involved with gangs. One said, "[Girls] kick it with the boy…they're doing that stuff with them [because] this boy has money. I'm going to ask this boy because he has money…"

Despite the inherent risks, many girls in our groups apparently view these inappropriate dating relationships as more acceptable than their other last-ditch options for making ends meet. Stealing or selling drugs are perceived as too risky; and, especially in high-poverty communities, these kinds of relationships between women and men may be highly normalized. A girl in San Diego told us: "It's one of those things that no one talks about, but everyone knows it goes on." Children see young teens doing it, and older teens see their mothers do it. "They be trying to hide it from their kids, but you know it's happening," one young woman in Portland explained.

Beyond these transactional dating relationships, in 7 of the 10 focus group communities, teens also related stories about girls exchanging sexual favors with strangers or stripping for money. They said these incidents occurred outside schools, in abandoned houses, at flea markets, and on the street. A girl in San Diego talked sadly about what happened to a friend from school, "Someone I knew dropped out of high school to make money for the family, she felt the need to step up, she started selling herself." And another girl in Chicago told a similar story, referring to an even younger girl who was only 11 when she dropped out of sixth grade to work in the sex trade. Boys in Los Angeles confirmed that this behavior may start at an early age in their community, with middle school girls putting up flyers in public places advertising their services.

Photo Source: Shutterstock

/ SELF-SABOTAGING FOR SURVIVAL

Selling, stealing, and engaging in survival sex all compromise teens' ability to be successful in school and may lead to life-altering experiences with criminal justice. However, underscoring the level of desperation facing too many of the youth we spoke to, teens in two of the communities shared stories of peers and neighbors who directly traded their futures to meet immediate needs.

"SOME KIDS WILL PULL A FIRE ALARM **TO GET A MEAL"**

GIRL, GREENSBORO METRO AREA

Those in the Chicago teen boy group discussed the tactic of failing school or a class to be placed in summer school, where two meals a day are guaranteed. A teen noted that, "Some people…they'll be passing all these classes and just fail that one class just to make sure like… [they're] behind. If I fail this class, I've got to make it up next year and I'll fail the next class." When asked by the moderator if they deliberately failed to try to get food, the boy responded "Yeah."

In the Portland and Greensboro metro-area communities, teen girls said that some young people in their community view incarceration as a viable strategy to fend off hunger. In Portland, a girl told us that "a lot of people are choosing to be in jail rather than be on the street." Portland girls continued, "It might not be the best food, might not be the best place to be, but it's a roof over your head." And "every single day, they eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner." Girls in Greensboro Metro agreed, "Jail is a luxury, especially for people who live in a trailer. Some people, including teens, will commit a crime to get a place to stay, a meal."

These anecdotes are by no means typical of how teens cope, even in the most distressed places, but illustrate the lengths to which some of the most desperate and food-insecure youth are willing to go to survive when there are few options available to them.

/ DISCUSSION

Although it generates less attention, material hardship—having to go without basic necessities—is more prevalent than poverty (Neckerman et al. 2016). Food insecurity is the most frequently reported kind of material hardship and one that often signals that the presence of many others, including housing instability, foregone medical care, and loss of essential services like water and heat (Gould-Werth and Seefeldt 2012; Feeding America 2014). In this sense, for many of the teens and families in our focus group communities, the difficulties they describe may not be just about food but also about daily struggles to meet their basic needs.

That said, food insecurity in particular takes a tremendous toll on young people at this important stage in their lives. Food-insecure youth have poor nutrition and inadequate physical activity, which may jeopardize their physical development (Fram et al. 2015). Moreover, food insecurity can have serious consequences for the mental health of young people. Food insecurity in youth is associated with increased mood, anxiety, and behavior disorders; substance abuse; dysthymia (persistent depressive disorder); and suicidal ideation (Alaimo, Olson, and Frongillo 2002; McLaughlin et al. 2012; Poole-Di Salvo, Silver, and Stein 2016). Episodes of food insecurity can also cause cognitive impairment that jeopardizes young people's educational outcomes (Gunderson and Ziliak 2014). However, hunger alone may not be causing these effects on the health and functioning of food-insecure teens: they may also be the result of the stress of broader material hardship and the different coping mechanisms that teens use to survive.

To date, there is little research on the role that youth play in making ends meet in their families. One small qualitative study documents that young people ages 9–16 in food-insecure households took on responsibility for helping to manage food resources, including participating in parental strategies, initiating their own strategies, and generating resources to provide food for the family (Fram et al. 2015). The authors also found that adults were not always aware of children's experiences. A recent longitudinal study of Baltimore public housing families who participated in the Moving to Opportunity Demonstration (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering 2010) also found youth stepping up early to take on economic responsibilities, calling this phenomenon "expedited adulthood" (DeLuca, Clampett-Lundquist, and Edin 2016). Youth who take on their economic role earliest, dropping out of high school and working, provide an average of 22 percent of their families' income (Scott, Zhang, and Koball 2015).

The findings from our focus groups signal that food-insecure teens overwhelming prefer employment over other ways to generate money. Earnings from youth employment can make a big difference to low-income families, reducing the risk of very low food insecurity 50 percent (Hamersma and Kim 2015). However, taking on a substantial economic role too early can come at a high cost for young people. Many studies have documented that early youth employment may negatively affect high school graduation, particularly for low-income youth and those who work more than part time during the school year (Apel et al. 2008; Oettinger 2000; Rothstein 2001; Warren and Cataldi 2006). Moreover, once they drop out of school, teens who work early have little prospect of going on to college, work fewer hours, and earn less by age 25 than young people who stay in and graduate from high school by age 19 (Latham, Scott, and Koball 2016). The recent study of MTO youth in Baltimore also shows that "expedited adulthood" can trap even the most motivated young people in low-paying, dead-end jobs and push them toward low quality postsecondary education that cannot provide the kind of career path necessary to escape poverty (DeLuca, Clampett-Lundquist, and Edin 2016).

When deprivation is severe and employment options limited, some youth —particularly young men—may turn to stealing or selling drugs. Research suggests that youth growing up in poor families in poor neighborhoods, like some of the ones in this study, experience a compounded risk of engaging in these kinds of delinquent behaviors (Hay et al. 2007). Youth unemployment rates and low wages are also associated with greater arrests for property crime (Allan and Steffensmeier 1989). Nevertheless, the literature on youth risk factors for criminal behavior gener-

ally does not mention food insecurity or the economic pressures that youth in our focus groups described (Shader 2001).Whatever the motivation, youth who engage in in criminal behavior at such young ages put themselves at great risk and undermine their long-term life chances. Young people who engage in criminal behavior are more likely to drop out of high school than their peers (Kirk and Sampson 2013; Latham, Scott, and Koball 2016) and if arrested are also more likely to be incarcerated as adults (Aizer and Doyle 2013).

Similar to other risky coping mechanisms, there is little research that explicitly connects food insecurity with sexual exploitation among youth. Most existing work documents that *adult* women—and men—sometimes resort to transactional sex to get money for food in poor communities in the United States and in other countries (Tsai et al. 2011; Weiser et al. 2007; Whittle et al. 2015). However, we know economic insecurity is one reason women and youth provide when describing why they might trade sex for things they need (see, for example, Dank et al. 2014, 2015; Silverman et al. 2015). And researchers have also found that *homeless youth*, especially lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer teens, are at risk for sexual exploitation (Dank, Yu, and Yahner 2016).

What makes the findings from our focus groups particularly alarming is that the communities where the link between food insecurity and sexual exploitation was strongest were places where teens were stably housed and had deep housing subsidies to protect their families from extreme hardship. This paradox aligns with existing literature on increased risk for young women living in neighborhoods with this kind of concentrated poverty. For example, the American Association of University Women reports that 56 percent of girls in middle and high school report sexual harassment (Hill and Kearl 2011). However, research suggests that women who grow up in chronically disadvantaged communities are even more vulnerable to sexual harassment, exploitation, victimization, and sexual assault (Cobbina, Miller, and Brunson 2008; Menard and Huzinga 2001; Popkin, Leventhal, and Weismann 2010; Smith et al. 2014; Mustaine et al. 2014; Popkin et al. 2016). Moreover, although some research estimates the rate of adolescents having ever exchanged sex or drugs for money as fairly small, at 4 percent (Edwards, Iritani, and Hallfors 2006), nearly one-third of a sample of African American youth living in urban public housing had traded sex for money (Nebbitt et al. 2014).

High levels of unemployment, chronic violence, and trauma in these communities are extreme, and adults sometimes know that these things are going on but do not feel empowered to intervene (Popkin et al. 2016). It is also possible that some of these stories reflect adult traffickers exploiting teens' vulnerabilities to force them into the sex trade, but without more information, we cannot know the extent to which this problem occurs in the focus group communities (Dank et al. 2014).

Regardless of where they live, sexually victimized youth struggle with posttraumatic stress, cognitive distortions, depression, and anxiety, and they are also more likely to engage in substance abuse, suicide, self-injury, binging and purging, and risky sexual behavior (Small and Zweig 2007). These young people may also have difficulty forming healthy relationships as adults.

The findings from this research advance our understanding of teen food insecurity and the kinds of coping mechanisms that youth may employ to survive. However, *quantitative* research is needed to better understand the prevalence of risky coping mechanisms and their relationship to food insecurity and other material hardship. Analysis of existing data, like the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, on youth contributions to household income, employment patterns, and delinquency would be helpful in starting to understand these trends. However, new questions in nationally representative surveys of youth are also needed to link food insecurity and deprivation to coping mechanisms that may put youth at risk in both the short and long term.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The material hardships that young people endure as well as the options they use cope should not be seen as issues in isolation. Their experiences are shaped by multiple ecological factors, including prevailing mainstream expectations, the effects of racial and economic segregation, the resources and supports available in local communities and neighborhoods, and their families (Rawlings 2015; Popkin et al. 2015). This nested complexity makes addressing teen food insecurity an extremely complex issue to address.

In the short term, there are many teen-focused strategies that could help alleviate hunger and direct teens away from risky behavior, including the following:

- **Improve SNAP adequacy:** Teens' insight only confirm conventional wisdom that SNAP benefits, while valuable, are not sufficient to ward off food insecurity. Research has confirmed that benefit levels in SNAP are inadequate for many families who run out before the end of the month (Executive Office of the President of the United States 2015). Recalibrating the benefit has the potential to substantially ameliorate hardship; a recent report from the Institute of Medicine (Caswell and Yaktine 2013) examines the issues of benefit adequacy and explores alternatives in thoughtful detail.

- **Strengthen teen nutrition programs:** Expanding access to school-based meals for teens in the summer months and after classes could make a big difference. Likewise, innovative models such as the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children have shown promise in reducing food insecurity (Collins et al. 2016). Charitable feeding programs could also be adapted in many ways to make them more welcoming and accessible to young people. These strategies are discussed in more depth in the companion report (Waxman and Popkin 2016).

- **Create more and better youth job opportunities:** Under current economic conditions, many youth need to work and get paid. Many of the less-than-minimum-wage subsidized summer programs or unpaid internships available to low-income youth are insufficient. Some efforts in this area are already underway, through efforts like the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative, a coalition of businesses committed to providing apprenticeships, internships, and both part-time and full-time jobs to youth ages 16 to 24 who are not working and out of school.[9] However, our focus groups indicate that there is a need to expand these types of initiatives to include *all* low-income youth; many youth struggling to make ends meet may be in school or working and still experience food insecurity and run the risk of dropping out and engaging in risky behavior. Jobs also need to be consistent with school schedules to make sure students who need to work can do so without sacrificing their education.

- **Foster empowering youth environments:** The Urban Institute and Feeding America are working with teens in Portland to design and pilot a new community-based approach to teen food insecurity (box 2). A teen advisory board and group of local service providers designed a new model that will include training programs for local kids as community health advocates, group activities around food, and teen-led food distribution. The team will be piloting this new approach throughout 2016, and we are excited about the opportunity to learn from a model that lets teens be agents of change. Not only may this model help alleviate food insecurity among teens and their families, it serves as the kind of "identify project" that scholars theorize helps provide especially low-income youth with a strong sense of self and motivation that can help them get through difficult patches during their transition from adolescence to adulthood (DeLuca, Clampett-Lundquist, and Edin, 2016).

- **Use trauma-informed approaches to help teens:** Girls who are sexually exploited often get treated as status offenders and end up in the criminal justice system where they do not get the help they need. Girls of color, especially those who live in deeply poor communities with coercive sexual environments are the most likely to have experienced trauma and to be treated as offenders rather than as children who need mental health and other supports. Advocates recommend training for educators and criminal justice officials in recognizing trauma as well as funding for gender-specific programs to provide prevention and trauma-informed interventions (Saar et al. 2015). Further, to interrupt the intergenerational cycle, many families require two-generational, trauma-informed care and counseling (Scott, Popkin, and Saxena 2016).

Members of New Columbia's Youth Community Advisory Board, or YCAB, pose for a group photo in the safe space the community has dedicated to their efforts. Photo Source: Matt Johnson / Urban Institute

BOX 2 - Addressing Teen Hunger: The Portland Teen Food Program

Families in the Portland, Oregon, HOST site experienced the highest levels of food insecurity among the three HOST communities included in the first round of focus groups: over 70 percent of households reported food insecurity (Scott et al. 2013). In contrast, the US Department of Agriculture reported that only 14 percent of households were food insecure at some time during 2014 (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2015). Focus groups conducted in 2014 underscored the severity of the problem and highlighted the risks that food insecurity creates for teens.

In response, in 2015 Urban and Feeding America launched a pilot program aimed at identifying ways to reduce teen food insecurity in the mixed-income New Columbia community, located in North Portland's Portsmouth neighborhood. New Columbia was redeveloped in 2005 with $35 million in federal HOPE VI funds from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development to Home Forward, the housing authority for Portland and Multnomah County. New Columbia is relatively service rich, with a range of facilities and services located on site. Nevertheless, local food options are limited and the closest full-service grocery store is several miles away.

Building on the relationships developed through HOST, Urban mobilized a group of local service providers and a group of local teens to collaboratively design and then launch a new teen-focused food program. The service providers—Home Forward, Food Works (a youth leadership program), and the Oregon Food Bank—are the Portland Teen Food Collaborative. The collaborative worked closely with Urban to design and facilitate a series of discussion groups with teens to explore issues and solutions related to food insecurity in their community. A group of 12 young people ages 12 to 18 served as the Youth Community Advisory Board (YCAB). These teens participated in monthly discussion groups and committed to providing outreach and support for new services. Urban synthesized information gathered from each group to inform a teen-centered food-program model that reflects New Columbia's needs and resources.

By the end of the seven board sessions, the teens had identified several possible approaches to improving their local food resources, including providing a designated meeting space for teens to access food and services, coupling food distributions and supportive services with activities geared toward teens, and creating opportunities for youth leadership development and youth-led initiatives.

In early 2016, Urban, Home Forward, the Oregon Food Bank and Feeding America launched the new Portland Teen Food Program, based on the teens' recommendations. Monthly food deliveries will be coordinated by teens with Food Bank and Home Forward staff, and a program manager will be hired to work with teens and develop services related to food security. The first food distribution served 116 households, 63 percent of whom had never accessed food assistance before. Urban and the collaborative will develop a 12-week youth empowerment program intended to develop cohorts of teen leaders who are knowledgeable about their local food environment and can be resources for their peers.

Urban is evaluating the pilot program to understand the potential impact of new services on local teens and to develop guidance for other communities interested in a similar collaborative design process.

In the long term, teen food insecurity can only be eliminated by addressing its root cause—family poverty. Teens do not live alone and should not have to take on adult responsibilities prematurely, or face the kinds of impossible choices outlined in this report. To make sure teens are protected, we must create conditions that empower their parents:

- **Basic employment opportunities and improved access to jobs:** In many communities like those profiled in this report, there is an acute shortage of employment across the board. The public and private sectors together have to find more effective ways to create jobs (Edin and Shaefer 2015; Fieldhouse et al. 2011). Further, many adults—who themselves might have faced impossible choices during their own youth—have great difficulty accessing employment. Sometimes this is because of exclusions for criminal history that come with their own unique challenges, but in other cases, entry to the labor market is blocked by limited access to training, transportation, and child care that require greater workforce development and work support investments to surmount (Golden, Loprest, and Adams 2013). However, there is also important work with employers to be done to change the way they automate their searches, craft their job descriptions, and think about training to improve access, particularly for entry-level workers (Capelli 2012).

- **Better quality jobs:** Much of the hardship described in the focus groups comes about because low-income parents cannot find the *kind* of work that allows them to earn a decent living. Many cities and states are passing minimum-wage laws, mandatory sick leave, and scheduling regulations. However, at the end of the day, businesses have to recognize how investing in good jobs benefits not only workers but also the public good and their profitability. Government can help support this shift by increasing transparency and accountability around the public cost of private low-road business practices as well as aligning tax and regulatory regimes to cultivate the creation and maintenance of good jobs in local communities (Scott, Baylor, and Spaulding 2016).

- **Cash assistance for families:** When parents cannot earn enough, there should be ways to get the money they need to cover the costs of essentials, like rent, utilities, transportation, child care, and clothing. In recent years, direct cash assistance to families in need through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program has dramatically decreased, as states tighten eligibility requirements and redirect TANF dollars for other purposes (Schott, Pavetti, and Finch 2012). Recalibrating TANF to maximize cash assistance and improving access to the program would take the pressure off parents to find alternative ways of making quick cash for necessities and may help youth in poor families avoid taking on adult economic roles in their households prematurely.

- **Provide better access to opportunity neighborhoods for families with housing subsidy living in in concentrated poverty.** There is clear evidence that helping deeply poor families move from distressed, high poverty communities to communities of opportunity has important benefits for children. In particular, research shows that for girls, escaping the pressures of the coercive sexual environment associated with chronic disadvantage leads to improved mental health (Popkin et al. 2016; Popkin, Leventhal, and Weismann 2010; Popkin et al. 2015). And more recent findings from the Moving to Opportunity Demonstration show long-term economic benefits for children of both genders—gains that may help them truly escape poverty (Chetty, Hendren, and Katz 2015).

- **Expand housing assistance to help other low income families manage the largest cost in their family budget.** Housing is usually the biggest cost for low-income families, yet only one in four eligible households are lucky enough to receive a deep federal subsidy. We know that housing assistance protects against homelessness and instability; we also know that it allows families to spend more on their children's needs. To address this problem, the Bipartisan Policy Center's Housing Commission has proposed both a significant expansion of the Housing Choice Voucher program along with an emergency fund that would serve less-deeply-poor families and help prevent them from slipping into homelessness (Turner, Cunningham, and Popkin 2015). Another alternative is to enact a Federal Renters' Tax Credit for landlords that would help offset high housing costs for low-income renters (Sard and Fischer 2013). The earned income tax credit already uses the tax code to help provide support for low-income workers and has shown success in buffering some of the consequences of low-wages, however it alone is not enough to protect families from the kinds of serious hardship we have documented in this report (Edin and Schafer 2015).

Addressing teen food insecurity is a great challenge, but the stakes are too high to ignore the problem. These young people are the future of our country. They and their families need real solutions.

/ NOTES

1. The US Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service maintains national statistics on household food insecurity, and published figures described trends before and after the great recession here: http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-security-in-the-united-states/interactive-chart-food-security-trends.aspx
2. The US Department of Agriculture classifies households as marginally food secure if they answer affirmatively to one or two reported indications on the Core Food Security Module. This condition is described as one that typically reflects anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house.
3. For information, see "HOST: Housing Opportunity and Services Together," Urban Institute, accessed April 28, 2016, http://www.urban.org/policy-centers/metropolitan-housing-and-communities-policy-center/projects/host-housing-opportunity-and-services-together.
4. The income threshold for SNAP benefits exceeds the federal poverty line in all states.
5. For a detailed breakdown of 2015 youth employment by industry and occupation, see the Bureau of Labor Statistics' website: "Demographics," Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed July 27, 2016, http://www.bls.gov/cps/demographics.htm.
6. 2010–14 American Community Survey five-year estimates.
7. In California, North Carolina, and Washington, DC, *all minors* have to get a work permit to get a job. Because of this barrier, young people in our focus groups in these states perceived that only less desirable employers are willing to hire them. In Oregon, the burden falls more solidly in the lap of the employers, which have to apply for permission to hire young people between the ages of 14 and 17. And in Illinois, the work-permit threshold is lower at age 16. However, the effect may be the same. See "Wage and Hour Division (WHD): Employment/Age Certificate," US Department of Labor, last modified January 2016, http://www.dol.gov/whd/state/certification.htm#2.
8. Literature has long documented the acute and unique barriers to employment that face young, African American men (Quane, Wilson, and Hwang 2015).
9. For more information, see "About the Initiative," 100,000 Opportunities Initiative, accessed July 27, 2016, http://www.100kopportunities.org/about-the-initiative/.

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/ ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Susan J. Popkin is a senior fellow and director of the Neighborhoods and Youth Development initiative in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute. A nationally recognized expert on public and assisted housing, Popkin directs a research program that focuses on the ways neighborhood environments affect outcomes for youth and on assessing comprehensive community-based interventions. A particular focus is gender differences in neighborhood effects and improving outcomes for marginalized girls. Popkin is the coauthor of the award-winning *Moving to Opportunity: The Story of an American Experiment to Fight Ghetto Poverty*, *lead author of The Hidden War: Crime and the Tragedy of Public Housing in Chicago*, *and coauthor of Public Housing Transformation: The Legacy of Segregation.*

Molly M. Scott is a senior research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute. In recent years, much of her work has focused on understanding how to improve the lives of the ever-more-diverse low-income young people. In particular, Ms. Scott has published briefs on the relationship between high school drop out, early work experiences, and household needs. She also has examined two-generation approaches to poverty alleviation, leading the process study for the HOST demonstration, a 3-site full-family demonstration aiming to improving life outcomes for parents and their children and end the cycle of poverty, and working closely with Somos Langley Park, a Promise Neighborhood in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC.

Martha Galvez is a research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Her expertise is in housing and homelessness policy, with a focus on examining how interventions aimed at improving housing stability and choice for low-income families are implemented, and how they affect individuals, families, and neighborhoods. Galvez's current projects include studies on housing stability, child welfare, and neighborhood mobility outcomes for low-income families who receive housing choice vouchers, and a study examining the role of race/ethnicity in housing and neighborhood location decisions. She is also interested in improving access to and use of integrated housing and social service data in order to understand the characteristics of families living in subsidized housing and the housing and service needs of vulnerable households. She has experience in mixed-methods research and has designed and managed studies involving collection and analysis of complex administrative, survey, and qualitative data. Galvez earned her BA in sociology from Wesleyan University and her MUP and PhD in public policy/administration from the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School at New York University.

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2100 M Street NW Washington, DC 20037