



A Brief on  
**“The Causes, Consequences, and Future of Senior Hunger in America”**  
a groundbreaking study sponsored by  
**Meals On Wheels Association of America Foundation**  
March 5, 2008

**What is this study?**

It is the most comprehensive national research study to look exclusively at *senior hunger* in the United States.

**Why is it considered groundbreaking?**

According to Dr. Eugene Smolensky, Professor of Public Policy at the University of California at Berkeley, and renowned economist who reviewed the study independently, it is a “first class report. . . a national study, using up to the minute methodology and the latest available data which finally takes us beyond anecdote, and small and partial studies, to a reliable picture of [senior] hunger nationwide.”

**Is there senior hunger in America?**

Absolutely. According to the report, hunger is a serious threat facing millions of seniors in the United States.

**Why was the report commissioned and who funded it?**

The Meals On Wheels Association of America Foundation (MOWAAF), with the financial underwriting of Harrah’s Foundation commissioned it precisely because, prior to this study, there was no reliable picture of senior hunger nationwide. MOWAAF is a 501 (c) (3) organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness about the problem of senior hunger in America and to solicit the financial support, primarily from corporations and individual donors, to eliminate senior hunger in America.

**Who conducted the study?**

There were two Co-Principal Investigators, James P. Ziliak, Ph.D., Gatton Endowed Chair in Microeconomics and Director of the Center for Poverty Research, University of Kentucky and Craig Gundersen, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Iowa State University. They were assisted by Margaret Haist, Ph.D., Senior Reseacher, University of Kentucky.

**How is “hunger” defined in the study?**

In order to utilize existing national databases, the researchers looked at “food insecurity,” the term defined by the Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.” This food insecurity

is measured across a continuum. In the study, Ziliak and Gundersen focus on three categories: the marginally food insecure; those at-risk of hunger (the food insecure); and those suffering from hunger (the very low food secure).

**Using the broader definition, how many seniors in America are facing the threat of hunger?**

*In excess of 5 million individuals -- an astonishing 11.4 percent of all seniors.*

**Does the study identify who is hungry and who is at-risk?**

Yes.

**Who is most likely to be at-risk?**

The most likely to be at-risk are seniors with limited incomes, under age 70, African-Americans, Hispanics, the unmarried, renters and persons living in the South.

**Is hunger confined primarily to those who are poor?**

No. The poor are more likely to be at-risk, but half of all at-risk seniors have incomes above the federal poverty line.

**Is hunger primarily a problem for minorities?**

No, not at all. Over two-thirds of all hungry seniors are white.

**Is the report contradictory in saying that certain minorities and the poor are at greatest risk, but there are more at-risk whites than any other race and as many at-risk seniors above the poverty line as below it?**

No. There are a greater number of white seniors in the United States than there are minority seniors.

**Does the report find any correlation between marital status and the risk of being hungry?**

Yes. Being divorced, separated, or never married is a risk factor. Married seniors are 20 percent less likely to be at risk of hunger.

**What about issues related to intergenerational family living arrangements?**

One of the study's most astonishing findings is that living with a grandchild in the home is a risk factor for hunger. In fact, seniors living with a grandchild are 50 percent more likely to be at-risk of hunger than those who don't.

**How about age? Are older seniors more likely to be hungry?**

That has been the conventional wisdom, but what the study finds is strikingly different. *The research clearly indicates that the senior cohort most likely at-risk of hunger is the younger old, those individuals in the 60-64 age range.* An 84 year old is over one-third less likely to be at-risk of hunger than a 64 year old

**Is there a clear correlation between hunger risk and education?**

Yes. Being a high school drop out increases the risk that a senior will suffer hunger. A high school graduate is 20 percent less likely to be at risk than a drop out. A college graduate is 40 percent less likely.

### **What factors contribute to hunger or being at-risk of it?**

Controlling for other factors the study enumerates the following causes:

- Being between the ages of 60 and 64
- Living with a grandchild
- Living at or below the poverty line
- Being a high school drop out
- Being an African-American or Hispanic
- Being divorced or separated
- Being a renter

### **We have long had anecdotal evidence that African-Americans were more at risk of hunger than whites. Does this report tell us anything new relative to hunger and race?**

Absolutely. First, the report gives us more than anecdote; it gives us concrete, quantitative evidence. Second, it reveals a surprisingly large gap relative to race.  *Holding other factors constant, African-Americans are 75 percent more likely to be at-risk of hunger than whites. Hispanics are 20 percent more likely than whites.*

### **Does hunger or risk of hunger affect health status?**

Yes. These seniors are significantly more likely to be in poor or fair health. In addition, they are more likely to have lower intakes of major nutrients.

### **Does hunger have an impact on the Activities of Daily Living (ADL) for seniors?**

Yes, a staggering impact. A senior at risk of hunger has the same chance of an ADL limitation as someone 14 years older. That is, there is in effect a large disparity between actual chronological and “physical” age, so that a 64 year old senior suffering hunger is likely to have the ADL limitations of a 78 year old.

### **What about senior hunger and the future? Does the study predict declining hunger rates?**

Quite the contrary. The study projects significant increases by 2025 – *75 percent more seniors will experience some form of food insecurity and 33 percent more will suffer hunger.*