



Writing Against Hunger 2025 – Winners & Finalists

Presented by the West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH)

www.wscah.org

About the Contest

Each year, WSCAH invites young writers to raise their voices against hunger through poetry and essays. Writing Against Hunger empowers students to reflect on food justice, community, and equity—putting their creativity to work for change.

In 2025, we received a record number of powerful submissions from students across New York City and beyond. We are proud to present the selected winners and finalists whose work resonated deeply with our panel of judges and community members.

Special Thanks To Our Judges:

Truth Thomas

Maritza Rivera

J R (Judy) Turek

Their care, discernment, and literary expertise helped shape this year's publication.

Read on for inspiring words from a new generation of writers working to end hunger.

DIGNITY | COMMUNITY | CHOICE

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(Winner, 2024 Writing Against Hunger Poetry & Essay Contest)

Winners – Poetry & Essay

Nisansa Abeyweera
10-12 year old category (poetry)

Hunger's Whisper

It's a mysterious thing, hunger—
A mere word, yet with the essence of a ravenous beast.
Lurking, in the depths of your mind,
In every crevice of your conscience.

Silently, hunger hangs over you,
Following your every move.
It is carried by faint aromas of
Spices, flavors, and herbs.
Mixing together in perfect harmony,
Bubbling rhythmically on the stove.

All while taunting you,
Being so far out of your reach.
That leaves your stomach hollow,
Echoing.

Hunger is deceiving.
Like a shadow,
Tucked away, hidden from the outside world
At first glance.
Yet constantly tugging at your thoughts
From within.

Hunger's accomplice,
Its partner in crime—
named Nostalgia.
Distant memories
Of childhood meals and homemade dinners
Awaken the voice of hunger—
The voice that rings loud and clear
Every hour, every minute
Of your life.

Why is it,
That hunger picks and chooses,
Who it strikes next?
Who must bear the heavy burden
That weighs down their shoulders—
Called Hunger

Frank Lin
10-12 Category (poetry)

The Dreaded Beasts of Hunger

The shattering roar
of the Lion.

The maniacal laughter
of Hyenas.

Those claws that catch,
Those jaws that snatch,
for food.

Beware the hunger, my friend.
The twisting of minds,
The warping of fate.

For the hunger approaches
with eyes of flame,
devouring the essence of self.

We are no different
from the beasts we fear.
Divided by hunger,
soon to be near.

For what is society,
with hunger inside?
A terrible beast
feared by all humankind.

The fattened ones feast,
while the skinny ones crawl,
gnawing on scraps
if they get any at all.

Like lions hoarding,
like vultures who sneer,
the strong take their fill
while the weak disappear.

Lila Stempeck
10-12 Category (poetry)

Spork

You walk past families eating a feast for Thanksgiving and your throat tightens at the sight.
 You wish you could be grateful.
 You wish you could appreciate what you have.
 But that's hard since everyone else has so much.
 You already know the drill.
 "Honey, this year has been hard with food"
 Mom would then offer you a leftover, half-eaten turkey sandwich to make up for it.
 But as you open your door,
 You know this time it was going to be different.

You smell a turkey.
 A delicious,
 Cooked to perfection,
 Turkey.
 Your brain wants to know what's going on but your stomach wants something else.
 You let your appetite lead you to the kitchen and your eyes grow as big as saucers.
 You do a double take.
 Right before your eyes is a feast.
 A turkey as big as a chair,
 Broccoli and cheese casseroles that look like your passageway to heaven,
 Countless pies,
 And enough mashed potatoes to serve an army.
 And right in the middle of it all...
 A spork.
 Clean as a whistle, with a warm smile.

"Mom, dad, you have some explaining to do."

"We walked in and a spork with a face was standing there. And then it talked," mom says.

"What do you mean it talked?"

"It comes with a deal. It will whip up all the food we want, whenever we want but only under one condition," she replies.

"I can see you took the deal," you say, eyeing the abundance of food. "But what is the 'condition?'"

"We must share our food with anyone else who needs it."

A few days later...

You smile and wave to the person you're serving.
 It warms your heart, making a difference in the world.
 Giving to other people,
 Is your way of giving to yourself.

Ana Hernandez
13-15 Category (poetry)

How it Used to Be

It wasn't always like this.

Once, she filled our plates simultaneously,
Confident and laughing,
Mouth full,
Pressed kisses to my forehead,
Lips smelling of pepper and lime.

But now, she waits.
Pretends she's full, stomach hollow,
Cuts her portion in half, then in quarters,
Pushes the last bite toward me,
With a smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

Her ribs are a quiet confession,
Whispers of the pain she endures,
She says she isn't hungry,
That the weight just "falls off sometimes",
That she "likes it this way".

But I remember.
I remember a mother who never let herself shrink,
Who sang while she cooked,
Who saved the last spoonful for herself,
Instead of scraping her plate clean in silence.

I want to tell her I see it,
That I hear the way her stomach pleads in the night,
That her love should never lead to her starving,
But she meets my gaze soft but certain,
And I chew my meal in guilty silence.

It wasn't always like this,
But as time goes on and memories fade,
All I can do is lull myself to sleep with thoughts,
Of how it used to be.

Chloe Deng
13-15 Category (poetry)

Famine

In Global, we learned about the
Northern Chinese Famine of 1876
When the land went barren,
The brazen heat unrelenting,
And the rain nowhere to be found

Crops withered alongside their farmers;
Nine and a half million lives lost
Now it's just a number;
A tragic event lost in the pages of time

That night my family has dinner
Bok choy, Szechuan spicy beef, and
a bowl of freshly steamed rice.
My mom tells me to eat plenty of meat,
"Not the rice," she tells me

Rice is cheap, bought by the pound
Two bags for seven dollars
It's nothing but an accessory to the meal.
At the end of the night,

As I bring dishes in the kitchen,
All of the bright blue bowls are half full with rice;
Forgotten.

I watch my mom scrape away the mushy clumps,
the juice of the meat oozing behind it;
down into the black abyss of our trash can,
It'll be gone by the next morning.

But I wonder
if that rice could have saved a life
I wonder if it still can.

Julia Harris
16-18 Category (poetry)

drowning can be empty

i did not want to confess to my mother
who lived on a sinking island
an ocean away
that i was drowning on dry land
choking down the clean american water
as the tide crashed on her tin roof
the roads a river of shit, garbage, and slaughter

i did not want to confess to my mother
that i was choking on fresh water
though it churned
down in my bloated stomach
a fat, dead sea with no fish
no life, nothing but saliva
and an ever-hungry wish

i did not want to confess to my mother
the fat and piggish ways
i laughed with other families at dinner
unsure and uncaring
what on earth my aunt's baby ate
for between the seven of us
not a single one was possible to satiate

i did not confess this to my daughter
until one family dinner with full plates
where me and my cousin laughed
grateful our children would never relate

Isaiah Asher
10-12 Category (essay)

Writing Against Hunger

It was the day before Thanksgiving. As we were walking up to the house, I felt the sun giving a cold light, spreading a chill throughout my body. My sister and I were carrying a turkey dinner to a small, tidy house to deliver it as part of a program that helps feed older people who need help all around Albany. We were about halfway through our deliveries. The woman who opened the door was old but looked youngish in a way. She was standing in a living room with many photos, black and white, young and old, and of various shapes and sizes.

While my sister and I were admiring the inside of her home, the woman told us that she had immigrated from Italy in the early twentieth century and had just celebrated her one hundredth birthday a few months ago. She seemed so happy talking to us, at least for me it made me swell up with pride at how much joy we made her feel. I was only ten at the time and I had just met someone ten times my age, this seemed so far away for me; she was talking about living at a time that I could only walk through using different books. I was surprised and confused that she, a woman with such a lovely house and character, was going to be alone and hungry during the holiday season.

Growing up in New York City, I had seen hunger before, but usually on the streets or on the subways. I know that there are many people all over the world who have something called food insecurity. That is when a person does not know when their next meal is going to be or doesn't know where their next meal is going to come from. What I didn't know was that hunger could come in all forms. Even people with a home can have food insecurity and not have enough support to live comfortably.

Many cultures prominently feature very important meals and dishes. For example, Thanksgiving in America, which is about food and togetherness, is one important part of my family traditions. This is why I was so sorrowful about how this wonderful woman would be spending her holiday season lonely, which should be spent with people close to you, not all alone.

Sometimes when I'm lying in my bed at night I think "why are there so many people going hungry when there is ample food everywhere?" This is true about people who have homes live in and for people who don't, which I only learned from that kind 100-year-old woman. I think it would be good for everyone to spend a day in the shoes of others, even one day I think would humble everyone. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "there are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of food." This quote made sense to me after that Thanksgiving Eve because food not only fills your body with nutrients but also brings people together, creating a sense of unity and hope.

Finalists – Poetry & Essay

Cecilia Baptista
10-12 Category (poetry)

The Food Pantry

The line out the door -----
Was oh so loong
The wait

Looked hard. Sad too.

The people who came in just needed more.
One asked for a milk
One asked for veggies
But they all looked hungry.

People of all kinds came together in the cold
To share food with people that don't have a ton
These are the helpers that we need to see.
They are the example we need to follow.

The problem of hunger that is happening now
Is one of the simplest problems of all.
There are problems like politics and war
How can we solve the hardest problems
When we cannot solve the simplest?

I know you will not pay much heed
To the words I am saying.
But I want you to know
I tried.

Charlotte Caplan
10-12 Category (poetry)

untitled

Food

Showers you with kisses of gratitude and warmth
Brings you together
With people you love
Brings you joy
Heals the soul

Hunger

Wraps its cruel wings
Around you
Takes you
To a place of begging, of sorrow
Brings the unknown

Food

Fills up plates
Fills up stomachs
Fills up so much more

Hunger

Wrestles with peace
Leaves you empty,
hollow.

Food and Hunger

Can come together
With dignity and respect
When those who have
share with those who need
We all deserve to be filled with
Food, kindness, and community

Zachary Cho
10-12 Category (poetry)

Hunger

a Terza Rima (Without an Iambic Pentameter)

Those who feed the poor pursue it with zeal
 For one in six children are hungry¹
 And unsure of where they can get their next meal

For it is innately discriminatory
 Thus it is a matter of social justice
 For example - take the Black minority

For them, the food insecurity rate is
 Double the White hunger rate²
 This can serve as a basis

For hunger- a meal could be days late
 Other minorities who have the same hunger
 Is a multitude my words could not sate

Populations affected by this problem of hunger
 Include the American Indian, Alaska Native, and Hispanic
 Minorities, especially those who are younger

That evidence can show we should rightly panic
 For these great wrongs could accrue
 And as such many children are starving and sick

Hunger is a Social Justice issue
 For eating is a human right³
 To fix this- we need everybody- including you

¹According to childrensdefense.org, as of 2020 (Yes, it is old, but this is the most recent source I could find.) "at least 1 in 6 children lived in food-insecure households in 11 states and the District of Columbia, up from 14.6% or 1 in 7 children in 2019"

²Taken from feedingamerica.org- as of 2023 - "22% of Black people in the United States experienced food insecurity. This is more than twice the rate of White people." In addition, 'Hunger Rate' is referring to the food insecurity rate

³The right to adequate food is recognized in Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (Article 11)

Rebecca Gingold
10-12 Category (poetry)

Break the Chain

People walk by,
I wish I had friends nearby.
Sitting on the rough ground,
I wish I had a soft couch that was safe and sound.

The rain falls like hail,
I wish I had shelter, a fairytale.
The wind blows, making my spine tingle,
I wish I had warm clothes.

My mouth is dry, I feel the thirst,
I wish I had water, it's the worst.
A sign up ahead,
I wish I could read.

My baby cries in my arms,
I wish I could provide.
Alone on the streets, In despair,
I wish I had a partner to care.

My stomach grumbles, the baby weeps
I wish for a meal that my soul keeps.
My scrawny body aches with pain,
I wish I had food, to break this chain.

Pema Goldberg
10-12 Category (poetry)

The Tanka Epic of the Desert Walker

A new day begins,
I awaken with a sigh,
Yet another day,
I start, smelling something good,
I thought I was alone here.

And yet, I smell food,
I walk across the desert,
Toward the small fire,
A boy sits there, tending it,
Maybe another merchant?

Used to solitude,
I don't know what to say now,
Humans are complex,
I say, "What are you making?"
The words sound strange in my mouth.

He seems quite surprised,
He sits there, in shock perhaps,
Shocked into silence,
"Qu-quail." He finally says.
"Please, could you spare some?" I ask.

He swallows "All right."
He hands me a plate of quail.
"Thank you." I replied.
As we finish eating he asks,
"Who are you? Why are you here?"

I stand up, silent,
I hand his plate back to him,
"The Desert Walker."
"But then, are the legends true?"
I turn around, walk away

Letizia Ilacqua
10-12 Category (poetry)

Empty plates

In a quiet corner
shadows creep
Where hunger whispers
Dreams are steep

The pantry is hollow
The fridge stands still
Each stomach rumble
is like a quiet chill

Children keep their eyes wide
Searching for hope
A better life
a better world

Among some sorrows
shadows creep
Seeds of kindness
hearts keep

So let's break the silence
Make our voices loud
Together we'll share
United and proud

Imagine a table
Wide and round
Where no one feels lonely
Where hope can be found.

Sophie Sargsyan
10-12 Category (poetry)

Why me..?

I wake up to another day of the same thing and leaning on an itchy brick wall.
No food, no water, barely any sleep, and people walking past me ignoring me.
"Excuse me sir, do you have any money to spare? Even a penny?"

No answer.

The next person walks by.
"Excuse me ma'am, do you have any money to spare?"

No answer. Not even a word.

As I'm sitting down, with the cup in front of my legs, I look at the people with money and dream
since that's the only thing I can do.
"How I wish that I was me."

Why not me? What did I do to deserve this? I've been living like this for the past 8 years.

Living like this made me realize that there's no point in waiting for a miracle and that I'll
continue living like this until the day I die.

Sophie Tong
10-12 Category (poetry)

untitled

Happens to everyone: is either loathed and feared, or just a mere annoyance and prompt to eat

Unnecessarily causes 21 thousand annual deaths in the US alone—yet 300 thousand die from
Overeating

Not equally shared: some people have more than enough, while others have none

Give to the community when you can, because even if the word "hungry" describes that feeling before
lunch for you, for someone else it could mean starvation

Earth provided us with enough to feed everyone—that food you scraped into the trash could've been a
meal for someone in need

Ranting about a homeless guy in the subway isn't helpful—next time buy them a meal.

Milo Uhrmacher
10-12 Category (poetry)

Look Around

Look around the table
Cultures are connected here
Through food
Love
Memories

Tomorrow
We are strangers
But today
We are people who are sharing a meal

Today
We are family

Look around the streets of New York
Hunger separates us

But at my table
Everyone has a seat
Doesn't matter if you don't have a penny to your name
If you look any different from me
Or if you speak a whole different language

Because today
We are family

Look around the supermarket
Food is a privilege
Something that only money can buy

For some
Food is a winning lottery ticket
For others
Food's just another rock at the beach

But for now
Let us eat

Because today we are family

Isadora Costas-Munier
13-15 category (poetry)

There is under the girl's bed a monster
 That even her mother can't scare away
 A monster that every night creeps out from its dark hiding place and climbs up her bed
 Clawing at the washed out pink sheets and digging its fangs into the girl's favorite
 nightgown, tearing apart the cherished garment
 Settling only when it has crawled deep in her bones
 The monster never sleeps, and so she rarely does
 Because it, the thing, grumbles and hisses from sundown till the early hours of the day

The monster likes to pull her hair out by the handful, till the ponytail she used to wear
 with such pride became nothing but a pitiful excuse for what it once had been
 The monster is careful to keep her body weak, frail and prone to falling sick
 Delighting in crushing her still growing bones in its cruel fists
 It eats at her from the inside, taking roots so deep in the girl it forever becomes a part of
 her
 Growing stronger by the day, while she slowly fades away
 The woman she could have grown up to be is a dream that slips from her tiny fists
 The monster taking from her the strength to take part in the games she used to love
 The girl who once was the fastest at tag and who could throw the ball the farthest
 amongst all the boys and girls in her class
 Now, sits in a corner alone with her monster, watching with envy her friends play while
 her lips turn blue despite spring's warm breeze
 And in class her head lies resting on her arms, her eyelids heavy from a burden far too
 big for the little girl to carry

Slowly, her body breaks, chipping away bit by bit, till one day, before anyone can see it
 Before even the girl's mind, still intact, can sense it
 Her body succumbs to the monster, too weak to keep fighting an unfair battle
 Her organs failing one by one, the monster now unstoppable, too fast for the men in
 white coats to keep up with, despite their best but too late efforts
 Till the girl's heart beats one last time before she is stolen from her mother's arms and
 thrown into the monster's eternal ice cold embrace

On the other side of town there are little girls just like her
 With big dreams and bright futures
 Who go to sleep with teddy bears and tender words as only companions
 They will never have to know what the monster looks like or how it likes to whisper
 terrifying nightmares that keep even the bravest of girls lying awake afraid to fall asleep

Every little girl and boy the monster takes is a loss we must all carry the responsibility of
 Every night we let the monster win while we sit by in our cushy beds, closing our doors
 and eyes on the reality of what is happening
 Is a night we wake up from complicit in an innocent's murder
 Let it be then that tonight be the night we are woken up to the urgency of taking action
 Let it be that tonight we vow to never let a child go hungry on our watch again

Adil Khan
13-15 Category (poetry)

A Taste of Memory

Tangy, citrusy, sweet
 I think about diving into those flavors
 As my mouth waters
 Waiting
 For mama to peel the orange for me
 My pudgy fingers
 Are no match for the leathery shield

All done!

She placed
 the plate of love
 Within my reach

The juicy first bite
 Of the perfect orange
 Burst in my mouth
 Oh!
 The tart kick first jabs
 At my tongue
 Then, the sweet liquid
 Flows through my teeth
 And down my throat

The nectar of the orange
 Quenches my thirst,
 With every wonderful bite I take
 As I swallow, the flavor only grows more intense

Until

I open my eyes
 I am forced back to reality
 I realize
 The orange is just a distant memory
 Something I can only yearn for
 Once taken for granted,
 Now unattainable

As I swallow the sad, grey lump
 of wet rice
 Mixed with a tablespoon of tears
 Fresh from my tired eyes
 Tracing the wrinkled path
 Down into the dull bowl of mush

I am hit with the bitter taste of
 Nothing
 And hunger

Despite
 Residing in the "Orange State"
 With nothing more to afford

I can only remember

Winston Krow
13-15 Category (poetry)

Modern Hunger

he kitchen is bare, pantry dry
The days feel like years as hope slips by

A hollow ache that crawls
A silence deep within is called

Hunger's grip is chaining me
I am wishing for a bite to set me free

The truth is that I am not alone
Millions want food for their own

James Moon
13-15 Category (poetry)

air is a feast

society seems to believe that one can
 survive on air alone -
 let it swell the stomach,
 flesh freed from the weight of food,
 it advertises itself best on the streets.

i ask, "where may i find air?"
 in the barren aisles
 of grocery stores during a pandemic,
 in the breath of children,
 spines bowed like question marks
 on the upper east side,
 methodically chewing on air for breakfast,
 lunch, and dinner.

air is both famine and feast,
 scarcity siphoning hope
 from hollowed bones -
 a parasite gnawing
 at the carcass of our hunger,
 at the rot of a dying promise,
 this, is american hunger.

air slips through the digestive tracts
 of people i pass each day,
 and the air whispers that emptiness
 can become our sustenance,
 if we endure it long enough.

but people will remember -
 clutching the memory
 of what it means to be full.

and when we devour hungrily
 on air for a long enough time,
 we will rise like phantoms
 with lungs full of sky,
 bodies weightless,

for that will be the end,

of our lifelong feast on air.

Tara Prakash
16-18 Category (poetry)

Tomato Room

Fingers massaging dirt like skin,
 Like soft shoulder, tight and knotted. We untangle tomato roots
 With hands valleyed in callouses, use the two-finger trick your

Mother taught you to press the body into soil, hugging the stem,
 Coaxing it in the hole three digits deep. This is how to love something,
 To get good at it.

I overwater the plant to death, drown it in hose
 Three times a day, until the pot is brimming.
 You say it reminds you of the seventh grade penny lab,

The one about surface tension, the amount of something a body
 Can withstand until it breaks. That time at my annual physical,
 Standing eight feet from the wall, one eye closed, my gaze

Straining to see the letters on the white sheet, tiny, tiny, hiding from me. E, I finally say,
 And the nurse shakes her head, F. I buy glasses the next day,
 thin narrow ones rimmed in brown to blend in with my bangs.

There is shame in impairment, like tenth grade reaching for the pull-up
 Bar and fingers just inches below. I kept jumping, hands raised.
 Some days, I wonder where that went, the refusal to use the stool,

My ankles and feet sore and tired from jumping, jumping.
 Now, I wipe a hand over the glass, the smear of mud blocking my vision. You cannot
 Force a body to see what's in front of it.

When neighbors come over, I stand by the wilted and yellowed tomato plant.
 Poor drainage, poor soil, I say before they ask. I learn to blame the uncontrollables,
 the independent variables moving up, down, separate from the rest of the world.

Everyone is a product
 Of environment, tomato plant and all. People leave and it's just me
 And the tomato plant. I slump down,

rest my head on the ceramic edge. Beneath it all, heartbeat. Rain falls, slow,
 then fast. I open my mouth to let it in, and I'm back in the gym, staring up
 At the pull-up bar, and I stop jumping, press my fingers into the tight spots

Of my ankle, relax the body into survival, even if short,
 And the world is falling apart, sobbing,
 and I drink in the tears, and we drown together.

Hailey Lee
13-15 Category (essay)

Kimchi has evolved from being a staple side dish in Korean households into a necessity for any hip modern Americans wanting to develop a gut of healthy bacteria and an open mind on foreign cuisine. Before its emerging popularity as a superfood, however, Kimchi was a food of necessity through generations of famine and war. Despite Korea's small population and territory, or perhaps because of it, Korea was part of various conflicts and wars that limited the quantity of food available to the people. Add in harsh winters and often unsympathetic kings, the people of Korea struggled to find a way to store food for an extended period of time. A key solution to this problem was the development of kimchi and other fermented food as it provided the Korean people with a stable supply of vitamins and calories for an extended period of time. The history of fermentation and its benefits refute how corporate America and the government deal with food availability as they prioritized sheer efficiency in terms of profits, and why we need to learn from the past to incorporate healthier food habits for the future.

Preserved food is not only seen in Korea's history, but also in cultures all around the world such as Sweden's and China's. Surströmming and stinky tofu are two of the most infamous foul-smelling foods that were created through the process of fermentation yet are cherished by the people for their roles during the harsh times of their ancestors. The process of creating these two dishes, along with other fermented food, are different as sun-drying, smoking, or freezing are used depending on the country's climate and available resources, shedding further insight of the historical context within each dish. But beyond the practical usage of each food, the existence of the food itself connects families separated by generations through the perseverance of recipes. Even the placement of food is considered important, as in Korea, there are certain mannerisms and set-ups one must follow at the dining table. Details like whether the soup bowl goes to the left or right of the plate means the difference between life and death (which is not a hyperbole as it indicates whether the food is intended for the living or the honored deceased). All of these examples illustrate a trait that is absent from the fast-food production culture of America: care and time. To put in effort to make sure that everything is done properly is detrimental to profit and is hence avoided in America, yet it is precisely what makes food special in various countries.

This is not to say that preservation of food is neglected in America, and in fact, modern food science allows for preservation of food even beyond the typical range of fermentation. Yet, one must ask themselves, at what expense do we extend their shelf lives? Toxins from the chemical preservatives pile up in the body, such as nitrates or even the presence of microplastics, leading to a higher risk of chronic diseases, digestive problems and even birth defects. This pileup of unhealthy substances is what occurs when proper care and time isn't prioritized, and instead the art of preserving food becomes a perverse method of increasing profits. Besides the preservation issue, another problem is sugar. Specifically, white sugar, a small harmless looking crystal that is added in most if not all consumable items (or some kind of sweetening replacement). As corporate America incorporates more white sugar into all dishes to enhance taste, with it comes an increasing risk of diabetes. Diabetes itself might not be particularly life-threatening, but it acts as a host that invites countless other misfortunes.

Food in ancient times was an ever-present issue that would linger in the minds (and stomachs) of all. The hardships of war, merciless winters and the never ending hunt for food led to the innovation of fermentation. However, American food insecurity comes not from war and famines, but from prioritizing profit over all. With the ever-rising cases of health-related diseases like diabetes, it is no surprise that one of the wealthiest nations on Earth continues to be one of the unhealthiest as well. With parents working jobs around the clock, the warmth of a homemade meal is fading from the minds of children. Lunchboxes that require no cooking, like Lunchables, are growing popular for working parents, but they are loaded with preservatives that are detrimental to children's health. Younger generations are getting addicted to the chemical filled tastes while destroying the foundation of their health. To preserve our health, we need to change our food and the approach we take in acquiring it, by learning from the past and looking into the future.

Keyana Orcel
16-18 Category (essay)

Hunger in a Rich Nation

America is one of the richest countries in the world. Hunger should not exist yet everyday millions of Americans go to bed without enough food. It's haunting to think about. How can there be so much food around yet so many people stay hungry? Hunger in America is not just about the lack of food it's about inequality, injustice and a system that often chooses profit over people.

Food is more than just something we eat. It connects us to our families, our culture, and our memories. I think about Sunday dinners in my household with warm plates of rice, beans, fried plantains, and pasta on the table. We talk, laugh and bond over the food that was made and the history behind it. These moments create a sense of belonging. But for those who struggle with food insecurity, those experiences become rare or don't exist at all. Hunger doesn't just affect the body, it affects the heart, the spirit and relationships. I remember being 10 years old, standing beside my mom and grandma in the kitchen as they seasoned the chicken and made the beans. The smell of garlic, onions, and peppers filled the room while Haitian news played in the background. It wasn't much, but those moments made me feel full in every way. For many food creates a sense of love and belonging but for those who struggle with food insecurity, memories like that are replaced by anxiety, stress and quiet hunger.

Hunger also brings silence. Some students at my school skip lunch, not because they're not hungry, but because they're embarrassed. I've seen classmates drink only water just to feel full. Parents quietly go without meals to feed their children. These stories are everywhere, but often invisible because people don't care or they choose not to see. Meanwhile, grocery stores throw out tons of food every night. At my school, I'm in a culinary program and when the food isn't eaten, we throw away trays of perfectly good leftovers. The problem isn't a lack of food it's that access to food depends on your ZIP code, your paycheck and sometimes even your skin color.

But there is still hope. Some communities are stepping up: volunteers run food pantries, neighbors stock community fridges, and bring to shelters, teachers keep granola bars in their desks and snack bins for students who need them. Kindness is powerful but it's not enough. We need justice. We need policies that treat food as a human right not a business opportunity because hunger isn't just an empty stomach. It's a sign of a broken system that America has played into for a very long time. And fixing it starts with the belief that no one deserves to be hungry ever

Rana Musleh
16-18 Category (essay)

She sat on the sidewalk near the subway entrance, her arms wrapped tightly around her toddler as if to shield him from the cold and hunger. A small sign beside them read, "Hungry. Please help."

Growing up, food was more than just sustenance; it symbolized gratitude and respect. My parents instilled in me the wisdom of appreciating every morsel, often reminding me, "Be grateful for what Allah has graced you with; others pray for just a grain of rice." Their words became a whisper guiding me through the years. I learned to savor every bite and express thanks for the hands that prepared my meals. If I couldn't finish, I'd save leftovers, treating them as treasures that could be my next meal. Yet, when I had no choice but to discard food, guilt washed over me, a reminder that for many, hunger isn't just an abstract concept; it's a daily reality.

In Islam, one of the core pillars is Zakah, the act of giving a portion of one's wealth to those in need. It's not just an act of charity, but a duty that reminds Muslims that what we have is not entirely ours, but a blessing from Allah meant to be shared. This practice emphasizes that no one should suffer from hunger while others have more than enough. It reinforces the idea that even small acts of giving can create a ripple effect, strengthen community bonds, and ensure that everyone is cared for. Through Zakah, Muslim communities are reminded of their responsibility to uplift one another, reinforcing the belief that no one should be left to suffer alone. True generosity in Islam focuses on preserving the dignity of those in need, and by giving quietly and sincerely, we not only fulfill our duty but also protect the feelings of those receiving help. This belief fuels my desire to assist others, as sharing what little I have, whether it's food or time, allows me to live out the principle of turning faith into action.

Hunger isn't merely a statistic or something we read about; it's a living, breathing crisis unfolding before our eyes every single day. It's not just about empty stomachs, it's about food waste, rising grocery costs, and unequal access to nutrition. A ton of decent food is thrown away while many search for their next meal. Hunger isn't caused by scarcity, but by how resources are distributed. It's a complex tapestry woven from threads of poverty, rising costs, and systemic barriers. When I see someone in need, I'm reminded of my privilege and our shared responsibility. What if we all gave just a little? Fewer would go without.

Food is not merely a privilege; it is a fundamental human right, like air, water, and shelter, essential and meant for all. In a world where we look out for one another, we can weave a fabric of compassion strong enough to embrace everyone and ensure no one goes hungry. By coming together and sharing our resources, we can create opportunities for all to thrive, proving that even the smallest gestures, whether sharing a meal, donating, or simply spreading awareness, can spark meaningful change. Every act of kindness is like a pebble dropped into a quiet pond, sending ripples of compassion that touch the lives of those in need and enrich the hearts of those who give.

Because somewhere, a mother still holds her child tightly against her chest, hoping someone will care enough to help. Let's be the ones who don't walk past, the ones who stop, give, and remind her she's not invisible. If we all carry the belief that no one should go hungry, one day, no one will. And the next time we pass someone holding a sign, we won't just look away. We'll stop, share, and remember hunger has a face, a story, a name.


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Learn more at www.wscah.org

263 West 86th St • New York, NY 10024 • 212-362-3662 • info@wscah.org

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