Food Insecurity and COVID-19: A Toxic Relationship

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Food insecurity on the college campus is not a topic that is often discussed. Let us talk about it here.

I think our best place to start is at the definition. Food insecurity, as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), is, “a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life” (2020). Just for another perspective, the Oxford Dictionary defines food insecurity as, “the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food”. Food insecurity can be found in any community, any state, and any country across our entire planet. To bring some global perspective to this, as of 2018 approximately 37 million people in the United States alone were food insecure, which equates to about 1 in 9 people (Hunger and Health, 2018**)**; and according to data gathered by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, over 820 million people suffered from food insecurity world-wide (FAO, 2019). Now, estimates are saying that these numbers have increased exponentially due to the pandemic. The consequences will reverberate across the globe for years to come. In an interview with Jack Griffin, CEO of Food Finder, when asked about how his resource has changed in reaction to the pandemic, he shared, “on the day that the National State of Emergency was declared, Food Finder’s usage quadrupled”. Not only that, but “Google searches for food pantries and food help have risen above the total number of searches for the last five years combined”.

In a year where food help is needed more than ever, on October 9th, 2020, the United Nation’s World Food Programme (WFP) was chosen as the admiral recipient of the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize. The work of the UN WFP strives to bring food to rural, isolated communities in over 80 countries, delivering needed food, cash, or food vouchers to over 97 million people who struggle with food insecurity. This year, the WFP intends to reach 138 million people. COVID-19- imposed necessary health and safety restrictions on agricultural labor and travel, locally and globally, have disrupted food distribution supply chains across the globe and in places that were already extremely difficult to reach. The UN projects global hunger to double by the end of 2020, and for the already-devastating levels of food insecurity to increase by the millions (UNWFP, 2020).

Food insecurity has always been here locally, as well. Prior to the pandemic, over one-third of students at the University of Michigan were food insecure (Maize and Blue Cupboard, 2020). Numbers are certain to be larger now, as the effects of the pandemic continue to sweep across campus. The difficulty of obtaining food for students at the University of Michigan is multifaceted. Top reasons for being food insecure on the campus include the absence of a grocery store on campus, a lack of transportation to the stores which are several miles away from campus, financial hardship as students have an expensive list of costs (plus possible job loss), and a lack of time. Once the pandemic hit in March, the University closed its doors and sent students home, which meant an abrupt end to student employment, and income, on campus. With over 70% of college students employed across the country, the shutdown was a struggle felt deeply here at the University of Michigan (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2020). With COVID-19’s continued presence, public transportation has been put on hold or now has limitations put in place allowing essential rides only, which increases the difficulty of obtaining food for those who are back on campus. This, my friends, is a toxic relationship between COVID-19 and food insecurity that needs our help.

So, what does this all mean? This all means that food insecurity was bad before, the fight against it has been made ever more difficult due to the ongoing pandemic, and that the struggle will continue for decades to come. The toxic relationship between COVID-19 and food insecurity goes something like this: with an unemployment rate in the U.S. that reached nearly 16% over the course of the pandemic (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), millions of people’s reliable income stopped, resulting in the inability to spend their tight budgets on nutritious food. This is felt especially by those who are single parents with multiple dependents, school children who no longer receive their free school lunches due to school closure for the unforeseen future; and if you are a college student here in Ann Arbor who has to pay for tuition, textbooks, online materials, rent, transportation, and, of course, food.

Arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many faults to light in the United States and across the world, including a reckoning on race, healthcare inequities that disproportionately effect the Black and minority communities, a great political divide, and- the issue not as commonly highlighted- food insecurity. With a 73% projected increase in child food insecurity in Ann Arbor’s neighboring communities, and Michigan’s placement in Feeding America’s “Top 10 States with the Highest Projected Rates of Food Insecurity from 2018-2020” it is clear that food insecurity is worsening in the place we call home.

If you take anything away from this, please let it be this: food insecurity has been a long-fought battle that needs more help now than ever before. And if you are not the individual seeking food help, then be the individual that can help. You can help simply by owning the knowledge of local resources, like food pantries and food finding apps. You can help by taking a moment to absorb the scope of food insecurity within your community, your college campus, and within our interconnected global society.

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