

# **Bread for the World puts price tag on hunger: \$160 billion in health care**

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Widespread hunger and food insecurity in the United States add \$160 billion to national health care spending, according to a Christian advocacy group.

David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, said hunger was a key factor in the United States having the worst infant mortality rate among developed countries.

“It is like a massive terrorist attack,” he said at the presentation of the group’s annual Hunger Report. “All the things that we do that allow the infant mortality rate to be so high—that is, in effect, killing a hundred thousand babies in communities across this country a year.”

The report, titled “The Nourishing Effect: Ending Hunger, Improving Health, Reducing Inequality,” notes the United States also ranks at or near the bottom for other indicators such as obesity, lack of access to food and maternal mortality.

## **Food insecurity affects one in six Americans**

The report says as many as 50 million people—approximately one in six Americans—live in a state of sustained hunger or food insecurity, defined as not having adequate access to food to keep them healthy. It says the figure has remained “stubbornly high” at the same level since 2008, despite the recovering economy.

John T. Cook, an associate professor of pediatrics at Boston University School of Medicine, who helped prepare the report, said the figure of \$160 billion in health care costs is “probably an underestimate.”

### **Connection between health and hunger**

But doctors increasingly are recognizing the connection between health and hunger, experts said.

Acacia Bamberg Salatti of the Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said hospitals are partnering with church groups to help patients translate their doctor’s instructions and connect them to healthy meals.

“At the end of the day, health care and hunger are very much linked,” she said. “You can’t be healthy, you can’t be able to stave off chronic diseases if you’re not eating healthy food.”

Sarah Jane Schwarzenberg of the American Academy of Pediatrics said there should be as much attention given to the economic and human costs of food insecurity as to a comparable breakout in infectious disease.

“I think the fact that we can’t see it makes it very hard for people to deal with it,” she said.