

Complex problem of hunger demands collaborative response

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Hunger in America represents a complex problem that defies easy solutions and demands collaborative responses, Bob Aiken, chief executive officer of [Feeding America](#), told a gathering of anti-hunger advocates at Baylor University in Waco.

Feeding America represents 200 food banks and 61,000 food pantries and meals programs across the country that provide more than 3.2 billion meals to more than 37 million people.



Kathy Krey, director of research for the Texas Hunger Initiative. (Photo: Baylor University) "But what's needed is 8.5 billion meals to feed 49 million people," 16 million of whom

are children, Aiken told the [Together at the Table Hunger and Poverty Summit](#) at Baylor.

The Texas Hunger Initiative—headquartered in [Baylor University's School of Social Work](#) and launched by Texas Baptists' [Christian Life Commission](#)—sponsored the summit in conjunction with Feeding Texas and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food & Nutrition Service Southwest Regional Office.

“None of us can solve hunger alone,” Aiken said.

Clients served by the food and meal programs associated with Feeding America report making tough choices due to inadequate resources, he noted: 69 percent choose between buying food or paying utility bills; 67 percent choose between food or transportation costs; 66 percent choose between food and medicine; and 57 percent choose between food or payments for housing.

“Hunger doesn’t exist in isolation,” Aiken said. A complex web of circumstances creates the climate that produces hunger—loss of a job, loss of a spouse, serious illness or insufficient hours of employment, among other factors, he noted.



Linda English
But too many Americans—conservatives and liberals alike—offer simplistic explanations for poverty that results in hunger, economist Linda English told summit participants.

Some people try to explain poverty by citing individuals causes—defects they see as inherent in poor people in terms of their ability, aspiration, work ethic or willingness to delay gratification, said English, clinical assistant professor in Baylor's [Hankamer School of Business](#).

Others point to structural causes as explanations for poverty, she noted. Conservatives blame a welfare system that they assert creates disincentives for work and dependency on public assistance. Liberals blame barriers in economic, political and social systems that restrict opportunities for advancement.

"Which explanation is correct? None of them in isolation," she said. "Poverty is not a unidimensional problem. The poor are a heterogeneous population."

English pointed to interlocking factors involving the individual and society as a better explanation, and she noted how scarcity affects economic behavior.

"Having less than you feel you need affects decision-making and behavior," she noted. And the less a person has, the greater the sense of urgency and the less consideration of long-term impact.

For example, a middle-class family and a family in poverty each might miss a utility payment and have to pay a penalty. While it might represent a minor inconvenience for the middle-income family, it could prompt a poor family to seek out a payday loan without regard to the long-term consequences, she noted.



Rebecca MiddletonCommunities can make a significant impact on reducing hunger and poverty when they understand the problem at a local level, Rebecca Middleton, chief operating officer of the [Alliance to End Hunger](#), told a breakout session about creating hunger-free communities.

"The things that are driving food insecurity in Arlington, Va., are not necessarily the same things driving food insecurity in Arlington, Texas," she said.

For all its complexity, in one sense, the problems of poverty, hunger and food insecurity can be reduced to a simple truth: American children are hungry, and Americans must remedy that problem, said [Audrey Rowe](#), administrator for Food and Nutrition Service with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



Audrey RoweIn 2013, one in five American households with children was food-insecure, and 360,000 households faced food

insecurity so severe parents reported children were hungry, skipped a meal or did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.

"This is the United States of America. How do we let that happen to our children through no fault of their own?" Rowe asked.

"We need to make a commitment to our children, realizing they are the most precious commodity we have. We need to make a commitment that we are not going to stand by and let children and families go hungry. ... We all have a role and a responsibility. We need to take it seriously.

"We can all make this happen. It is our moral responsibility. It is our God-given purpose."