

SNAP Challenge Day #3: Face of Hunger

September 16, 2013



I'm really dragging today. I've been having a hard time focusing and sustaining my body on a much slimmer calorie allotment than it's used to. I made the mistake of creating a meal plan for the week that was heavy on carbohydrates and, as a result, I am feeling bloated and weak. So instead of talking about food in my post today (I'm trying not to think about it), I decided to talk about the issue of hunger in more detail. I will also address many of the questions you have raised in your comments about Panera's own efforts in the hunger space.

It is a common misconception that food insecurity is confined to a type of person or a singular community. This could not be further from the truth. There is no one face of hunger. Hunger can affect all neighborhoods, all communities, all types of families. The reality is that many of us are only a major health crisis or a funeral or an unexpected bill away from food insecurity and could easily join the already 49+ million people current experiencing food insecurity in this country.

Helping to address food insecurity has been a focus of mine for many years. The most important lesson I have learned in my efforts is to set aside my judgment and preconceived notions of what hunger "looks like." My involvement in the Panera Bread Foundation's non-profit community cafes, Panera Cares®, has shown me that hunger is not synonymous with unemployed or homeless. The inability to put food on the table is not equivalent to lazy. At Panera Cares, I have learned that appearances are not always what they seem and everyone has a story to tell.

One story in particular stands out. There was a gentleman joining us for lunch at least once a week. Each day, he came in wearing a suit and would ask to “share a meal” with us. This man did not look hungry. However, it turns out this father of five had lost his job earlier in the year as had his wife. He came to Panera Cares before job interviews so that he wouldn’t be taking food away from his children at home. This man is just one face of food insecurity.

In the U.S., roughly 15% of households are food insecure. Food insecurity is not bound by neighborhood or setting. Urban, suburban, rural – all are affected by food insecurity. In fact, counties with higher rates of persistent poverty are often rural and more than 2 million rural households nationwide experience food insecurity.

The face of hunger is as diverse as this country is. Unfortunately, this reality also makes it a harder problem to solve. According to the USDA, due to limited money and resources, 1 in 6 Americans are not getting enough food. The [Map the Meal Gap](#) study from Feeding America® highlights the face of hunger at a local level. I’d encourage you to take a look and get a sense of what hunger is like in your own neighborhood.

As Hunger Action Month goes on, I hope to shed light not only on those impacted by food insecurity, but also inspires creative and innovative solutions from leaders across the country – solutions as diverse as the populations we need to serve. This is not an insurmountable challenge. We can do this.

For tips on what you can do, visit www.hungeractionmonth.org and, as always, feel free to share your thoughts in the comments.