

# Who's Hungry? Who Cares?

BY JACK MARCUM

**Efforts to reduce chronic hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity have shown some success recently. But do we know the facts about who's still hungry? We can influence how governments and other organizations respond to the one in seven people who are hungry in the world.**

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**O**ne in seven people in the world are hungry. Most of these live in developing countries, where efforts to reduce hunger have shown some success over the last decade. Hunger in industrialized countries is less severe and more episodic, but in the United States at least, it has proven stubborn to further reductions. The first section of this article provides a statistical overview of these patterns and trends.

Christian citizens can influence how governments and non-governmental organizations respond to the large numbers of people who remain hungry. To find out what Christians are thinking, the second section examines opinions on hunger among members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).<sup>1</sup> The results indicate much agreement among Presbyterians on hunger-related issues. Furthermore, Presbyterians with different beliefs and religious practices have similar opinions on hunger, suggesting that the results may apply more broadly to other Christians in the United States.

## **WHO'S HUNGRY?**

At the outset of the twenty-first century, the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization estimates the number of hungry people worldwide at 842 million, with all but a fraction of these living in developing countries:

- Industrialized countries, 10 million
- Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, 34 million
- Latin America and the Caribbean, 53 million
- China, 135 million

- India, 214 million
- Asia and the Pacific, 156 million
- Sub-Saharan Africa, 198 million
- Near East and North Africa, 41 million

In relative terms, hunger is greatest in Sub-Saharan Africa, where a third of the population is undernourished. Other relatively high regions include the Caribbean (25%), Oceania (27%), India (21%), and the rest of South Asia (29%). Among the lowest hunger rates in the developing world are those in China (11%), South America (10%), and North Africa and the Near East (10%).

#### DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

The number of hungry people in the developing world declined from 817 million in 1990 to 798 million in 2000, despite an overall net population growth from 4.0 to 4.7 billion people over the same period. That brought the percentage of hungry people in developing countries down to 17% in 2000, from 20% a decade before. Nowhere was the change more dramatic than in China, with a drop from 193 million to 135 million hungry people during the 1990s, a relative decline from 17 to 11%. Other areas with sizable declines in hunger are South America (42 to 33 million, or 14 to 10%); Southeast Asia (76 to 66 million; 17 to 13%); and West Africa (36 to 33 million; 21 to 15%).

In contrast to China, India's hungry population remained static at 214 million over the decade, although population growth in India was such that their relative share still dropped from 25 to 21%. Other areas with a similar pattern (the number of hungry people stayed constant or even grew, but the percentage of population who were hungry declined) include the rest of South Asia (77 to 79 million, a drop from 29 to 25% of the population); East Africa (73 to 81 million; 44 to 39%); Southern Africa (34 to 37 million; 48 to 41%); the Caribbean (8 million in both years; 28 to 25%); and North Africa (6 million; 5 to 4%).

The hungry population grew both absolutely and relatively in Central America (5 to 8 million; 17 to 21%), the Near East (20 to 35 million; 10 to 14%); and, most dramatically, Central Africa (22 to 48 million; 35 to 58%).

#### THE UNITED STATES

Because food is generally abundant in the United States and other developed countries, few individuals face a chronic lack of sufficient calories. Instead, hunger more commonly takes the form of *food insecurity*, defined by Bread for the World as "a condition of uncertain availability of or ability to acquire safe, nutritious food in a socially acceptable way." By this definition, 12 million households, containing 35 million people, were food insecure at some time during 2002, as measured by the United States Agricultural Department. In relative terms, 11% of all households, containing 12% of the population, are food insecure.

Children are more likely than other Americans to live in food-insecure homes. Of all households with children, 16%, containing more than 13 million children, had food insecurity at some time during 2002. Other groups with higher rates of food insecurity include black households (22%), Hispanic households (22%), and female-headed, single-parent households (32%). Relatively few elderly households, 6%, are food insecure; the rate is only marginally higher for elderly persons who live alone (7%). Regionally, relatively more food-insecure households are found in the South (12%) and West (12%) than in the Midwest (10%) or Northeast (10%).

The percentage of households with food insecurity has remained relatively constant since 1995, the year the current measurement process was begun. Then, 10.3% of all households were food insecure. The highest rate, 11.8%, was found in 1998. The 2002 rate of 11.1% is thus an increase from the mid-1990s but a drop from 1998.

#### **CHRISTIAN OPINION ON HUNGER**

What do Christians think about the current hunger situation? As a partial answer, this section looks at results from a questionnaire on "Hunger Issues" that was distributed in February 2003 to a national representative sample of members in Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations.<sup>2</sup> While not typical of all Christians, Presbyterians are likely similar in their views to those in other mainline denominations (i.e., Episcopal Church, United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, Reformed Church in America, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, American Baptist Churches).

##### *SIZING UP THE PROBLEM*

Most Presbyterians believe (77% *agree*; 15% *disagree*; 8% *not sure*) that "the problem of widespread hunger can be solved in the United States." They are much more closely split on whether "the problem of widespread hunger can be solved throughout the world," however, with 44% responding *agree*, 33% *disagree*, and 24% *not sure*. The greater pessimism about world hunger is consistent with respondents' evaluations of current trends. When asked about the hunger problem in the United States over the last decade, 39% of Presbyterians believe it has *gotten worse*, 19%, *gotten better*, and 24%, *remained the same*. To a parallel question about hunger worldwide, 63% believe it has *gotten worse*, 6%, *gotten better*, and 13%, *remained the same*.<sup>3</sup> The rest responded *don't know*.

Only one in six Presbyterians (16%) chooses *food insecurity* as the best word or phrase to describe "the real problem" when it comes to hunger in the United States. Similar percentages select *malnutrition* (20%), *child hunger* (19%), or *chronic hunger* (18%). Only 1% selects *starvation*. Another 25% responds *don't know*.

That so few choose *food insecurity* may indicate that this new way of conceptualizing hunger in the United States is not widely known. Nevertheless, most Presbyterians seem up-to-date in recognizing that relatively

more children than older persons have hunger problems: when asked which one of four categories of people needs the most help “when it comes to the hunger problem in the U.S.,” 41% choose *children* but only 8% *senior citizens*. The other two options are *poor families*, chosen by 42%, and *women*, chosen by 1%; 8% respond *don't know*.

PROVIDING FOOD, TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Presbyterians do not blame the hungry for their circumstance, but they do expect them to take responsibility for it when food assistance enables them to get back on their feet. Less than one in ten Presbyterians (7%) believe “people who are hungry are hungry because it is their own fault.” Most Presbyterians view hunger as something that needs to be eliminated *before* individuals can be expected to take responsibility. This view is most apparent in response to this statement, “We need to do more to help feed the chronically hungry so they can then get back on their feet enough to take responsibility for feeding and caring for themselves and their families,” with which 83% *agree*.

At the same time, Presbyterians want accountability. While 20% choose (from only two options) *to help the chronically hungry, we have to first provide them with food, because otherwise they will be too weak to get back on their feet and take responsibility for themselves*, 74% choose *we need to help the chronically hungry by making sure they have food so they are not too weak to get back on their feet, but at the same time we need to demand accountability and work*.

STRUCTURAL CHANGE

When asked which of two statements “comes closer to your own personal opinion” about “the best way to fight hunger in the U.S.,” 87%

choose *through programs that help poor people to get better jobs that pay enough so they can feed their families*. Only 10% choose *through programs that provide food to poor families*. Another 8% *don't know*. Consistently, more Presbyterians choose economic or other structural answers (50%) than direct food provision

(32%) when asked “when it comes to fighting the hunger problem in the U.S., which *one* of the following do you believe is the *most* effective in fighting hunger?” The remainder, 18%, *don't know*.

DOING MORE, SPENDING LESS

Three in four Presbyterians *agree* (74%) that “there should be major new efforts, led by charitable and religious groups, with some taxpayer support, to make sure that every child in America has enough to eat.” Yet less

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**Presbyterians in the survey think “we need to do more to help feed the chronically hungry so they can then get back on their feet enough to take responsibility for feeding and caring for themselves and their families.”**

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than half that number (31%) *disagree* that “enough money is being spent on the hunger problem.”

Clues to resolving this apparent inconsistency are found in responses to other questions, where Presbyterians indicate that reforming current efforts would allow the same amount of money to have a bigger impact. Nowhere is this clearer than for a question on hunger among children. Two-thirds choose *we spend enough money on programs for hungry children, but we need to reform programs to make them more effective*, from a list of three statements. Of the rest, only 10% choose *we spend too little money, which is why we have too many hungry children*. Another 4% select *we spend too much money on hunger programs, and in the end most of the money is wasted*. The rest, 19%, *don't know*.

#### POLITICAL CONCERNS

As the “higher priority for Congress,” many more Presbyterians (58%) choose *reducing hunger in the United States over reducing hunger throughout the world* (7%). Another 30% believe both *should have the same priority*, and 6% *don't know*. As for which political party is better suited to accomplish that goal, opinions are divided:

- *Republicans*, 19%
- *Democrats*, 15%
- *Both equally*, 31%
- *Neither*, 16%
- *Don't know*, 18%

But politicians should pay attention to hunger issues, according to Presbyterians. Fully 86% indicate they would be more likely to vote for a candidate for Congress *who says s/he will make fighting hunger problems a higher priority over one who says there is currently enough being done to fight the hunger problem* (14%).

#### FAITH DIFFERENCES

To explore the link between hunger issues and religious characteristics, responses to questions on hunger issues were examined by categories of three other variables. In general, Presbyterians' opinions are similar (1) whether they view the Bible as literally true or not, (2) whether they attend worship weekly or less frequently, and (3) whether they agree or disagree that “All the world's religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth.” Of opinions on 23 hunger issues for each of these three religious variables—69 comparisons in all—only ten reveal statistically significant differences, and only four of those involve differences of ten or more percentage points. The largest is found for frequency of worship attendance: more Presbyterians who attend every week (81%) than those who attend less frequently (69%, once a month or less; 66%, 2-3 times a month; 75%, nearly every week) *agree* that “there should be major new efforts, led by charitable and religious groups, with some taxpayer

support, to make sure that every child in America has enough to eat.”

In short, differences in worship attendance and two important beliefs are associated with only small variations in hunger-related opinions, if any.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite gains made in eliminating hunger the last several years, the number of hungry people in the world remains high, especially in the developing world. It is not surprising that only a minority of Presbyterians are optimistic that global hunger problems will ever be solved. In contrast, three in four are hopeful that a solution is possible in the United States, where policies and programs have ameliorated the worst problems and hunger is more often viewed as “food insecurity.”

At the individual level, few Presbyterians blame the hungry for their circumstances, and most want more direct food aid. At the same time, they expect those so helped to take more responsibility for feeding themselves and their families. They want more done to ameliorate hunger, but believe that reforms in current efforts will be more effective than spending more money. Only a minority believe that one of the major political parties is likely to do a better job than the other in effecting change, but almost all would vote for a candidate who makes fighting hunger a priority over one who does not.

Other analyses show that these hunger-related opinions are similar across categories of worship attendance, beliefs about the Bible, and perspectives on the uniqueness of Christian faith.

These results leave open the question of what it is about faith and practice that shapes their hunger concerns. Alternatively, the similarity of opinion among Presbyterians of varying beliefs and behaviors may indicate that core Christians values, rather than more variable dimensions of faith, underlie the views they express regarding hunger.

The finding that hunger-related opinions do not differ greatly between

Presbyterians who take the

Bible literally and those who do not, is particularly suggestive because theological differences among individual Christians are often more salient than denominational ones. Given these results, it is not unreasonable to think that Christians in more evangelical groups, for example, may hold similar views. If so, the results presented here provide more than a detailed look at hunger attitudes within one denomination. While we await

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**Those who attend church every week are more likely to want “major new efforts, led by charitable and religious groups, with some taxpayer support, to make sure that every child in America has enough to eat.”**

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additional research, individuals seeking to speed up the process of ameliorating hunger both at home and abroad could do worse than using the Presbyterian responses as a broad blueprint for effecting further change.

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Every year Bread for the World Institute issues a report on the state of world hunger. Download a free copy of *Are We on Track to End Hunger? Hunger Report 2004* (Washington, DC: Bread for the World Institute, 2004) at [www.bread.org/institute/hunger\\_report/index.html](http://www.bread.org/institute/hunger_report/index.html).

*Food Insecurity in the World 2003* (Rome: Food and Agricultural Organization, United Nations, 2003) maps hunger, malnourishment, and food insecurity around the world and recommends international strategies for eliminating hunger. Download the report at [www.fao.org/docrep/006/j0083e/j0083e00.htm](http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/j0083e/j0083e00.htm).

For more on the situation in America, see Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, *Household Food Security in the United States, 2002*, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 35 (FANRR35) (Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2003). It's available online at [www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr35/](http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr35/).

The survey report on which this article is based, *Hunger Issues: The Report of the February 2003 Presbyterian Panel Survey* (Louisville, KY: Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2004), is online at [www.pcusa.org/research/panel/0203\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/research/panel/0203_full_report.pdf). Its charts and further analysis will supplement your reflection on the ideas presented here.

#### **NOTES**

1 This survey was undertaken as part of the Presbyterian Panel, a national random sampling of members, elders, and ministers affiliated with the Presbyterian Church who respond to questionnaires quarterly. This analysis is limited to members' responses (n = 654). The questions were adapted from those asked on a telephone survey of likely U.S. voters conducted in 2002 for Bread for the World by McLaughlin and Associates. The Panel survey was conducted by Research Services with funding from Research Services and the Presbyterian Hunger Program, both parts of the General Assembly Council, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

2 Respondents were not provided with facts on hunger before being asked these questions. The largely inaccurate perceptions on world hunger indicate that the progress in recent years is not widely known, even in a denomination with high levels of education.



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