

# Windows and Mirrors for All

## Three Squares

by Florence Sprague

A place to call home and three square meals a day. That's not much to ask for.

According to the CDC 70% of adults in the U.S. are overweight (including obesity) and between 9 and 20% of children and teens are overweight, depending on age. (<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/obesity-overweight.htm> ) And yet, too many people in this country can't count on having enough to eat. Food insecurity is a major social and public health issue.

Food insecurity is defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. (<https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/understand-food-insecurity/hunger-health-101/> referencing <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx> ) That is, after making adjustments to limit choice, quality and desirability of items, there just isn't enough to go around, isn't enough to be certain that there will be dinner on the table.

The number of students in our schools who are eligible for free or reduced price meals has been steadily increasing. In ISD 623 it reached 48% last year (<https://www.isd623.org/sites/isd623.org/files/623Demographic%20Report%202016-17.pdf>), in ISD 622 it was almost 55% (<https://www.isd622.org/Page/180>), and in ISD 621 it was only 30% (2012 data, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2012/05/07/map-of-free-and-reduced-lunch-rates> ). School districts run food shelves and weekend or holiday food backpack programs as well as serving both breakfast and lunch. These are generous services aimed to help students be healthy and ready to learn, but they shouldn't be necessary.

In some neighborhoods, problems of food insecurity are exacerbated by the realities of limited or less convenient access to food and the consequent higher cost and often lower availability of nutritive variety and a situation known as a food desert. Grocery stores are fewer and farther between in lower income neighborhoods. This is not generally the case in the first ring, middle class suburbs. Food insecurity can affect children whose families' earnings do not stretch to cover all needs, seniors living on a limited income that does not grow with expenses, or young adults struggling to both support themselves and pay off student loans—anyone whose income does not adequately cover all expenses.

Some discussions of food insecurity look globally to production methods, crop choices, droughts and floods, desertification, pollution, inept distribution of foodstuffs, monopolistic markets, the role of graft and corruption. All of these affect food insecurity worldwide, but looking locally, those factors are not key, so why are people in this wealthy nation still hungry? Why are children distracted from learning by wondering whether they will get dinner? Families with children have a higher rate of food insecurity

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(16.5% v. 10.5%) than those without children, and not surprisingly, families with only one parent present are often in tougher places than those with two. (Of households with children- headed by a single woman, 30.5% and by a single man, 21.6% are food insecure) (<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx>) I find little comfort in the fact that Minnesota is below the national average in the prevalence of food insecurity. It is also admirable that the USDA can determine that in some families only the adults are food insecure. That is, the adults skip meals so that their children can eat. That is admirable, but shouldn't be needed, shouldn't be acceptable to us.

Food for thought.