

Opinion: Letters to the Editor

Less Food Is Not the Answer

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While I can see the value in arguing that federal feeding programs lack nutritional consideration or that Americans in general are criminals of overconsumption, I fail to see the merit or logic in providing "smaller and simpler meals" to the poor, particularly poor children [Outlook, Dec. 8]. Moreover, 33 million Americans who live in households without adequate food supplies probably would disagree with Douglas Besharov's proclamation that "hunger has largely disappeared from America."

The issue of nutritional deficiency goes beyond the narrow perspective Mr. Besharov presented and includes such factors as large fast-food chains, which serve the poor and homeless grease-laden food. After working a double shift, most people will pick a five-minute line at a fast-food place over a two-hour line for government food aid.

The fact that federal food programs put too much gravy on one plate is but one small factor in the unhealthy diets that our government and society offer the poor. Our government needs to do more to help the poor, but to offer them less as a solution is absurd. The poor are starving, so pick up a ladle.

ELIZABETH SERPA

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Douglas Besharov implied that hunger and obesity cannot coexist. As former local directors of women, infants and children nutrition -- or WIC -- programs, we know this is not true.

Hunger is an immediate physical state that has immediate consequences, such as the inability to concentrate in school. Obesity, like starvation, results from a longer-term process.

Obesity is a critical public health problem in this country and starvation is not. But many poor parents struggle to feed their families, and many children occasionally go hungry. Periodic hunger can coexist with overweight and obesity, in the same family or the same person.

Mr. Besharov also implied that because the rise in obesity has coincided with increased spending on food programs, the solution is less food. But, as he rightly notes, it is better-quality diets and effective education that are needed. In both the WIC program and school feeding programs, cost constraints have always limited the range of high-quality foods and the amount of education

offered.

Nutritionists in these programs know how to improve the food offered and how to deliver practical and motivating nutrition education. But they need the resources to do so.

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The Dec. 8 Outlook section carried an article decrying how America's poor children are consuming too many calories because of federal food programs and school-cafeteria cooking.

On the op-ed page is a column decrying the loss of recess: An amazing 40 percent of America's public-school students miss out on daily exercise along with one of the most important aspects of the elementary school experience.

No doubt many complex factors contribute to the problems of obesity and hyperactivity. Nevertheless, it's hard to resist the impulse to say "Duh!"

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