

Activity 2: Defining Hunger, Food Security And Poverty

GRADES 3-12

GSE

GSE Standard
Alignment: Social Studies



30 - 60 min.



This activity can be paired with
Food and Life and Family Budgets.

Student Learning

Students will develop an understanding of what the Atlanta Community Food Bank and other hunger fighting organizations mean when referring to hunger, food security and poverty. Participants will examine how these words can be interpreted in different ways and how they relate to one another.

Objectives

Students will be able to define these words: hunger, food insecurity and poverty.

Students will be able to examine misconceptions that surround these words and the issues they represent.

Materials

- Pens/Pencils
- Flip Chart Paper or Whiteboard
- Markers or Pens/Pencils
- Teacher Guide

Performance Tasks:

On three separate pieces of chart paper or on three different sections of white board, write one of these three phrases:

- What is Hunger?
- What is Food Security?
- What is Poverty?

Explain that this is a silent activity. No one may talk and each student should contribute to each sheet. You may comment on other people's ideas by drawing a connecting line between your ideas and ideas of others.

Allow 5 minutes for students to write their thoughts on each topic. Students may write definitions, what a term means to them, their perceptions of the terms, etc.

Facilitator may choose to stand back and let the activity unfold or expand thinking by:

- Circling interesting ideas
- Connecting related or opposing thoughts
- Inviting more comments
- Adding your own reflections/ideas

After 5 minutes (or after everyone has participated) compare students' answers to the definitions in the Teacher's Guide and discuss.

Conclude by going over the suggested discussion questions with the students.

Discussion Questions

- How did the group's definitions of hunger, food security, and poverty compare with the official definitions? Were they similar or different? If different, in what ways?
- What misconceptions were there around any of the terms? Where might they have come from?
- The US adopted an official poverty measure in the 1960s by looking at the cost of a basic food plan and multiplying it by 3 to account for other basic expenses. This method of measuring poverty has changed very little even though our economy and society has changed a great deal. What economic differences can you imagine between the 1960s and the 2020s? Do things cost the same? What do we buy now that we didn't in the 1960s?
- Considering what you know about the poverty measure, do you think it's possible to live well above the poverty line and still be food insecure? Why?

Extension Ideas

If time allows, break students into three groups to research the terms on their own before the reveal and comparison.

Research and Explore

Have students do additional research about hunger, food security, and poverty. Share findings as a class or have students create reports individually or in small groups.

Questions to Explore:

- How do all three issues (hunger, food insecurity, and poverty) connect to one another?

- How do we determine how many people are food insecure in this country?
- How might we improve how we measure poverty?

Hunger in the Media

For one week, ask students to observe and research whether hunger, food security or poverty is talked about by local or national media outlets. Have students consider ways that they could raise awareness about hunger in their community. Examples might include: writing an article for your school newspaper, a letter to the editor or launching a social media campaign.

Poverty Guidelines and Food Security

Using some or all of the family scenarios from Activity 5: Family Budgets and the Federal Poverty Guidelines, have students work in small groups to determine if these households are above, at or below the poverty line and if they might face food insecurity.

Questions to Explore:

- How were the poverty guidelines originally developed? Do you think these guidelines accurately determine who might need assistance today?
- What is the difference between marginal food security, low food security and very low food security?
- Is it possible to earn an income that is above the poverty line and still be food insecure? Why might that be?

Teachers may need to modify this activity for younger elementary grade levels.

Feeding America has a tool for parents talking to younger children about hunger that might be helpful:

<https://www.feedingamerica.org/take-action/talk-about-hunger>

TEACHER GUIDE: DEFINING HUNGER, FOOD SECURITY AND POVERTY

Below you will find the official definitions of these terms as well as links to the definitions and more information. This is a reference guide for the teacher/facilitator. Ultimately, we want students to be able to express the meaning of these terms in their own words.

What is Hunger?

Hunger is an individual-level physiological condition that may or may not result from food insecurity. Hunger is a potential consequence of food insecurity that, because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation. (<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security/>)

What is Food Security?

Access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum (1) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and (2) an assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (that is, without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing or other coping strategies). (<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security/>)

Food banks often talk about hunger and food insecurity interchangeably. However, hunger is difficult to measure and requires more extensive research and data based on an individual's physical condition rather than a household's ability to access food.

Because of this, the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) of the National Academies recommended that the USDA make a clear distinction between hunger and food insecurity:

Food Insecurity – the condition assessed with a food security survey is a household level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.

Hunger – an individual-level physiological condition (defined above) that may result from food insecurity.

What is Poverty?

It's difficult to talk about hunger and food insecurity without talking about poverty. Poverty is often defined as the state or condition of not being able to pay for basic needs.

The way we measure poverty was developed in the 1960s during the Johnson administration and has changed very little since then. The Census Bureau uses a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is living in poverty. If a family's total income is less than the threshold, then that family and every

individual in it is considered to be living in poverty. A simplified version of these thresholds, called poverty guidelines, is used to determine eligibility for federal programs that provide food and other assistance. To learn how these thresholds were developed, and more:

https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2014/demo/poverty_measure-history.html

<https://aspe.hhs.gov/frequently-asked-questions-related-poverty-guidelines-and-poverty>

The current federal poverty guidelines in the United States are delineated by family size. (2024 HHS Poverty Guidelines)

POVERTY GUIDELINES CHART

Number in Family	48 Contiguous States and D.C.	Alaska	Hawaii
1	\$15,650	\$19,550	\$17,990
2	\$21,150	\$26,430	\$24,320
3	\$26,650	\$33,310	\$30,650
4	\$32,150	\$40,190	\$36,980
5	\$37,650	\$47,070	\$43,310
6	\$43,150	\$53,950	\$49,640
7	\$48,650	\$60,830	\$55,970
8	\$54,150	\$67,710	\$62,300
Each Additional	+\$5,500	+\$6,880	+\$6,330

U.S Department of Health and Human Services, January 2025.

<https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines>