

Check It Out! A Proposed Public Library-Based Meal Program to Combat Literacy Struggles in Children

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Abstract

Purpose: To highlight the relationship between hunger in children and struggles with reading and to propose a library-based social program that is directly incorporated within the local libraries' already established summer reading program to address it. All local libraries throughout the country have an established summer reading program to provide learning stimulus for students when school closed for summer recess. **Design/methodology/approach:** The method is to analyze the problem using the lens of an economic theory and the research method is the literature review. The theoretical approach or underpinning is that Arthur Laffer's, trickle-down economic theory has failed our children who go to bed hungry. **Findings:** School-aged children who are food insecure suffer academically and the problem is worse during the summer months because there is no access to school meals. The local public library is in a unique position to provide social services in the form of a library-based meal program that is incorporated with the summer reading program. **Research limitations/implications:** Due to the nature of the study, since there were no participants, the findings are only generalizable to a sample of libraries. Future studies could explore topics related to the actual implementation of a library-based meal program that is tracked over a period of three years.

Keywords: food insecurity, child hunger, public library, summer meal program

1. Introduction

1.1 *Cycle of Poverty and Illiteracy*

Poor children continue to be disadvantaged because of a generational cycle of poverty and illiteracy that must be stopped (Koomson, Kofinti, & Laryea, 2023). Experts agree that "reading is important...reading is the gateway skill that makes all other learning possible" (Sampson, 2018, p. 34). Food inequality in America is one core problem that has led to food insecurity. This food insecurity has negatively impacted child literacy skills. In fact, it is estimated that "more than 34 million people, including 9 million children in the United States are food insecure" (USDA, 2023). The problems related to systemic racism reveal that hunger in African-American, Latino, and Native American communities is higher (Feeding America, 2023). The problem is that "children must have safety, security, and food if they are to learn" (Sampson, 2018).

1.2 Trickle Down Economic Theory

The cause of governmental officials' inability to effectively address this problem relates to Laffer's trickle-down economic theory (Lapadat, 2023). This theory was popular during the 1980's with the Reagan administration and it has lasting consequences. Governmental policies based on the theory have failed American children who live in poverty. The theory assumes that giving financial breaks to the rich will result in economic benefits that trickle down to the lower classes (Lapadat, 2023). The rich just got richer and policies based on these ideas have harmed children. In order to improve child literacy rates, we need great teachers and we have to fund programs and expand current programs. It is necessary to turn to other organizations for help and support to aid in this crisis. The public library, for example, is used already helping people who are struggling and librarians make great teachers.

1.3 *Aim*

The aims of this research are to raise awareness about the need for public libraries to address the social needs of their communities relative to literacy struggles in children from food insecure households by leveling up the summer reading program to include a meal component. The library summer programs will feed children's minds

and bellies. The article updates the current research which examined the issue in the State of California during the summer of 2015 when ten libraries began serving meals to children and adults (Bruce, De La Cruz, Moreno, & Chamberlain, 2017). The government may not be the best answer to help with this problem. Sampson stated, “history has proven, though, that government help is not effective in increasing the literacy success of children living in poverty” (p.34). For Sampson (2018), the teacher is the one that makes all of the difference. Therefore, our librarians have to become good teachers (Stricevic & Rubinic, 2023). It appears that our government has contributed to some of these problems because governmental policies have not improved poverty or child literacy rates in America the way that officials planned for (Okojie, & Boulder, 2022).

2. Method

This article uses the literature review as its methodology to present the problems associated with governmental programs that are designed to alleviate the devastating effects of child hunger in America. It is important to highlight the most effective way for local libraries to provide direct assistance to children from food insecure families. According to Snyder (2019), the literature review is an effective methodology to demonstrate the body of research that is currently available to address a specific societal problem. The research reveals that food insecurity is a barrier to improving literacy rates in America, especially in rural areas (Bowen, Elliott, Hardison-Moody, 2022). The best and logical way for local libraries to help with this serious problem has been researched and identified based on the most current articles available. The results revealed that local libraries can make a measurable difference in the lives of children by improving their literacy skills but children can only learn when they are satiated.

2.1 Search Procedure

The keywords used in the search for scholarly journal articles were “local libraries,” “hunger,” “school lunch program,” and “child poverty by race.” The search strategy included using Google Scholar and limiting the search parameter to the past two years.

2.2 Narrowing the Search Fields

It is important to provide identifiers that will limit the list of identifiers so that the most relevant scholarly journal articles appear in the results list. The search returned 1,500 articles and a limiting identifier helped to find reveal the specialized approaches that linked child hunger with an ability to learn. The articles that discussed poor literacy rates and learning were directly related to the scope of this article and were focused on. The final results using the limiting keywords “starving children” and “lower literacy rates” revealed fifteen articles that were published within the last year. These articles were written by experts in the field who argue that children simply cannot learn when they are starving and this problem is even more widespread than previously anticipated.

2.3 The Problem with Governmental Programs

The governmental programs in their current form are not reaching the children who need them the most (USDA, 2023). The problem is that many households with children simply do not qualify for assistance programs and these people rely on visits to food banks. In many cases, the income threshold is too low because it is based on outdated data and poor families do not even qualify for support (USDA, 2023). The school lunch program provides some relief for children but the summer months can present a crisis for food insecure families. The government is still fervently searching for more local ways to implement the school lunch program to reach starving children during the summer months when schools are closed (Bruce, De La Cruz, Moreno, & Chamberlain, 2017).

2.4 Failings of Laffer's Trickle-down Economic Theory

The government has been traditionally slow to act as many social services programs have faced budget cuts. A history of failed economic and social policies that have been implemented in the United States have contributed the problem that millions of Americans are living in poverty conditions (Lapadat, 2023). Our children have suffered the most. In fact, the socioeconomic conditions that result in food inequality stem from poverty and oppression. These conditions have been exacerbated by failed economic policies such as Laffer's *trickle-down economic theory* (Lapadat, 2023). Under the theory, the wealthy would share their resources with the poor (Lapadat, 2023). Theorist Roberts (2023) criticizes the so-called Laffer curve which requires that the tax burdens of the richest 1% be reduced to increase economic growth. In the United Kingdom and in the United States, politicians followed the trickle-down hypothesis and tax reductions for the rich worsened the distribution of income with no meaningful improvement in unemployment (Roberts, 2023). Figure 1 depicts how investments from the rich would trickle down to low skilled workers who would gain higher pay (Roberts, 2023). The problem was that the rich just got richer and now we are faced with an economic crisis and an unbreakable cycle of poverty (Lapadat, 2023).

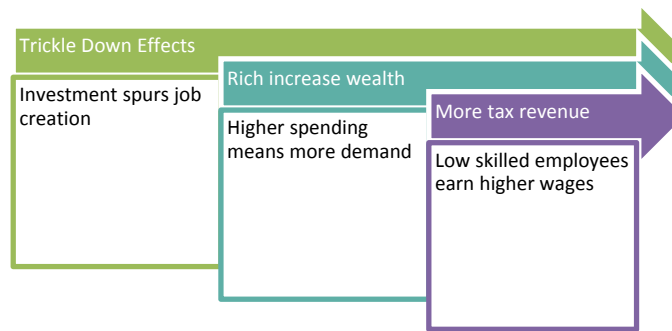


Figure 1. Trickle -down economics

3. Race and Ethnicity Are Factors for Children Living in Poverty

Race and ethnicity are directly correlated with poverty as Rodriguez (2018) stated, “eradicating food insecurity from the lives of current and future generations of children of low-income areas requires thinking beyond how to make the modern industrial food system work better” (p. 74). Therefore, the best way to attack this problem is to implement local programs in public libraries that are akin to movements working to disrupt structurally marginalized communities. Rodriguez (2018) pointed out that we have food deserts in impoverished communities. These food deserts harm low-income areas because they are manifestations of food inequality. Figure 2 shows that, at 33%, African-American and American Indian children bear the highest rates of children in poverty. Hispanic or Latino families are next with 26% depicting that this problem impacts race and ethnicity since 11% are Caucasian. This poverty data signifies that these problems must be addressed. The public library is the best place to start addressing these issues at the local or regional levels since most towns and cities have a public library.

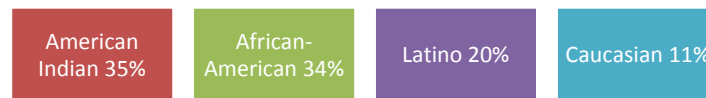


Figure 2. Children living in poverty by race

4. Results

The results show that local libraries can assist by carrying out smaller targeted programs within their communities to alleviate child hunger which is debilitating. Child hunger is a serious problem that impedes a child’s ability to learn (Sampson, 2018). A starving child cannot focus on literacy because he or she is suffering the physical pains from being hungry (Sampson, 2018). The summer months are the most difficult for these children to navigate since they lose the school lunch program because of school closings. Rodriguez (2018) advised that, “being poor and living in an area with little or no access to inexpensive and nutritious food is the double disadvantage that is the basis for food insecurity in America” (p. 69). It is clear that the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) has to be expanded and adopted, in some form, by as many public libraries as possible. In 2011, a few libraries in California adopted the Lunch at the Library program and this can serve as a framework for developing similar programs across the nation (De La Cruz, Phan, & Bruce (2019). The program has not expanded since 2011 in the way that social workers would have liked. Many people are simply unaware of these issues. In California’s Lunch at the Library program, staff members served summer meals to children under 18 (De La Cruz, Phan, & Bruce, 2019). More research is needed to spread the word about how libraries can help children within their respective communities. In fact, there has been limited research about how a summer meal program could be implemented at a public library and about the compelling reasons for why the programs are a necessity.

5. Discussion

This is the best time for libraries to ascertain innovative approaches to helping their communities. Economically disadvantaged members of the library community are in dire need of all of the services that the library can muster. Libraries can be more effective in the service to their communities which means going beyond offering the traditional services. We have reached critical levels of illiteracy in this nation and libraries can continue their partnerships with school officials to support children. This support must be levelled up because hunger is a greater need that food insecure families are facing within our communities. Libraries struggle to stay relevant during high

technology times and the needs of modern library patrons are changing and evolving. The modern local library provides free internet access and but we must also feed their bellies and their minds. The pandemic has increased the problem of food insecurity in children (Feeding America, 2016). The unequal distribution of wealth in America has resulted in concentrated areas of poverty (Rodriguez, 2018). Library stakeholders are aware of the needs within their communities. Libraries strive to provide information literacy to the communities that they serve. For many libraries, the summer reading program can be easily integrated with the summer reading program. The library summer reading program is a successful and lasting traditional summer program that can be used as a launching point for the summer meal program. The summer months are short and the program would not take up too many resources. Volunteers could also be recruited to help to administer the newly formed additions to the program. The library summer reading program is designed to provide children with educational resources since school is on summer break. These programs take the form of reading challenges and they are supplemented with fun games and entertainment for children and teens. Summer reading program participants can win prizes for the number of books that they read. The program should be easy to integrate with a summer library-based meal program.

6. Conclusion

The proposed library-based meal program will be an extension of the summer reading program. It will be a levelling up of that existing program. Every public library has some form of a summer reading program. These programs have nourished our children's minds but they are missing the meals element. We must find a way to replace the meals that children were getting during the school year. Children cannot focus when they are hungry and their literacy skills are suffering. Library stakeholders realize that food insecurity increases during the summer months because children lose their school meals. The best solution is to implement the lunch at the library program and to fully integrate it with the library summer reading program. Every summer, public libraries across the nation feature a summer reading program based on a single theme. The program is an intensive reading program in which children compete for prizes and the library hires entertainment to impress children and caregivers. We now have the opportunity to expand the summer reading program to include a hot lunch and snacks. We can make a difference and we need to start now.

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