

Hungry Americans get "A Place at the Table" in new documentary



By Andrea Burzynski
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(Reuters) - What do a police officer, a teacher, a rancher, and a second grader have in common? They all go hungry despite living in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

Documentary film "A Place at the Table," which opens nationwide on Friday, shines a spotlight on the prevalence of hunger in the United States through the personal stories of some of the millions of Americans who struggle to feed themselves and their families.

"There is this perception that it's a tiny marginalized group of people who are facing it, but at this point we're looking at 50 million Americans," director and producer Lori Silverbush told Reuters.

Silverbush and fellow director Kristi Jacobson said that the scope of problem remains largely hidden in the United States because people often associate hunger with images of children with sunken cheeks in developing countries. Many citizens are also ashamed to admit they cannot afford enough food.

"It's not what we are conditioned to think hunger looks like," Jacobson said.

Hunger and obesity sometimes coexist in the same person, and "A Place at the Table" draws connections between this seeming paradox.

In the film, New York University nutrition professor Marion Nestle notes that the price of processed foods has decreased by 40 percent since 1980 while the price of fruit and vegetables has gone up by the same amount. The price disparity has helped drive the obesity epidemic, especially among low-income groups, she contends.

FOOD DESERTS BEREFT OF FRUIT, VEGETABLES

Tremonica, a second grader in the Mississippi Delta featured in the film, suffers from both hunger and obesity, and her mother says that she often cannot afford fresh food for her daughter.

"I think it's really important to think about hunger and obesity as opposite sides of the same coin," said Bill Shore, founder and chief executive of Share Our Strength, which works to eradicate child hunger in the United States.

Access to healthy food can be a problem in "food deserts," a term for areas in both urban and rural communities where fresh food is scarce.

North Philadelphia mom Barbie is filmed taking a two-hour round trip bus ride to get to a supermarket with a better selection than the ones in her neighborhood.

Even with a full-time job, she often finds herself feeding her children tins of cheap, small, prepared meals because she can't find or afford much else.

Jacobson and Silverbush hope that their film helps raise awareness about hunger and inspires people to take action.

"We know how to fix hunger. It's not a mysterious condition that we don't know what causes it," Silverbush said.

"When we speak to (U.S.) legislators, they tell us that their phones aren't ringing on this issue, they're not getting texts, they're not getting emails. That's why we made this movie, to convince people that if they decide to engage on this they will have agency and we will change it," she said.

Some of the solutions proposed in "A Place at the Table" include expanding food stamps, ensuring that all children who qualify for free school lunches have access to them, implementing nutrition education, reexamining farm subsidies, and revising guidelines for federal food assistance.

A social media-based action campaign accompanies the launch of the film to connect people with information about anti-hunger efforts.