

National Commission on Hunger

Written Testimony on Food Insecurity

Plains Indian Tribes, Pine Ridge and Rosebud Indian Reservations

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Incredible diversity exists across the 564 federally recognized tribes. This diversity further increased when the U.S. census made it possible to report ethnicity as mixed and more people began self-reporting as having Native ancestry. One-third of Native people live on reservations and Designated Statistical Areas, which refers mostly to Oklahoma. Some live in cities, while others live in extremely isolated reservations. A handful of very wealthy tribes have been able to profit from casinos, but that is not the experience of most Native people in the United States. Approximately 26 percent of American Indians in the United States live below the poverty line, and in some reservations, such as the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, more than half of the people live in poverty.

All Native populations have the shared history of land alienation, dispossession of resources, and having to adapt to a government that was imposed on them. American Indians and Alaskan Natives, even those who are full-time, year-round wage workers, earn much less than the median income for the U.S. population as a whole. Also, the returns on education for Native Americans in general are lower than for other groups, in part because of their dedication to returning to and giving back to their reservation communities.

### **Access to Food**

For many people on reservations, access to food can be a great challenge. Many reservations have significant food deserts<sup>6</sup>, where there are limited healthy food options and what is available is difficult to access. All of the census tracts encompassed by the Pine Ridge Reservation are identified as food deserts by the USDA Economic Research Service, meaning that a majority of residents are low-income and live more than 10 miles from a supermarket. Research has consistently shown that living in a food desert is strongly correlated with food insecurity, which in turn, is implicated in the rapid rise of diabetes, obesity and other dietary diseases in the last 30 years.

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<sup>6</sup> A geographic area, particularly lower-income neighborhoods and communities, where access to affordable, quality, and nutritious foods is limited (IOM/NRC, 2009b).

Among American Indians, 67 percent are overweight, and 34 percent of American Indian and Alaskan Native men and women are obese. These astronomical rates of obesity have dire health consequences. One in six American Indians is diagnosed with diabetes, and 95 percent of those with diabetes are overweight. Tribes such as the Pima demonstrate amazingly high rates of diabetes—more than 50 percent—so much so that they have become a research gateway for looking at the effects of genetics on obesity for Native Americans. Policy clearly plays a role in these rates, since in some cases the same tribal ethnic communities reside on both sides of the Mexican or Canadian borders, yet there are different rates of obesity for the populations across the borders. There's something more than just genetics going on.

Food deserts, wherever they exist, are symptoms of broader injustices, such as land dispossession and economic marginalization. They also reflect the very class-based nature of the American food economy. While low-income people of color are surrounded by fast-food and gas stations, upper class whites have access to any food they could imagine. Reservation communities too often carry the burden of these injustices, as reflected in their high incidence of food insecurity and dietary diseases. Many factors contribute to this discrepancy, such as high rates of poverty, great distances to food sources, and inconsistent accessibility of social services.

#### **Location and Food Insecurity**

The remote location of most Plains Indian tribal communities creates special challenges for providing access to fresh, nutritional and affordable foods. Interviews with store owners on and near the Pine Ridge in 2007 indicated that they too face numerous challenges navigating the complexities of the Reservation economy. Regional and national markets determine the types of foods available in local grocery stores, and the supply is mediated by the economic positioning of the reservation as a whole. Economies of scale present a particular challenge for Reservation grocery stores, as their relatively small share of the market makes it difficult to compete with big box stores like Wal-Mart or Safe-Way. National distribution companies--such as Surefine, which is the distributor for all except one store on the Reservation--prioritize shipping routes based on strength of the local market, not what are the best geographic routes are for delivery. Therefore, Chadron, Rapid City and Gordon--all relatively larger hubs around the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation--receive deliveries from the distributor before any of the stores on the Reservation. Several local store owners spoke of the difficulties in having to wait for supply trucks to arrive, often well past expected dates, and the corresponding increased costs.

As one Lakota person interviewed on the Pine Ridge reservation said, "We don't have big stores like in Rapid [City]. If you've gone into Sioux Nation [the local grocery store], and look, the first thing you see is pop, chips, donuts, and candy, and all of the fruits in the back. All of the [healthful food] is in the back of the store, everything that's bad for you is right there in the front. I went and, you know, our food ain't the best here. It's not very good fruit. For this program, if we want really good fruit we have to go to Rapid (120 miles one way) and buy it at Wal-Mart, and you go for quantities."

Marcella Gilbert, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and a South Dakota State University Extension Field Specialist offers the following recommendation to deal with the sparse landscapes separating families from food:

Provide incentives to transportation operations to allow families free rides to grocery centers within 100 miles, for example on the 10th of each month families receive their EBT allocation. The Cheyenne River Reservation is as large as the state of Connecticut and has two large grocery stores located in the center, 19 miles apart from each other. Families who live on the most eastern and western sides of the reservation will travel 60+ miles if they shop at those grocery stores on the reservation. For those on the eastern end, their option is to instead travel 20+ miles east, 45+ miles north, or 55+ miles south off reservation to a grocer where they can find cheaper prices, a larger variety, and better nutrition. Those who live on the western side of the reservation will travel 30+ miles north, 90+ miles east, or 75+ miles west off reservation to access food including spending money to purchase gas or pay someone to take them to these places. Unfortunately, this has a negative effect on economic growth on the reservation since money is being spent off reservation.

In addition, store owners spoke of the challenges they face to keep fresh produce stocked in their stores. Given their limited space and few coolers, stocking fresh produce consistently can be a challenge. Across the country, similar challenges have been found in high poverty urban areas, as few options exist for accessing fresh fruits and vegetables reliably. Several innovative programs have been developed in these urban neighborhoods to provide greater access to healthy foods for local residents. The Healthy Corner Stores Initiative in Philadelphia, for example, worked with a coalition of 600 store owners to provide training, new equipment and other support to encourage owners to stock fresh produce. After two years, more than 80% of the stores were offering, on average, 44 new healthy options in their stores ([http://foodtrust-prod.punkave.net/uploads/media\\_items/hcsi-y2report-final.original.pdf](http://foodtrust-prod.punkave.net/uploads/media_items/hcsi-y2report-final.original.pdf)).

Another approach to increase access to fresh produce is to bring the produce to the consumer. Mobile farmers markets, such as Peaches and Greens in Detroit, use refrigerated vehicles to bring fresh fruits and vegetables to different neighborhoods, eliminating transportation barriers for consumers who otherwise cannot take advantage of local markets ([http://www.detroitmarkets.org/Market/Peaches .and. Greens](http://www.detroitmarkets.org/Market/Peaches_and_Greens)). Often these mobile markets are set-up to accept EBT cards, which further increases the ability of low-income families to purchase fresh produce. Given the vast distances reservation residents must travel to area stores, and the limited availability of reliable transportation, mobile markets are potentially a viable option for many reservations.

### **Food Assistance Programs**

There is a strong association between poverty and food insecurity. A survey developed in concert with members across communities for the Pine Ridge Reservation asked whether there was a time in the past year when the person being surveyed did not have enough food.

For the 300 participants who answered the survey, half said yes. Comparatively, in 2013 less than 15% of the U.S. population were food insecure (USDA ERS).

Food assistance programs remain critical for many American Indian households on the Plains. In Pine Ridge, nearly all respondents relied on some form of food assistance program (SNAP, FDPIR, etc). In 2007, nearly 58% of Pine Ridge households received SNAP and an additional 40% were receiving support from the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), commonly known as the commodities program. The commodities program started in 1977 as one of the Food Stamp Act renewal programs, and it has a critical influence on nutrition availability and affordability today. The reach of this commodities program is tremendous. Many households prefer to use SNAP rather than FDPIR, in part because it is more flexible. Also, some people suspect that the food provided by FDPIR cause diabetes, though there is no research substantiating such an association. The reduction of TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) benefit levels has caused confusion around SNAP. As people stay away from TANF, more pressure is being put on limited food dollars. The FDPIR program avoids some of these problems by providing foods that can be shared.

### **Cultural Responses to Food Insecurity**

Many social and cultural circumstances surround the consumption and distribution of food. Yet programs such as FDPIR and SNAP focus on individuals or household units, rather than looking at community-based measures for understanding food access and food insecurity. Sharing food resources between kin, whether purchased or harvested through hunting and gathering, is still an operative force for reservation residents. Householding is a crucial element of the Pine Ridge economy, where subsistence and self-sufficiency are common terms used by Lakota households to describe their economic ideals.

Most pointed to economic hardships as the reason they did not have enough food. Thirty-two percent mentioned the expectation of sharing, which also occurs with borrowed money. For Lakota people it's considered culturally shameful to be a borrower, but it's considered a good thing to be generous, so people will report what they gave or what they loaned to other people, but will underreport what they received or whom they borrowed from.

When asked about food sharing, for example, 91 percent of respondents said that they share food with people not living in their household, so a community-level orientation for food research is necessary. As one person said, "Everyone shares food here. It's a Lakota trait. We share with whoever needs it. It's a tradition that when someone comes into the house, you're supposed to feed them." Another respondent said, "No one has ever starved to death, because of the kinship system. Everyone has somewhere to go. Even strangers are treated as kin."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has tremendous potential to improve food security and the relationship with health on reservations. The FDPIR and SNAP programs together represent 45 percent of the sources of food for reservation residents in Pine Ridge. In contrast, only 3 percent of the total food consumed is wild food, although 65 percent of households still hunt, fish, and gather wild plants. The Lakota people often mention the idea of

restoring access to wild plants instead of using land for other purposes, such as leasing it for cattle production.

### **The Role of Land**

Due to decades of federal land fractioning, and control of Reservation resources by the Department of the Interior, few have access to wild foods or game or have resources to produce own food. Unsustainable uses of resources for capitalist production lead to loss of biodiversity because inflexible global-scale socioeconomic institutions are unwilling to respond to ecological changes at the local level (Alcorn and Toledo 1998; Jodha 1998a; Pinkerton 1998; Gonzalez and Nelson 2001; Gunderson and Holling 2002 ; Foster 2002 ; Dolsak et al. 2003 ; Jiang 2006 ). Alienation from the local resource-base leads to a lack of effective and enduring community-based resource stewardship institutions (Folke et al. 1998 ; Jodha 1998b ; Berkes et al. 2003 ; Cumming et al . 2006 ). In contrast, socio-economic embeddedness in local ecology, coupled with deep spiritual reverence for nature, tends to strengthen the incentives for building community-based stewardship institutions.

Lakota households continue to believe in their interdependence with nature, embedded in their ongoing use of local resources (2008). More than 80% of Lakota households maintain that their spiritual beliefs are connected to the way they feel about nature (Pickering and Jewell 2008:8), with a strong belief that humans, animals and plants are interdependent upon each other to survive. In addition, 73% of Lakota households make direct use of wild plants and animals for subsistence and trade, including food items, medicinal plants, and traditional arts and ritual items, like porcupine quill work and antler staffs (Pickering and Jewell 2008 :23). At the same time, Lakota households discuss an extensive and integrated spiritual conception of nature that places humans squarely on a par with other species (Ross et al. 2010: chapter 4).

However, the Lakota are immersed in the political conundrums of reservation land-use policy and face severe socio-ecological degradation as a result of historical policies. While the use of wild resources for subsistence is an ongoing practice, structural barriers thwart the implementation of their practical environmentalism. Although Lakota households are organized around social relationships designed to support economic self-sufficiency through direct access to local natural resources, rather than externally imposed or created institutions, government policies and global economic interests have separated most Lakota households from their resource base. Lakota autonomy to steward and control access to subsistence resources is extremely limited due to the federal trust status of reservation lands.

The most significant barrier to the implementation of the desires of Plains tribes for control of their lands is the profound disconnect between federal, state and tribal land-use policies and cultural beliefs regarding the natural world (Pickering and Jewell 2008 ; see Nadasdy 2003 ). For example, on the Pine Ridge Reservation, federal, state and tribal political resource management policies favor commodity agricultural practices over individual household subsistence and self-sufficiency. These land-use policies provide no recognition for the opinions and ideas of Lakota households, and, not surprisingly, these governmental policies

are not supported by Lakota households. Concomitantly, Lakota households have become increasingly alienated from not only the political process but their local ecology and resource base (Pickering and Jewell 2008). Market-based resource use and scientific management have systematically stripped the landscape of the social, relational, and spiritual perspectives of the Lakota (Pickering and Jewell 2008). The most effective method for increasing resilience and adaptability on reservation lands is to restore Lakota access to land and control over their traditional subsistence resources. The majority of Lakota households expressed a desire to be in control of managing their own lands (Pickering and Jewell 2008).

Overall, household respondents on Pine Ridge indicate a significant level of disillusion with cattle-ranching and the socio-ecological effects of the ranching economy's domination of Pine Ridge lands. As an alternative, respondents consistently expressed a desire for the restoration of wild ecosystems, and especially to open Pine Ridge lands up for wild, free-ranging buffalo herds that contribute to the social, economic and spiritual well-being of Lakota people. One knowledge holder asserted "...in the past buffalo were food, clothes, and shelter. They were our economic foundation, and they still can be today." Another knowledge holder took issue with the term of "land management," stating "get back to self-sustainability and no one will have to deal with that [conflict]." His comments reflected disillusionment with centralized resource management, and a belief that community self-sufficiency is the key to Pine Ridge sustainable land-use practices. The same knowledge holder described his long-term vision as follows:

Have our own food, let the bison roam openly like they did a couple hundred years ago, on this two million acre piece of land here? Oh yeah! Everybody just live in common. Self-sustaining, through bison, through our own food, doing our own renewable energy and just get back to the simple way... Then, that federal BIA money, give that back. The feds don't give money, it's a contract...so don't even go there for any kind of money, become self-sustainable in every which way.

Marcella Gilbert offers two recommendations to deal with this situation on the Cheyenne River Reservation. One, at the corporate level, is to "provide incentives to stores that offer healthy choices, local foods, support local gardeners/farmers and ranchers [. . .] Offer incentives to stores/agencies/programs that provide space for local wild food vendors.." And two, at the individual level:

Prioritize wild foods among indigenous population centers. On the Cheyenne River Reservation, 40% consume wild game and 45% consume wild plants, while only 23% garden. (Voices Survey-Tribal Ventures Executive Summary Report 2012-2014) Offer incentives to ranchers and farmers who conserve and share wild food sources for local use.

Catawba ethnobotanist and instructor at Sitting Bull College on the Standing Rock Reservation, Linda Black Elk, further emphasizes Gilbert's recommendation:

We need to encourage and enable hunting and gathering of traditional foods and we need to remind people how delicious these foods can be through gathering, storage and preparation training. Finally, we need to make arrangements with local landowners and

farmers so that our people have consistent access to hunting grounds and community gardens.

Currently Linda Black Elk, in conjunction with her husband Cheyenne River Lakota, Luke Black Elk, hosts ethnobotanical excursions on both the Cheyenne River Reservation and the Standing Rock Reservation. They also are subcontracted for ethnobotanical lectures and workshops in Yellowstone National Park. Thus, they are not only informing local indigenous communities about the usefulness and accessibility of wild resources, but they are informing the greater public about the importance of access and use as well to combat unhealthy, colonial diets and food insecurity.

Linda Black Elk also teaches several courses at Sitting Bull College, one of which includes a final examination consisting of cooking a contemporary meal, with the requirement of substituting at least one ingredient with a traditional Lakota food. Her insistence on hands-on, action learning is effective due to do the: compatibility with Lakota learning styles; emphasis on critical thinking with resource use; notion that food options are available, aside from what is offered at grocery stores and food programs; engagement of young adults with cooking skills; and an enhanced sense of traditional pride in a contemporary setting. According to Black Elk:

We should, of course, be concerned about food deserts, because we undoubtedly live in areas where fresh, healthy food is extremely difficult to find. But we must also learn how to prepare these foods. We live in *culinary deserts*, where new ingredients seem scary, pretentious, and unpalatable. Many of our traditional recipes have been forgotten and knowledge concerning unfamiliar foods is seriously lacking. Imagine being a young child on the reservation, who grew up with soups made from only meat, potatoes, and salt – a child who had only dry ramen noodles (eaten directly out of the plastic) for dinner – a child who is told that frybread and commodity cheese are the penultimate in food items – a child who has literally never seen an avocado, asparagus, or green leafy lettuce.

Black Elk's courses are also accompanied by a book she compiled of plants used for caloric value and medicine. Likewise, she blogs and writes posts, continuing discussions in regards to edibles and medicines with the greater public and other reservation communities.

### **A Holistic Approach**

Looking at the coping strategies people use to maintain food security on a daily basis, these are very dynamic households. Every aspect of economic life of households on a reservation is constantly moving—household composition, whether you're in or out of wage work, what kinds of resources you're bringing to bear, how you're responding to short-term and long-term health conditions. Efforts to annualize these kinds of measures end up creating fictional abstractions that neither provide understanding for the challenges of reservation life nor realistic solutions to the issues of food insecurity and hunger. Food security, health, and physical activity need to be linked with economic and cultural revitalization to support community-based solutions to food insecurity, which supports a more holistic approach to increasing food access and ending hunger.

## APPENDIX

### Marcella Gilbert - South Dakota State University

Recommendations re: food insecurity on Cheyenne River Indian Reservation

Narrative:

It is necessary to understand the history of food on reservations in order to understand the difficulties related to accessing foods. In Indian Country in North America, indigenous nations share a common history with European influence and force. In relation to food, these nations have a history of forced diet changes dictated by federal policy. This continues to present day and has had a negative effect on health at all levels.

However, when observing the behaviors and relationships with food today on one reservation, many elements come into play. If there is food insecurity, not having access to adequate food, it is among those who are subject to some kind of neglect. Young children may live in situations that prevent them from accessing good food on a daily basis due to negative actions of the adults or caregivers, and this may be the case for elderly as well. Both these populations can get at least one good meal per day at some kind of charity organization, usually a church or food pantry or a federal food program such as an elderly nutrition program or summer feeding program for youth. Of course schools feed many children at least two meals per day during the academic year.

Most evident, on this particular reservation, there are no real opportunities to access healthy food specifically for this population. Indigenous people suffer from many health issues due to the food we eat including obesity, heart disease, diabetes, malnutrition, all of which are preventable diseases. Currently, it is my observation that the current healthiest food available is the USDA Food Distribution commodities, and here is why: there are fresh fruits and vegetables, whole meats, 100% juice, oatmeal, cornmeal, dried fruits, and trail mix. The rest of the commodities offer mostly starch in flour and pastas, highly processed grains in cereal form and vegetable oil. Since families using these foods are usually feeding many people, the starch is the mainstay of the diet. Many families will often choose the items that can be stretched such as ground meats and pastas and will forego the fresh items for those that can be stored longer like canned foods. In comparison, foods available at the local stores are mostly processed, heat and serve frozen foods, and a very large variety of snack foods such as chips and soda. The number one selling product (according to a young store stocker) is the precooked frozen heat and serve meals that include pizza. There is a full wall dedicated to such foods. This is not healthy for an indigenous population who has had less than 300 years to adapt to a very foreign diet from their own. Overall, the prices in this store are very high. I once tried to purchase an organic apple, it rang up as \$3.86! One apple! I did not buy it. Needless to say, the organic choices are for those of us who can afford to buy it. Many of the families who live on the Cheyenne River Reservation cannot afford such prices. The organic section of the store is about three, five foot long shelves.

There are many barriers that exist when accessing food, I named only a few. The following are recommendations:

1. *Provide incentives to transportation operations to allow families free rides to grocery centers within 100 miles*, for example on the 10<sup>th</sup> of each month families receive their EBT allocation. The Cheyenne River Reservation is as large as the state of Connecticut and has two large grocery stores located in the center, 19 miles apart from each other. Families who live on



the most eastern and western sides of the reservation will travel 60+ miles if they shop at those grocery stores on the reservation. For those on the eastern end, their option is to instead travel 20+ miles east, 45+ miles north, or 55+ miles south off reservation to a grocer where they can find cheaper prices, a larger variety, and better nutrition. Those who live on the western side of the reservation will travel 30+ miles north, 90+ miles east, or 75+ miles west off reservation to access food including spending money to purchase gas or pay someone to take them to these places. Unfortunately, this has a negative effect on economic growth on the reservation since money is being spent off reservation.

2. *Include food incentives to those persons who are in substance abuse treatment facilities.* Many of those who are experiencing hunger are the young or the old who are subject to the care by someone who may be suffering with some kind of negative addiction in which their financial resources are used to support that addiction.

3. *Offer food incentives to young people who may be responsible for feeding their younger siblings,* i.e. staying in school or college, participation in healthy activities, sports, book clubs, attend nutrition and parenting classes, etc.

4. *Re-establish home economic classes in schools.* Unfortunately, young adults are not learning to cook from scratch and are receiving very little education about nutrition.

5. *Provide incentives to stores that offer healthy choices,* local foods, support local gardeners/farmers and ranchers.

6. *Prioritize wild foods among indigenous population centers, i.e. reservations.* On the Cheyenne River Reservation, 40% consume wild game and 45% consume wild plants, while only 23% garden. (Voices Survey-Tribal Ventures Executive Summary Report 2012-2014) Offer incentives to ranchers and farmers who conserve and share wild food sources for local use. Offer incentives to stores/agencies/programs that provide space for local wild food vendors.

**Linda Black Elk, Ethnobotanist, Sitting Bull College**

Food insecurity is a direct result of colonization. Hunting and gathering was declared illegal, and eventually it was considered a shameful act, practiced by savages and heathens. Boarding schools reinforced these ideas and served small children daily meals of bread and coffee, altering the Indigenous pallet and mindset for decades to come. Food insecurity has not just impacted us physically, but mentally, emotionally, and spiritually as well. The food industry has become a new tool of colonization, as we must contend with a lack of access to healthy foods in our grocery stores and corner gas stations. Those of us who wish to “decolonize our diets” must deal with decreased access to traditional hunting and gathering places, as well as the complete disappearance of traditional foods due to corporate agriculture, soil and water pollution, and climate change.

Combating food insecurity must be a multi-tiered effort – focusing on the community level. We do indeed live in food deserts, where the average Native American must drive (if they own a vehicle) an average of two hours (when they can get time off of work) to purchase healthier groceries (if they can afford them) in larger towns that border the reservation. For those who manage to overcome the obstacles and are able to travel to these “border towns,” often face horrifying level of racism from local non-Natives.

Purchasing the right food, however, is only part of the problem. We should, of course, be concerned about food deserts, because we undoubtedly live in areas where fresh, healthy food is extremely difficult to find. But we must also learn how to prepare these foods. We live in culinary deserts, where new ingredients seem scary, pretentious, and unpalatable. Many of our traditional recipes have been forgotten and knowledge concerning unfamiliar foods is seriously lacking. Imagine being a young child on the reservation, who grew up with soups made from only meat, potatoes, and salt – a child who had only dry ramen noodles (eaten directly out of the plastic) for dinner – a child who is told that frybread and commodity cheese are the penultimate in food items – a child who has literally never seen an avocado, asparagus, or green leafy lettuce.

We need local access – good food brought directly into our most remote communities – and we need to teach people how to grow and prepare these foods for themselves. We need to encourage and enable hunting and gathering of traditional foods and we need to remind people how delicious these foods can be through gathering, storage and preparation training. Finally, we need to make arrangements with local landowners and farmers so that our people have consistent access to hunting grounds and community gardens.