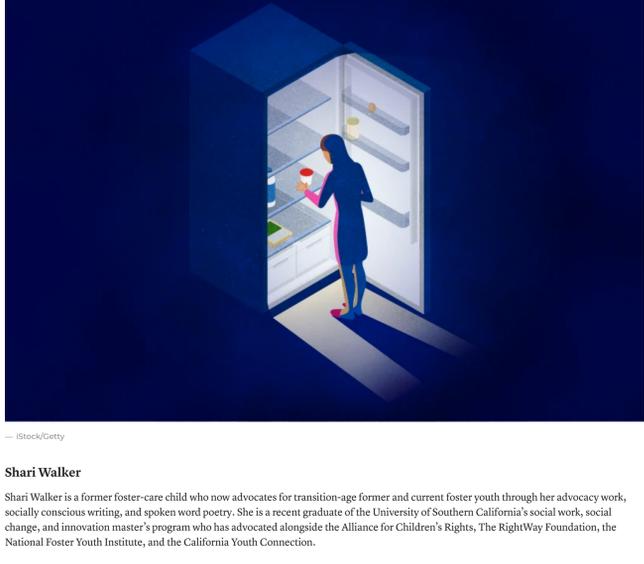


I Lived Off School Lunches as a Kid. Here's How to Make the Program Better

It will take more than school meal programs to end food insecurity

By Shari Walker — October 04, 2021 4 min read



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Shari Walker

Shari Walker is a former foster-care child who now advocates for transition-age former and current foster youth through her advocacy work, socially conscious writing, and spoken word poetry. She is a recent graduate of the University of Southern California's social work, social change, and innovation master's program who has advocated alongside the Alliance for Children's Rights, The RightWay Foundation, the National Foster Youth Institute, and the California Youth Connection.

Growing up in poverty in the projects of the Watts projects of Los Angeles, I was dependent on free and reduced-price school lunches. Today, I am a foodie, someone who plans vacations around the food and not the destination because of the experiences of my childhood.

Like my taste palate, my life has been molded by both the good and bad I experienced growing up in poverty and with food insecurity, never being adopted, and emancipating from foster care.

Food insecurity defined my childhood. I lived in a food desert that required grocery shopping to be done mainly at the liquor store down the street, which had no access to fresh, healthy food. On the weekends, I crashed strangers' birthday parties at Chuck E. Cheese by blending in with groups of children, just so my family could get pizza and other delicious foods from the party tables.

But my primary source of food as a child was school lunches.

Like so many others, my lunch was decided by whatever was most accessible that day. I learned early on that food was a precarious thing—from the trash bags of moldy pizza my parents would bring home from work to the small milk cartons and tiny "ghetto" Jell-O containers with low-budget tops at the homeless shelters we ate at on weekends to the party food I collected from Chuck E. Cheese.

One of the things I learned quickly before entering the foster-care system when I was 14 was that food was either your enemy or friend. Some days, it tasted like a refreshing strawberry Slurpee on mercury-bending Watts afternoons that melt your sneakers, but on others, it could taste like a salmonella sub with no ginger ale in sight. So, yes, eating was always a precarious suspension of time within each and every bite.

I can see now as an adult how my palate as a kid was shaped by my circumstances. Hot dogs on a fork for dinner were my weekly delicacy. School lunches became my primary meals—the square-shaped pepperonis were an all-time favorite.

Because of my childhood experiences, I decided to attend the school of social work at the University of Southern California, where I obtained a master's degree in social work. I became one of the founding members of the National Foster Youth Institute (NFYI) Homelessness Action Committee here in Los Angeles. I have helped to create grassroots campaigns and have shared my story, just as so many others have, to push for policy changes.

I am now a first-time mom. And I am still learning to eat healthy because I want a healthy family. Even as an adult, I'm learning new lessons on healthy eating especially when watching children's shows like Michelle Obama's Netflix series "Waffles + Mochi."

Although things have changed for me, food insecurity remains a major problem across the country. The U.S. Department of Agriculture found that nearly 15 percent of households with children didn't have enough food to feed the whole family last year. Millions of school-age children depend on free or reduced-price school lunches to survive.

Researchers have long recognized the vital link between learning and having basic food needs met, and policymakers have enacted various federal and state policies to mitigate food insecurity. Schools already serve as an important foundation for tackling food insecurity across the country through school meal programs.

But there's still much more work to be done. We need both short-term and long-term solutions to address the current food insecurities students face every day.

In the short term, we must take a holistic approach to food insecurity by offering more wrap-around services for school-age children and their families.

This can be done by launching food fairs on-site at schools during back-to-school nights and parent conferences in order to connect families with ongoing food support. Allowing community partners, nonprofits, food banks, local food drives, and church food programs to be on-site can offer resources for the whole family rather than just the children.

At the state and national levels, policymakers can expand on programs that build bridges between on-site school resources and local community entities. The USDA already has a long-standing policy that allows child-nutritional-program staff to donate excess food to food banks, homeless shelters, and other nonprofit organizations, "[when it is not feasible to reuse leftovers.](#)"

In the long term, however, it will take more than school-based programs to break free from the bonds of food insecurity and consistently provide food to all children. It will take [cutting the red tape](#) and [creating new opportunities](#) for every family to rise above the poverty line by providing access to careers that earn a living wage.

In his famous last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., wrote, "Why should there be hunger and privation in any land, in any city, at any table, when man has the resources and the scientific know-how to provide all mankind with the basic necessities of life?" Poverty, King concluded, is not a "deficit in human resources; the deficit is in human will."

We have made much progress since the 1960s, yet the problem of poverty and food insecurity continues. I propose a more holistic approach by starting with building connections between school meal programs and community partners. More importantly, we must find the "human will" to stamp out poverty. The status quo of food insecurity does not have to last forever. We need the will, patience, and support of people like you to ensure no future child goes hungry.

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