

Hitting the Public in the Stomach:

What Does the COVID-related Meat Shortage Have to do With Social Policy?

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“U.S. reels toward meat shortage; world may be next” (Hirtzer & Freitas, 2020) was just one of many news articles this spring about COVID-related meat shortages. I teach social policy at Stockton University. My main research interests are social justice, poverty, and public benefits. Personally, I’m a long-time vegetarian. On any level, this headline should be of limited interest to me. And yet. The coronavirus-related meat shortage can be seen as closely intertwined with social work concerns. Meat production in the United States is at the nexus of multiple core social justice issues. It is rarely a topic in social policy textbooks or social work advocacy. I argue that it should be, for the following reasons.

Immigration: Just over half (51.2%) of frontline meatpacking workers are immigrants, often guest workers on limited visas or without any documentation. (Fremstad et al., 2020; Groves & Tareen, 2020). These workers are one of the first links in the U.S. food supply chain, and have been recognized as critical essential workers (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2020). Yet they have no path to citizenship. Because of their precarious situations, immigrants may be more fearful to report poor conditions of employment (Flynn et al., 2013). This is even more true for undocumented immigrants. Meanwhile, there are many advantages for corporate meat producers in hiring undocumented immigrants, and few significant penalties (Jain, 2015).

Labor policy: The treatment of workers in the meat production industry closely tracks with the reliance on undocumented immigrants, and the vulnerabilities of minority workers in the U.S. Undocumented immigrants cannot unionize, and often cannot ask for better conditions because

of their precarious positions. About one quarter (25.2%) of frontline meatpacking workers are Black, 42% are female, and 45.1% are in deep poverty (below 200% of the federal poverty line) (Fremstad et al., 2020). These groups are subject to power imbalances that make it more difficult to challenge working conditions. For example they may be less likely to report work related injuries. Meat industry executives, for different reasons, routinely underreport injuries to regulators (Barnes & Morris, 2016).

The same factors that make these jobs hazardous make them especially vulnerable to COVID, including 10-12 hour shifts, close quarters, intense physical demands, high speed tasks, and cold temperatures which may extend virus viability (Centers for Disease Control, 2020; Dyal, 2020). COVID deaths among workers in meat and poultry processing plants (aka slaughterhouses) are higher than among the general population. Within facility-related fatalities, deaths appear to be higher among minority workers than white workers. The CDC reports that of the 16,233 COVID-19 cases in meatpacking facilities in May and June, 87% of those with race/ethnicity reported were minorities (Waltenburg et al., 2020). The COVID crisis has shined a spotlight on these poor conditions (Jordan & Dickerson, 2020), but they existed long before the pandemic. Changes in meat production in the late 20th century led to low-skilled, non-union, dangerous jobs that were often filled by Latinx immigrant workers (Krumel, 2017).

Environmental social work: Factory farming in the United States is devastating to the environment. Much meat and poultry in the U.S. is sourced from animals raised in Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), where animals destined for the slaughterhouses are raised in crowded and lightly regulated conditions. CAFOs contaminate the air, surface water and groundwater and contribute to climate change (Copeland, 2014; Glibert, 2020; Hribar, 2010; Pollan, 2006). This is allowed to be so because of federal environmental policies which do not

apply to factory farms, fully or partially exempt them, or are easily avoided (Copeland, 2014; Skaller, 2017; Tomas, 2018; Worsham, 2016). Taxpayers are left with the costs of pollution cleanup and health impacts, insulating corporate owners from the financial pain of environmental damage (Pollan, 2006). Environmental social work, especially relating to climate change, is one of the Social Work Grand Challenges (Grand Challenges for Social Work, 2020); meat production in the U.S. is a major contributor to environmental damage.

Cruelty to animals: There is a growing recognition of the importance of animals in mental health and wellness. Companion animals can promote physical and mental health (Brooks et al., 2018; Gee & Mueller, 2019; Purewal et al., 2017). Animal-assisted therapy is increasingly implemented within clinical social work (Blank, 2015; Compitus, 2019; Evans & Gray, 2012; Legge, 2016). Conversely, animal abuse has been linked with violence towards humans (Henderson et al., 2011; Newberry, 2017; Overton et al., 2012). By their very nature, factory farms utilize abusive practices to promote quick growth, slaughter, and greater profits (Gullone, 2017; Janovsky, 2013; Sluszka, 2015). There are few federal or state animal cruelty laws that apply to farm animals, and often lax enforcement of those that exist (Cassuto & Eckhardt, 2016; Fiber-Ostrow & Lovell, 2016). A growing number of states have policies preventing observation and/or photography of factory farms and slaughterhouses, providing a “veil of secrecy” which shields corporations from public anger (Fiber-Ostrow & Lovell, 2016; Holifield, 2016).

Public benefits: The meat industry in the U.S. receives extensive subsidies – read public welfare – from the federal government. Meat processing plants are consolidated into a few large corporations (Stull, 2017), giving them greater wealth and political power to keep subsidies in place. Agricultural subsidies and crop insurance authorized by the federal Farm Bill artificially lower the costs of unhealthy foods including feed crops for meat production (Johnson & Monke,

2019; Sewell, 2019; Siegel et al., 2016). These subsidies make factory farms more profitable, and allow beef, pork, and poultry to be sold at prices far below what they would cost without federal support. These same supports are not extended to healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables, meaning that for low-income individuals, it is much more affordable to eat unhealthy foods. In public discourse, individuals with obesity – especially those in poverty - are often demonized for lacking self-discipline and adhering to unhealthy habits (Brownell et al., 2010; Firth, 2012; Glaze & Richardson, 2017). Yet our federal government makes it easier to eat a cheeseburger than a salad.

Health care policy: The biggest contributor to U.S. mortality rates is chronic disease, often linked to “lifestyle choices” such as diet (Neuhouser, 2019). Further, obesity is a risk factor for complications from COVID-19 and other viruses (Dietz & Santos-Burgoa, 2020). Because of the federal subsidies discussed above, these lifestyle choices are often anything but. Of course individuals at all income levels have agency. Yet, we make it more difficult for those who are low-income to make healthy diet choices by artificially lowering the cost of unhealthy ones. The increase in obesity at every income level contributes to the high costs of health care (Biener et al., 2017). Our federal policy should not be contributing to obesity through subsidies at the same time as lamenting the high cost of treating obesity-related health conditions. Additionally, the accepted practice of non-therapeutic antibiotic use, necessary to keep animals healthy in overcrowded conditions and on diets that are designed for quick growth but not animal wellness, contributes to the growing public health danger of antibiotic-resistant bacteria (Copeland, 2014; Wallinga, 2018). Government policy relating to factory farms and meat production creates and maintains disease and increases the costs to treat those diseases.

The policy contributions, and impacts, of U.S. meat production are not generally seen as a focus of social work advocacy except as fragmented pieces. However, factory farming is the site of what I call policy intersectionality - the overlapping tangle of pathological policies that impact people, the environment, the economy, and animals. Just like many other social policies, this pathology is due to wealth-based power inequities. The corporate owners of factory farms and meat producers have disproportionate political power that far outweighs that of the low-income populations hurt most by our irrational support for practices that are lethal to the health of our society and planet. The current meat shortages and increased prices, caused primarily by worker illness, could have been easily predicted. The functioning of these plants has rarely received public outcry as long as the meat supply is plentiful and cheap. However, what the hazardous work conditions, environmental damage, health care costs, and cruelty to animals, could not accomplish, the COVID-related meat shortages and price increases finally have. The concentration of meat production in the hands of a few powerful companies, and the normal practice of dangerous and crowded conditions for slaughterhouse workers, have produced the perfect storm of closed plants and sparsely filled supermarket shelves. As Upton Sinclair famously said about the reaction to his exposé on Chicago's meatpacking plants, "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach" (Sinclair, 1962, p. 126). Perhaps now, while the public's stomach is in pain, is the time to advocate for changes in food policy that will protect workers, consumers, and our planet.

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