

## POPULATION HEALTH FORUMS

### Politics, Poverty and Hunger: The Population Health Impact

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"Working on hunger is difficult" explained Mariana Chilton, PhD, MPH as she opened the 2015 season of the JSPH Forums. Dr. Chilton has devoted much of her career to hunger, poverty, children's health, and policy issues. She is an Associate Professor at Drexel University School of Public Health, and Director of the [Center for Hunger-Free Communities](#), and is Co-Principal Investigator of [Children's Health Watch](#). She founded [Witnesses to Hunger](#), a participatory action group, and has testified before the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives on the importance of child nutrition programs and other anti-poverty policies.

Chilton described hunger as an "experience of shame" and used the term, "food insecurity" to describe the lack of access to enough food for an active and healthy life. She went on to discuss the relationship between food insecurity and public policy. Throughout her presentation she focused on children and illustrated the connections between hunger, poverty, and health outcomes. Chilton provided an overview of "toxic stress," which in her view encompasses nutritional deprivation and economic hardship. Poverty, she explained, should be looked at as a childhood disease.

Public health policies to decrease child poverty should include good nutrition, supports for working families, and adequate public assistance that promotes health. Aside from the familiar food stamp programs, other programs such as energy assistance can also play a role in decreasing poverty and improving health.

Chilton challenged the audience to examine how public assistance interacts with the labor market. What happens when families lose benefits as a result of working? She believes this can impact food insecurity and child hunger. It is important to have family-friendly policies. Chilton also stressed the importance of analyzing current assistance programs and work on improvements, while looking at other interventions beyond public assistance.

"We must be willing to talk of the nuances of promoting self-sufficiency...we must have a fearless and sustained dialogue." Chilton's obvious passion for these issues was inspiring and thought provoking.

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