

LEVELED BOOK • Z¹

HUNGRY Right Here?

MULTI
LEVEL
V•Y•Z¹

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Focus Question

Why is there an epidemic of hunger in the United States, and how can kids help to fight it?

Words to Know

access

awareness

benefits

campaign

census

epidemic

federal

food assistance

food banks

food stamp

minimum wage

nonprofit

outstripped

poverty

surplus

Page 3: The first surplus food stamps let people trade a \$1 stamp for \$1.50 worth of food in 1939.

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Table of Contents

The Invisible Epidemic	4
Why People Can't Afford Food	5
How Food Assistance Works	7
The Politics of Hunger	10
Filling the Gap	12
Kids Can Make a Difference	14
What Can I Do?	17
Glossary	19



The Invisible Epidemic

It's the last day of school! Everyone is excited about the long summer break—everyone except a boy named Mario. He slumps in his chair with his head on his desk. His stomach rumbles. The only food he's had today is the school lunch, and he knows the cabinets at home are empty. His mom works two jobs, but by the end of the month they always run out of money for food. He sighs, thinking of the long summer ahead.

Like Mario, millions of American children go hungry every day. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), 48.1 million Americans lived in "food insecure" households in 2014. This means they did not always have **access** to enough food for everyone living there. Of these Americans, 15.3 million were children. That means about one in five children in the United States were food insecure.

Hunger brings pain and stress. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has found that children who don't get enough to eat have more health problems and miss more school than those who do get enough to eat. When food-insecure kids are in school, they have a harder time concentrating and learning. Hunger makes children tired, so they don't get enough exercise. Hunger also has long-term effects. Children grow fast, and their brains develop rapidly at a young age. Too little food slows both their physical and mental development. Many of these children never catch up.

The United States grows and exports millions of pounds of food, and the government has programs to help people who can't afford food. Yet there is an **epidemic** of hunger in the United States. Why?

Why People Can't Afford Food

Bad things can happen to anyone. A factory closes and a parent loses a job. A guardian gets sick and can't work. A single mom must stay home to take care of an aging parent or sick child. When families lose income—or don't have enough to begin with—they often have to make tough choices. Sometimes they must choose to either pay the bills or eat.

Millions of Americans work full time and are still food insecure. Since the 1950s, the rising costs of housing, medical care, and food have **outstripped** most people's wages. The **federal** government has set the **minimum wage** at \$7.25 an hour, or \$15,080 a year for a full-time job, but many minimum-wage jobs hire only part-time employees in order to avoid paying **benefits** such as health insurance. After paying taxes and insurance, even those who have higher-paying jobs can get into trouble.

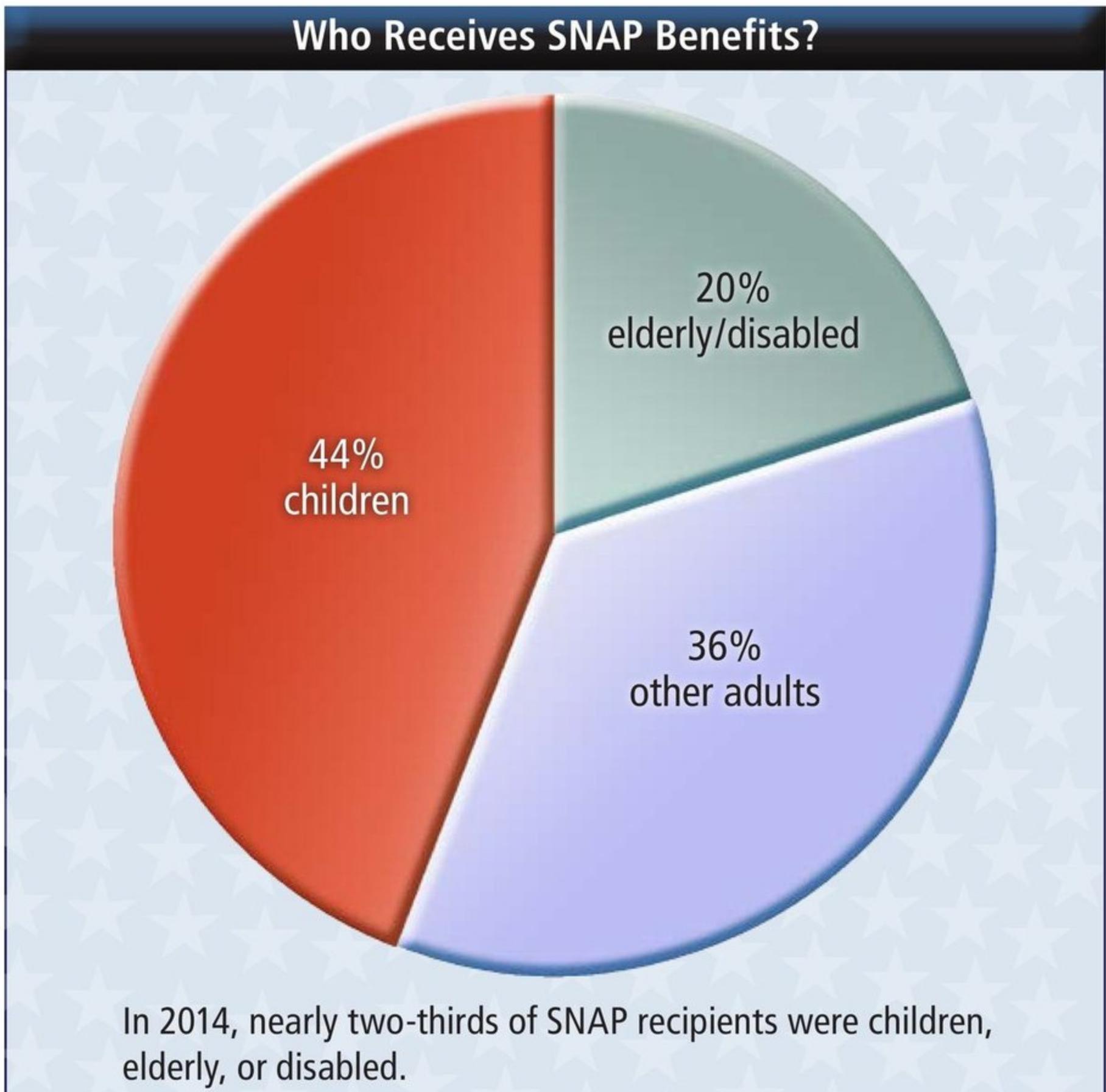
USDA figures show that more than 60 percent of adults receiving **food assistance** are women. According to the National Women's Law Center, women are more than twice as likely as men to work in low-paying jobs—and even when they do the same job as a man, are likely to be paid less for doing it. In 2015, the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that women made seventy-nine cents for every dollar made by men for full-time work. Yet the U.S. **Census** shows that more than 80 percent of single parents caring for children are women, and they are twice as likely to live in **poverty** as single fathers caring for children. That's doubly unfortunate, because when mothers are living in poverty, their children often are, too.

How Food Assistance Works

Federal food assistance began as a way for the government to help farmers during the Great Depression. Starting in 1933, the USDA bought farmers' **surplus** crops and distributed them to those in need. In 1939, the government began issuing actual stamps that people used to buy surplus food. By 1964, the program allowed people to buy any type of food, not just surplus. In 2008, the **Food Stamp Program** was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to reflect the program's new emphasis on nutrition.



During the Great Depression, the government gave out surplus food to help feed hungry Americans.



Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

To decide whether or not people should get food stamps, the federal government evaluates their income. In 2016, if a family of two earned \$15,936 a year, they were living at what the government calls the *poverty level*. That means a single parent who works full-time for minimum wage (earning \$15,080 a year) and his or her child both live in poverty.

In 2015, SNAP helped more than forty-five million Americans. The average monthly food stamp benefit is less than \$5.00 a day.

Another federal program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), helps pregnant women and children under the age of five. WIC provides specific nutritious foods such as milk, baby formula, and baby food.

For more than thirty million children, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) also provides free or reduced-cost lunches at public schools to low-income families. With the urging of First Lady Michelle Obama, Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. The government increased funding for NSLP and, for the first time in thirty years, set new standards for nutrition.



Children eat free lunch at an Oregon school. Some low-income schools receive federal funding to provide free breakfast and lunch for all their students.

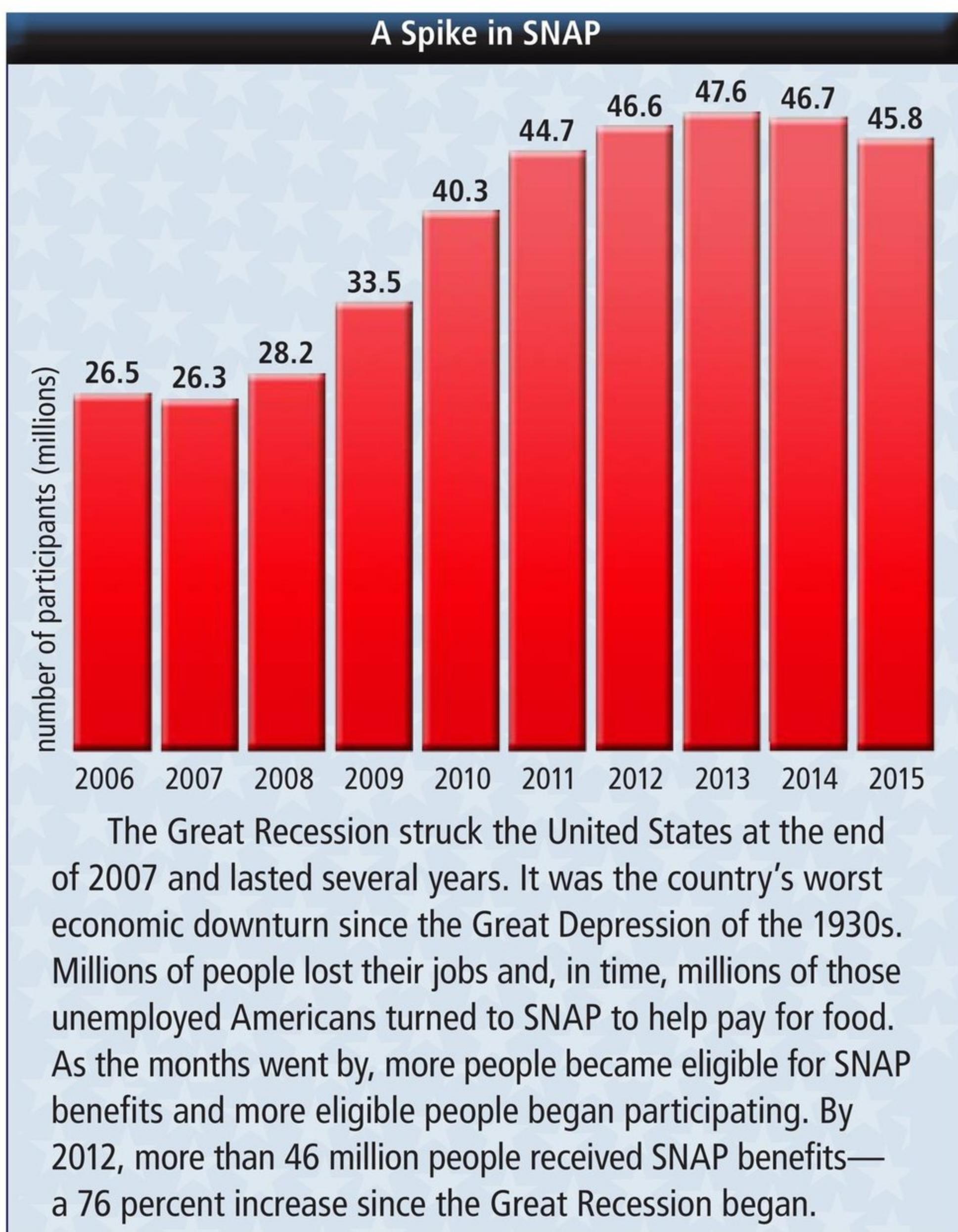
The Politics of Hunger

While the government offers a safety net to many hungry Americans, the amount of money budgeted for federal food programs varies from year to year. Shifting political winds led to severe cuts to the program in 1980–81, with some funding restored by 1990. In some years, Congress cuts billions in spending for SNAP; sometimes it increases spending for school lunch programs. People disagree about how much the federal government should spend on food programs, who the government should help feed, and how the government should determine who qualifies for that help.

For instance, some people think the government should change its current measure of poverty, which was first developed in the 1960s. This government formula accounts for inflation. It does not account for other rising costs, however, or shifting demands on Americans' budgets. The cost of other necessities such as childcare, housing, transportation, and education have increased much more than food. As a result, more families today struggle to pay their bills.

Even for those who qualify, not everyone who needs help gets help. Many people may not know they qualify or don't know how to apply for SNAP.

Others could be embarrassed to ask for help. Applying for benefits often means taking time off work and finding transportation to a government office. People who can't afford food can't afford to miss work.



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Food Deserts

High-poverty areas are often “food deserts”—places not served by large grocery stores. Some are in inner cities where stores have closed. Others are in rural areas with small populations. People in these areas often can’t afford to travel ten or fifteen miles to buy groceries, so they buy basic food at small, local stores. Prices are generally higher, and small stores often don’t carry nutritious foods like quality meat or fresh produce.

Filling the Gap

When government funding is not enough to meet the needs of hungry Americans, local food programs help fill the gap. **Food banks** in every state collect food from growers, restaurants, and grocery stores to distribute to charities, such as food pantries and soup kitchens, that serve the public.

Food banks often provide canned or other nonperishable foods because storing fresh produce, for instance, is difficult. For low-income people, the nutritional gap can sometimes be filled by community gardens. Here, people plant, care for, and harvest produce to use at home or share with the community. There are more than eighteen thousand community gardens in the United States and Canada, and many grow vegetables for their local food banks. Even food not grown for food banks sometimes makes its way there if growers have extra.



A mother and her children plant tomatoes in a middle-school garden in Colorado. They plan to donate their produce to a local food bank.

Feeding America, the largest **nonprofit** organization helping American families, has more than two hundred food banks and sixty thousand food pantries that feed about twelve million kids each year. However, charities account for less than 6 percent of the food assistance in the United States. As costs rise, wages stay the same, and federal food programs are cut, these organizations are finding that they cannot meet the needs of hungry people. They often run out of food and have to turn families away.

Do You Know?

The nonprofit organization AmpleHarvest.org connects more than 7,500 food charities with gardens that want to donate produce.



Volunteers prepare meals at the Central Kitchen in Washington, D.C. The kitchen prepares 4,500 meals every day for homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and other programs.

Kids Can Make a Difference

In addition to food stamps and food banks, individual kids like you can help.

Students in Concord, New Hampshire, hosted a “hunger banquet” for their parents. The “cost” to attend the banquet was canned food for the food pantry. A sixth-grade class in Bellingham, Massachusetts, made an award-winning video about hunger to raise **awareness** in its community. Other students have raised money for food banks through bake sales, art sales, car washes, walk-a-thons, read-a-thons, and other fund-raising activities.

Sam Adamo played his cello at a local farmer's market and collected \$700 for his local food bank in Rhode Island. Carson Pazdan used his love of cooking and created a cookbook for and by kids. The cookbook sales raised more than \$20,000 for the Northern Illinois Food Bank. Nine-year-old Macy Stewart distributed empty bags in her school and asked classmates to fill them for St. Mary's Food Bank. She collected 844 pounds (383 kg) of food.

Do You Know?

St. Mary's Food Bank in Surprise, Arizona, is the world's first food bank. It was founded in 1967.

When seven-year-old William Winslow realized that kids in Wake County, North Carolina, would not have food over spring break, he asked a local Mexican restaurant to team up with him. The restaurant gave free cheese dip to customers who brought in foods for BackPack Buddies, a program that sends meals home on weekends for students in need. Then William asked a local grocery store to let him stand outside and tell people about the program. In only one weekend, he collected 1,400 pounds (635 kg) of food and \$305 in cash donations. His donation sent extra food home over spring break.

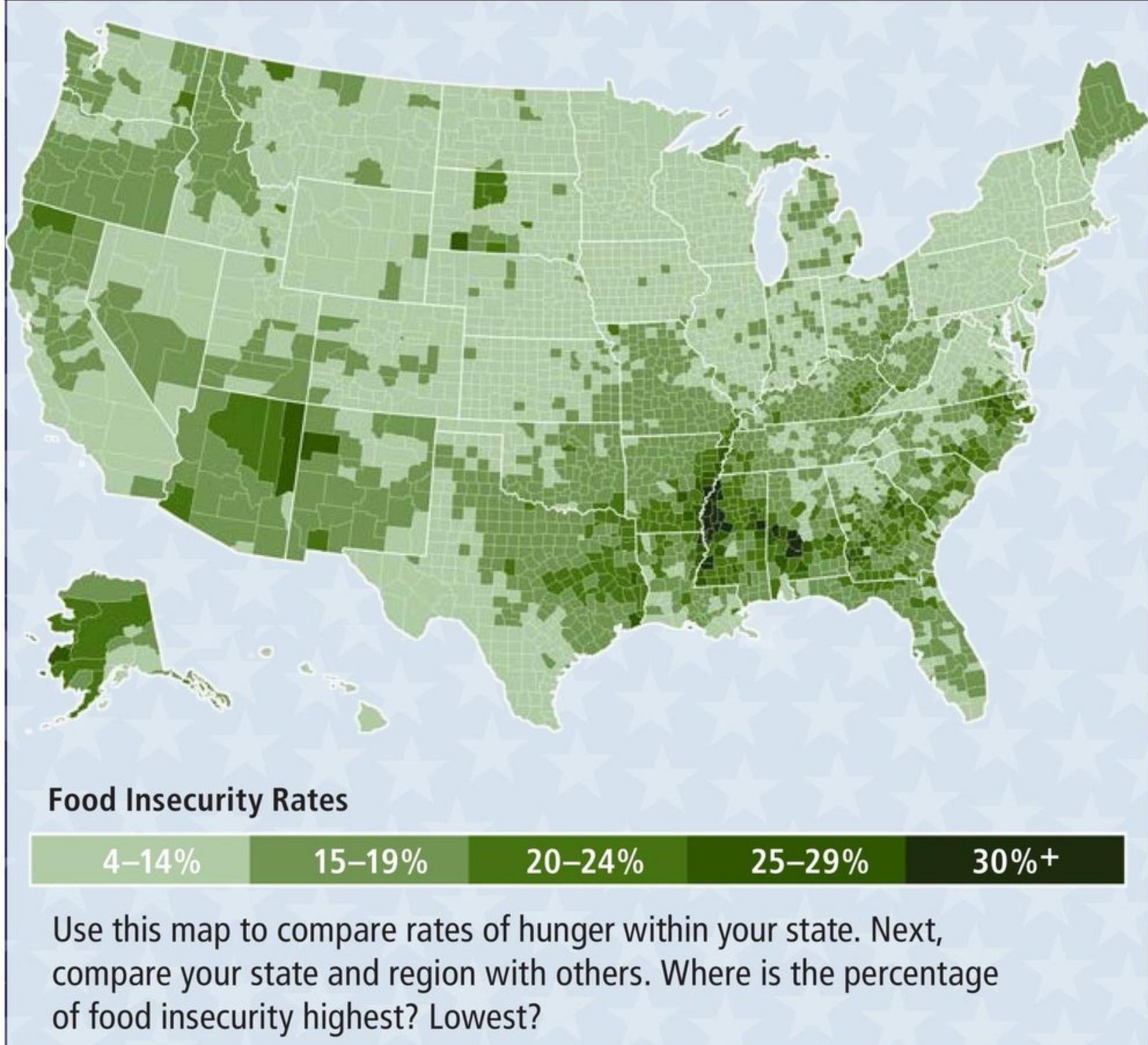
Now in fourth grade, William still holds an annual fundraiser. In 2016, he enlisted and organized 171 volunteers to collect donations at ten grocery stores. Donations provided eleven thousand meals to regional children. In 2017, he hopes to expand throughout the state of North Carolina. William, a swimmer and Cub Scout, says, “I’m just an involved, regular kid. Any kid can make a difference if they want to. It’s just whether they want to or not.”

“I’m just an involved, regular kid. Any kid can make a difference if they want to. It’s just whether they want to or not.”



William collected 8,100 pounds (3,674 kg) of food for BackPack Buddies in 2016.

Map the Meal Gap



What Can I Do?

If you have a family garden, you can donate extra produce to a local food pantry—or plant an extra patch of vegetables to donate! You can also donate part of your allowance and encourage others to do the same. Kids in Loudoun County, Virginia, came up with a plan to allow kids to donate a dime to the food bank each time they bought lunch. Encourage a school **campaign** to buy products to support food banks or work with a local company to raise funds for a local food bank.

Find out what the local food bank and charities need and at what time of year the need is greatest. Share what you find with friends, family, and neighbors. Most people don't know a lot about hunger in their own communities. Let them know by writing a letter to your local newspaper. Write a report on hunger in your community and present it to your class.

Write letters to your representatives in Congress and to your state and local governments. Encourage them to support programs that help ensure that no child goes hungry. Start a letter-writing campaign at school to tell government officials what you think.

We have the resources to make sure that children like Mario never go hungry again. We just need the will to make it happen.

Don't Waste Food!

About 40 percent of food in the United States is thrown away. The average family of four wastes about \$1,500 worth of food, or two million calories, each year. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and USDA have set a goal of reducing food waste by 50 percent by 2030. If you waste food, how might you waste less?



Glossary

access (<i>n.</i>)	a way of getting near to or entering something or someplace; a way of being able to use or get something (p. 4)
awareness (<i>n.</i>)	knowledge or understanding that something exists (p. 14)
benefits (<i>n.</i>)	money or services given to someone by the government or a company (p. 6)
campaign (<i>n.</i>)	a planned series of actions designed to reach a certain goal (p. 17)
census (<i>n.</i>)	an official count of a population in an area (p. 6)
epidemic (<i>n.</i>)	a sudden occurrence of something harmful or unwelcome in a community that spreads quickly (p. 5)
federal (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to a central government that shares power with separate states or regions (p. 6)

food assistance (<i>n.</i>)	help given by federal programs to people who are in need of food (p. 6)
food banks (<i>n.</i>)	groups or centers that collect food and give it to those who need it (p. 12)
food stamp (<i>n.</i>)	a coupon or other document given by the government to help people buy food (p. 7)
minimum wage (<i>n.</i>)	the lowest hourly pay rate allowed by law (p. 6)
nonprofit (<i>adj.</i>)	not made or done for the purpose of making a profit (p. 13)
outstripped (<i>v.</i>)	was larger, faster, or better than something else; exceeded or overtook (p. 6)
poverty (<i>n.</i>)	the state of being poor (p. 6)
surplus (<i>adj.</i>)	more than what is needed; left over or extra (p. 7)

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Word Count: 1,813

Connections

Writing

What can you do to help fight the epidemic of hunger? Write an essay highlighting three ways you can contribute to this cause and help fight hunger.

Social Studies

What are some organizations in your area that help hungry people? Pretend you are a spokesperson from one of the organizations. Write a public service announcement that encourages members of your community to support your organization.

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