

LEVELED BOOK • Y

# HUNGRY Right Here?

MULTI  
level  
V•Y•Z°

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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

awareness  
benefits  
campaign  
census  
epidemic  
federal

food assistance  
food banks  
food stamp  
nonprofit  
poverty  
surplus

Page 3: 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.

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**Correlation**

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## 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 enough food for everyone living there. Of these Americans, 15.3 million were children. That’s about one in five children in the United States who 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. When kids are hungry at school, they have a harder time learning. 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 that choice is to either pay the bills or eat.

Millions of Americans work full time and sometimes still go hungry—women in particular. USDA figures show that more than 60 percent of adults receiving **food assistance** are women. According to the U.S. **Census**, 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. When mothers are living in poverty, their children often are, too.



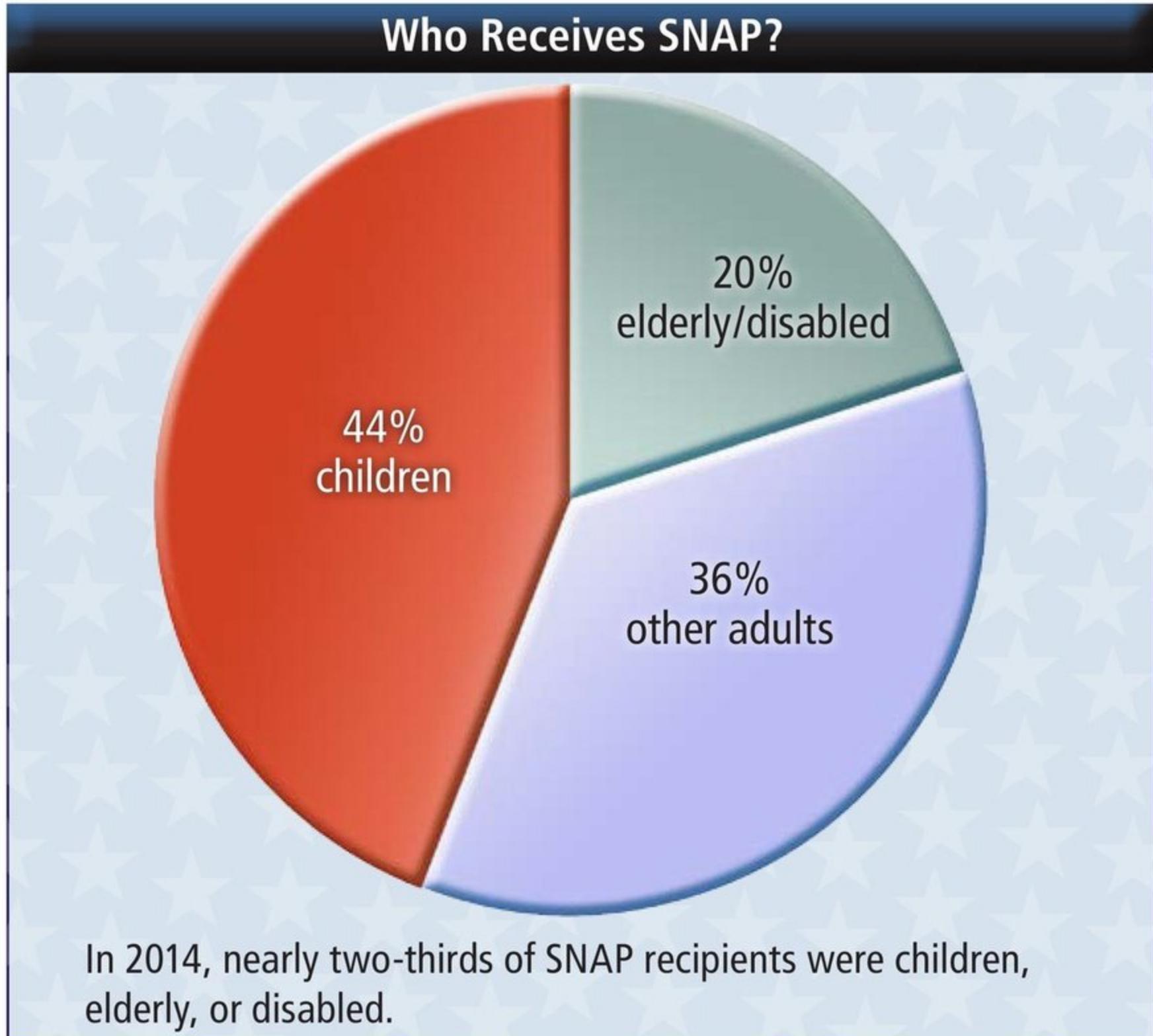
A mother-to-be uses government assistance to buy fresh food.



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

## 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' extra crops and gave 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 extra from farmers. In 2008, the **Food Stamp** Program was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to reflect the program's new emphasis on nutrition.



Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

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.

## 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. In some years, Congress cuts billions in spending for SNAP; in some years, it increases spending for school lunch programs. People disagree about how much the federal government should spend on these food programs. They also disagree about who should qualify for help.

For instance, some people think the government should change its current measure of poverty. 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. Costs such as childcare, housing, 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 off work, something people who can't afford food can't afford to miss.

## 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 boxed 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. Many community gardens grow vegetables for their local food banks.

### 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.



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.

## Kids Can Make a Difference

In addition to food stamps and food banks, 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, and read-a-thons.

Sam Adamo played his cello at a local farmer’s market and collected \$700 for his local food bank in Rhode Island. Carson Pazdan created a cookbook for and by kids. The cookbook sales raised more than \$20,000 for the Northern Illinois Food Bank. Macy Stewart collected 844 pounds (383 kg) of food by distributing empty bags in her school and asking classmates to fill them for St. Mary’s Food Bank in Surprise, Arizona.

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 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.



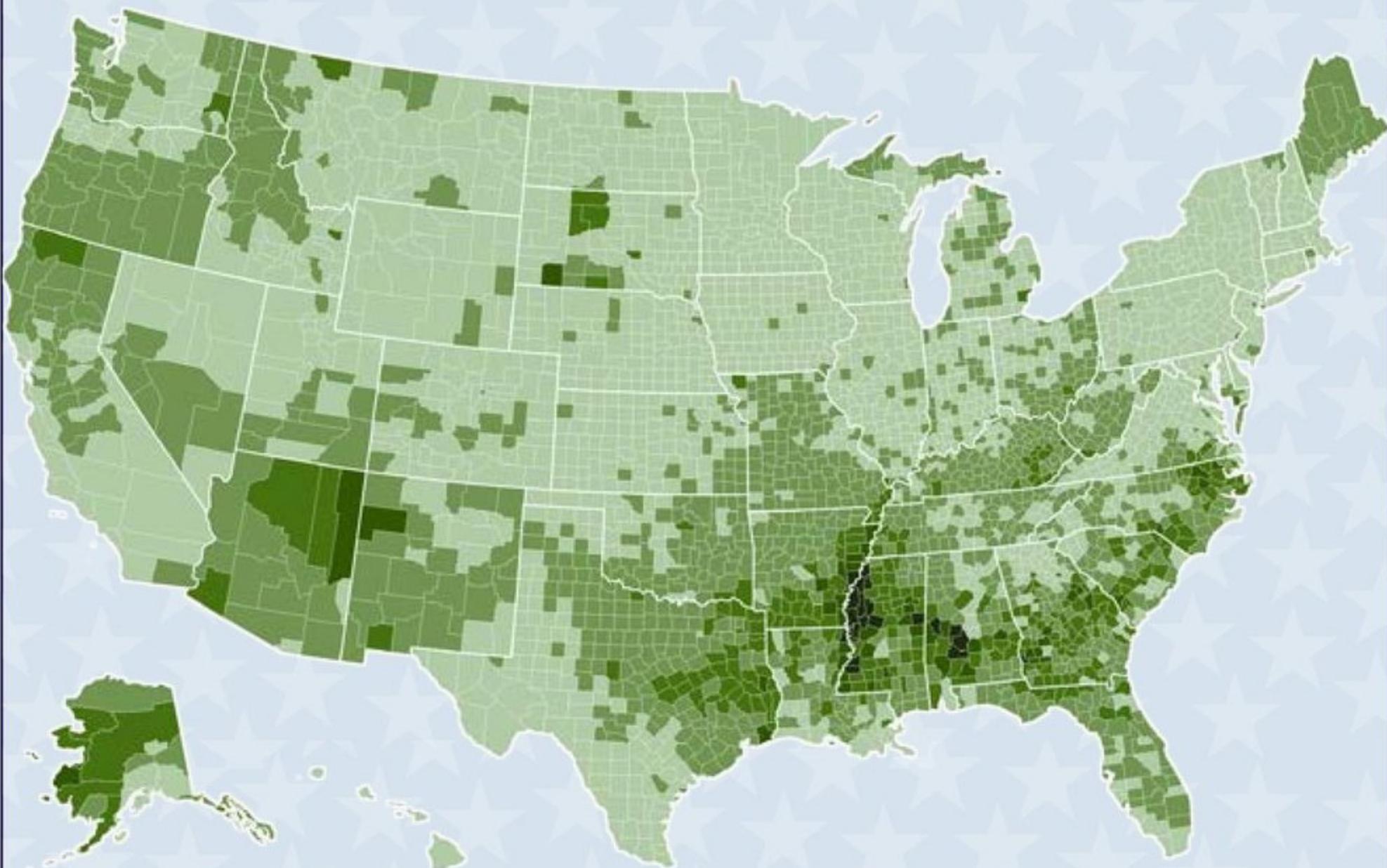
William collected 8,100 pounds (3,674 kg) of food for BackPack Buddies in 2016.

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. Now in fourth grade, William still holds an annual fund-raiser. In 2016, he enlisted and organized 171 volunteers to

***“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.”***

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 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.”

## Map the Meal Gap



### Food Insecurity Rates

4–14%      15–19%      20–24%      25–29%      30%+

Use this map to compare rates of hunger within your state. Next, compare your state and region with others. Where is the percentage of food insecurity highest? Lowest?

## 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.

Look around your community. 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 make sure no child goes hungry. Start a letter-writing campaign at school to tell government officials what you think.

We have the resources to ensure 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

<b>awareness</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	knowledge or understanding that something exists (p. 12)
<b>benefits</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	money or services given to someone by the government or a company (p. 9)
<b>campaign</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a planned series of actions designed to reach a certain goal (p. 14)
<b>census</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	an official count of a population in an area (p. 6)
<b>epidemic</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a sudden occurrence of something harmful or unwelcome in a community that spreads quickly (p. 5)
<b>federal</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	of or relating to a central government that shares power with separate states or regions (p. 7)
<b>food assistance</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	help given by the government and other organizations to people who are in need of food (p. 6)
<b>food banks</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	groups or centers that collect food and give it to those who need it (p. 10)
<b>food stamp</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a coupon or other document given by the government to help people buy food (p. 7)
<b>nonprofit</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	not made or done for the purpose of making a profit (p. 11)
<b>poverty</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the state of being poor (p. 6)
<b>surplus</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	more than what is needed; left over or extra (p. 7)

# Hungry Right Here?

A Reading A-Z Level Y Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,463

## 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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