

Hungry Right Here?

A Reading A-Z Level V Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,242

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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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

budgeted	food assistance
census	food banks
charities	food stamp
Congress	funding
epidemic	nutrition
federal	poverty

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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Correlation

LEVEL V

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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. His stomach rumbles. The only food he's had today is the school lunch, and he knows the cupboards 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” homes 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.

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. Too little food slows children’s physical and mental development. Many of them never catch up.

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



All-you-can-eat buffets suggest a land of plenty. But is it for everyone?

Why People Can’t Afford Food

When families don’t have enough money, 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 numbers 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. These women are twice as likely to live in **poverty** as single men caring for children. When mothers are living in poverty, their children often are, too.



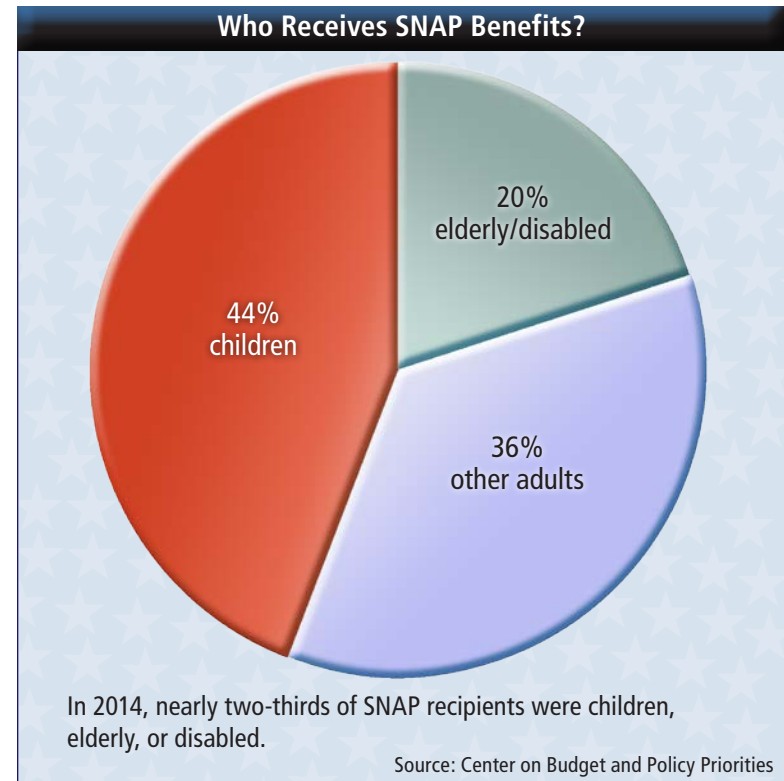
A mother-to-be uses government assistance to buy fresh food.



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

How Food Assistance Works

Federal food assistance began in 1933 as a way for the government to help farmers. The USDA bought farmers' extra crops and gave them to those in need. In 1939, the government began giving actual stamps that people used to buy that extra 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 focus on nutrition.



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 helps pregnant women and children under the age of five. It 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

The government offers a safety net to many hungry Americans. Yet the amount of money **budgeted** for federal food programs varies from year to year. Who draws up the budget? **Congress**, our national lawmakers in Washington, D.C. 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 disagree about who the government should help feed and how the government should determine who gets that help. Because of other rising costs, such as childcare, housing, and education, many families today struggle to pay their bills. To help with that struggle, some people think more Americans should receive food assistance.



A five-year-old holds a sign to help protest a 2013 House farm bill. The bill would have cut SNAP by \$20.5 billion. Actual cuts in November 2013 affected more than 47 million Americans.

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. They give the food to **charities**, such as food pantries or soup kitchens, that serve the public.

Food banks often provide canned or boxed foods because storing fresh fruits and vegetables is difficult. For low-income people, the need for these fresh foods can sometimes be filled by community gardens. Here, people plant, care for, and harvest food 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 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 provide 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 New Hampshire held a “hunger banquet” for their parents. The “cost” to attend the banquet was canned food for the food pantry. A sixth-grade class in Massachusetts made an award-winning video about hunger to educate people in their 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 handing out 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 his part of North Carolina would not have food over spring break, he asked a local grocery store to let him stand outside and talk to people. He told them about Backpack Buddies, a program that sends meals home on weekends for students in need.

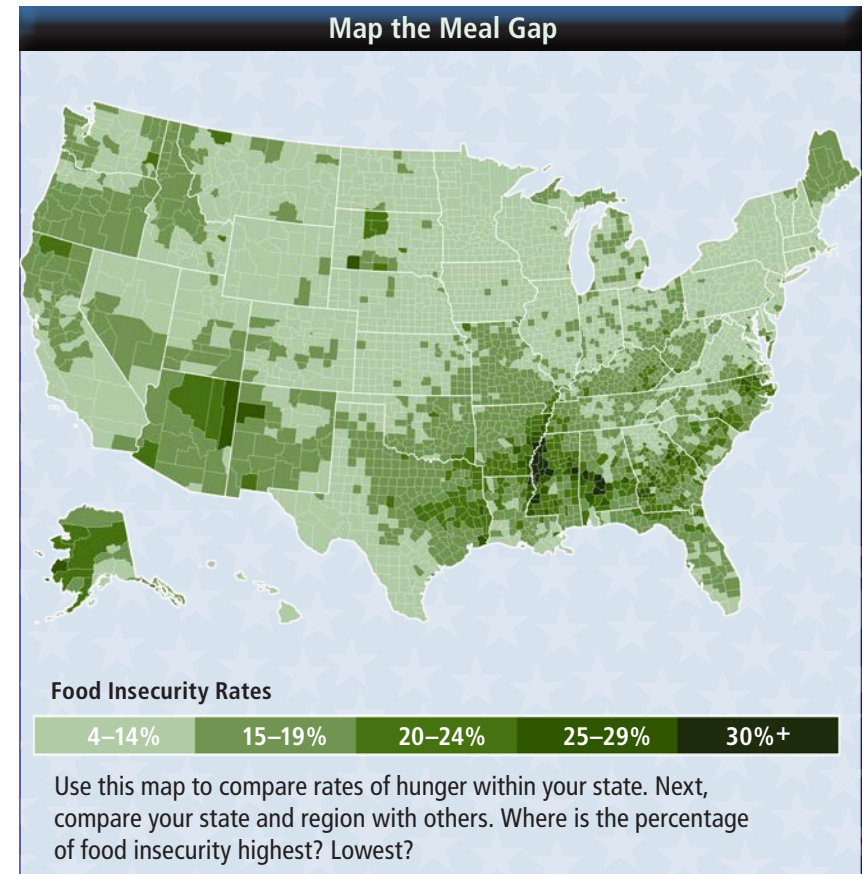


William collected 8,100 pounds (3,674 kg) of food for Backpack Buddies in 2016.

In only one weekend, William collected 1,400 pounds (635 kg) of food and \$305 in cash donations. Now in fourth grade, he still holds a fund-raiser each year.

“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.”

In 2016, he organized 171 volunteers to collect donations at ten grocery stores. Donations provided eleven thousand meals to children in his area. 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.”



What Can I Do?

If you have a family garden, you can donate extra vegetables to a local food pantry—or plant an extra patch to donate! You can also donate part of your allowance and encourage others to do the same. Kids in Virginia came up with a plan to allow kids to donate a dime to the food bank each time they bought lunch. Create a plan at your school to support food banks.



Volunteers prepare meals at the Central Kitchen in Washington, D.C.

Most people don't know a lot about hunger in their own communities. 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. Write letters to Congress and to your state and local governments. Encourage your leaders to support programs that help make sure no child goes hungry.

We have what it takes 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.



Glossary

budgeted (<i>v.</i>)	planned or set aside something, usually money, for a particular purpose (p. 9)
census (<i>n.</i>)	an official count of a population (p. 6)
charities (<i>n.</i>)	organizations that accept donations of money, goods, or services and use them to help those in need (p. 10)
Congress (<i>n.</i>)	the highest lawmaking body of the U.S. government, which includes the Senate and the House of Representatives (p. 9)
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. 7)
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. 10)
food stamp (<i>n.</i>)	a coupon or other document given by the government to help people buy food (p. 7)
funding (<i>n.</i>)	money given by a government or other organization for a specific purpose (p. 10)
nutrition (<i>n.</i>)	the process of eating the kind of foods necessary for life, growth, and health; the study of food and healthy eating (p. 7)
poverty (<i>n.</i>)	the state of being poor (p. 6)