



HUNGER AND FOOD SECURITY

LESSON PLAN

Overview

Estimated in-class lesson time: 90 minutes, excluding projects and presentations.

10 min **Introduction**

Primer

Includes background reading and vocabulary builders.

Lecture-discussion

Students will share their perspectives on how to define, measure, monitor and prevent hunger. Covers essential questions and lesson overview.

15 min **Hunger**

Lecture-discussion

Covers a brief history of hunger in America, emergency food assistance and early federal interventions.

30 min **Food security**

Activity

Students will simulate how household food security is measured in the U.S.

Lecture-discussion

Covers contributors to and consequences of food insecurity.

15 min **Interventions**

Lecture

Covers federal programs and the community food security movement.

20 min **Conclusion**

Activity

In groups, students will compare emergency food programs, federal food and nutrition assistance and the community food security movement.

Reflection

Students will respond to a quote and revisit essential questions.

Project

In groups, students will complete one of the following assignments and write a report based on their findings:

- *Assemble a mock food policy council to represent their community; or,*
- *Analyze how relying on a SNAP budget might affect diets.*

Essential questions

Essential questions¹ invite inquiry into to the “big ideas” of a module. They can be discussed, written on the board and posed on essays and exams.

- What is hunger? How can we measure it?
- How can we measure food security?
- Why is there hunger and food insecurity in the United States?
- How should hunger and food insecurity be addressed?
- Who should be responsible for addressing hunger and food insecurity?

Learning objectives

Students will be able to:

- List criteria that a household must meet in order to be considered food secure;
- Explain differences between hunger and food insecurity;
- Describe contributors to food insecurity;
- Describe effects of food insecurity on health and well-being;
- Compare emergency food programs, federal food and nutrition assistance and the community food security movement, and assess strengths and limitations of each;
- Design a project aimed at reducing hunger and food insecurity.

Materials

- Vocabulary definitions
- Background reading
- Presentation slides
- Student handouts

10 min Introduction

Primer

Includes background reading and vocabulary builders.

Lecture-discussion

Students will share their perspectives on how to define, measure, monitor and prevent hunger. Covers essential questions and lesson overview.

Instructions to educators are written in italics; talking points to students are written in plain font. Talking points are not intended to be delivered verbatim—we expect educators will adapt them to best suit their audiences.

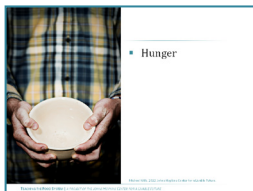
Primer

- *Educators may wish to review the [background reading](#) as a primer for this lesson. It can also be made available to students as an optional reading assignment, or for reference purposes.*
- *Before beginning this lesson, we recommend students become familiar with the [vocabulary definitions](#) for this module. Refer to [vocabulary builders](#) for suggested activities.*

Lecture-discussion



Title slide



Hunger

- What words or images come to mind when you think of hunger?
- How would you define hunger?
- How would you measure hunger?



Food insecurity

- *The following questions are meant to get students thinking about food insecurity.*
- How would you know if someone was at risk of experiencing hunger? Are there conditions that could serve as warning signs?
- *Possible responses include:*
 - Worrying that food would run out before money is available to buy more;
 - Skipping meals because there is not enough money for food;
 - Eating less than usual because there is not enough money for food;
 - Needing to rely on food banks, soup kitchens or other forms of emergency food assistance.



Interventions

- How could hunger be prevented?
- Are you aware of any interventions aimed at reducing hunger? What are some of their strengths and limitations?



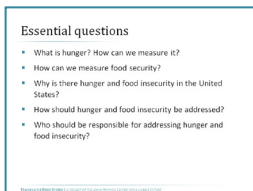
Hunger

- **Hunger** has been defined as the discomfort, weakness, illness or pain caused by a lack of food.²
- Although the United States has been called the “land of plenty,” about one in thirty U.S. households—about 4 million—reported experiencing hunger during 2010 because they could not afford enough food.³



Food insecurity

- Almost one in seven U.S. households—over 17 million—suffer from food insecurity, a condition that includes:
 - Hunger, in more extreme cases;
 - Having to skip meals;
 - Having to compromise on nutrition;
 - Relying on emergency food sources such as food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens.³



Essential questions

- The presence of hunger and food insecurity in the United States raises questions of how to measure them, why they prevail, how they should be addressed and who should be responsible for doing so. These questions reflect the “big ideas” covered in this lesson.
- *Allow students time to read and reflect upon the essential questions.*
- *Briefly solicit students’ initial responses to the questions.*
- *If you intend to use essential questions on exams or essay questions, notify students now.*

- *Provide each student with a copy of the [handout](#) entitled “Comparing interventions.”*
- *Alert students to the fact that they will complete this worksheet later in the lesson, and that in order to do so they will need to take good notes.*

15 min Hunger

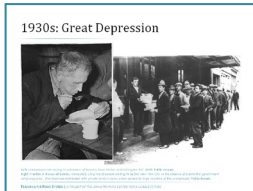
Lecture-discussion

Covers the history of hunger in America. Students will critically assess emergency food programs and federal responses to hunger.

Lecture-discussion

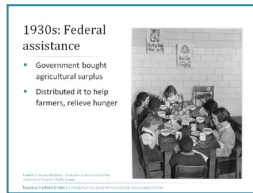


Overview: Hunger



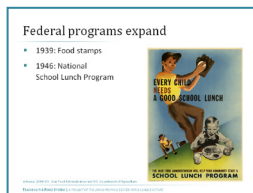
1930s: Great Depression

- Hunger in the United States first garnered significant national policy attention during the Great Depression, a global economic downturn in the 1930s that left a quarter of the American workforce unemployed.⁴
- Economic conditions were already particularly bad for American farmers, who had accumulated enormous debt from investing in costly, specialized machinery—part of the transition to a more industrialized food system (refer to *History of Food*).⁴
- Farmers were also producing far more food than they could profitably sell; at the same time, millions of Americans were hungry. This phenomenon has been described as a “paradox of want amid plenty.”⁵
- If you were a policymaker during this time, how would you propose to address these problems? *Prompt students by explaining the relationship between supply and demand. Possible responses include:*
 - Pay farmers to stop growing crops on part of their land;
 - Destroy crops and livestock;
 - Purchase surpluses from farmers and distribute them to the hungry.
- The federal government responded with all three of the aforementioned measures. In order to reduce agricultural surpluses and raise prices, the president ordered the destruction of 6 million piglets, 200,000 sows and 10 million acres of cotton. Many Americans were angered by these measures.⁴



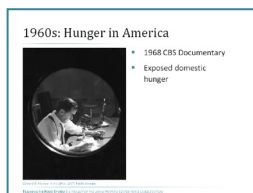
1930s: Federal assistance

- The U.S. government responded with several new programs. Most were intended to help struggling farmers by reducing **agricultural surpluses**, though some of these efforts went hand-in-hand with hunger relief programs.^{4,6}
- In 1932, Congress authorized the government to purchase surplus wheat from farmers and donate it to the Red Cross for hunger relief.⁷⁻⁹
- This represented a major shift in the role of the U.S. government, as feeding the hungry was traditionally considered to be the role of private charities.⁸
 - Many policymakers argued that the government had no role in hunger relief, believing it would undermine America's work ethic.⁸
 - Some also questioned the extent of hunger in America.⁸
 - Many social workers also criticized the idea, arguing that government handouts undermined their clients' dignity.⁸
- How would you respond to these criticisms during the time of Great Depression? How would you respond today?
- To what degree, if at all, should federal programs be responsible for addressing hunger in America?



1930s-40s: Federal programs expand

- Despite objections, federal food and nutrition assistance would gradually expand over the following years, leading to the institution of early food stamp programs in 1939.¹⁰
- The **National School Lunch Program** (refer to *Food Environments*) was later established in 1946, adding additional government support in the campaign against hunger.
 - Support for the program was amplified by the realization that two out of five World War II draftees were rejected primarily because they were undernourished.¹¹



1960s: Hunger in America

- Hunger in America again came under scrutiny in the late 1960s, after a series of investigations in the rural South reported evidence of widespread hunger.
- These were followed by the award-winning CBS News documentary, *Hunger in America*, which drew further attention to domestic hunger.
 - Although famed journalist Edward R. Murrow had died of lung cancer before work on *Hunger in America* began, the documentary followed his model of rigorous, fact-based journalism. In Murrow's words, "To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful."
 - How well does journalism today abide by this principle?

1960s: Federal response

- Expanded Food Stamp Program
- School Breakfast Program
- Free, reduce priced school meals
- WIC

1960s: Federal response

- The effect of these persuasive investigations was dramatic.
- Much of the American public was shocked to learn that hunger could exist in a country with such an abundant food supply.
 - They reacted with outspoken criticism of federal programs, calling for greater food and nutrition assistance to the poor.^{8,11,12}
- The government responded with several initiatives, including:
 - Expansion of the Food Stamp Program;
 - The School Breakfast Program;
 - Free and reduced price meals in schools;
 - The **Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children** (WIC).¹²

Emergency food programs



Emergency food programs

- During the early 1980s, the U.S. economy suffered from a severe recession that left many Americans unemployed. Federal budget cuts, meanwhile, weakened many social support programs.¹³
- These events coincided with a dramatic rise in poverty.¹⁰
- Hunger once again became evident throughout the United States,¹⁰ while homelessness became increasingly apparent in large cities.¹³
- America's poor turned to food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens and other charitable programs for help. To meet the urgent need, the size and number of these **emergency food** programs multiplied over the course of just a few years.¹³
- Today, emergency food programs provide assistance, at least during parts of the year, to more than one in twenty Americans.¹⁴
- Millions of Americans support these programs through donations of food, money and volunteer labor.¹³
- What are the strengths are limitations of emergency food programs?
- Is there a downside to the proliferation of emergency food programs?

Emergency food programs

Criticisms:

- "Culture of charity"
- "Dismiss responsibility to the poor"
- "Kinder, but less just"

Emergency food programs (continued)

- Sociologist Janet Poppendieck argues that the proliferation of emergency food programs indicates a failure on the part of society to deal with the root causes of poverty.¹³
- By making charitable donations, Poppendieck adds, Americans can alleviate the discomfort evoked by seeing hunger and poverty, creating a "culture of charity" that allows the government to "dismiss its responsibility for the poor."¹³
- Poppendieck paraphrases English author Samuel Johnson in describing this arrangement as "kinder, but less just,"¹³ referring to the abundance of charity in a society that lacks legal obligation to uphold its citizens' right to food.
- How would you respond to Poppendieck's comments?
- To what degree, if at all, should emergency food programs be responsible for addressing hunger in America?

30 min Food security

Activity

Students will simulate how household food security is measured in the U.S.

Lecture-discussion

Covers contributors to and consequences of food insecurity.

Activity

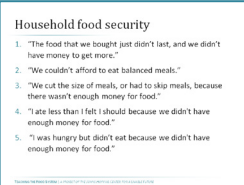


Overview: Food security

- In the introduction to this lesson, we talked about conditions that may precede hunger.
 - By the time someone experiences hunger, he or she may already have suffered considerable harm, as we will discuss shortly.
 - For this reason, U.S. policymakers have expanded their attention from a narrow focus on hunger to a broader lens that examines **food security**—a concept that includes the conditions that lead to hunger.⁶
 - Food security is a measure of having consistent access to safe, adequate and nutritious food for an active and healthy life.^{15,16}
 - For a household to be considered food secure, its members must be able to acquire this food without resorting to emergency food programs, scavenging, stealing and other coping strategies.¹⁵
 - If a household does not meet these conditions for any part of the year, or if these conditions are uncertain, it is considered food insecure.¹⁵
 - Food insecure households include those that are:
 - Unable to afford balanced meals;
 - Worried their food will run out before they have money to buy more;
 - Forced to skip meals because they can't afford enough food;
 - In more severe cases—hungry because they can't afford enough food.³
 - In this activity, we will simulate how food security is measured in the United States by using actual government surveys. *An illustration of this activity is depicted below.*
-
- Scenario: You have been tasked by the U.S. government to measure levels of household food security in your town. How will you go about doing this? *Discuss.*
 - For this activity, one of you will ask questions from an actual U.S. government survey designed to measure levels of household food security.
 - Ask for a volunteer. Give them the household food security survey included in the *student handouts*.
 - One of you will interpret the results of the survey.
 - Ask for a second volunteer. Give them the handout entitled “Interpreting survey results.”
 - Some of you will respond to the survey questions based on answers given to you on note cards. Your collective responses will reflect the state of food security in the U.S., as it was measured in

2010. Because questions of food security are very personal, we won't ask you to respond on behalf of your household.

- Ask for 20 volunteers. Distribute the response cards (see student handouts) among these students. Each student represents roughly 6 million U.S. households. Have these students stand in line, facing the same direction.
- If there are more cards than students, place each extra card on the ground, in line with the standing students, to represent the remaining households.



Household food security

- Have the first volunteer proceed with the survey. In response to each question, students will remain in place or take one or two steps forward to illustrate their responses. Students' responses should resemble the following U.S. statistics from 2010:¹⁴
 - The food that we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more: 15%;
 - We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals: 15%;
 - We cut the size of meals, or had to skip meals, because there wasn't enough money for food: 2% (true in one or two months), 7% (true in more than two months);
 - I ate less than I felt I should because we didn't have enough money for food: 9%;
 - I was hungry but didn't eat because we didn't have enough money for food: 4%.



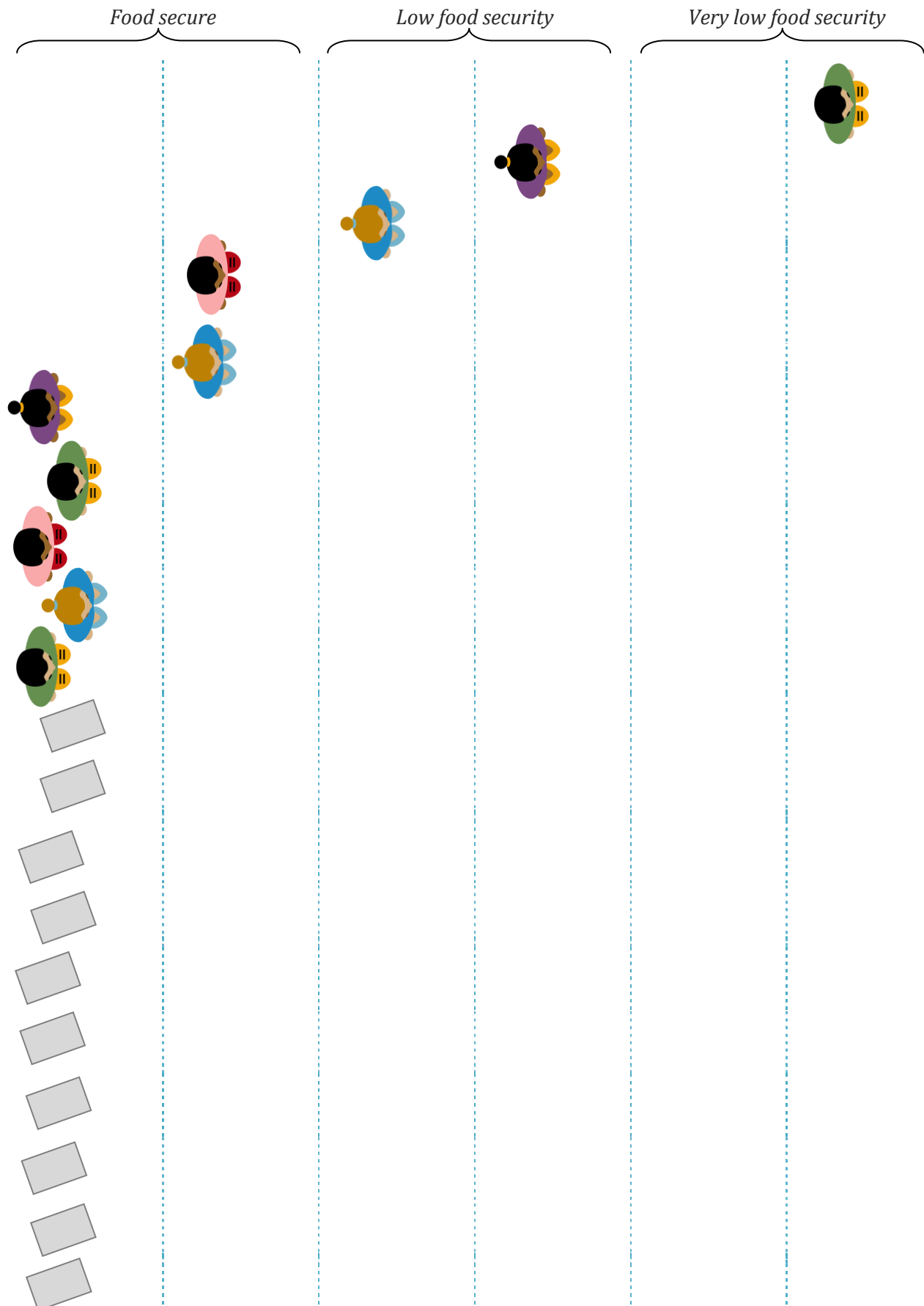
Household food security (continued)

- Once the survey is complete, have the second volunteer interpret the results (see handout for details). The results should resemble the following U.S. statistics from 2010:³
 - Food secure: 86% (16 students, or roughly 72 million U.S. households);
 - Low food security: 9% (2 students, or roughly 12 million U.S. households);
 - Very low food security: 5% (1 student, or roughly 6 million U.S. households).
- Invite students to return to their seats.



Food insecurity

- In the United States, close to 15 percent of households (almost one in seven households, or over 17 million) experience food insecurity at some point during the year.³
- Was there anything about these results that surprised you?
- Do the results seem like an accurate reflection of food security in the U.S. today? Why or why not?
- Do you feel the survey is a good tool for measuring household food security? Why or why not? Are there any questions you would add, remove or change?

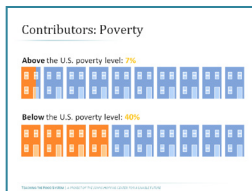


Lecture-discussion



Contributors: Key factors (2 slides)

- What do you suspect are the causes of food insecurity?
- Globally, food security depends on three key factors.¹⁷
 - Food availability: There must be an adequate food supply. Regions with large populations but little farmland, for example, may be unable to produce enough food to feed its inhabitants.
 - Food stability: The supply must be stable. Some regions may have adequate food supplies during parts of the year, but that falter during drought seasons.
 - Food access: People must have physical and economic access to food. In regions suffering from armed conflict, corruption, poverty or **inequitable** food distribution, a stable and abundant food supply holds little value if people are unable to physically reach it and afford it.
- Because the United States has an abundant and stable food supply, U.S. food security has primarily been concerned with issues of food access—particularly households' ability to afford food.



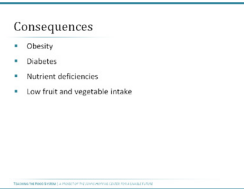
Contributors: Poverty

- Poverty is frequently cited as the root of food insecurity.¹⁸
- In 2010:
 - 40 percent of households below the U.S. **federal poverty level** were food insecure;
 - Only 7 percent of households whose incomes were well above the poverty level were food insecure.³
- Unemployment, low paying jobs, substance abuse, mental health problems and reduced government benefits (such as food stamps) may partly explain why some food insecure households struggle to afford adequate food.¹⁸
- Their food budgets may compete with other priorities, including housing, medical and child-care costs.¹⁸



Contributors: Food environments

- The physical environment in low-income neighborhoods may pose additional barriers to accessing affordable, healthy food.
- Low-income neighborhoods often have fewer supermarkets,¹⁹ which generally offer a wider variety of fruits and vegetables at lower prices than smaller food stores.^{20,21}
- In both urban and rural communities, households that don't own a vehicle and live far from supermarkets may be particularly affected.²²
- Refer to *Food Environments* for more information.



Consequences (2 slides)

- What do you suspect are the consequences of food insecurity?
 - What are the health consequences?
 - What are the social consequences?
 - How are children affected?
- Residents of food insecure households face greater risks to their health and well-being. Food insecurity has been linked to:
 - **Obesity**;
 - **Diabetes**;
 - **Dietary nutrient** deficiencies;
 - Low fruit and vegetable intake;
 - Other indicators of unhealthy diets.¹⁸



Consequences: obesity

- Some nutritionists argue that the links between poverty, food insecurity and obesity can be partially explained by the lower cost of foods high in **added fats, added sugars** or **refined grains** (such as snacks, soft drinks and fast food).²³
- These foods tend to be cheaper than **nutrient-dense** foods (such as fruits and vegetables).²³
- Do you think an unhealthy diet is cheaper than a healthy diet? How would you know? What measurements would you use to compare foods?
 - Some nutritionists compare the cost per **calorie** of nutrient-dense foods versus **nutrient-poor** foods.²³
- Other possible explanations for the links between poverty, food insecurity and obesity include:
 - Psychological stress;
 - A lack of accessible nutrition information among food insecure communities.^{18,24}



Consequences: children

- Children may be particularly affected by hunger and food insecurity. Studies have found links between food insecurity and:
 - Poorer academic performance;
 - School absences;
 - Suspension from school;
 - Involvement in fights;
 - Headaches;
 - Depression;
 - Other physical, emotional and behavioral concerns.^{18,25-27}

15 min Interventions

Lecture

Covers federal programs and the community food security movement.



Interventions

- Earlier, we introduced federal food and nutrition assistance, emergency food assistance, and some of the strengths and limitations of charitable interventions against hunger.
- This section provides further insight into federal programs, followed by an introduction to the community food security movement.



Federal programs

- Today, federal food and nutrition assistance programs such as WIC and the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program** (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) continue to help increase food security for millions of individuals.
- Funding for SNAP is allocated in the U.S. **Farm Bill**.
- In 2011, one in five Americans participated in at least one of these programs at some point during the year.²⁸



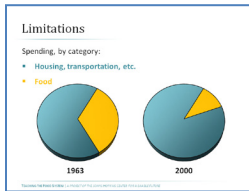
Federal programs: economic benefits (3 slides)

- Federal food and nutrition assistance programs also benefit the U.S. economy. Participation in SNAP, for example, encourages people to spend more on food—every dollar’s worth of SNAP benefits generates an additional 17 to 47 cents of additional spending, which supports grocers, wholesalers, farmers and other businesses.^{29,30}
- When SNAP benefits are accepted at farmers’ markets, they have the added benefit of supporting local farmers (refer to *Food Distribution and Transport*).



Limitations

- Some argue that federal food and nutrition assistance programs exclude many people who should be considered eligible.³¹
- Households are eligible for programs such as SNAP and free and reduced price school meals if their income is below 130 percent of the U.S. federal poverty level,^{32,33} which is set at three times the estimated cost of an adequate diet.³¹



Limitations (continued)

- When the poverty level was created in 1963, Americans spent a third of their disposable income on food. Today, Americans spend closer to 11 percent on food, while other costs—such as housing and transportation—have risen substantially.
- The formula for the federal poverty level has not been updated to reflect these changes, leaving many Americans without much-needed support.³¹
- Do you think changes in how much Americans spend on food should be reflected in the federal poverty line? If so, how would you revise the formula for the federal poverty line?



Community food security

- After recognizing the limitations of emergency food and federal food and nutrition assistance programs, activists began to explore other means of addressing food insecurity.
- In 1994, the community food security movement took hold in the United States, with the goal (among others) of providing community residents with a safe, nutritious and **culturally appropriate** diet.¹⁷
- It strives to build self-reliance, empowering residents to acquire adequate food without depending on emergency food or federal assistance.⁶
- Where possible, it seeks to provide food grown using **sustainable agricultural** practices (refer to *Agriculture and Ecosystems*) and **local food systems**, unlike anti-hunger programs that generally have not focused on how or where food is produced.³⁴



Community food security (continued)

- Some community food security advocates have begun to recognize the importance of creating an infrastructure that supports farms throughout a given **region**, recognizing the limits of what can be produced locally (refer to *Food Distribution and Transport*).
- Finally, community food security emphasizes local decision making and citizen engagement, in contrast to federal programs that are shaped by decisions made primarily by the government.⁶



Community food security (continued)

- In practice, the community food security movement takes a systems approach (refer to *Ingredients of the Food System*).⁶
- Rather than responding to food insecurity with isolated interventions, the movement recognizes the relationships between farmers, distributors, retailers, community residents, researchers, non-profits, policymakers and other participants in the food system.
- **Food policy councils** illustrate this approach by bringing together representatives from these different groups to examine the food system and develop recommendations to improve it.³⁵
- Many community food security projects help to build relationships between farmers and consumers. These projects can provide community members with better access to fruits and vegetables, while providing greater transparency into how their food is produced, processed and distributed.⁶ To this end, the movement works to establish:
 - Community gardens;
 - Farmers markets;
 - **Community supported agriculture** (CSA) programs;
 - Urban farms.⁶
- Other projects work to build self-resilience among communities.
 - Educational programs offer residents training on how to grow, preserve and prepare produce for themselves and for their community.
 - With small loans and entrepreneurial training, community members can start up small businesses that produce food for farmers markets, stores and restaurants.⁶
- These examples demonstrate how the community food security movement strives to promote community self-reliance, social justice and democratic decision-making.¹⁷
 - While these goals are worthy in their own right, more research is needed to measure how the movement is affecting hunger and food insecurity on a national scale.

20 min Conclusion**Activity**

In groups, students will compare emergency food programs, federal food and nutrition assistance and the community food security movement.

Reflection

Students will respond to a quote and revisit essential questions.

Project

In groups, students will complete one of the following assignments and write a report based on their findings:

- *Assemble a mock food policy council to represent their community; or,*
- *Analyze how relying on a SNAP budget might affect diets.*

- *The estimated time for this section does not account for projects and presentations.*

Activity

- *Place students in groups of two or three.*
- *Using their notes as reference, students will work together to respond to the questions on the [handout](#) entitled “Comparing interventions.”*
- *Ask volunteers to share their results with the class. Discuss.*

Reflection

- *Ask a volunteer to read this quote aloud: “To many people hunger means not just symptoms that can be diagnosed by a physician, it bespeaks the existence of a social, not a medical problem.”³⁶*
- *Students will reflect on this quote, pair up with a partner, then share their reactions and interpretations.*
- *Hunger and food insecurity pose large and complex problems—in part because they are closely tied to poverty,¹⁸ a condition that has prevailed since the beginning of recorded history.*
- *Federal nutrition assistance programs and community food security projects strive to address these challenges; these complementary approaches weave what has been called a “safety net” designed to prevent people from sliding into hunger and food insecurity.⁶*
- *Revisit the essential questions. To demonstrate what they have learned, have students respond to these questions in journal entries, exams or a class discussion.*

Project

- *In groups, students may pursue one of the projects described in their handouts.*
- *Students may need several class periods to complete their projects, including time outside of the classroom.*
- *Have each group present their results.*

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