



Food Insecurity in the U.S.: Problems, Programs, and Policy



Discussion Guide

Nobody is "pro-hunger." And yet food insecurity is a major problem in America, affecting over **35 million Americans** in 2019. Billions of dollars and volunteer hours are spent in the U.S. each year to end hunger, but the problem is not going away. The good news is that we know the most effective solutions to ending food insecurity in America—and anyone can be part of the solution.

We created the short video **Food Insecurity in the U.S. — Problems, Programs, and Policy** to introduce people to the root causes of food insecurity in the U.S. and ways they can advocate for effective anti-hunger policies. This guide will help you use this video to spark discussions with small groups of volunteers, students, or others, and get people thinking about how they can take action to end hunger in the U.S.

The video can be screened [all at once](#), or shown in four parts of 2-3 minutes each. Each of the following pages covers one part. You can adapt the guide to fit your event schedule in any number of ways. Get creative and think about what will work best for your audience:

► **Food Pantry Volunteers**

Screen the whole video after your volunteers have completed a work shift, or at volunteer orientation. Pick a few relevant questions to start a discussion.

► **Staff Retreat or Learning Day**

Screen the video in four parts. After each part, go through the discussion questions and complete one of the additional activities.

► **Campus / Faith Group Week of Action**

Screen the video in four parts over four meetings and engage in discussions and activities after each.

What has worked best for you and your group? Let us know! Email us at zerohunger@hungercenter.org or find us on Twitter ([@hungercenter](#)) or Facebook ([/hungercenter](#)) to tell us how you've used the videos and this guide with your group.

Before You Get Started...

You may not have experienced food insecurity yourself, but there's a good chance that some people in your group have personal experience with hunger or poverty, or close friends or family who have. This is commonly referred to as **lived experience**. Some may want to share their personal stories with the group. Others may not. Both responses are fine! As a facilitator, your job is to create an inclusive learning environment where people can expand their understanding of food insecurity in the U.S.



What is Food Insecurity?

This video covers the **basic definition of food insecurity**: how it differs from hunger, how many people in the U.S. experience food insecurity, and what factors need to be present in someone's life for them to be food secure.

[Watch Part I here.](#)



Discussion Questions

- ▶ What are the four requirements for food security? (*Answer: a person's food supply must be sufficient, affordable, culturally appropriate, and nutritious*). Were any of those new to you?
- ▶ Think about some of ways people commonly approach "ending hunger." How many of the four requirements does each of them address?

Activities & Resources

Use Feeding America's [Map the Meal Gap tool](#) for your area. How many people experience food insecurity in your county? In your state? How does your state or region compare to other states or regions?



What Causes Food Insecurity?



This segment names three of the root causes which drive high rates of food insecurity in the U.S.: **racism**, **low wages**, and **high cost of housing**.

[Watch Part II here.](#)

Discussion Questions

- ▶ What are the three root causes named in the video? Can you think of other causes of food insecurity?
- ▶ In this section Yolanda G. says "the rent eats first." Can you think of other sayings or proverbs about food insecurity?
- ▶ In the last section, you brainstormed approaches to ending hunger. How many of these also address root causes? Do you think food insecurity can be ended without addressing the root causes mentioned in this section?

Activities & Resources

The [Racial Wealth Gap Learning Simulation](#) from Bread for the World is an excellent resource to help groups navigate the concept of generational wealth and poverty.

Laura Y. describes racism as a factor in how her family arrived in her neighborhood in Los Angeles. **Redlining** is the process by which neighborhoods were effectively segregated through FHA loans. A consortium of Universities in Virginia and Maryland have created an [online resource to picture redlining's impact](#) on cities in the U.S.

The Safety Net

This segment introduces three important and widely-used federal nutrition programs—**SNAP, WIC, and school meal programs**—which together form the first line of defense against food insecurity in the U.S.

[Watch Part III here.](#)



Discussion Questions

- ▶ What are the three important federal nutrition programs mentioned in the video? Can anyone name any other federal nutrition programs?
- ▶ For every bag of food provided through emergency food assistance, SNAP and federal nutrition programs provide ten bags of food. If your organization had to multiply your anti-hunger activities tenfold, could you do it? What about organizations across the country?
- ▶ When you ask people what ending hunger looks like, many people will mention food pantries, can drives, and soup kitchens, but not necessarily SNAP. Why do you think that is?
- ▶ Think back to the requirements of food security. Does using SNAP to shop for the food your family needs at a grocery store meet those requirements? How does that compare to receiving a box of food from a food pantry with limited selection, or no ability to pick what you want for yourself?

Activities & Resources

SNAP is a federal program, but it is administered separately by each state, territory, or federal entity. [Search for your state's version of SNAP on the USDA website.](#) What is SNAP called in your state? How do you apply for it? Does it seem simple?

Advocacy



The final segment shows how anyone can get involved in anti-hunger advocacy at the local, state, and federal level.

[Watch Part IV here.](#)

Discussion Questions

- ▶ How many of you have written or telephoned an elected official? Had a meeting with an elected official, or a member of their staff?
- ▶ Why is it important to talk to elected officials about hunger?
- ▶ In this segment, you heard our narrators explain why they feel it is important to share their personal stories as advocates. Do you think sharing personal experience is an effective form of advocacy? Why or why not?
- ▶ What are some examples of moments in history when advocacy has created lasting change?

Activities & Resources

Note: if you are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, some of these activities may not be appropriate. Check with your executive team before you get started.

Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper about hunger in your community.

Write letters to your elected officials about hunger in your community, and what you've learned about effective solutions to hunger. (Alternative: draft a group letter to a fictional Member of Congress.) What should the letter include? What are some arguments you could use which would be persuasive?

Additional Resources

For a deeper dive into all the topics covered in this video and much more, consider partnering with the Congressional Hunger Center for the **End Hunger in 30 Challenge**, which runs each October. Participants set aside 30 minutes a day for 30 days for guided lessons, readings from experts, and a lively discussion forum to sharpen their knowledge and skills as Zero Hunger Advocates. [Learn more about the End Hunger in 30 Challenge.](#)

The **College SNAP Project** is a state-by-state guide for college students who need up-to-date information on how to apply for and receive SNAP benefits in their state, and for finding advocacy organizations working on this issue in their state. This crowdsourced knowledge center lets students, administrators, and advocates contribute their firsthand information and use their voice to strengthen the nutrition safety net. [Learn more at collegeSNAPproject.org.](#)

Food Solutions New England offers a [21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge](#) to help participants expand their knowledge and chart a course of action to dismantle racism in our food system and our world.



About Us

Founded in 1993 by a bipartisan group of Members of Congress, the **Congressional Hunger Center** develops, inspires, and connects leaders in the movement to end hunger, and advocates for public policies that will create a food secure world. We envision a world free from hunger and poverty, where every person can achieve their full potential thanks to equitable systems that establish financial freedom and full access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods.

Our programs include:

- ▶ **Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellowship:** A one-year program combining anti-hunger work in local communities across the United States with policy-level experience in Washington, D.C.
- ▶ **Mickey Leland International Hunger Fellowship:** A two-year program where participants learn professional and leadership skills while strengthening food and nutrition security around the world.
- ▶ **Zero Hunger Internship:** A ten-week summer program for college students and recent graduates to develop their leadership skills and gain on-the-job experience with anti-hunger organizations.
- ▶ **Zero Hunger Academy:** Our food security and leadership development curriculum is also available as an online learning experience for individuals or networks seeking to expand their knowledge on domestic and global hunger.



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