

FOOD SECURITY

No One Hungry in a Country of Plenty

Food security as a foundation of freedom, and the proof that hunger in America is a policy choice.

PILLAR 3 · THE FOUNDATIONS OF A DIGNIFIED LIFE

AT A GLANCE

The problem

47.9M Americans food insecure after supports that worked were allowed to lapse.

The proposal

Universal school meals, restored supports, the count protected by statute, and farmer dignity against monopoly, CAFOs, and the seed-patent trap.

Cost & funding

Purchases with documented returns; school meals are a known, bounded line item.

Evidence strength

Strong: the platform's clearest both-directions natural experiment, told with its caveats.

Principal risk

The survey termination blinds evaluation; a missing measurement is not a null result.

Success looks like

Child-household food insecurity back below its 2021 low, and measured.

Summary

A person who is hungry is not free. A child who is hungry cannot learn, a worker who is hungry cannot work well, and a parent skipping meals so their kids can eat is carrying a weight no one in a country this rich should carry. America grows more food than it needs, wastes an enormous share of what it grows, and still left 47.9 million people, including 14.1 million children, in food-insecure households in 2024. That combination, abundance and hunger side by side, is not scarcity. It is a delivery failure, and the pandemic years proved it in both directions: when the supports were on, child food insecurity fell to a historic low of 12.5 percent; when they lapsed, it climbed back to 18.4 percent.

This brief proposes five things: restore and protect SNAP as the first line of defense, close the eligibility gap that may exclude nearly half of food-insecure people, feed every kid at school with no forms and no stigma, build the local food layer for daily access and for the day the trucks stop, and keep the count, by statute, so no administration can cut food assistance and then cancel the measurement that would show what happened.

The Principle

A person who is hungry is not free. A child who is hungry cannot learn, a worker who is hungry cannot work well, and a parent skipping meals so their kids can eat is carrying a weight no one in a country this rich should carry. Food is the first foundation, older than housing, older than healthcare, and the test of a food system is the simplest test in this platform: does everyone eat?

America fails that test, and it fails it by choice. This is not a country that lacks food. It grows more than it needs, wastes an enormous share of what it grows, and still leaves tens of millions of its people uncertain where the next meal comes from. That combination, abundance and hunger side by side, is not scarcity. It is a delivery failure, and rights require delivery systems. The principle here is plain: in a country of plenty, no one goes hungry, and the systems that feed people get built, funded, and maintained like the essential infrastructure they are.

The System Failure

Start with the count, while we still have one. In 2024, 47.9 million Americans lived in food-insecure households, about one household in seven. Within that, 7.2 million households experienced very low food security, the bureaucratic phrase for skipping meals and going whole days without eating. Among households with children the rate was 18.4 percent, which means 14.1 million children in the wealthiest country in history did not reliably have enough to eat last year. Hunger is in every single county in America, and in the hardest-hit counties nearly half the children face it. The burden is not evenly carried: about one in four Black households, one in five Hispanic households, and nearly one in three American Indian and Alaska Native households were food insecure, at least double the white rate.

Now the finding that settles the argument about whether this is solvable. During the pandemic, the country briefly ran the experiment. Expanded SNAP benefits, free school meals for every student, and an expanded Child Tax Credit drove food insecurity among households with children down to 12.5 percent in 2021, a historic low. Then those supports were allowed to lapse, and by 2024 the rate had climbed back to 18.4 percent, erasing a decade of progress in three years. The dial moved down when we turned it down and up when we let go of it. Hunger in America is not a mystery, a market outcome, or a character defect. It is a policy choice, demonstrated in both directions, in real time, in the government's own data.

The safety net that does exist is effective and full of holes at once. SNAP is the nation's first line of defense against hunger, and the research record is consistent: benefit increases reduce food insecurity, and benefit cuts reduce food spending and worsen health, especially for children. But the eligibility lines are drawn so low that an estimated 47 percent of food-insecure people may not qualify for SNAP at all, working families who earn too much for help and too little to eat reliably. And the program is now being cut, not patched: the recent budget law made the deepest SNAP cuts in the program's history, with the Congressional Budget Office estimating around four million people losing some or all of their food assistance, including children, seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities. Note also who is being cut: more than a quarter of SNAP households have earned income, and among SNAP households with children, more than half do. These are working families.

And then there is the failure that should alarm anyone who cares about honest government, whatever their politics. After the 2024 report, the administration is ending the household food security survey itself, the nation's longest-running and most consistent measure of material hardship, the benchmark on which three decades of policy has been built. The deepest cuts to food assistance in history and the elimination of the instrument that would measure their consequences are happening at the same time. That is turning off the smoke detector before the fire. A government confident in its policy measures the results. A government that stops measuring is telling you it already knows.

The Proposal

Five planks: restore the floor, close the gap, feed the kids, build the local layer, and keep the count.

1. **Restore and protect SNAP as the first line of defense.** Reverse the cuts, restore the four million people pushed off assistance, and defend benefit adequacy, because a benefit too small to buy a month of groceries is a promise half kept. Repeal the expanded paperwork requirements that function, exactly like their Medicaid cousins in the healthcare brief, as barriers dressed up as work programs; most SNAP households with children already work, and the documented record of these requirements is administrative cost without employment gains. Judge the program by the only standard that matters: does it reduce hunger. The evidence says it does, every time it is funded to.
2. **Close the eligibility gap for working families.** Nearly half the people facing hunger may not qualify for the main program built to fight it, which means the lines are drawn wrong. Raise and simplify the income thresholds so that a family that cannot reliably afford food is not disqualified from food assistance by a wage that cannot cover it, and smooth the benefit cliff so that earning one more dollar never costs a family its groceries. A floor with a hole in the middle is not a floor.
3. **Feed every kid at school, full stop.** Universal free school meals, breakfast and lunch, for every student, no forms, no lunch debt, no stigma line in the cafeteria. We ran this during the pandemic and it worked; several states kept it and it works there now. It is the single most efficient delivery system for child nutrition the country has, the meals arrive exactly where the children already are, and the evidence ties school meals to health, attendance, and learning. Pair it with summer feeding so the floor does not vanish in June. A country that requires children to attend school can feed them while they are there.
4. **Build the local food layer, for daily access and for the day the trucks stop.** This is where food security meets the resilience agenda in the climate and security pillars. Invest in local and regional food systems, community agriculture, food hubs, and the retail infrastructure that puts real groceries within reach of the neighborhoods that lack them, because a benefit card is only half the answer if there is nowhere nearby to spend it on real food. And treat local food capacity as the survival infrastructure it is: when a disaster breaks the long supply chain, the communities that eat are the ones with food systems close to home. Food deserts and disaster fragility are the same weakness wearing two coats.

5. **Keep the count.** Restore the household food security survey permanently, by statute, so that no administration of any party can turn off the nation's hunger measurement again. Tie it into this platform's broader accountability architecture: named public signals, tracked over time, with someone answerable for the trend. What is not measured is not managed, and a measurement that can be killed the moment it becomes inconvenient is not a measurement, it is a courtesy. The country deserves to know whether its children are eating, especially when the policy just changed.

Food Systems That Can Take a Punch

Feeding people reliably requires food systems built like the resilient infrastructure this platform demands everywhere else: regional, redundant, and able to absorb shocks. The position is localized, sustainable food networks as national policy: regional processing and storage capacity so a single plant closure or contaminated shipment cannot empty a region's shelves, procurement that rewards sustainable practices, farm-to-institution pipelines feeding the universal school meals this brief proposes, and support for the small and mid-size farms that make a food system plural instead of brittle. Cities belong inside the food system, not at the end of it: no neighborhood should be an agriculture desert, and the urban layer, community gardens, rooftop growing, greenhouses on waste heat, and controlled-environment agriculture where its economics genuinely work, adds freshness and shock absorption while the surrounding region carries the staples. The new-places brief carries this design into the next generation of communities; this plank carries it into every community that already exists.

Give Farmers Back Their Farms: Break the Squeeze, End the Cruelty

A farmer is one of the most essential jobs in the country and one of the most quietly endangered. The 2022 Census of Agriculture counted 1.9 million farms, down about 7 percent in five years, worked by producers whose average age is now 58.¹ And of every dollar Americans spend on food, the farm gets only about 16 cents; the rest is captured downstream. The people who keep us fed are being squeezed off their own land, and the squeeze is not an accident of markets. It is the product of concentration. Four meatpackers control roughly 82 percent of beef, 54 percent of poultry, and 66 percent of pork,² up from a quarter to a third of each in the 1970s and 80s, and that handful sits between hundreds of thousands of ranchers and the entire eating public, setting the price on both ends. This platform's anti-extraction principle was built for exactly this: the goal is not fewer farms and bigger processors, it is farmers who own their work and answer to the land rather than to Cargill or Tyson.

So the position is to restore competition and independence to the people who farm. Enforce the antitrust and fair-dealing laws already on the books against processor concentration, and back a moratorium on the largest new factory operations while restructuring the contracts that trap growers, the model of the Farm System Reform Act. Protect farmers from the seed-patent trap directly: the story most people have heard, that companies engineered seeds biologically designed to die so farmers must rebuy, is not quite what happened, and the truth is more useful. The genetic "terminator" that would sterilize seed was patented but never brought to market after public backlash; what actually binds farmers is legal, not biological. Patent licenses and contracts forbid saving and replanting seed, and the Supreme Court upheld that control 9 to 0 in *Bowman v. Monsanto* in 2013.³ A handful of firms now control most of the world's seed. The danger to the food system is real either way: a food supply narrowed to a few patented, monoculture lines is brittle exactly where resilience matters, so the platform's answer is a farmer's right to save and replant seed, strong support for public and open-source seed breeding and the seed banks that guard crop diversity, and antitrust scrutiny of the seed giants. The dignity of farming is inseparable from control over the seed, the herd, and the contract.

Ethics belongs in this too, without apology and without policing anyone's dinner. Concentrated animal feeding operations are the clearest case where cheap production externalizes its costs: they consume the majority of the medically important antibiotics sold in the United States,⁴ which accelerates the drug resistance that threatens human medicine, they foul the air and water of the mostly rural, mostly lower-income communities around them, and they treat animals as units rather than creatures. The platform's position is a real transition away from the CAFO model, paired with the investment that makes it survivable for the farmers inside it: enforce meaningful animal-welfare standards, hold operations accountable for the pollution they now offload onto their neighbors, curb the routine antibiotic use that is a public-health problem and not only an animal-welfare one, and fund the shift toward pasture-based and higher-welfare systems rather than demanding family farmers eat the cost of doing right. This is the invest-in-people doctrine applied to the land: a country that values the farmer over the conglomerate, and treats feeding people ethically as skilled and honorable work, not a race to the bottom run by four companies.

Implementation Pathway

SNAP restoration, eligibility reform, and the statutory survey requirement are federal legislation, moving through the same farm bill and appropriations machinery that built the cuts, which means they are as reversible as they were passable. Universal school meals is federal legislation with a proven state track record to point to, and states can continue moving first while the federal standard is won. The local food layer runs through USDA programs, state and local investment, and the disaster-resilience funding streams in the climate pillar. None of this requires new inventions. The pandemic years already demonstrated every major piece at national scale. The task is not to design the machine. It is to turn it back on and bolt it down.

Funding and Public-Value Logic

Feeding people is cheap and hunger is expensive. Food insecurity drives costs through the health system, through worse chronic disease, worse child development, and more hospitalization, and through the schools, where hungry children learn less and need more. SNAP dollars are among the fastest-circulating dollars in the economy, spent immediately and locally, which is why the program doubles as economic stabilizer in every downturn. School meals purchased at scale cost less per meal than any patchwork of forms and means tests, and the administrative machinery of exclusion, the verification, the paperwork, the churn, is itself a cost that buying every kid lunch simply deletes. The country already paid to prove the counterfactual: when the supports were on, child hunger hit its historic low. The question is not whether we can afford to feed people. It is whether we can keep affording what hunger costs.

Risks and Guardrails

The first risk is fraud-and-abuse framing swallowing the program, so the answer stays factual: SNAP's error rates are overwhelmingly administrative rather than criminal, most recipient households with children work, and integrity enforcement should target the actual documented fraud, which is concentrated among a small number of retailers, not the families buying groceries. The second is that universal programs get caricatured as waste on the non-poor, and the answer is that universality is the feature: it deletes the stigma, the paperwork, and the churn that keep eligible children unfed, and the cafeteria line stops sorting kids by their parents' income. The third is that local food investment drifts into boutique projects, so the standard is access and resilience, measured in neighborhoods reached and shelves stocked, not in ribbon cuttings. And the honest constraint is that this brief swims against the current policy tide, so the sequencing is defensive first: protect what remains, restore what was cut, then build.

Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on the only numbers that matter, and insist they keep being collected.

- The household food insecurity rate, overall and for households with children, tracked toward and below the 2021 low that proved what is possible.
- Very low food security, the skipped-meals number, tracked toward zero.
- The share of food-insecure people ineligible for assistance, tracked down as the lines are redrawn.
- School meal participation and the elimination of lunch debt.
- Food access in the lowest-access neighborhoods, and local food capacity as a resilience measure.
- The survey itself: restored, statutory, and published every year, whoever holds power.

Opposition and Responses

Some will say food assistance discourages work. Most SNAP households with children have earned income. The people being cut are disproportionately working families, seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities, and the documented record of paperwork requirements is that they remove eligible people through red tape without increasing employment. If the concern is work, the answer is wages and childcare, both elsewhere in this platform, not hungrier workers.

Some will say universal school meals waste money on kids who don't need them. The means-testing machinery costs money too, and it buys stigma, lunch debt, and eligible kids going unfed. Feeding every student is simpler, cheaper per meal at scale, and treats school food like school buses and textbooks, part of the infrastructure of the school day. We do not means-test the fire department.

Some will say the hunger numbers are exaggerated. They are the government's own numbers, collected the same way for three decades, and the response to doubting a measurement is to keep measuring, not to cancel the survey. Ending the count while cutting the program is the behavior of someone who expects the answer to be bad.

Some will say charity and food banks can handle it. Food banks themselves say they cannot, and they said it loudest when the cuts passed. Charity is the overflow valve, not the system. A food bank line stretching around the block is not evidence that private generosity works. It is evidence that public policy failed.

What Would Change Our Position

This brief rests on the natural experiment, so new measurement could unsettle it: if the food security survey is restored and the numbers showed restored supports failing to move hunger, the program mix changes. If universal school meals at national scale showed no measurable attendance, health, or learning effects, or crowded out better-targeted spending, the plank would be revised toward what the evidence supports. What does not count as counter-evidence: the absence of data after the count was ended. A missing measurement is not a null result, which is exactly why keep-the-count is a plank and not a footnote.

The farmer-dignity plank carries its own tests. It rests on the claim that concentration, not efficiency alone, is what strands farmers on 16 cents of the food dollar; if breaking up processor concentration and restructuring grower contracts did not measurably move farm income or the farm share back toward producers, the mechanism would be rebuilt around what did. The CAFO-transition plank is bound to its stated harms: if pasture-based and higher-welfare systems could not be scaled without pricing food out of reach for the families this platform is most concerned about, the transition timeline and the public investment behind it get revised before the standard is imposed, because making ethical food a luxury is its own failure. And the seed plank rests on a fact already settled in court rather than a prediction, so what would change it is evidence that a right to save and replant seed measurably harmed the crop improvement it is meant to protect.

Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. This country grows more food than it can eat and still lets 14 million kids go without enough of it. We know that is a choice, because we briefly made the other choice: during the pandemic we fed people, and child hunger fell to the lowest level ever recorded. Then we stopped, and it came right back. So make the other choice for good. Protect and restore food assistance, fix the lines that exclude working families, feed every kid at school with no forms and no stigma, build local food systems strong enough for daily life and for disasters, and keep counting, by law, so no government can ever again cut food from families and then cancel the measurement that would show what happened. In a country of plenty, no one should be hungry. That is not charity. That is the floor.

SOURCES

1. USDA NASS, 2022 Census of Agriculture: Farm Producers highlights ↩

2. White House briefing on meat-processing concentration, with USDA data (September 2021) [↔](#)
3. Bowman v. Monsanto Co., 569 U.S. 278 (2013), opinion of the Court [↔](#)
4. FDA, ADUFA summary report on antimicrobials sold or distributed for food-producing animals [↔](#)