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National Efforts to End Food Insecurity and Hunger

A HISTORICAL RETROSPECTIVE OF INTERMITTENT
 INVESTMENTS IN FOOD PROGRAMS

SEPTEMBER 2022



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Long before a direct measure of lack of access to food was developed for the US population, indirect indications of its existence, such as unemployment and poverty rates, as well as prevalence of diseases and health conditions arising from hunger, abounded. These gave Congress and multiple federal Administrations since the Great Depression additional* reasons to establish, fund, expand, or strengthen food assistance programs that would mitigate food deprivation and hunger. Federal programs have included:

- SNAP** *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (originally "food stamps")*
- WIC** *Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children*
- CACFP** *Child and Adult Care Food Program*
- NSLP** *National School Lunch Program*
- SBP** *School Breakfast Program*
- SFSP** *Summer Food Service Program*
- P-EBT** *Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer*



Evidence overwhelmingly shows these programs effectively reduce food insecurity

— the inability for all members of a household to access enough food for an active, healthy life due to financial constraints — and improve the health of people across the lifespan, particularly in childhood.^{1,2,3,4,5}

Despite these positive outcomes, and efficient program structures, funding for, and even the existence of federal assistance programs have been targets of legislative and administrative attacks since their creation. As a result, federal investments in public food assistance programs have decreased over time as part of a strategy to shift government responsibility for providing access to food onto the private food assistance system,^{6,7,8} which shares funding mechanisms among public, charitable, and private corporate sources. This harmful strategy — among other shifts away from policies and funding that reduce poverty and economic hardship — led to increases in the prevalence of food insecurity across the country, with inevitable adverse effects on child and adult health. Providing robust investment in public food assistance programs is important for reducing food insecurity and ensuring that people only need to rely on private food assistance systems in times of emergency.

This brief summarizes ways in which fluctuations in public policy, and funding for public and private assistance programs, have either supported or hindered people's ability to access and afford food across the US, especially during times of economic downturns. These and other policy shifts disproportionately impacted Black and Latinx families and exacerbated the racial and ethnic inequities historically found in food insecurity rates in the US.⁹

* The primary reason for the inception of the Food Stamp Program was to absorb agricultural surplus arising from farm and agriculture policies that encouraged over-production while disregarding low demand due to poverty and lack of living wages. Today, the mismatch in food supply and demand is still in place, and the public and private food assistance systems share as much agricultural surplus as processed, packaged, energy-dense, nutrient-sparse food surplus.

A HIGHLY EFFECTIVE STRATEGY

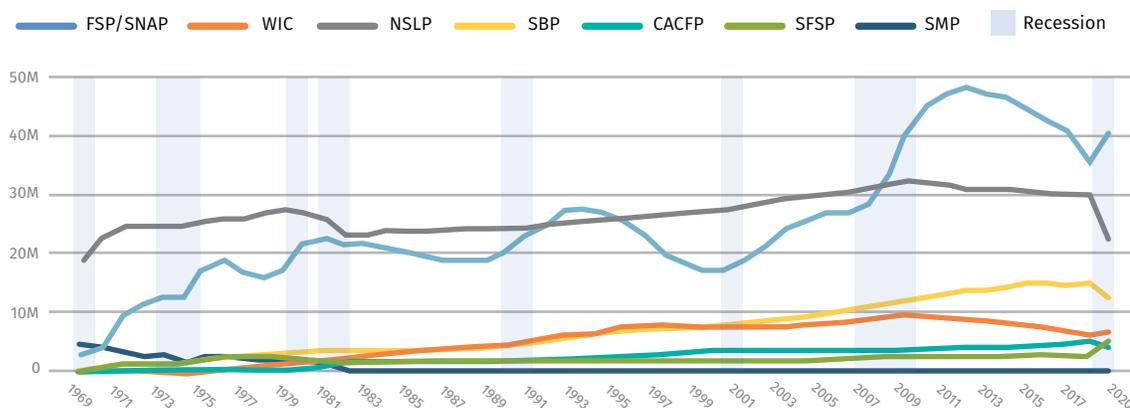
FEDERAL FOOD PROGRAMS ARE A HIGHLY EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR REDUCING FOOD INSECURITY

Over the past fifty years, federal food programs have grown significantly, helping people access affordable, healthy food in times of need, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. SNAP is our nation's largest food assistance program and, compared to others, it has had the most growth in participation since the 1970s. This growth is due to SNAP's counter-cyclical program design, which is meant to respond quickly to increases in unemployment and poverty during recessions, combined with its entitlement status, which means that those eligible to participate have a legal right to receive program benefits. (Exhibit 1)

In addition to SNAP, the US has other food programs targeted to specific populations, such as school meal programs, which provide

breakfast and lunch to school-age children; the Summer Food Service Program, which distributes meals to children 18 and under in the summer months; WIC, which provides support for breastfeeding and healthy food purchases to pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding women and their children under 5 years of age; and CACFP, which financially supports child care centers, day care homes, and adult day care centers in offering meals to children and adults. All these programs are essential to complement food that families need to stay healthy, and their children can learn and grow, which in turn affect rates of food security in the future.^{1,2,5} If these public food assistance programs were adequately designed and funded, food insecurity and hunger would be greatly reduced or even eliminated.

EXHIBIT 1 Number of participants in Federal Public Food Assistance Program, 1969-2020



Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Service, Annual Program Data. FSP/SNAP: Food Stamp Program, now named Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; WIC: Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; NSLP: National School Lunch Program; SBP: School Breakfast Program; CACFP: Child and Adult Care Food Program; SFSP: Summer Food Service Program.

DRAMATIC SHIFTS IN INVESTMENTS FROM PUBLIC TO PRIVATE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS WEAKENED FEDERAL RESPONSES TO HUNGER

Despite widespread support for food programs based on perceived increases in hunger in the 1970s, opposition among law makers to the public food assistance system, particularly SNAP, grew in the 1980s. In 1981 and 1982, Congress and the Reagan Administration passed legislation that placed additional restrictions on eligibility and reduced benefit levels in SNAP. The implementation of these restrictions was concurrent with worsening economic conditions in the early 1980s. In response, anti-hunger advocates mounted sustained efforts to counter the Reagan Administration's activities to cut federal food assistance programs, and to persuade Congress to address hunger.

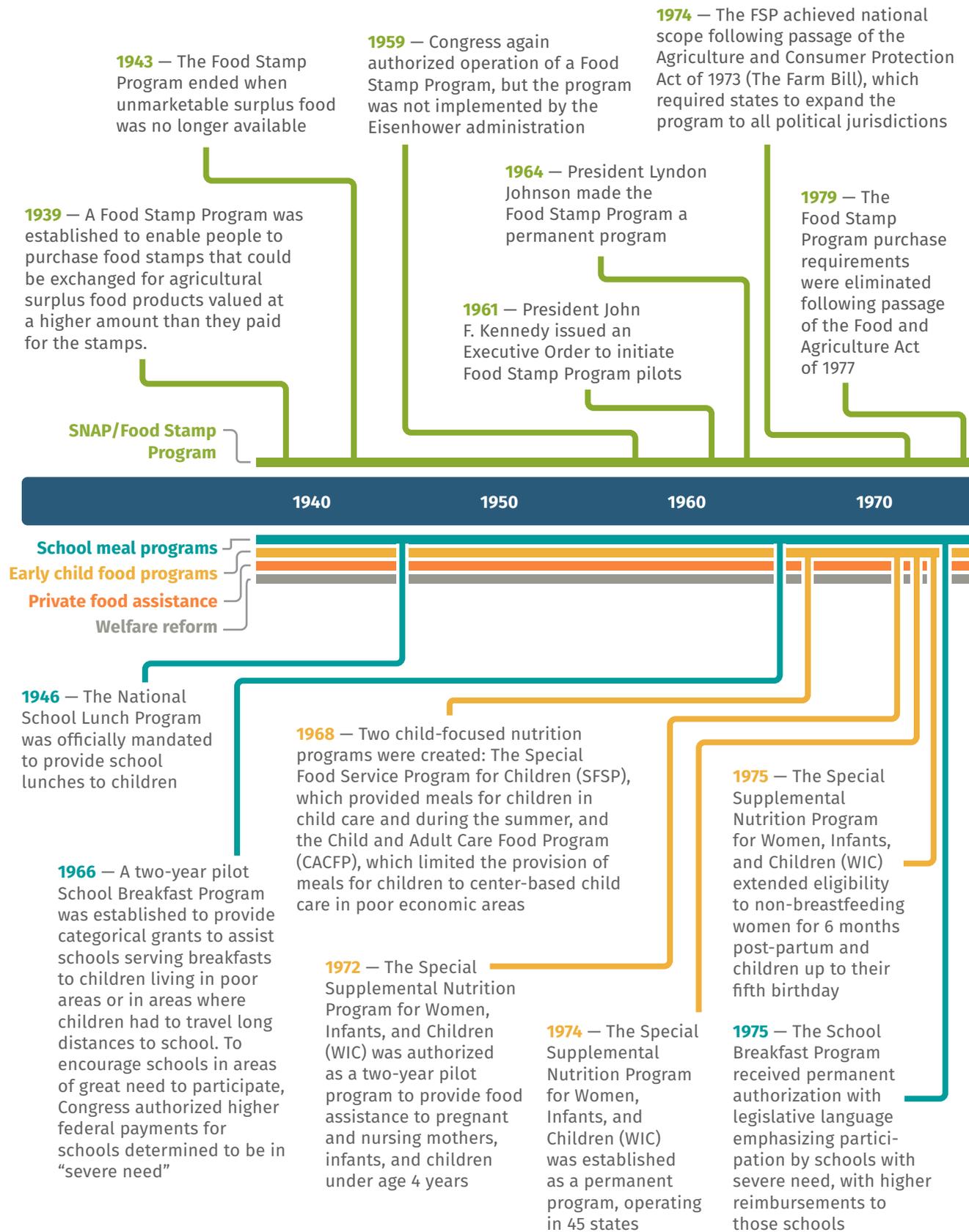
In 1982, Congress included stipulations in the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act requiring that "the government distribute federally-owned surplus commodities to soup kitchens and other groups that provided free food to indigent people".¹⁰ This action, which was designed to support family-farmers during a time of crisis - set a precedent that would have major implications for the future of the federal government's response to hunger. It effectively established a mechanism for transferring a significant part of the government's responsibility for dealing with hunger to a private charitable food assistance system.^{11,12} Continuing government disinvestment from federal food assistance programs, Congress also established the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)¹³ in 1983. TEFAP

was as an avenue for large increases in transfer of government-owned surplus agricultural commodities, and financial support to the still relatively new charitable food banking system to cover costs of administering the program, and for transport and storage of surplus food.¹⁴ Efforts to expand the private food assistance system following cuts to public food programs were not only unsuccessful in reducing hunger, they established policies and funding streams that led to major expansions of food bank and food pantry networks, and enabled them to market themselves as the way to "end hunger".⁹ This widespread shift in funding also resulted in greater reliance on the emergency food assistance system for chronic food needs rather than its intended design of providing short-term food resources for people on an emergency basis.

Nevertheless, the private food assistance system complements the public system. A study conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) in 2001-2002 estimated that the **private food assistance system provided approximately 10% of total resources from the private and public food assistance systems combined.**¹⁵ Despite that, researchers concluded that in specific situations the private food assistance system can likely address hunger more quickly than the public system. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic many people were not eligible for public food assistance programs due to long-lasting re-

TIMELINE

US Efforts to End Hunger and Food Insecurity



2008 — The Food Stamp Program was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to place a greater emphasis on the nutritional goals of the program.

2014 — The Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) program was created to support pilot incentives in SNAP to increase the purchase of fruits and vegetables.

2020 — SNAP benefits were boosted to provide households the maximum benefit and later increased by 15% for all households in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

1982 — Congress and the Reagan Administration restricted eligibility for the Food Stamp Program and reduced benefits for the program, precipitating a resurgence of hunger in the US

2009 — SNAP benefits increased across the board for all participants in response to the Great Recession.

2013 — The SNAP benefit boost was prematurely rolled back for all SNAP participant households to offset costs associated with dietary improvements to school meals.

2021 — Re-evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan resulted in a boost in SNAP benefits to more accurately reflect the cost (monetary and time) of food for families.

SNAP/Food Stamp Program

1980

1990

2000

2010

2020

School meal programs

Early child food programs

Private food assistance

Welfare reform

1982 — As food banks and food pantries struggled to meet demand, the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1982 directed the federal government to “distribute federally-owned surplus commodities to soup kitchens and other groups that provided free food to indigent people.”

1982 — A model was created for using prepared and perishable food recovery for rapid procurement and distribution of donated food from restaurants, caterers, and hotels to congregate meals sites

1983 — The Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) was established to create a vehicle for large increases in transfer of government-owned surplus agricultural commodities to the still relatively new charitable food banking system, as well as financial support for administrative costs of food banks and pantries

1996 — The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (also known as “welfare reform”) was passed by Congress and signed into law. Notably, this legislation was rooted in racist and xenophobic rhetoric and stereotypes that demonized families living in poverty and sought to redefine the role of the federal government in addressing poverty and economic hardship. Tangibly, the legislation transformed the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a key poverty-fighting measure in the US with entitlement status, into the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) — block grant program to states that eliminated entitlement status and allowed states to use funds for purposes beyond providing direct assistance to families and imposed harmful sanctions on families.

2020 — The Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program was created to provide financial resources to families to help offset loss of meals for children during school and child care closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2010 — The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act passed, making significant improvements in the dietary quality of school and child care meals.

RACIAL DISPARITIES

restrictions initiated in the 1980's. To put food on the table, people were forced to rely on the private food assistance system. Given the ongoing state of economic inequities and market failures in the US, both private and public food assistance systems will continue to be needed and to coexist. However, the magnitude and nature of the total need for food assistance in the US, and the relative size of the two systems make it extremely unlikely that the pri-

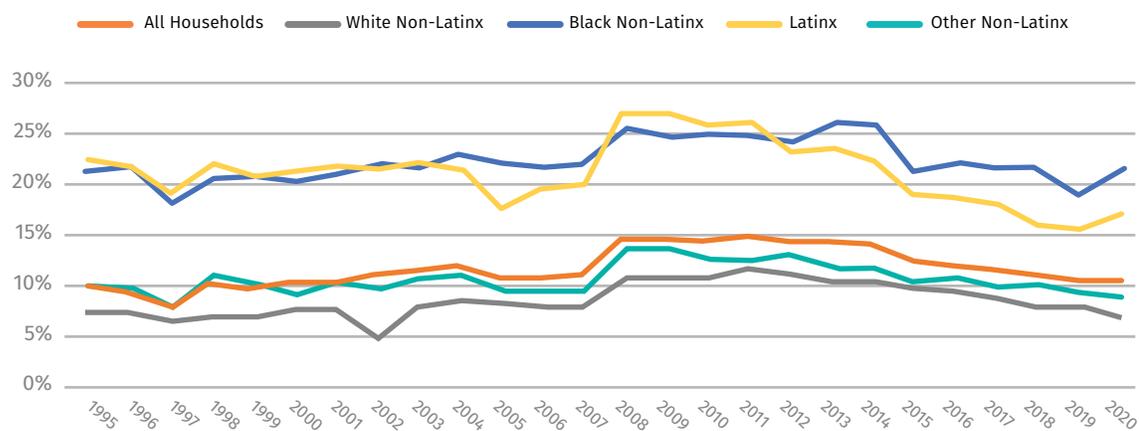
vate food assistance system could ever meet the full food assistance needs of the nation. Thus, in addition to other structural changes there will be a continuing major role for the federal food assistance system. It is thus essential that public programs are adequately funded so that people only need to rely on the private food assistance system in times of true emergencies.¹²

RACIAL DISPARITIES IN FOOD INSECURITY PERSIST DUE TO STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES

Throughout US history, indigenous people and people of color have been systematically marginalized, leading to wide-ranging disparities and adverse outcomes,¹⁶ including persistently high rates of food insecurity among families of color since measurement began, compared to

white households (Exhibit 2). National Census Bureau data show that people of color, particularly Black and Latinx families, are over-represented among low-income workers and disproportionately live in poverty, both of which place families at risk of food insecurity

EXHIBIT 2 Percent of US Households that are Food Insecure by Race and Ethnicity of Householder, 1995-2020



Source: USDA/ERS Food Insecurity in the US Reports.

RESPONDING TO GLOBAL CRISIS

and other material hardships.^{17,18} At the same time, numerous barriers exist that prevent or deter participation in food assistance and other critical benefit programs such as housing, child care, and health care, particularly for people of color and immigrants. For example, common barriers include experiencing stigma or discrimination while trying to access a program and inadequate availability of linguistically appropriate assistance. In addition, perception

can drive harmful action. Destructive stereotypes, misconceptions of public assistance, and corporate imperatives to diminish social safety-net programs and reduce taxes have driven further disinvestment and exclusions from public programs.¹⁹ Racism plays an important role - research has shown that programs perceived as serving mostly people of color, including SNAP, are often the target of funding cuts and stricter eligibility requirements.²⁰

FOOD INSECURITY AND HUNGER IN THE TIME OF A GLOBAL SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) PANDEMIC

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the prevalence of hardships — including food insecurity — has increased, particularly among historically marginalized communities.²¹ In response to the increase in hardship and new and exacerbated access challenges, Congress and federal agencies authorized new assistance programs — such as Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT). These new infrastructures have provided monetary resources for families to help feed their children during school and child care closures. Some existing programs were also transformed to better address challenges and meet families' basic needs. In addition to creating and expanding public food-assistance programs, the federal government has made

significant investments in widespread direct cash transfers through Economic Impact Payments and the expanded Advance Child Tax Credit, which have also helped families afford basic needs, including food. Policy changes that decreased barriers to participation in food assistance programs and expanded cash and food resources for families have been critical to reducing food insecurity and other hardships during the pandemic. National data show that these policies have had rapid stabilizing effects.²² The improvements they have enabled should be made permanent to better address food insecurity and to promote equitable access to food assistance programs.

LESSONS LEARNED

Robust investments in food assistance programs, particularly programs that are easily deployable and designed to expand when economic crises and other disasters hit, are necessary for reducing food insecurity in the United States. To promote food security, it is essential to ensure that all programs are universally available — regardless of immigration status, race/ethnicity, age, or employment status — and structured to adequately meet the nutritional needs of all people living in the U.S.

In addition to investing in public food programs, addressing root causes of hunger and food insecurity through policies that promote equity and economic justice is urgently needed. Policies that increase family economic resources, including guaranteed basic income, as well as investments in key areas that consume large portions of family budgets, such as housing, child care, and health care, can ensure families are able to afford these basic needs, in turn bolstering food security.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing racial/ethnic inequities in food insecurity rates. Systemic changes and long-term solutions are required to proactively and intentionally reverse disparities and eliminate food insecurity.

Close examination of history shows ways in which efforts to eliminate food insecurity and hunger in the U.S. have shifted over the last fifty years. Federal food programs, including SNAP, WIC, NSLP, SBP, CACFP and more recently P-EBT, were created to help people access food and are the cornerstones of our nation's effort to combat food insecurity and hunger. These programs ensure people from the prenatal pe-

riod through old age have resources for food, a basic human necessity and a human right. While more permanent solutions to financial stability and economic mobility are needed, people across the country are fed through these core programs, and as a result, hunger is less frequent in their lives. For this reason, the public food assistance system, currently inadequate for meeting the dietary requirements of all U.S. people in need, in addition to other public programs— including guaranteed income policies - should be recognized for the critical role they play in reducing food insecurity and promoting health. Our country's history of disinvestment in this essential infrastructure, especially over the last forty years, along with a shift in funding from public to private programs has contributed to both a rise in charitable food banks and food pantries as well as an increase in hunger and chronic non-communicable diseases. While food banks and food pantries are critical components of the food assistance infrastructure in the U.S. today, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, they continue to provide only a fraction of the meals served by the public assistance system. As we look to the future, identifying opportunities to expand public food programs and other public supports that address root causes of hunger and promote equity by addressing historical injustices will be critical for dealing effectively with food insecurity and hunger. Ultimately, ending hunger in the U.S. will only be possible when the nation effectively makes systemic changes.

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About This Series

Project Bread is one of the Commonwealth's oldest and most successful anti-hunger advocacy and food assistance service providers. To mark its 50th year of service, Children's HealthWatch, in partnership with Project Bread, developed a set of two briefs that examine the history of food insecurity and hunger since the 1960's. This first brief describes how unemployment rates and income instability and resulting rates of poverty and food insecurity in the US have evolved over time. The second brief describes how shifts in federal investments from the public food assistance system to the private food assistance system were used to justify cuts to Federal Nutrition Programs that adversely impacted rates of food insecurity. Both briefs provide information to re-ignite and energize conversations toward identifying solutions to address food insecurity so that all children and adults in the Commonwealth have enough food to thrive.

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