

Millions of working Americans don't know where their next meal is coming from. We sent three photographers to explore hunger in three very different parts of the United States, each giving different faces to the same statistic: One-sixth of Americans don't have enough food to eat.

Osage, Iowa

On a gold-gray morning in Mitchell County, Iowa, Christina Dreier sends her son, Keagan, to school without breakfast. He is three years old, barrel-chested, and stubborn, and usually refuses to eat the free meal he qualifies for at preschool. Faced with a dwindling pantry, Dreier has decided to try some tough love: If she sends Keagan to school hungry, maybe he'll eat the free breakfast, which will leave more food at home for lunch.

Dreier knows her gambit might backfire, and it does. Keagan ignores the school breakfast on offer and is so hungry by lunchtime that Dreier picks through the dregs of her freezer in hopes of filling him and his little sister up. She shakes the last seven chicken nuggets onto a battered baking sheet, adds the remnants of a bag of Tater Tots and a couple of hot dogs from the fridge, and slides it all into the oven. She's gone through most of the food she got last week from a local food pantry; her own lunch will be the bits of potato left on the kids' plates. "I eat lunch if there's enough," she says. "But the kids are the most important. They have to eat first."

The fear of being unable to feed her children hangs over Dreier's days. She and her husband, Jim, pit one bill against the next—the phone against the rent against the heat against the gas—trying always to set aside money to make up for what they can't get from the food pantry or with their food stamps, issued by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Congressional cuts to SNAP last fall of five billion dollars pared her benefits from \$205 to \$172 a month.

On this particular afternoon Dreier is worried about the family van, which is on the brink of repossession. She and Jim need to open a new bank account so they can make automatic payments instead of scrambling to pay in cash. But that will happen only if Jim finishes work early. It's peak harvest time, and he often works until eight at night, applying pesticides on commercial farms for \$14 an hour. Running the errand would mean forgoing overtime pay that could go for groceries.

It's the same every month, Dreier says. Bills go unpaid because, when push comes to shove, food wins out. "We have to eat, you know," she says, only the slightest hint of resignation in her voice. "We can't starve."

"It's Not Enough" *Christina Dreier describes the difficulty of feeding her family on an inadequate budget.*

Chances are good that if you picture what hunger looks like, you don't summon an image of someone like Christina Dreier: white, married, clothed, and housed, even a bit overweight. The image of hunger in America today differs markedly from Depression-era images of the gaunt-faced unemployed scavenging for food on urban streets. "This is not your grandmother's hunger," says Janet Poppendieck, a sociologist at the City University of New York. "Today more working people and their families are hungry because wages have declined."

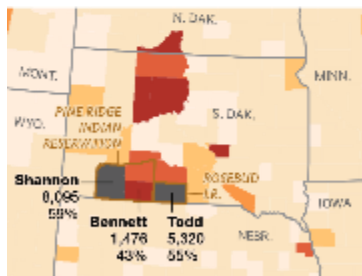
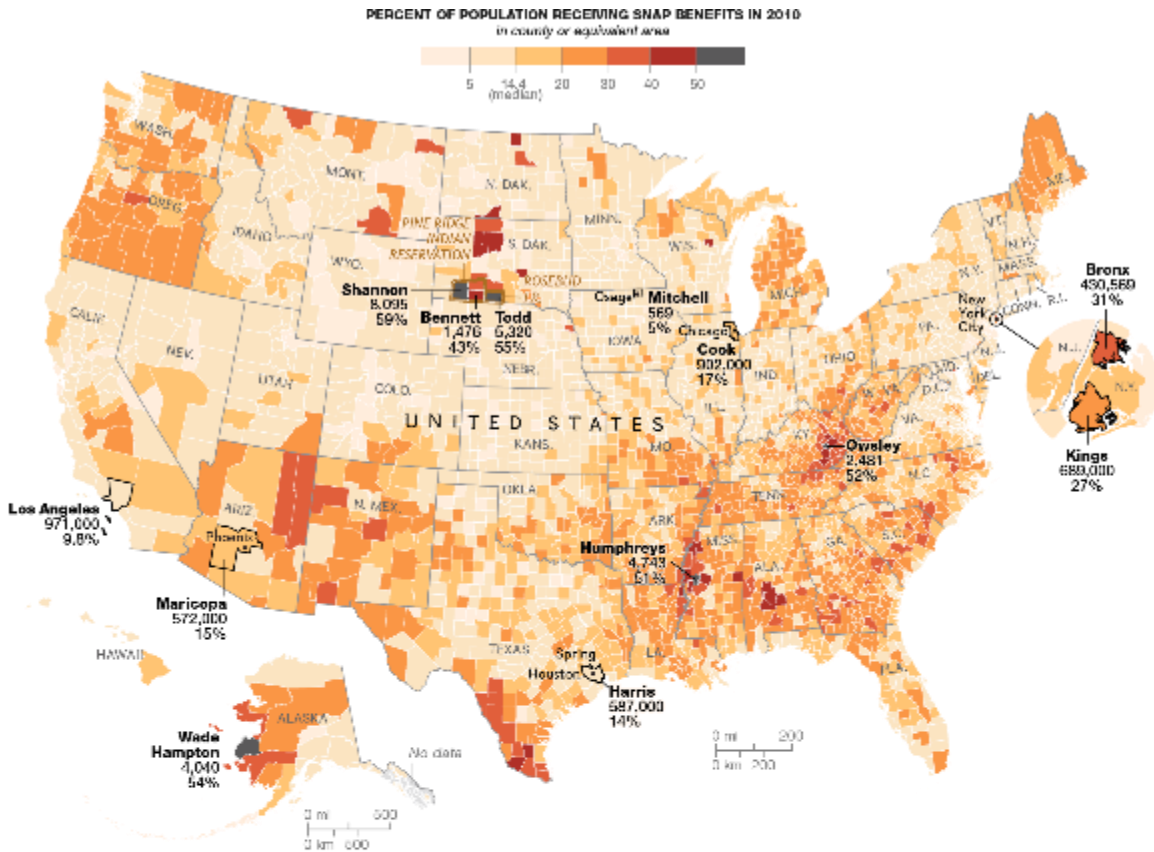
In the United States more than half of hungry households are white, and two-thirds of those with children have at least one working adult—typically in a full-time job. With this new image comes a new lexicon: In 2006 the U.S. government replaced “hunger” with the term “food insecure” to describe any household where, sometime during the previous year, people didn’t have enough food to eat. By whatever name, the number of people going hungry has grown dramatically in the U.S., increasing to 48 million by 2012—a fivefold jump since the late 1960s, including an increase of 57 percent since the late 1990s. Privately run programs like food pantries and soup kitchens have mushroomed too. In 1980 there were a few hundred emergency food programs across the country; today there are 50,000. Finding food has become a central worry for millions of Americans. One in six reports running out of food at least once a year. In many European countries, by contrast, the number is closer to one in 20.

To witness hunger in America today is to enter a twilight zone where refrigerators are so frequently bare of all but mustard and ketchup that it provokes no remark, inspires no embarrassment. Here dinners are cooked using macaroni-and-cheese mixes and other processed ingredients from food pantries, and fresh fruits and vegetables are eaten only in the first days after the SNAP payment arrives. Here you’ll meet hungry farmhands and retired schoolteachers, hungry families who are in the U.S. without papers and hungry families whose histories stretch back to the *Mayflower*. Here pocketing food from work and skipping meals to make food stretch are so common that such practices barely register as a way of coping with hunger and are simply a way of life.

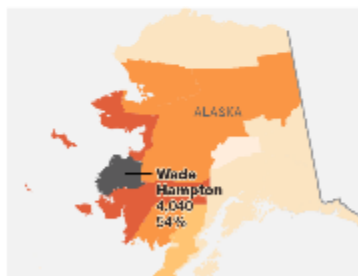
It can be tempting to ask families receiving food assistance, If you’re really hungry, then how can you be—as many of them are—overweight? The answer is “this paradox that hunger and obesity are two sides of the same coin,” says Melissa Boteach, vice president of the Poverty and Prosperity Program of the Center for American Progress, “people making trade-offs between food that’s filling but not nutritious and may actually contribute to obesity.” For many of the hungry in America, the extra pounds that result from a poor diet are collateral damage—an unintended side effect of hunger itself.

Help for the Hungry

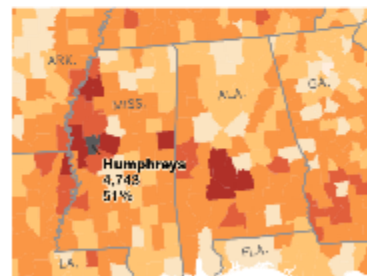
More than 48 million Americans rely on what used to be called food stamps, now SNAP: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.



These two Indian reservations have the country's highest poverty rates and the highest SNAP participation rates.



The Wade Hampton census area, 98 percent Native American, struggles with unemployment and poor schools and health services.



Mississippi has the highest state poverty rate (24%) and the highest state SNAP recipient rate (22.5%).

COUNTIES WITH THE HIGHEST SNAP PARTICIPATION IN 2010

Recipients, in thousands		Percent of county population	
1	Los Angeles, CA 971	1	Shannon, SD 59
2	Cook, IL 902	2	Todd, SD 55
3	Kings, NY 669	3	Wade Hampton, AK 54
4	Harris, TX 587	4	Owsley, KY 52
5	Maricopa, AZ 572	5	Humphreys, MS 51

In 2013 benefits totaled \$75 billion, but payments to most households dropped; the average monthly benefit was \$133.07 a person, less than \$1.50 a meal. SNAP recipients typically run through their monthly allotment in three weeks, then turn to food pantries. Who qualifies for SNAP? Households with gross incomes no more than 130 percent of the poverty rate. For a family of four that qualifying point is \$31,005 a year.¹

Houston, Texas

As the face of hunger has changed, so has its address. The town of Spring, Texas, is where ranchland meets Houston's sprawl, a suburb of curving streets and shade trees and privacy fences. The suburbs are the home of the American dream, but they are also a place where poverty is on the rise. As urban housing has gotten more expensive, the working poor have been pushed out. Today hunger in the suburbs is growing faster than in cities, having more than doubled since 2007.

Yet in the suburbs America's hungry don't look the part either. They drive cars, which are a necessity, not a luxury, here. Cheap clothes and toys can be found at yard sales and thrift shops, making a middle-class appearance affordable. Consumer electronics can be bought on installment plans, so the hungry rarely lack phones or televisions. Of all the suburbs in the country, northwest Houston is one of the best places to see how people live on what might be called a minimum-wage diet: It has one of the highest percentages of households receiving SNAP assistance where at least one family member holds down a job. The Jefferson sisters, Meme and Kai, live here in a four-bedroom, two-car-garage, two-bath home with Kai's boyfriend, Frank, and an extended family that includes their invalid mother, their five sons, a daughter-in-law, and five grandchildren. The house has a rickety desktop computer in the living room and a television in most rooms, but only two actual beds; nearly everyone sleeps on mattresses or piles of blankets spread out on the floor.

Though all three adults work full-time, their income is not enough to keep the family consistently fed without assistance. The root problem is the lack of jobs that pay wages a family can live on, so food assistance has become the government's—and society's—way to supplement low wages. The Jeffersons receive \$125 in food stamps each month, and a charity brings in meals for their bedridden matriarch.

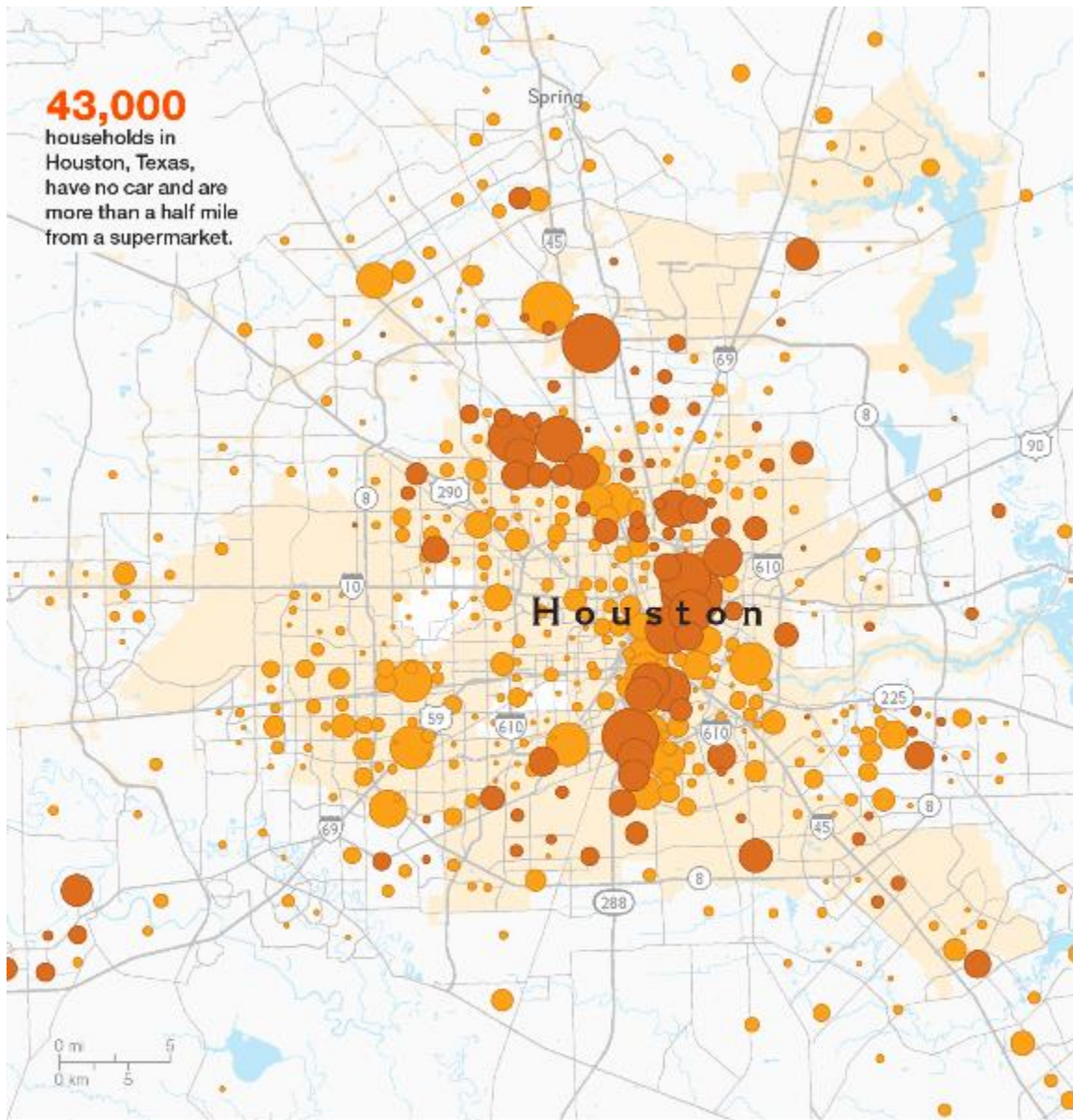
Like most of the new American hungry, the Jeffersons face not a total absence of food but the gnawing fear that the next meal can't be counted on. When Meme shows me the family's food supply, the refrigerator holds takeout boxes and beverages but little fresh food. Two cupboards are stocked with a smattering of canned beans and sauces. A pair of freezers in the garage each contain a single layer of food, enough to fill bellies for just a few days. Meme says she took the children aside a few months earlier to tell them they were eating too much and wasting food besides. "I told them if they keep wasting, we have to go live on the corner, beg for money, or something."

Stranded in a Food Desert

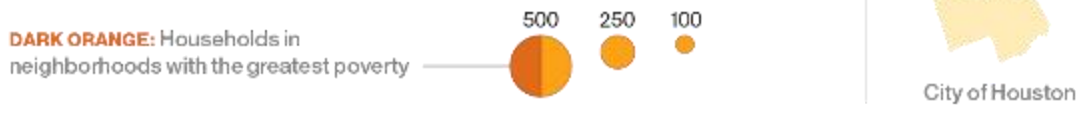
Tens of thousands of people in Houston and in other parts of the U.S. live in a food desert: They're more than half a mile from a supermarket and don't own a car, because of poverty,

¹ Qualifying incomes in Alaska and Hawaii are higher than in the contiguous U.S.

illness, or age. Public transportation may not fill the gap. Small markets or fast-food restaurants may be within walking distance, but not all accept vouchers. If they do, costs may be higher and nutritious options fewer.



Households lacking a car and located more than half a mile from a supermarket



Jacqueline Christian is another Houston mother who has a full-time job, drives a comfortable sedan, and wears flattering clothes. Her older son, 15-year-old Ja’Zarrian, sports bright orange Air Jordans. There’s little clue to the family’s hardship until you learn that their clothes come mostly from discount stores, that Ja’Zarrian mowed lawns for a summer to get the sneakers, that

they're living in a homeless shelter, and that despite receiving \$325 in monthly food stamps, Christian worries about not having enough food "about half of the year."

Christian works as a home health aide, earning \$7.75 an hour at a job that requires her to crisscross Houston's sprawl to see her clients. Her schedule, as much as her wages, influences what she eats. To save time she often relies on premade food from grocery stores. "You can't go all the way home and cook," she says.

On a day that includes running a dozen errands and charming her payday loan officer into giving her an extra day, Christian picks up Ja'Zarrian and her seven-year-old, Jerimiah, after school. As the sun drops in the sky, Jerimiah begins complaining that he's hungry. The neon glow of a Hartz Chicken Buffet appears up the road, and he starts in: Can't we just get some gizzards, please?

Christian pulls into the drive-through and orders a combo of fried gizzards and okra for \$8.11. It takes three declined credit cards and an emergency loan from her mother, who lives nearby, before she can pay for it. When the food finally arrives, filling the car with the smell of hot grease, there's a collective sense of relief. On the drive back to the shelter the boys eat until the gizzards are gone, and then drift off to sleep.

Christian says she knows she can't afford to eat out and that fast food isn't a healthy meal. But she'd felt too stressed—by time, by Jerimiah's insistence, by how little money she has—not to give in. "Maybe I can't justify that to someone who wasn't here to see, you know?" she says. "But I couldn't let them down and not get the food."



To supplement what they get from the food pantry, the cash-strapped Reams family forages in the woods near their Osage home for puffball mushrooms and grapes. Kyera Reams cans homegrown vegetables when they are in season and plentiful, so that her family can eat healthfully all year. "I'm resourceful with my food," she says. "I think about what people did in the Great Depression."

Of course it is possible to eat well cheaply in America, but it takes resources and know-how that many low-income Americans don't have. Kyera Reams of Osage, Iowa, puts an incredible amount of energy into feeding her family of six a healthy diet, with the help of staples from food banks and \$650 in monthly SNAP benefits. A stay-at-home mom with a high school education, Reams has taught herself how to can fresh produce and forage for wild ginger and cranberries. When she learned that SNAP benefits could be used to buy vegetable plants, she dug two gardens in her yard. She has learned about wild mushrooms so she can safely pick ones that aren't poisonous and has lobbied the local library to stock field guides to edible wild plants.

"We wouldn't eat healthy at all if we lived off the food-bank food," Reams says. Many foods commonly donated to—or bought by—food pantries are high in salt, sugar, and fat. She estimates her family could live for three months on the nutritious foods she's saved up. The

Reamses have food security, in other words, because Kyera makes procuring food her full-time job, along with caring for her husband, whose disability payments provide their only income.

But most of the working poor don't have the time or know-how required to eat well on little. Often working multiple jobs and night shifts, they tend to eat on the run. Healthful food can be hard to find in so-called food deserts—communities with few or no full-service groceries. Jackie Christian didn't resort to feeding her sons fried gizzards because it was affordable but because it was easy. Given the dramatic increase in cheap fast foods and processed foods, when the hungry have money to eat, they often go for what's convenient, just as better-off families do.

Senior Care *In rural Arkansas many elderly people don't have enough to eat and rely on food banks for help. Charolette Tidwell and Ken Kupchick work tirelessly to make sure every person is fed.*

It's a cruel irony that people in rural Iowa can be malnourished amid forests of cornstalks running to the horizon. Iowa dirt is some of the richest in the nation, even bringing out the poet in agronomists, who describe it as "black gold." In 2007 Iowa's fields produced roughly one-sixth of all corn and soybeans grown in the U.S., churning out billions of bushels.

These are the very crops that end up on Christina Dreier's kitchen table in the form of hot dogs made of corn-raised beef, Mountain Dew sweetened with corn syrup, and chicken nuggets fried in soybean oil. They're also the foods that the U.S. government supports the most. In 2012 it spent roughly \$11 billion to subsidize and insure commodity crops like corn and soy, with Iowa among the states receiving the highest subsidies. The government spends much less to bolster the production of the fruits and vegetables its own nutrition guidelines say should make up half the food on our plates. In 2011 it spent only \$1.6 billion to subsidize and insure "specialty crops"—the bureaucratic term for fruits and vegetables.

Those priorities are reflected at the grocery store, where the price of fresh food has risen steadily while the cost of sugary treats like soda has dropped. Since the early 1980s the real cost of fruits and vegetables has increased by 24 percent. Meanwhile the cost of nonalcoholic beverages—primarily sodas, most sweetened with corn syrup—has dropped by 27 percent.

"We've created a system that's geared toward keeping overall food prices low but does little to support healthy, high-quality food," says global food expert Raj Patel. "The problem can't be fixed by merely telling people to eat their fruits and vegetables, because at heart this is a problem about wages, about poverty."

When Christina Dreier's cupboards start to get bare, she tries to persuade her kids to skip snack time. "But sometimes they eat saltine crackers, because we get that from the food bank," she said, sighing. "It ain't healthy for them, but I'm not going to tell them they can't eat if they're hungry."

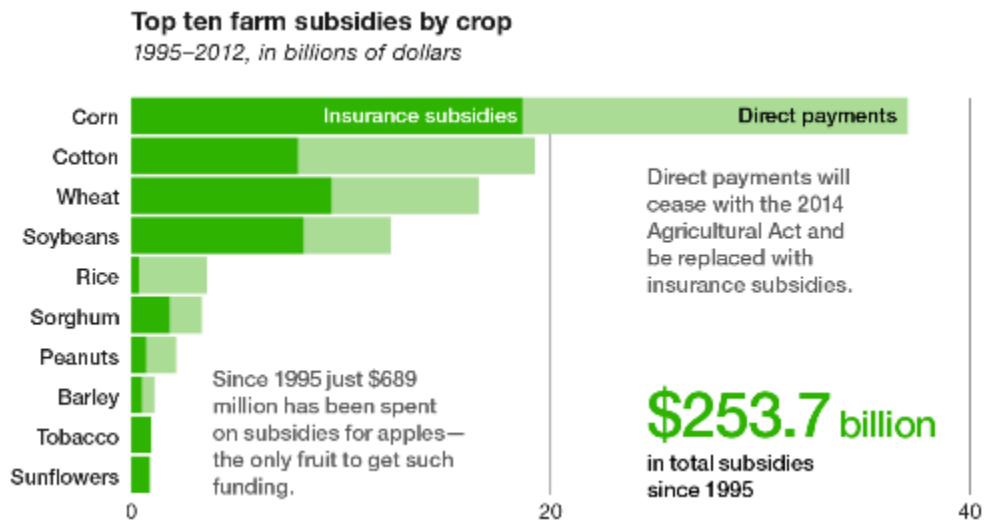
The Dreiers have not given up on trying to eat well. Like the Reamses, they've sown patches of vegetables and a stretch of sweet corn in the large green yard carved out of the cornfields behind their house. But when the garden is done for the year, Christina fights a battle every time she goes to the supermarket or the food bank. In both places healthy foods are nearly out of reach. When the food stamps come in, she splurges on her monthly supply of produce, including a bag of organic grapes and a bag of apples. "They love fruit," she says with obvious pride. But most of her food dollars go to the meat, eggs, and milk that the food bank doesn't provide; with

noodles and sauce from the food pantry, a spaghetti dinner costs her only the \$3.88 required to buy hamburger for the sauce.

What she has, Christina says, is a kitchen with nearly enough food most of the time. It's just those dicey moments, after a new bill arrives or she needs gas to drive the kids to town, that make it hard. "We're not starved around here," she says one morning as she mixes up powdered milk for her daughter. "But some days, we do go a little hungry."

Crops Taxpayers Support With Subsidies

Federal crop subsidies began in the 1920s, when a quarter of the U.S. population worked on farms. The funds were meant to buffer losses from fluctuating harvests and natural disasters. Today most subsidies go to a few staple crops, produced mainly by large agricultural companies and cooperatives.



How Subsidized Crops Affect Diet

Subsidized corn is used for biofuel, corn syrup, and, mixed with soybeans, chicken feed. Subsidies reduce crop prices but also support the abundance of processed foods, which are more affordable but less nutritious. Across income brackets, processed foods make up a large part of the American diet.

Top ten sources of calories for low-income individuals

Age two and older, per person per day

