



# The Hidden Faces of Hunger

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After college I served in South Africa for a year through the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Following a year of enriching experiences, I had to decide whether to stay in sub-Saharan Africa or return to the United States. I thought I could make more of a difference back home, working in Washington, DC, where the U.S. government makes decisions every day that affect the lives of millions of hungry and poor people around the world.

When I applied for an internship in Bread for the World Institute, the editor of the Hunger Report asked if I knew anything about the farm bill. In my head I saw tractors. He explained that the farm bill should be called the food bill because two-thirds of its funding goes to national nutrition programs. I was still concerned that my focus would be on rows of corn in the Midwest and not on people struggling for food.

During my first week in the Institute, one of Bread for the World's field organizers asked for information about the national nutrition programs. With many new members of Congress calling for steep cuts in government spending, voters in these districts were asking why should the government feed hungry people in the United States. Couldn't the churches do the job?

Because a voter in Kansas asked this question, my first project was to compile information on public and private sources of food assistance in Kansas. In 2009, the year we had the most consistent data, one in seven people in the United States was receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. In Kansas, it was one in 13 people, mostly because half the people who were eligible did not enroll. How can it be that one in seven people in the country use SNAP to help meet their nutritional needs and I can't name seven people in the program? Where are all of these hungry people and why does the problem of hunger in the United States seem so invisible?

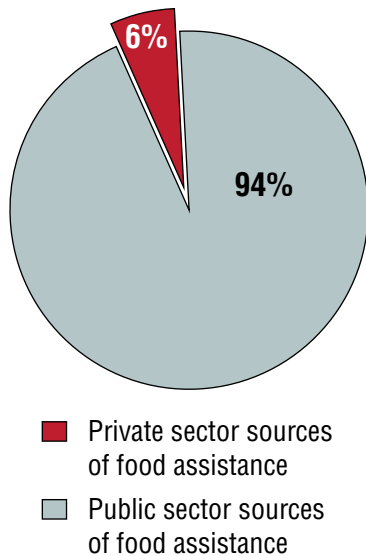
## Conclusion

“Everything we have achieved for hungry and poor people in the last 35 years is under severe threat of budget cuts—nutrition programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and SNAP (formerly food stamps), as well as poverty-focused development assistance.”

— *Rev. David Beckmann,  
president of Bread for the  
World and Bread for the  
World Institute*



Figure c.1 **Private and Public Sector Sources of Food Assistance in Kansas, 2009**



Sources: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service; Private—Kansas Food Bank, Harvester: The Community Food Network, Second Harvest Community Food Bank.

The task of identifying all the sources of food assistance for hungry people in Kansas overwhelmed me. Thankfully, information about public sector food assistance is easy enough to find on the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s website. Where do people find private sector food? I didn’t know how private food systems work. I soon learned that soup kitchens and pantries, like the Salvation Army chapter that I had volunteered for in my hometown, often get their food through a food bank. Food banks receive donations from businesses and individuals, as well as commodities provided by the U.S. government. Most of these food banks are members of Feeding America, an umbrella organization of more than 200 food banks around the country.

It’s not possible to account for every dollar of food from every private source. All the organizations I contacted—the Salvation Army in Kansas, the United Way in Kansas, Feeding America’s three food banks in the state, Feeding America’s main office in Chicago, and the Food Research and Action Center in Washington, DC—told me the largest sources of private sector food donations are delivered through the food banks.

The Kansas food banks provided me with extensive information. In Kansas, it turns out that only 6 percent of food assistance comes from the private sector. It was astonishing to realize that 94 percent of food assistance is delivered through the public sector.

In most states, government distributes the vast majority of food assistance. As I learned about how many people in the United States receive food through government programs, I called the Salvation Army chapter where I had volunteered in high school. Pat, the social services director, talked with me about the value of food assistance that comes from private sources. Volunteers help to strengthen connections between hungry and non-hungry people who live in the same community. Pat believes the advantage of the public sector is the financial power it can bring to bear on the problem.

When I worked as a volunteer in my community, serving in a soup kitchen, collecting trailers full of food for food drives, it seemed like we were providing so much food. Without seeing and recognizing the faces of hungry people there, I would not be working in Bread for the World Institute today. But if I had known what I know now, I would’ve included a letter-writing campaign to members of Congress—asking them to support SNAP and other nutrition programs—as part of every canned food drive I helped run at my church and high school.

In 2010, the share of the population in deep poverty (below half of the poverty line) hit a record high of **6.7%**

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out of 435 congressional districts have at least 1 in 5 households with children struggling with food hardship, according to an August 2011 Gallup poll.

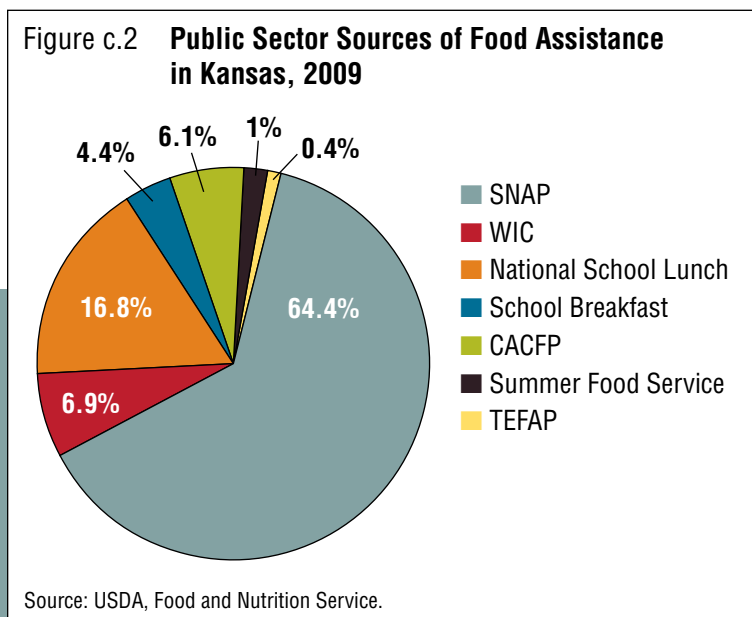
Please do not misunderstand me: churches, communities, organizations, and individuals should do their best to help support people in need. Public and private assistance are both essential. Sadly, even with the public and private sectors trying to make food available, together they still don't provide for everyone in need. But the notion that the private sector, much less churches alone, can make up for the difference in cuts to public sector funding now seems dangerously ignorant to me. Unfortunately, most people don't grasp the extent of the government's contribution to fighting hunger.

In 2011, David Beckmann, Tony Hall, and tens of thousands of people around the country fasted to ask God for guidance and to raise awareness about the importance of nutrition programs. This fast has turned into the campaign called the "circle of protection," declaring that Congress and the administration must not balance the budget on the backs of poor people. I joined the fast by not eating for the first 30 hours. The experience reminded me how food is a gift from God, and this gift should not be denied to anyone.

*Kate Hagen is the project assistant on the 2012 Hunger Report.*



David Beckmann, Bread for the World president (at lectern), is joined by (from left) Ambassador Tony Hall, executive director of the Alliance to End Hunger; Ritu Sharma, president and co-founder of Women Thrive Worldwide; and Jim Wallis, president and CEO of Sojourners, as they launch a fast to form a circle of protection around U.S. government programs that help hungry and poor people at home and abroad.



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The number of religious leaders, denominations, and organizations who have joined the circle of protection.