

Building Your Community

Hunger and Food Insecurity

The need: Food insecurity means not always knowing where your next meal will come from. It's more common, and more hidden, than most people realize, and it's something youth can genuinely help with.

"If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one." — Mother Teresa

"Food is symbolic of love when words are inadequate." — Alan D. Wolfelt

"No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted." — Aesop

FACILITATOR NOTES

Time. about 60–90 minutes, run in one sitting. Works in a classroom, youth group, or club. Option A needs no setup; Options B and C use real service arranged ahead of time.

Service today. Pick one option in Serve below and set it up before you begin.

Warm-up (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

Keep this quick, short answers are great. Read the questions together.

- When you hear the word “hunger,” what comes to mind? Where do those images come from?
- Why do you think some people feel embarrassed to ask for help with food?
- What might make it hard to tell that a classmate or neighbor doesn't have enough to eat?
- Have you ever had to make food stretch, or known someone who did? (No need to share details.)

Learn (10–20 minutes)

Food insecurity doesn't mean a person never eats. It means they don't always know where the next meal is coming from. It can mean skipping meals so younger kids can eat, stretching the same groceries across too many days, or leaning on school lunch and food pantries to get through the week. It's about uncertainty and stress, not personal failure. Most people facing it are working, raising families, or handling a hard season that has stretched their budget thin.

It often looks like:

- Quietly skipping meals so others in the family can eat.
- Choosing between groceries and another bill, like rent, gas, or medicine.
- Relying on school meals during the week and coming up short on weekends.

A closer look. Picture a mom picking up her two kids after work. She's holding down a job, but a surprise car repair last week ate the grocery money, and payday is still days away. Tonight the kids will eat; she'll say she isn't hungry. She isn't careless or lazy; she's one rough week away from okay, like a lot of families. A box of pasta, some canned chicken, and a couple of cans of vegetables from a pantry would quietly take the weight off until Friday.

Why it happens. There's rarely one reason. Usually it's a few ordinary pressures stacking up at once. It might be a job loss or cut hours, or a surprise expense like a car repair or a medical bill. It might be a new baby or an aging relative to care for. Or simply living too far from an affordable grocery store, with no easy way to get there. Most often it's temporary, a hard stretch rather than a permanent state.

Understanding that keeps our help respectful: we're lending a hand to someone in a tough moment, not judging how they got there.

How youth can help. Youth can make a real difference here, and the best approach is to follow the lead of the people and groups already doing the work. You can:

- Donate food thoughtfully: ask a pantry what they actually need before collecting, and choose things families want, like peanut butter, rice, pasta, canned proteins, soups, and shelf-stable milk.
- Help local pantries and meal programs directly: sorting, packing, and stocking are exactly the jobs they're short on hands for.
- Help grow or gather fresh food: produce is the healthiest, and the hardest for tight budgets to reach.
- Protect dignity: use kind, matter-of-fact language, and focus on helping, never on “fixing” anyone.

Keep these in mind.

- **Ask before you gather.** A pantry knows its needs better than you do; one phone call makes your help twice as useful.
- **Everyone deserves good food.** Treat the people you serve the way you'd want your own family treated.
- **Small adds up.** One box of pasta or one hour of sorting doesn't feel like much, but together it feeds people.
- **Help, don't judge.** Assume people are doing their best in a hard moment, because they usually are.

Serve (30–60 minutes)

Today you'll put this into practice in a real service activity. Here are ways to do it:

Option A — Sort, pack, and promote *(no cost, no prep, works in any setting)*

You don't need to buy anything to help feed people. Make a clear, friendly flyer or sign listing a local pantry's hours and the items they most need right now, so neighbors know exactly how to give, and write warm notes to tuck into food bags. Clear information and a little encouragement are real donations, no money or setup required.

Option B — Build meal or produce kits *(low cost, a bit more effort)*

At a pantry shift set up for today, do the work they're always short-handed for, sorting donations, packing weekend food bags for kids, stocking shelves, or, as a group, assemble simple meal or produce kits to donate. A meal kit might hold pasta and sauce, canned beans, rice, and shelf-stable milk; a produce bag, longer-lasting fruits and vegetables. Ask the pantry what they need before you start.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll arrange ahead of time a pantry shift, or confirm with a local pantry what kits to build and what mix they want, and gather the items. JustServe.org lists pantries, meal programs, and openings near you.

Option C — Partner with a pantry or garden over time *(more effort; ongoing service)*

Build a lasting connection with a local or national food nonprofit, a neighborhood pantry, a community garden, or a food bank in the Feeding America network, and become a group they can count on: pack on a schedule, grow and harvest produce to donate, or run a focused drive for the exact items they need. Steady, reliable help is what programs need most.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll connect ahead of time with a local or national food nonprofit and set up a regular way to help. JustServe.org can help you find one and make the connection.

Before you go (all options): Have your mentor contact any pantry or program ahead of time and come along. Go as a group, in public, supervised settings, and follow the organization's rules and food-safety guidance. For anything homemade or fresh, check first what the group is allowed to accept.

Reflect (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

After serving, talk through a few of these together, then give everyone quiet time to write.

What surprised you about food insecurity, or about who it affects?

How did helping change the way you picture someone who's hungry?

Why do dignity and respectful language matter so much with this need?

What's one thing, big or small, you'd want to keep doing to help?

Then finish one or both sentences:

One way I want to help with hunger in my community is...

One thing I'll do differently in how I talk about people facing hard times is...
