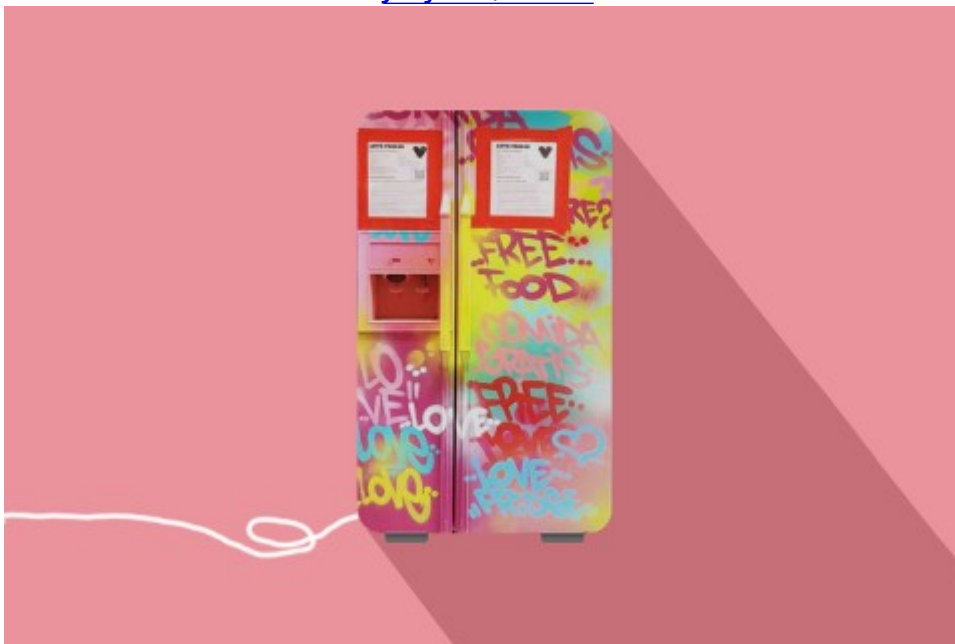


Ending food insecurity will take more than community fridges

It's beautiful when people come together to protect their hungry neighbors. It's appalling that they have to.

From the Editors in the [July 28, 2021](#) issue



(Illustration sources from iStock / Getty and Love Fridge)

In June, Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park, on the South Side of Chicago, installed a community fridge just outside its front doors. Anyone can leave food in the fridge or take food from it. Local restaurants, stores, and residents donate meals and fresh produce, and volunteers help keep the fridge clean. The congregation is working in partnership with the Love Fridge, a Chicago mutual aid group founded last year to help prevent food waste and reduce food insecurity.

Food insecurity, defined by ongoing uncertainty about where one's next meal will come from, rose dramatically in the United States during the pandemic. Black and Latino families were disproportionately impacted. In February 2020, 20.1 million Americans did not have enough to eat; that number rose to 29.7 million in December 2020 before falling to 20.3 million in June 2021. Participation in the

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which expands automatically based on eligibility, increased from 36.9 million Americans in February 2020 to 42.4 million in March 2021.

Food insecurity is a long-standing problem with a complex matrix of causes. Income and wealth disparities leave many Americans at the edge of poverty with no safety net. For decades, food prices have risen steadily while wages have stagnated. In cities especially, Black and Latino neighborhoods have long suffered from disinvestment, which leads to food deserts—the lack of local access to affordable, healthful food.

The community fridge movement has expanded rapidly across the country since the start of the pandemic. So have other grassroots efforts to alleviate hunger, such as pop-up produce giveaways and expanded services from soup kitchens. There's something beautiful about people finding creative ways to come together in mutual support when society fails them. At the same time, it's appalling that refrigerators full of donated food have to be set up on sidewalks by volunteers to keep their neighbors from starving. Local direct aid efforts make a difference, but it's a small one. We need longer-term, scalable solutions.

Some of the federal government's pandemic-related initiatives could significantly reduce food insecurity if they were made permanent. These include the provision of free meals to all public schoolchildren in high-poverty districts, expansions of SNAP eligibility and benefits, and converting the child tax credit into direct cash payments. Several current bills also aim to alleviate hunger. Among them is the Wise Investment in Children Act, a proposed expansion of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children which has bipartisan support in Congress.

But food insecurity will persist until we address deeper issues embedded in our social structures. The boundaries of most of our neighborhoods are defined by race and income. Many Americans work multiple jobs and still can't make a living wage. The gap between rich and poor is widening. The disenfranchisement of low-income Americans threatens to make these inequities permanent.

A community fridge is a great idea. It's not a long-term solution.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Hungry neighbors."