

Still hungry

by [David Beckmann](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

Growing Up Empty: The Hunger Epidemic in America.

By Loretta Schwartz-Noble. HarperCollins, 252 pp., \$24.95.

A U.S. Marine, peeking suspiciously from behind the front door of a run-down military house, surrenders his pride long enough to accept a bag of free food to feed his wife and infant daughter. It's the end of the month, there's no money in the house and the food purchased by food stamps and from WIC has run out. By telling such stories, Loretta Schwartz-Noble puts a face on the millions of hungry people vulnerable to changes in public policy. Her stories illustrate what hunger advocates have been saying for years--that "hunger in America is far too vast to be contained by charity alone . . . that as federal aid is slashed, suffering and hunger increase among us and that as federal aid increases, hunger proportionately decreases."

Hunger is not a new topic for Schwartz-Noble, an award-winning journalist and author. When her first article on hunger appeared in Philadelphia magazine in 1974, the sophisticated network of food banks and food distribution charities we now take for granted didn't exist. By the time her acclaimed book *Starving in the Shadow of Plenty* was published in 1981, hunger had come to the forefront of public awareness and both corporate and private-sector groups were organizing to expand charitable feeding programs. Now, despite the Herculean efforts of food banks, churches and charities, the number of hungry people in America is actually higher than when Schwartz-Noble first began writing.

These are grim times for hungry people. The ebbing tide of the economy has lowered all boats. It has especially affected the 33.6 million people in the U.S.--more than one-third of them children--living in households in which access to food is "limited or uncertain." In the coming weeks Congress will make changes to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, commonly known as welfare. Hailed by some as a success and condemned by others as a blow to the poor, the landmark legislation that changed welfare from an entitlement program to a block grant in 1996 is now being reconsidered.

The House has passed a bill that would add work requirements for welfare recipients without providing the requisite child care funding. It would also authorize President Bush to approve state proposals to redesign TANF, food stamps, housing and job training programs. At a time when states are in financial crises, this flexibility would certainly shift money away from hungry and poor people. The Bush administration is also proposing to weaken Medicaid, the Earned Income Tax Credit and Head Start, and the president's proposal for yet another huge tax cut will force even deeper cuts in these programs in years ahead.

In *Growing Up Empty* Schwartz-Noble lends an impassioned and provocative voice to the millions of people suffering from hunger of epidemic proportions in the world's most prosperous country, people whose stories are often denied or discredited. By giving the silenced hungry in America a place at the table, Schwartz-Noble shatters stereotypes about who they are and why they are hungry. Of the 23.3 million people who requested assistance from America's Second Harvest agencies in 2001, 40 percent were working adults.

From coast to coast, from rural communities to suburbia to the inner city, the hidden stories of hunger uncovered in this book are both familiar and yet somehow fresh in their ability to evoke the helplessness and hope of people who struggle to find daily bread. Cautious of having "risked sentimentality," Schwartz-Noble presents hungry people and their difficult choices with dignity, yet without bowdlerization or censure. This remarkable collection of stories, the fruit of Schwartz-Nobel's personal investigation, is sandwiched between a brief history of public awareness about hunger in America and an analysis of the root causes of hunger. Attributing the hunger epidemic to the enormous cuts in nutrition programs in the 1980s, Schwartz-Nobel accurately chronicles policymakers' denial of hunger and their failure to fund programs that address the needs of hungry people. Unfortunately, when it comes to welfare, the current political rhetoric of compassion appears to be as empty as the refrigerators of the people whose stories Schwartz-Nobel tells.

Growing Up Empty is both a shining example advocacy journalism and a bold challenge to the reader. You simply cannot read this book without feeling a sense of urgency and forming the resolve to do something. Schwartz-Noble does a superb job of describing the critical role of charities that meet the immediate needs of hungry people in the absence of adequate public policy. I wish she had also described what churches, charities and advocacy groups are doing to influence important legislation. She is clear, however, that "ending poverty and hunger means more than

just ending welfare and asking charity to do the impossible by picking up the shortfall caused by massive food stamp cuts." The only way to end hunger is to make fundamental changes in the systems that keep people stuck in poverty.