THE HUNGER WARS: FIGHTING FOR FOOD IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

In this series, The Times examines four battlegrounds in the war on hunger in Southern California.

- **Hungry children, caught in the battles over school breakfast.**
- **The growing salvage food industry--spawned by hard times--takes a bite out of charitable food banks.**
- **U.S. Department of Agriculture changes course and launches a crusade to attract more people to food stamps.**
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- **family at a time.**

Going to School Hungry

As poverty spreads, teachers often see students who have not eaten for days. Malnutrition hinders learning, but resistance to breakfast programs raises question of how far districts should go to help.*

By SONIA NAZARIO, TIMES URBAN AFFAIRS WRITER
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The symptoms have swept through Edgewood Middle School.

By 10 many mornings there is a long line outside the nurse's door at the West Covina school. Some children clutch their stomachs. Others grasp their heads. In this mostly middle-class bedroom community, these children share a common ailment. They are hungry.

One boy came into Assistant Principal Amelia Esposito's office last year and confessed to stealing food from a 7-Eleven store. "Every night I go to bed hungry," the 13-year-old told her, bowing his head. "There isn't enough food."

"It's scary how many kids here are hungry," says Esposito, who believes one in four children comes to class undernourished.

America's hunger is not the starvation of Somalia or Rwanda that galvanizes global attention: bloated bellies, emaciated arms, failing bodies along roadsides. Hunger here saps people in more subtle ways; families eat only once a day or skip meals for several days, causing chronic malnutrition. It is a problem that many researchers say eased markedly in the 1960s and '70s, but resurfaced with a vengeance in recent years.

Hunger, they say, afflicts up to 30 million Americans. Twelve million of them are children, many in recession-ravaged Southern California.

Their plight has emerged most publicly in the schools, where teachers delve into their own pockets to feed children whose ability to learn is being crippled by hunger.

Yet half of California's schools--including all 11 in the West Covina Unified School District--do not offer one ready remedy: breakfast, a federally funded entitlement. Nationally, 37% of the 13.6 million low-income children who get a subsidized lunch also eat a morning meal at school. In some districts, breakfast has been barred or eliminated by school officials who oppose it on philosophical grounds. Many in West Covina, where Christian conservatives dominate the school board, oppose feeding children breakfast at school, calling it anti-family and a usurpation of what should be a parent's responsibility.

"I want kids to eat at home with their families," said school board President Mike Spence. "Breakfast at school is just one more thing school districts do rather than allowing parents to take care of their children."

A suburb that blossomed from orange groves in the San Gabriel Valley after World War II, West Covina, the "City of Beautiful Homes," is an unlikely haven for hunger. In the 1980s, however, teachers watched as lost jobs, an influx of newcomers from the inner city and an increase in single mothers left many students living hand-to-mouth. Although the median family income in West Covina is $51,000, there are pockets of poverty: one in four single mothers lives on less than $14,800 a year.

Although the shifts in West Covina are hardly unique, the town's emerging economic stratification has made hunger highly visible in the schools.

The number of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches at Edgewood, the district's only middle school, has surged to nearly two-thirds from one-third a decade ago.

Among them is Cristina Yepez, a soft-spoken 12-year-old with freckles and wide-set blue eyes, who spends some mornings at the school health office complaining of stomachaches. Last year, she says, she got dizzy on the playground, crumpling onto the blacktop at Merced Elementary. She had had no breakfast that day. Dinner the night before was a potato.

"A lot of times, we have just bread," says Cristina, gently combing the silky red hair on her Little Mermaid doll as her family prepares for an evening's meal. "Sometimes, I get really hungry. But there's nothing more to eat. I go to my friend's house and pretend to play and say: 'Oh,

can I have something to drink?' "

Cristina sits down with her mother, Darlene, and sister, Jesseca, 13, for dinner. It is their only meal today. One hot dog each, and water. Darlene Yepez, 38, who is divorced, was sidelined from a forklift job by a back injury but is searching for work. Meanwhile, the family survives on $607 in welfare and $130 in food stamps, which run out halfway through the month. Swallowing her pride, the mother has gone to West Covina's food pantry--but has used her five allowed visits. A few times, the girls have gone up to three days without food, she says, quietly beginning to sob. The last two weeks, she says, they have had one meal a day.

Studies show that hungry students are fatigued. They cannot concentrate. They do worse than their peers on standardized tests. Because they are ill twice as often, they miss class more frequently.

"They are dazed. You can see it in their eyes. Sometimes, their hands tremble," says Edgewood teacher Kim Breen, who estimates that three-quarters of her students arrive without eating breakfast. Some do not have the energy to raise their heads from their desks. One girl broke down last year in class, her hands shaking, describing how she had gone all weekend without eating.

Kathi Jennings sees hunger's toll daily at Edgewood, which has about 1,800 students. Knowing many of them are undernourished, she keeps a choice of rewards for daily tasks on her desk: a baseball card, a small toy or a cup of applesauce. Many kids choose food.

Two guards who patrol Edgewood's playground say one 13-year-old girl chases their green security cart, asking for food. Physical education teacher Barbara Davids says she sometimes fed a 12-year-old boy who volunteered to help custodians pick up after lunch so he could salvage garbage scraps.

Another student got in trouble regularly so he could be sent to the assistant principal's office, where a jar of diabetic candies is perched on her desk. "I'm so hungry. I'm so hungry," sobbed the 12-year-old boy, dipping his hand into the jar and stuffing six candies into his mouth.

Hunger plagues many U.S. schools. More than a quarter of elementary schoolchildren come to class without breakfast, said Doris Derelian, president of the American Dietetic Assn.

The Los Angeles Unified School District, like many urban areas, has long served breakfasts so the problem on those campuses is less pronounced.

Rural and suburban districts are less likely to serve a morning meal. In the Baldwin Park Unified District, nearly half of 16,000 visits to the school nurse last year were tied to hunger. Since then, the district has started offering breakfast at many of its schools.

The mounting toll in schools mirrors a resurgence in hunger, which studies show was brought under control in the '70s but grew by 50% between 1985 and 1991. Even for Americans with jobs, a growing percentage--now nearly one in five--work full time but earn less than the poverty level.

Divorce and out-of-wedlock births left children, along with their mothers, the nation's biggest losers. More than one in five children live in poverty, and almost a quarter of low-income children in the United States are anemic--a condition linked to inadequate or poor nutrition. Government cuts have not helped: median Aid to Families With Dependent Children benefits for a family of three have dropped 47% since 1970. California food stamp payments average 70 cents a meal, slightly more than half of what the U.S. Department of Agriculture says it takes to get an adequate diet.

In an effort to assess the extent of hunger in America, the federal government has launched its first tally on malnutrition. Results from the survey of 60,000 households are expected to be released in 1996.

Recent academic research already has focused on the effects of hunger in the classroom. A 1993 Tufts University study said hunger is stunting cognitive development as lethargic children disengage from learning, and warned that "our country may be heading for a crisis of enormous proportions."

"Health and nutrition are powerful determinants of educational competence," says Ernesto Pollitt, a UC Davis human development professor. His 1993 study found that anemic and iron-deficient toddlers lag behind their peers in mental development by up to 25%. Nonetheless, Pollitt said he is surprised to find that many schools do not serve breakfast and ignore the effects of hunger on the ability to learn.

A study of 1,023 public schoolchildren in Lawrence, Mass., found that when schools started to serve breakfast, students' standardized test scores rose, and absenteeism and tardiness declined. Math, another study shows, is hardest hit when children are not given a morning meal.

"Scientific evidence shows that if you don't do this, you are undermining the very reason for your existence, which is to educate

children," says J. Larry Brown, director of the Tufts University Center on Hunger, Poverty and Nutrition Policy.

At Edgewood school, mid-morning is the worst, said science teacher Breen. "How many eat three meals a day? Two? One?" Breen asks her class. Most say they eat twice, some only once. It is her annual informal body count on hunger, and the results are more grim each year. Breen estimates a sixth of her students are hungry regularly.

"I have to repeat instructions two or three times," she says. "I try to teach them physics, but I can't." By second period, a boy in the third row drops his head to his desk. "I just leave them alone. They aren't going to get it," Breen says, her voice full of frustration.

Just before lunch, a 14-year-old girl rises from her desk and slowly approaches her teacher. She says she has not eaten in two days. Earlier, on the playground, she nearly fainted, dizzy from lack of food. "Could I have 50 cents?" she says quietly so the other children can't overhear. "I'm hungry." Breen--who often gets requests for food--fishes out four quarters. The girl, who has not yet been issued a card that will allow her to get a free lunch, still lacks enough money to buy one. She eats what she can: a bag of Doritos from the school vending machine.

"I keep my own stuff," says the school health clerk, Deborah Paschal, swinging open the office cabinet. Sandwiched between the Band-Aids and medicines are peanut butter, crackers and boxes of juice, all purchased with her own money. Counselor Pamela Clausen sometimes gives away her sack lunch. Physical education teacher Barbara Davids occasionally brings in grocery bags of food. When she runs out, or does not have money, she sends children to the cafeteria with a note: "Feed this kid."

Throughout Southern California, teachers like Ernie Sanchez are picking up the slack. When he was a second-grade teacher at Vejar Elementary School in Pomona, Sanchez spent the first period each morning making cheese sandwiches for every student. If he had no cheese, he scooped a cup of cereal into a napkin on each child's desk. Once, he brought apples to the school, where 99% of the children qualify for free or reduced-price meals. "All these little hands reached out toward me," says Sanchez, who--faced with the crush of children--struggled to regain control of his class. "I'll take that image to my grave. I didn't think I would ever see that in America."

"It has gotten worse," says Debbie Norman, a fourth-grade teacher at East Whittier's Evergreen Elementary. She worries that math and English, taught first thing in the morning, are most jeopardized. "I have parents tell me: 'I just don't have enough to feed them.' The kids say: 'There is

nothing in the house.' "

Her colleague, kindergarten teacher Linda Palmer, could no longer endure the procession of hungry 5-year-olds to her desk. Palmer now passes out crackers and popcorn to children who come to class without snacks.

Some hungry children come from neglectful or drug-plagued homes. At Edgewood, Assistant Principal Esposito puts the number at one in 10.

"We don't have food sometimes," says one 13-year-old Edgewood student, nervously adjusting her glasses. Asked what her mother does, the girl said, "She stays in the house and watches TV every day." Her father? "He takes drugs. That's why my mom threw him out."

But most, Esposito says, suffer because their parents have been laid off, work long hours and leave their children to fend for themselves in the mornings, or work at jobs that barely cover the rent.

Lisa Drynan, 32, was recently laid off from her administrative job at an engineering firm, the second position she's lost to "downsizing" in three years. She is again searching for work. Drynan has gone up to two days at a time without food. Her three boys, Kevin, 3, Kenny, 9 and Keith, 11, who attends Edgewood, often eat once or twice a day. The night before, says Drynan, staring inside her bare refrigerator, her three sons split two hot dogs.

"There are many days I don't have anything for them for breakfast," she says in her tidy apartment, where the toys are lined up outside the front door. Even though she buys generic brand foods, her $102 in food stamps each month run out after 2 1/2 weeks. Drynan, who is divorced, has used up her five trips to the West Covina food bank. "I know food is important. But I know we need a roof over our heads more," she says, adding that most of her income goes to the $690-a-month rent, bills and collection agencies to pay off thousands of dollars in medical costs owed from one son's head injury.

"I'm hungry," says Kevin, tugging at his mother's white T-shirt. Drynan has heard that her 3-year-old ventures to neighbors' homes, asking for food. She pulls out a Popsicle--the last bit of food in her freezer--and gives it to Kevin, who consumes the treat in seconds.

Kenny, a skinny boy with big brown eyes, laments not having had his favorite food, pork chops, since his birthday in March. At school, he says, "in the mornings, I get real hungry." By 10:30, he begins a daily lunchtime countdown, eyes focused on the classroom clock. Other children

sit down after morning recess for snack time--a treat from home. "They read us a story, or we do our work. I just have to work. I don't have a snack," Kenny says quietly. "I get hungry when I look at them."

Drynan knows hunger afflicts other families in her neighborhood, even those in which the parents have jobs. When Drynan sent her children for a sleep-over to Susie Ballard's house across the street, they were told to eat supper at their own home, then come over.

Ballard, 38, whose daughter Kristin attends Edgewood, explains that although she works, she cannot put three meals on the table for her own three children, much less visitors. Ballard, whose marriage broke up two years ago, lost her longtime job as a pizza company training manager. Work as a cleaning lady barely covers the rent. Half the month, there is no breakfast. Ballard stretches a pack of spaghetti into three meals, thinning down the red sauce with cans of water.

"There are nights I tell the kids: 'I'm not hungry. You eat,' " says Ballard, nervously smoothing the lace doily on the apartment's living room table. She gives the kids Kool-Aid to fill their bellies. Fresh fruit, vegetables and coffee are luxuries of the past.

"I tell them: 'If someone offers you a free meal, take it, take it.' I used to go to bed crying every night. I feel a failure to them. I ask: How can they look up to me?"

Kristin, 13, is curled up in a chair in the corner of the sparsely furnished but immaculate apartment. "If the food was there, I would eat more," she says shyly.

Anti-hunger advocates are waging a coordinated, nationwide campaign in a school-to-school battle to get the tens of thousands of schools without breakfast programs to sign up. Without breakfast in schools, the $16 billion California spends on elementary and high school education may be wasted money, Assemblywoman Gwen Moore warned in a January letter to colleagues, prodding them to push the program in their districts. Twenty-one states--including New York and Texas--now mandate that all or some of their schools serve breakfast. Bills to make breakfast mandatory in California schools have failed, partly because they are viewed by some legislators as coddling immigrant children.

In La Habra, a recently implemented breakfast program has made teaching more productive. Morning stomachaches used to afflict half her students daily, said Maria Vigil, a Las Lomas Elementary kindergarten teacher. "They were all nauseous" and lethargic, she said. Her office brimming with more than a dozen hungry children by midmorning, Las Lomas

Principal Mary Jo Anderson found that for 10% of the students, school lunch was their only solid meal. "If their tummies hurt, their brains can't work," Anderson says. School breakfast, she adds, resulted in a 95% drop in disciplinary problems. "They are calm, happy. They aren't angry. They aren't hurting. It's like a miracle."

"Teacher! I am going to eat!" children yell at Vigil as they spill out of yellow school buses. Sandra Andrade, 5, races from the parking lot, grabs her green meal ticket, then rushes to the wire screen window, waiting impatiently for her tray of milk, juice, cereal and string cheese. Unemployed father Roberto Andrade--who some days can't scrounge up the gas money to search for work--hovers over the school breakfast tables, where four of his children who attend Las Lomas share their food with his other three younger children. "Without this, they might not eat some days," says the handyman. Three-year-old Eduardo devours a packet of graham crackers with his sister Sandra.

The focus on food is everywhere. As soon as class starts in Vigil's Room 6, she notices that 6-year-old Jonathan Quintana is irritable and crying. Vigil's hand dives into a desk drawer and pulls out a bag of crackers: "Let's get you a little cereal, OK?"

Jonathan is ushered to a table, seated next to his teddy bear, and given cereal, juice, milk and more crackers. The lesson quickly continues. Jonathan's sobs become more infrequent. He sniffles. By 9, he is seated with the other students, at work on lessons about the calendar and the weather.

As Vigil offers each child an animal cracker from a large jar, Jonathan cheerfully plays with Legos. Even as lunchtime approaches, children attentively listen to Vigil's rendition of "The Three Bears," jostling to see the book's pictures. Later, Alberto Cueva, 5, savors his lunch--a burrito, followed by corn and milk--before his half day of school ends.

"Sometimes, we eat at night," says the boy, urgently shoveling the burrito into his tiny mouth. "Sometimes we don't."

Schools Defend Decision Against Offering Breakfast
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Although school breakfast programs could help many children, there are many reasons why schools do not offer a morning meal.

Logistic barriers can be a nightmare, said Wanda Grant, food services director for El Monte City School District. Her district, which serves

breakfast at its 18 schools, had to shuffle bus schedules, buy trucks to haul more food supplies and deal with water heaters that could not handle bigger dishwashing loads. Food service directors, principals and custodians usually do not jump at the chance to do more work for the same pay.

However, schools that want to offer breakfast find a way. When the Riverside Unified School District could not juggle bus schedules, it offered breakfast pizza and pancakes on the school bus.

Often, philosophical objections are the bigger obstacle. Many people believe parents, not taxpayers, should provide something as basic as breakfast for their children. If schools take on more duties--offering sex and drug education, for example--won't that encourage parents to abdicate more responsibilities?

In a case that attracted widespread attention, the Meriden, Conn., school board, arguing that children should eat at home with their families, repeatedly voted down school breakfast programs from 1990 to 1993--flouting a 1992 school breakfast state mandate until they were sued by the state attorney general.

A survey this year by the California Department of Education, which allocated only a third of the $3 million in breakfast start-up grants last year because of a dearth of applicants, found that many principals and superintendents voiced philosophical objections to breakfast programs. "The parents have some responsibility for these kids. It's not the schools' job to be all things to all people," one principal wrote.

Since the 1980s, Shyrl L. Dougherty, the nutrition services director for Montebello Unified, has prodded four of 26 schools balking at serving breakfast. In one school, 98% of the children would qualify for free or reduced-cost morning meals.

"How much are we supposed to do for families?" one principal protested to Dougherty.

Only about a tenth of students in Orange County's second-largest district, Garden Grove Unified, get free or reduced-price breakfasts, although half qualify.

"What's next? Are we going to provide housing for these people too?" one principal asked the district's food services director, Karen Papilli.

In the West Covina Unified School District, many administrators and teachers believe the decision to not offer breakfast is rooted in

conservative attitudes. The school board begins its meetings with Christian prayer.

"We have a conservative school board. They are very concerned about the role of the school," said Mary J. Herbener, the district's child welfare and attendance supervisor. Merced Elementary Principal Janet Swanson said: "Breakfast is a hot potato. It's a political issue."

Edgewood Middle School Assistant Principal Amelia Esposito said she has pushed for breakfast for three years. "This board is stuck in the '60s. Lunch is OK, but breakfast is controversial."

Anthony Reymann, who calls himself the board's lone liberal, sizes up his colleagues' reaction to a breakfast program: "They will say: 'Ultimately God put parents on this earth to take care of their children. By God, that is what they should be doing.' "

The board's conservative president, Mike Spence, said: "The government is trying to usurp the responsibilities of the parent. There is a trend to take over aspects of what the family does."

"Schools need to educate," said Susan Langley, the West Covina School District Council-PTA president. She says parents should turn elsewhere for food assistance. "We are really big on self-help."

Some teachers are skeptical as well. One told Esposito: "If they (parents) weren't on drugs, their kids wouldn't be hungry."

Since bringing in breakfast last year at Santa Ana's Pio Pico Elementary School, the droves of hungry children who arrived at Principal Judy Magsaysay's office sick with hunger in the morning have disappeared. Teachers are astounded at the difference in the classroom: 10 to 11:30 a.m., once dead time, has become a fertile learning period.

Magsaysay said she knows the difference the meals make when she watches students return from monthlong vacations visibly thinner. Twenty-five children line up against the cafeteria's outer wall by 6:45 a.m. for breakfast. Sometimes, the cafeteria lady runs late. When she finally swings open the door, the children clap and cheer.

Competition for Supplies Fierce Among Food Banks
Charity: Companies increasingly sell salvaged goods they once donated. More of the hungry are turned away.
By SONIA NAZARIO, TIMES URBAN AFFAIRS WRITER
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Nuns and church volunteers who run Los Angeles' charitable food pantries circle like wily prizefighters around a pile of boxes filled with dented food cans and torn cereal packages at the Los Angeles Regional Foodbank. Today is "Monday Madness," the bank's weekly food grab, where affiliated pantries cart off damaged foods donated by supermarkets and food companies.

"No pushing! No fighting! No name-calling!" a food bank employee warns.

Volunteers swarm over the heap, colliding as they reach for the choicest loot, running the boxes back to their pantry's zealously guarded stash. "Grab it! Grab it!" pants one nun to another.

Older church workers complain of being nearly trampled in the rush for food, which they take from the food bank and distribute to the hungry through a network of pantries. Fistfights sometimes erupt. "It's like we're going into a wrestling match," says Holy Cross parish pantry director Suzanne Snyder, who steers clear of the coveted frozen meat boxes "for fear of physical harm."

The skirmish for food has turned frenzied as charitable groups--which flourished in the 1980s as one of America's primary responses to a rising tide of hunger--struggle to survive cuts in their lifeblood: food company donations. Gifts of "secondary" and "salvage" foods to Second Harvest, coordinator of the nation's largest network of food banks, slipped 11.2% in the first 10 months of the year--a drop of 23.5 million pounds.

Companies grappling with debt from leveraged buyouts and razor-thin margins are selling what they once gave away, fueling a $2.4-billion industry of dented or expired products trafficked under tarps in flea markets or in secondary food stores--from Scratch 'N Dent Food Shops in Plant City, Fla., to Dentco in Fontana.

"There has been a national change in corporate priorities . . . ," frets L.A. Regional Foodbank Executive Director Doris Bloch, turning with trepidation to a Los Angeles map riddled with 758 red dots--one for each agency--that rely on her bank to feed 300,000 weekly. At the food bank, donations from national food companies have dropped 41% so far this year. And in a UCLA study from 1993, one in four hungry families seeking food were already being turned away by Los Angeles pantries.

"I eat Rolaids regularly. This scares me to death," says Deborah Keegan, marketing director for Second Harvest, whose affiliated pantries fed nearly 21 million families last year.

In the middle of the conflict are the giant food manufacturers, torn between needed profits and charitable giving. The pressures can be intense: At a recent conference, a secondary food chain executive urged corporations to forsake traditional policies of donations and sell to his market instead.

He drilled home the point: selling, not giving, helps companies reel in more cash. Still, the Grocery Manufacturers of America board--a trade group that represents the nation's largest food companies--has urged members to keep giving.

Augie Fernandes, vice president of a supermarket consulting firm and an expert on the salvage business, says four of 10 major food companies in the past two years have begun selling secondary foods, and he predicts donations could drop another 30%. Says Fernandes: "The food banks are in trouble."

In the Pantries: A Daily Balancing Act

At the Community Food Bank of West Covina, pantry coordinator Victoria Portillo begins a daily balancing act: helping people, but not running dry before closing time. Portillo unlocks the heavy metal door of the old school that serves as the distribution point for food. People step inside, one at a time, eyes cast downward, voices sometimes cracking. "They never thought they would lose their job. They never thought they would be here," Portillo says.

Outside, a cadre of elderly men, all volunteers, unload food from a rickety donated pickup truck. Inside, a silver-haired woman prepares the packages to be distributed: a small grocery bag containing canned goods and pasta, bread and a home-grown cucumber donated by a neighbor, a ration more generous than on some days.

A middle-aged woman, divorced, is first to swing open the pantry's door. Five children cling to her skirt. "Is this your first time here?" Portillo says. When she asks this question, grown men often break down, quietly sobbing. "You can come five times in a lifetime--period," Portillo tells the woman.

Portillo calculates what she has in stock, then plucks one of a few chocolate cakes stashed in the pantry freezer and piles that on top of the bag of groceries. The children quickly gather around the food. Their eyes devour the dessert. The mother fights off tears. "I didn't know what I was going to do for my child's birthday this Saturday," she says, cradling the bag of food in her arms.

But when a man comes in with his wife and three young children, Portillo tells them she cannot help, because they used up their five visits four years before. The woman's expression turns from hope to desperation. Her husband becomes belligerent. "Give me some bread! Give me some bread! I got three hungry children here!" he says, springing menacingly from his chair. Portillo fearfully shoves several loaves into his arms.

"This is my last time," says a young woman who enters near closing time, a tinge of despair in her voice. Portillo suddenly realizes the pantry is down to a few loaves of bread. She madly snatches back some of the loaves volunteers have put into the young woman's cart; Portillo needs to stretch what's left for the half-dozen families still lined up outside.

Nearly half of 9,300 pantries and soup kitchens surveyed nationwide have recently been forced to slash the amount of food they give each family, Second Harvest found. Glendale's Salvation Army has cut the number of yearly visits in half to six; some pantries allow one food request per year. At L.A. First Church of the Nazarene's pantry, which feeds the first 100 people to arrive three times a week, the hungry line up before dawn to claim one of the coveted food bags, which are given out mid-morning. Twenty San Bernardino and Riverside County pantries in the past 1 1/2 years have shut their doors altogether, says Daryl Brock, executive director of Riverside's Survive Food Bank.

"There isn't much food available," laments Rita Russo, one of two nuns who founded the Seedling, a South-Central Los Angeles pantry. The line of people stretches halfway down the block from the pantry's red, green and yellow tent, where volunteers sort turnips and cans of food into boxes that once contained a week's supply, but have dwindled to three or even two days of food.

The Seedling and other pantries are bracing for cuts in their other main food source: government surplus items--made famous by massive cheese giveaways in the 1980s--which provide Los Angeles County's big food banks with nearly four of every 10 pounds distributed, but have been slashed by two-thirds for next year.

In late 1993, the Seedling had government surplus foods only, and by Christmas, just two items remained: beans and butter. This year, it may have to close for the holidays.

"I've heard desperate mothers say we just prayed through last night because there was nothing to eat," said Russo, who often watches children

sit on the floor of the pantry's giant tent and tear open packages of bread, feasting on the floor as if the loaves were ambrosia. "To me, this is a gospel need. Jesus said, 'Feed thy neighbor.' "

Nearly one-third of those who come to U.S. food agencies are the working poor, people who can't pay high rents on minimum wage and still put three meals on the table, a survey last year by Second Harvest found. Single parents make up more than two-thirds of pantry and soup kitchen clients, and children, who are a quarter of the population, were almost half of emergency food recipients.

Most who come to the agencies were recently unemployed. A majority don't get food stamps, either because of the stigma of applying or misunderstandings about eligibility. More than four of five who get the coupons said the aid never lasts the month.

In the 1980s, food bank advocates convinced great numbers of food companies that it was better to donate food than to shovel it into landfills. The Government Accounting Office, Congress' investigative arm, estimated that as much as 20% of all food grown in the U.S.--up to two tons per person, per year--was thrown away. Food banks touted the write-offs corporations would get, and battled companies' fear that donating less-than-perfect food would tarnish their product's carefully cultivated image.

Firms faced the mounting P.R. problem of wasted food as hunger, which appeared to be nearly eliminated by the War on Poverty program, resurfaced in the 1980s. "The trickle of people became a river," says Carolyn Olney of Los Angeles' Interfaith Hunger Coalition. Grass-roots food pantries and soup kitchens quadrupled to 40,000 between 1982 and 1990.

Last year, more than 1 billion pounds flowed to the food banks from food companies and supermarkets--products that flopped, were discontinued or had expired code dates or production errors. General Mills Inc. donated cereals that were too lightly toasted or had flakes that were too small. Its biggest giveaway: $3 million of Cheerios boxes containing a toy ball on which a 1-year-old child choked to death. (The food banks had to promise to remove the balls before distributing the cereal.)

American consumers--particularly sensitive since the tampering scares--set aside all but the most pristine packages. (Food bank volunteers sort through cans, removing any that appear questionable. Laws enacted in the '80s protect companies from liability when they donate food.)

But by the 1990s, being hailed as a big donor had become something of an embarrassment--a red alert to shareholders that a company was wasteful and inefficient. Two years ago, food company executives began warning food bankers to look elsewhere for food. "They said, look guys, we love you, but we're going to sell this. We have to look to the bottom line," recalls Bloch, of the L.A. Regional Food Bank. Excess food was increasingly sold to Pic 'N' Save, 99 Cents Only Stores and others.

Major American food companies balk at revealing the proportion of "unsalable" goods they sell to secondary merchants. For example, Quaker Oats Co., whose donations declined from $11.9 million in fiscal 1993 to $5.1 million in fiscal 1994, will not specify how much secondary food it sold. A spokesman attributed most of the drop to increased efficiencies that decreased the quantity of unsalable food available.

Despite critics in the world of food banks, the corporations have many defenders. They note that few other industries are expected to give away a significant part of their goods to the needy, and that they shouldn't be expected to take the place of the government in feeding America's hungry.

"Food retailers are in business to make money," says Fernandes, the salvage expert. "Companies have to recover their losses. They want to put these products back onto their bottom line."

And indeed, many firms try to balance charity with fiscal necessity. The Vons Cos. grocery chain sells 15% of its salvage and much of its discontinued foods, but donates 12 trailers of food each week to 150 local charities.

General Mills, which was unable to say how much it sells to secondary sources, donates $10.5 million in food yearly. Still, said General Mills Foundation vice president David Nasby: "It's always better to sell your product than to give it away."

Bargain Shopping in the Salvage Aisle

Sandwiched on a lonely stretch of road between a massage parlor and a motorcycle shop, Dentco is doing a booming business with the food companies' change of heart. Founder Orlan T. Riggs, who until his heart surgery presided over a five-store dented can empire from Yucaipa to Santa Ana, now pours all his energy into his Fontana store.

On Saturday mornings, up to 50 people line up outside the mustard-colored cinder block building, waiting to pick over the wire bins of taped boxes and tarnished fare. An employee empties dozens of dented

cans into huge bins, replenishing what customers have purchased. "All of the name brands are here," he says, proudly motioning to the damaged items being scrutinized by customers under a Spartan row of fluorescent lights.

At the high end of the salvage industry is Canned Foods Grocery Outlets in Berkeley. Known as the the Cadillac of the business, Canned Foods promises a "discreet outlet for remarketing your products" to 76 of the country's largest food companies. Canned Foods has grown into more than 100 stores in six western states. Enthusiastic blurbs from executives for Hormel Foods Corp. and Sara Lee Bakery adorn Canned Foods' glossy marketing brochure.

Less glossy--but highly popular--is Joe Sanchez's place in Lincoln Heights.

"It's kind of an underground business," says Sanchez, president of La Quebradita (the Broken Thing), whose facade carries a bucolic rendering of a man wearing a sombrero astride a muscular horse pulling a shopping cart full of groceries.

Sanchez inches past his store's beauty salon and restaurant into a back room, where huge bins overflow with damaged packages of microwave pudding and torn boxes of cereals. (Sanchez says the boxes have an inner package that protects the food and that he tosses out anything questionable.) The back room is for the real bargains. "This is where people won't run into their neighbor," he says.

Sanchez buys 2,000 boxes full of dented cans each month from grocery chains for $6 to $11 each, marks up the price 28%, and makes an 8% profit, at least four times what supermarkets in Southern California net. "It's a super business," he says effusively. Starting with a $3,800 initial investment, Sanchez has used profits to open two large grocery stores and a sausage company.

"Before, supermarkets donated everything. They want the green now. They want cash," he says.

The most vigorous salvage sales have perhaps been at flea markets, some of which have seen the number of vendors quadruple in the past two years.

Al Ruby sold shoes for 11 years at the Cypress College swap meet, until the recession caused sales to dry up. He looked across the aisle to see his swap meet neighbor madly selling dented cans of food. "People can't afford shoes. But they gotta eat," he says with a shrug.

Low prices scream out from fluorescent pieces of cardboard. Most of the goods on display have outlived their printed expiration date, sometimes by four months. Some cans are rusty. At a neighboring salvage food stand, where food is as much as eight months past the code date, mayonnaise with no paper label sits in the hot sun, huge air pockets developing in the middle of the jars.

"I get a lot of calls each day from people who want to buy this stuff," says Manuel Duran, manager of salvage operations for Certified Grocers of California, made up of 2,200 small grocers and chains. "C'mon, just show me what you got," people cajole him, said Duran, standing in the heart of Certified Grocer's salvage operations, a dimly lit City of Commerce warehouse where huge fans churn the heavy air. Last year, he sold about $3.8 million worth of food products to intermediaries that distributed the goods to peddlers and stores. Duran, who says the sales help supermarkets keep regular food prices down, can name only six companies that still require him to donate their damaged products. Out on the dock today, amid a swarm of small flies: crushed packages of cup noodles that he'll sell, mangled cans of green beans, fruit cocktail.

Salvage and secondary food operators such as Canned Foods aggressively call Second Harvest's corporate food donors weekly, often offering to buy products sight unseen. Food banks counterattack by warning companies that salvage operators might not handle their product well, and prey on their fears that people who buy their brand in a salvage store might have otherwise purchased it at a regular store at full price. Calling salvage sales a ticking time bomb, they claim that some salvage operators aren't careful to eliminate all swollen cans or those dented at the seam that could lead to botulism poisoning, a bacteria infection that can be fatal.

Those in the salvage industry counter that they are as vigilant as food banks and pantries in weeding out suspect food products.

Alfonso Medina, chief of the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services food and milk program, said his inspectors have found at least two cases this year of swollen and potentially dangerous cans of salvage food being sold at swap meets.

To be safe, he says, salvagers must glean out about half the cans they buy, tossing out "flippers, swellers or leakers"--cans that are swollen on one end, both ends, or dented at the seam. Medina said he knew of no questionable food distributed at food banks.

Salvage customer Julio Herrera is grateful for the secondary food industry and the bargains it provides him. "I can't live without these

guys!" raves Herrera, taking a break as he and five of his six children rummage through 16 rows of banana boxes full of motley food products under a gray tarp at the outer edge of the Santa Fe Springs swap meet. They select torn bags of rice.

Before finding the salvage stand two years ago, Herrera was unable on his $15,000 annual salary as a truck driver to put three meals on the table for his children. A church pantry, he says, nonetheless rejected him, saying his income was too high. "They said other people were more needy," he says, casting his eyes downward as he recalls the embarrassment of asking for food, then being turned away empty-handed. He now buys 95% of his groceries at the stand.

'What Is to Become of These Hungry People?'

As corporations wrestle with whether it is better to sell or give, food bank proponents have learned they must become more aggressive to survive. Second Harvest typically takes four or five days to tell food manufacturers anxious to clear their docks whether or not they want a food gift, said Mike Mulqueen, director of the Greater Chicago Food Depository.

Foodbank of Southern California, Los Angeles' second largest, left the Second Harvest network in 1991, dissatisfied that 82% of what they were receiving were snack foods such as candy, potato chips and sodas. Contacting food companies on its own, donations rose 86% the next year.

"Before, you waited at your desk for the phone to ring and the food to flow in. Food banks have to be hungrier and work their tails off now," said John F. Knapp, president of the Foodbank.

"The big major donors may be tapped out. But lots of medium-sized companies haven't been asked to join the hunger fight," agreed Mark Lowry of Orange County's Community Development Council food bank.

Some food bank authorities say they must also turn to different and more nourishing foods, such as produce, fish and leftovers from restaurants. Half of the food banks approached this year about starting programs to use vegetables and fruits that cannot be sold but are still edible rejected the idea, said Susan Evans, a professor at the Institute for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Research at the University of Southern California. "Food banks haven't been responsive to change," Evans said.

Love Is Feeding Everyone (LIFE), a Los Angeles food bank begun by actors Dennis Weaver and Valerie Harper, trucks milk, meat and bakery

products from 52 Hughes markets to needy institutions, but most supermarkets haven't been tapped, says James Schiffner, LIFE's chief executive officer.

As another sign of their evolution, a few pantries, such as St. Joseph Center in Venice, are becoming social service agencies, providing help to get jobs, parenting skills and budgeting classes, convinced that the only solution is to stem the number of people who live in poverty and need help.

But for many in the hunger movement, the pantry's problems have caused a fundamental questioning of whether their core principle--that private charity can take the place of government--works in the leaner '90s.

"Everyone agrees government services need to be cut. But at the same time, the private sector says they have to be mean and lean," says Bloch, of the L.A. Regional Foodbank. "So what is to become of these hungry people?"

USDA Tries to Serve Up Food Stamps to the Hungry
Poverty: Millions have been spent to make the program accessible. Critics say it encourages welfare
By SONIA NAZARIO, TIMES URBAN AFFAIRS WRITER
Los Angeles Times Tuesday November 22, 1994

Bucking the anti-welfare movement, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is bankrolling a crusade to attract people to food stamps--the most broadly used federal anti-hunger effort, already serving one in nine Americans.

The effort is a striking turnaround for the USDA, which has issued grants totaling more than $2.5 million to 27 groups since last year in an attempt to make food stamps, the largest of 14 federal hunger programs, more accessible. Such federal outreach funding was banned throughout much of the 1980s, as government shunned the notion that taxpayers should pay to promote welfare programs.

The new policy means taxpayers are now underwriting the efforts of anti-hunger advocates such as Cynthia Lottie. Twice a week, Lottie and others from the nonprofit Southern California Interfaith Hunger Coalition scour welfare offices, hoping to ease the way for many among the millions who are eligible for food stamps but not receiving them.

On a recent morning, Lottie passes throngs of security guards and a metal detector as she enters the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services office Downtown. Every chair inside is taken, and people

line the walls. The air reeks of sweat. Social workers in 12 plexiglass booths address people through microphones. Lottie announces: "Anyone have a problem with their case?"

"Yes! Right here!" exclaims Milton Oppenheimer, madly waving his arms in the air. Oppenheimer, 35, is beleaguered. This is his second trip to the office to apply for food stamps in the past week. On this day, he arrived at 7 a.m. After he repeatedly asked why he hasn't been put on food stamps, the homeless man says, his social worker shut off her two-way microphone and shoved his application aside, asking him to move along. A security guard who has been out of work for two months, Oppenheimer says he is despondent. "I'm in limbo. I think they put my papers in the circular file."

Lottie offers to help the Marine Corps veteran. Oppenheimer cheers her on. "Sure! Go in there! Kick some tail!" He adds: "Once you get hungry you get desperate. Then, you take care of No. 1. . . . This is America. C'mon. I'm a veteran, for God's sake."

Lottie files a complaint, then prods the social worker to put Oppenheimer on food stamps, arguing that he is clearly eligible. An hour later, Oppenheimer's name blares over the loudspeaker as he is called to be fingerprinted and issued a food stamp identification card. Oppenheimer says he can now spend his time looking for another job as a security guard or in a factory rather than standing in soup kitchen lines.

As a homeless man, Oppenheimer is part of one group the federal government is trying to reach through its new efforts to promote hunger assistance programs. Others are the elderly and the working poor--people who often don't know about food stamps, falsely believe they are not eligible, are stymied by the bureaucracy or avoid applying out of shame, sometimes going hungry instead, USDA officials say. The policy shift--which probably will be reviewed by the new Republican majority in Congress--also reflects a recognition of research that shows the ranks of hungry Americans have burgeoned to up to 30 million, many of them children.

In Los Angeles, $200,000 in federal money now funds seven public service television ads--airing in English and Spanish since August--that urge people to look into food stamps. "Food stamps can help you in tough times," the announcer intones, flashing the Interfaith Hunger Coalition hot line number. A San Francisco grant helps five city outreach workers promote food stamps in senior citizen centers and subsidized child-care centers. And in New York City, the Community Food Resource Center Inc. scours unemployment, utility and telephone offices to sign people up.

Soon, the USDA will announce a $5-million, two-year national nutrition education blitz by the agency. The aim is not only to inform children about the benefits of good eating, but to use the agency's first coast-to-coast billboard, television, radio and print ad campaign to highlight the nation's anti-hunger programs.

Some oppose the agency's new outreach attempts. "The government should be discouraging people from getting on welfare. We used to tell people we wanted them to be self-sufficient," says Robert Rector, senior welfare policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. The federal government will spend $40.2 billion in fiscal 1995 for 14 anti-hunger programs, including food stamps and school lunches, roughly 60% of the Agriculture Department's budget. "What we are doing is generating a huge population of dependent people who work less, marry less and rely on the government more," Rector said.

Many in Congress are moving in the opposite direction of the Agriculture Department, determined to cap spending on food stamps and other welfare entitlement programs whose budgets until now have expanded to meet the burgeoning numbers of eligible applicants. Almost 69% of those eligible received food stamps in 1992, the most recent figure available--up from nearly 56% in 1989. One welfare reform bill--which estimates that the total welfare tab will swell from $328 billion to $500 billion by 1998--requires that the growth rate in these programs be held to 3.5% each year.

But USDA officials and many food policy experts point out that two-thirds of the elderly who are eligible for food stamps and more than half of the working poor go without. Some opt instead for church-sponsored food pantries, but these, facing more clients and fewer food donations, are overwhelmed, forcing them to limit their assistance and turn away many requests for help. "There are many needy people who aren't participating," said James Ohls, a senior fellow at Mathematica Policy Research Inc., which conducts government studies on food stamps.

Contrary to widespread perceptions of dependency, most food stamp recipients use the program for less than seven months. More than a third, however, again sign up for food stamps within a year of leaving the program. "A lot of this is people moving in and out of jobs," said University of Wisconsin professor and welfare expert Maurice MacDonald, who contends that food stamps therefore are doing exactly what society wants: preventing hunger. Recent studies, MacDonald said, have measured the disincentive to work generated by food stamps and found the effect is minor.

"These programs exist to serve all who are eligible and hungry. If we

aren't reaching them, we should," said USDA Undersecretary Ellen Haas, who intends to continue outreach funding.

The government's new efforts are unlikely to curb what many see as the main factor driving hunger: the growing number of people falling into poverty. Although outreach, increased government assistance and an expanding economy drastically reduced the ranks of the hungry in the 1970s, their numbers soared by 50% between 1985 and 1991, according to Tufts University reports, as global economic shifts brought a loss of manufacturing jobs and erosion of income.

"The problem is more with our poverty policy than our hunger policy. It is our continuing failure to address poverty," said Peter Eisinger, director of the La Follette Institute of Public Affairs, Public Policy and Administration Program at the University of Wisconsin. Contrary to earlier spurts of economic growth, expansion of the economy in the 1980s and 1990s pulled more people--now almost one in six--into poverty, as a growing number were left to compete for low-paying service jobs. Earnings for the average man without a high school degree plummeted to an inflation-adjusted $14,439 in 1989 from $22,858 in 1967.

Mounting divorce rates and out-of-wedlock births have left more parents to raise and feed children on one salary. Spending on public housing declined, forcing nearly half of low-income families to spend 70% of their earnings on housing, and less on food. Those who seek out government assistance such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children have seen benefits for a family of three plummet 47% since 1970, when adjusted for inflation. "The government must create incentives to keep jobs in the U.S." and discourage their flight to lower-wage countries, said Marc Cohen, senior research associate with the nonprofit advocacy group Bread for the World. "The problem isn't really with the (anti-hunger) programs. It is with the lack of high priority for a full employment economy."

Still, in California, only half of those eligible for food stamps receive them. Focus groups conducted this summer by the nonprofit California Food Policy Advocates found that many falsely believe a person must be homeless or unemployed to qualify for food stamps; many elderly say that despite hunger, they cannot ask for a government handout. Others say that because food stamp benefits are adjusted according to a person's income, small benefits for some are outweighed by application waits that can last days in dangerous and dirty welfare offices.

Welfare offices often close their doors early--2 p.m. in Los Angeles. Anyone with a car valued at more than $4,550 is disqualified. Food stamp recipients must file monthly reports and reapply every six months, even

if their incomes do not change. Those who want to apply for various federal anti-hunger programs must deal with up to four separate agencies that manage the programs in California, according to the Government Accounting Office, Congress' investigative arm. "We need to simplify procedures," Haas said. "Today, many people sit in food stamp offices all day."

Participation problems affect other USDA anti-hunger programs, where nearly two-thirds of recipients, according to the GAO, are children. Most children who are eligible for a free or reduced-price breakfast at school don't get it because their districts don't participate in the program. Fewer than 17% of children getting free or reduced-price lunches at school last year received summer meals because of the lack of sponsors, according to the Food Research and Action Center.

Ohls, the government's food stamp researcher at Mathematica, noted that those receiving food stamps typically get enough coupons to last three weeks, leaving them hungry the last week of the month. The average benefit, 74 cents per meal, is only about half of what the USDA calculates is needed for a nutritionally balanced diet. Benefits are low because the Agriculture Department's formula unrealistically assumes that even applicants with very low incomes can set aside 30% for food, Ohls said. Another assumption--that people who often lack cars can shop at low-priced supermarkets absent from many inner cities--is equally unrealistic, said David Super, general counsel for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal research group. "Clearly," Ohls said, "people who are on food stamps are hungry. It is not satisfying all their food needs."

Among the USDA's highest priorities now is to substitute a plastic credit card for traditional paper food stamp coupons. The recipient's benefit amount becomes a kind of credit limit; purchases are deducted at the cash register. The process, which operates in six areas of the country, is meant to be less vulnerable to fraud and also reduce the stigma for food stamp users. California's program is scheduled to begin in San Bernardino and San Diego counties in 1995, followed by Los Angeles the next year.

While the government moves to modernize its food stamp program, people like Sondra Trudeau are at the front lines in welfare offices, helping the public sign up.

Trudeau, an Interfaith Hunger Coalition trainee, encounters people struggling with the 10-page food stamp application--shorter than those in other states, which run up to 40 pages long. Sometimes tempers flare. "If I see you on the street, I'll kill you. I'll kill you," one woman says,

gesturing angrily in a social worker's direction as security guards guide her toward the door of the South-Central office.

A 58-year-old woman with bad eyesight who can't read or write approaches Trudeau, who has helped three others get food stamps today. Her food stamps stopped eight months ago--she's not sure why, but she wants to get them again. This is her seventh trip to the office, says the former garment worker, who is looking for work as a nanny or cleaning lady because she can no longer see well enough to sew. "No one will help me," she laments, explaining that she has spent five hours in the office today alone.

Nearly two hours later, Trudeau has worked with the woman's social worker to gain her $115 in food stamps and $212 in general relief. Deeply moved, the woman, explaining that she is very hungry, quietly says to Trudeau, "Thank God. Thank you."

The Food Angel of 42nd Street
Mae Raines loads an old pickup with donated food and hands it out in some of the city's poorest areas. 'When I can ease someone's pain, I feel good,' she says.
By SONIA NAZARIO, TIMES URBAN AFFAIRS WRITER
Los Angeles Times Wednesday November 23, 1994

To the children running excitedly after her rusty blue 1978 Dodge pickup for a piece of bread, or an orange, she is Mother Raines or the Muffin Lady.

Mae Raines' food truck pulls to a stop in South-Central Los Angeles and she begins the task of easing hunger. "A lot of kids don't know what a snack or lunch is," says Mae, who watches some children devour whole bags of bread. Women sometimes sob when she puts food in their hands. Men bow their heads and say thanks.

At 71, when most are quietly enjoying their golden years, Mae spends her time hauling truckloads of food to some of the most dangerous streets in Los Angeles, places many people in the City of Angels avoid. In her mind, she is simply a good Christian. "God said: Take care of the poor and the widows. I do what the Word says," says Mae, a widow herself. To her neighbors, she is the food angel of 42nd Street.

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On a crisp autumn morning with wisps of clouds in the sky, Mae arrives at the Los Angeles wholesale produce market's "charity dock," where she gets donations of fruits, vegetables and bread. An ample woman, Mae--clad

in flowing purple culottes, black high-top sneakers and a royal blue beret covering salt-and-pepper hair--points two of her foster sons at boxes of food to load. The boys pile the scratched and scarred Dodge with loaves of bread, sweet corn, oranges, pumpkins, even doughnuts. And they never forget an item children in her neighborhood south of the Coliseum count on Mae to bring: English muffins.

"We need radishes, four boxes," Mae prods her foster son, Donell.

An hour later, Mae and the children scramble into the cab of the truck. The squeaky doors clang shut. She grasps her window and pushes it down by hand. Peering out the shattered windshield, she eases away from the concrete loading dock, heading south, through the warehouse district near Downtown, over two railroad tracks, past rubble-strewn lots and graffiti-marred walls, zigzagging into the heart of the city.

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Rolling past low-slung houses, Mae's food wagon brakes at her first stop. Most who converge on her truck are very old or very young.

One 4-year-old boy, Minor Beli, can barely believe it when Mae holds out a box of doughnuts. "Do you want it?" she asks. For a moment, Minor hesitates, then reaches out, tightly grasping the box. His eyes look lovingly at the treat, then at Mae. Minor's mother, Ana Beli, 27, says she must often limit how much her children eat to stretch their food to the end of the month. "When I pay the rent, there is little left," she says.

The Belis pay $350 a month for a room in a house they share with another family. Her husband works for minimum wage as a garment worker. Last night, she says, Minor, 2-year-old Jennifer and Angel, 7 months, ate one egg each.

Mary Lou Ellis, an 83-year-old with tufts of gray hair peeking out from under her cap, hobbles down the block to Mae's truck. Mae thrusts a bag of bread, radishes and tomatoes into trembling hands. "Oh lordy, lordy. Thank you! Thank you!" the woman says, beaming at Mae.

The former Lockheed Corp. riveter and housecleaner says that there often isn't enough food, so she skips meals. The rent eats up $400 of her $645 Social Security check. Utilities consume most of the rest. Someone swindled her out of her meager retirement savings, she says. Her house was emptied of furniture in a recent break-in. She leans heavily on her brown cane and stares hard at the ground. "I've never lived like this," she says, confessing to no one in particular. "I feel like taking a gun

and shooting my brains out."

The stooped woman hobbles away. But as word gets out, her neighbors emerge from their homes, creating a crowd. "Are you selling this?" one woman asks. Mae turns to her with a warm smile. "No," she says, "I'm giving it away."

"Oh! There's my girl," Mary Washington squeals at Mae, who has helped her ever since she fell and broke her neck a decade ago. A former cook and janitor, she points to a long surgical scar that runs the length of her neck. Her head tilts to the side. Ever since the accident, seizures have made it hard to keep a job.

"She'll dress you. She'll feed you," she says, stroking Mae's shoulder as her friend fills a bag with radishes and corn. Each month, she tries to survive on $212 in welfare--which lets her rent a room in a house--and $103 in food stamps. Collecting cans and bottles from trash bins brings in $15 more, which buys some food for the end of the month.

Mae is her buffer against hunger: "She bring us food. She sure do. She's the grace of God." Grasping a pumpkin with fingers horribly bloated by diabetes, she coos with delight as Mae eases a can of pork and beans into her bag. "Thank you a lots!" Mary says, her eyes twinkling.

The bags of bread begin to steam in the midday heat. Mae has fed 25 families, some Latino, most black.

She hands food bags to a grandmother in a tattered polyester skirt and a gang member covered in tattoos who hugs and kisses her, saying he can't find a job and must hustle the streets to feed his four children.

"Vendiendo or regalando? " one woman asks tentatively. "Selling or giving?" Mae, who doesn't speak Spanish, hands the woman a white enamel cup, raises four fingers, and points her to a large bag of red beans. The woman scoops out four cups. "All right! That's it!" Mae says, chiding herself because she has given out so much in one stop that others may go without. She crawls back into the cab of her truck, and rolls on.

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Mae began this journey when she was a little girl in Dallas. As a child during the Depression, she helped her grandmother carry home tin buckets of government-issued milk. By 11, she was working, washing dishes for $1.50 a week after school.

Her father was a chauffeur for a priest. "My daddy cared about

people," Mae says simply. "If we had plenty, we could only keep so much." At Thanksgiving, when the family received five baskets of food from the priest, her mother kept two. Three went to needy neighbors. Year-round, Mae's home was open to strangers--from visiting church members to black circus employees who were barred from local hotels. To accommodate the constant stream, Mae and her siblings often slept on the floor.

When Mae was 18, her father moved the family to Los Angeles--hoping that discrimination against blacks would be less pronounced.

She first glimpsed the face of hunger at a South-Central bread store where she worked much of her early life, bagging and selling loaves for 15 cents. One 8-year-old boy, whose father had died, stopped at the store every day, asking her for work, saying he had nothing to eat. "After him," Mae says, "I started to notice." She lobbied the company's owner to let her give to the hungry some of the day-old or over-baked loaves being sold for hog feed. Many parents broke the stale bread with their children right in the store.

As a teacher's aide in Los Angeles schools in the 1970s, she saw that hunger was ever-present. One preschooler tucked half his lunch into his pants pocket, stowing away something--cereal, or a piece of liver wrapped in napkins--to take home to his younger sister. Mae brought bags of fruit, a tray of cookies and four dozen cupcakes each Monday.

In 1980, at 56, she retired after an accident led to back surgery to remove a disk. She retired, that is, to begin hauling truckloads of food several times a month through the streets of Watts, Compton and her own neighborhood. She pays for some of the food herself, with money from Social Security and a meager retirement fund; most of it, however, is donated by World Opportunities International, which operates the charity dock at the produce market.

Mae--who raised three children of her own--often takes some of her four foster children on her food runs. Chris, 11, and Cee, 13--who are from Thailand--were removed from abusive parents. Donnie, 18, is autistic and is unable to speak or perform life's most basic functions without help. Donell, 26, has been with Mae for 10 years. His birth mother said she wanted nothing to do with him when Donell, who is mentally retarded, turned 18 and was released from foster care, Mae says.

Two years ago, at 69, Mae took in a 2-day-old crack baby for a year. She has had 10 foster children over the years, and also has taken in 10 other neighborhood children off and on, occasionally sleeping on the living room window seat to accommodate them.

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Sometimes, the tough grandmother feels fear on her food runs. Once, she had driven her truck Downtown to Skid Row, parked and begun laying out pans of homemade rice, chicken wings, cheese toast and cobbler. Chris and Cee were at her side, wrapping forks and spoons in napkins. A group of homeless men gathered around her menacingly. Mae quickly solicited one of the ragged men to help her. "You can come here anytime," he said, staring down the others. "I guarantee no one will take advantage of you and your children." She fed 200 that day.

Mae's neighborhood is rough, too. In recent years, two neighbors' sons--neither one in gangs--were killed in drive-bys, shot through the back and neck. One, an 18-year-old boy, was buried in a grave site Mae had purchased for herself. The Menlo Avenue School one block from her home has a "gunfire evacuation plan." Its schoolyard has been sprayed with bullets 10 times in the past year and a half, once just as kindergarten was letting out, says Principal Arthur W. Chandler. Police helicopters often hover overhead, tracking clashes among the 18th Street Gang, the Rolling 40 Crips and increasingly violent tagging groups such as the Dirty Old Men.

Poverty is another mounting concern. Part of Mae's route traverses an area of South-Central in which more than one in four residents didn't have the resources to feed themselves the entire month, according to a UCLA study.

Since the 1980s, as a growing tide of poverty has left more people hungry, the efforts of nonprofit groups and individuals have become increasingly critical in curbing hunger's toll. "The government cannot do it all. If it weren't for the private sector, the tragedy would be, I think, unbelievable," says Roy B. McKeown, president of World Opportunities. Requests from people like Mae, he says, have become more urgent in recent years as joblessness in the inner cities has skyrocketed.

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Mae's drive through this hungry landscape often includes a stop at her neighborhood Unocal gas station. "C'mon baby," she beckons to a man furiously washing windshields one recent day. Word spreads like wildfire down the street. Soon, the truck is surrounded by homeless women and men, many of whom have known Mae for years. She plucks oranges, apples and bread from boxes around the rim of the truck.

One bag goes to Tyrone Richardson, a 32-year-old unemployed

construction worker. Taking the food, he fishes a wadded-up dollar bill from his pants. He stuffs it into Mae's shirt pocket. "This will help you get gas to help others. Sometimes I don't have a dime. Today I do," he says. The gift amounts to half of his total assets. Mae vehemently refuses the money. But, cradling a watermelon in his arm, he walks away, saying only, "She got a good heart."

"This is what we do," Mae says simply, stuffing more plastic bags with food.

"What's the problem? Tell me?" Mae quietly asks Sheree Wilson, 31, who has been homeless for three months and was headed to Jack-in-the-Box to eat a free packet of jelly when she noticed Mae's truck.

"This is my baby," the woman says, pulling from her jacket a crumpled photograph of her 1-year-old boy, Joshua, beaming from his crib. She stops peeling her orange and begins to sob, explaining that she left the baby with her mother because she is addicted to crack and "going crazy."

She says her best friend, who was on the streets with her, was recently arrested for prostitution and drug dealing. Now that she's alone, the streets are wildly dangerous. She's not sure how to get out, or if she has the will to leave crack behind.

Mae pulls out a small coin purse, counts out four quarters. Then, standing by her truck, Mae lays her hand on the woman's chest and leads her in prayer. "You are gonna be all right. Nothing is too hard," she urges.

"I have faith," Sheree says, lovingly fingering the picture of her son. "I just went the other way."

Mae pulls out of the station, leaving behind a destitute crowd on the blacktop, all of them munching apples.

It's not long before Mae happens upon Rosa Ramirez, 20, with her two children, Marbella Heredia, 1, and Jose Heredia, 2. Her husband, she explains, gets sporadic work in the garment industry. Now, things are slow and he brings home as little as $50 a week. Marbella virtually inhales an orange she grasps in her tiny right hand. The juice cascades down her chin, trickling onto her white sweater. "I try to feed them something every day. Sometimes, it's just rice and beans," she says.

Mae prepares to leave, but Jose's brown eyes look pleadingly at her as he stuffs the orange into his mouth. "More?" he asks.

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Mae's last stop of the day is Tarlee McCrady's house on Raymond Avenue. Mae peers inside the two-story house from her truck and, seeing no sign of life, drives on. But a loud pleading wail comes from behind the front door: "I'm here! I'm here!"

Mae parks in the shade. "You want a pumpkin?" she asks. The woman, who has sweptback gray hair, runs out and nods.

A 65-year-old living on Social Security, she met Mae in church nearly two decades ago. When her body is up to it, she goes out on the truck with Mae, helping distribute food. Today, she says, she is fretting over how to pay her water bill. She, too, gets much of her sustenance from Mae.

If not for the help, she says, "I'd be down on Skid Row. What else would I do?"

"She doesn't do a lot of talking. But she does a whole lot of doing," says Brenda White, who works at Church of the Harvest, which Mae attends. She says she's seen Mae take a bed out of her house--even the food in her own refrigerator--and give it away. Brenda, who has two daughters, was divorced six years ago and had a breakdown, leaving her temporarily unable to work at her hair salon. She was too embarrassed to ask for help from relatives. Mae didn't need prodding. Every other week, she began to bring bags of food.

In addition to her Social Security, Mae receives a modest income from caring for her foster children. Everything that's left after paying bills--about $100 a month--is put in a coin purse and slowly given out to people in need. The only handout she's taken from the government is some cheese.

"People have millions of dollars, they die, and their children fuss over it. I give my surplus money for children," she says.

Mae, nearing exhaustion, steers her truck home.

*

Wheeling into her driveway, Mae still has a third of the food. "Hi, Mother Raines!" a little girl from next door cries, waving. Other neighbors drop by. "What kind of bread you need? Brown bread? White bread? Your grandma feel better today?" Mae asks Erick, 8. He nods. Mae knows that many neighbors skip some meals each day but are too

embarrassed to ask for food. "I know which ones won't come out," she says. "Some people would rather die than ask for help." For these, she packs boxes, which Donell begins delivering on people's stoops.

"I work in the shadows of an inner city overrun by gangs and riotous living. But when I can ease someone's pain, or can encourage them, I feel good," Mae says. "If I never do anything for the community I live in, why am I here? I don't want to hear the baby next door cry from lack of milk or see a child walk by without shoes.

"It's not hopeless. Everyone isn't extending themselves."

On Thanksgiving Day, Mae says, she will bake 17 traditional dishes. In the morning, her natural and foster children will gather, and read prayers. "Thanksgiving is for my family," Mae says, closing her front gate as the last of the food is dispensed and dusk approaches. That said, Mae concedes that last year, she gathered her leftovers at the end of the day, some paper plates and plastic silverware and summoned her children to help. She went to the corner of her street and served food to the thankful until every crumb was gone.

Seeking Solutions
There are thousands of individuals and groups working against hunger in Southern California. Here are three approaches that stand out.
Products of Sharing: Food and Good Works*
Los Angeles Times Wednesday November 23, 1994

The principle is simple: Get people to pool their resources and buy food in bulk, and you'll help those with limited resources purchase more food for their money. Require participants in the purchasing pool to do some volunteer work for the food, and you improve the community they live in too.

The Self-Help and Resource Exchange, or SHARE, which was launched in 1983 in San Diego and now has branches in the United States, Mexico and Guatemala, distributes close to a quarter of a million food packages each month to 30,000 families. SHARE, which has expanded to 600 pickup sites in 40 California counties, is working to increase participation in Southern California.

Participants pay $14 at the beginning of the month, put in two hours of volunteer work in their community, then pick up a bag filled with 30 pounds of nutritious foods, valued at $30 to $35, at the end of the month. Each bag includes six to 10 pounds of meat, four to seven kinds of fresh vegetables, two to four types of fresh fruits and staples such as

rice or pasta and a few specialty items.

People do such work as cleaning up graffiti or helping out at the Red Cross, Little League or schools to meet the volunteer requirement. They can even do good deeds for neighbors--baby-sitting, tutoring children, mowing lawns--as long as they get a receipt.

SHARE participation, which is open to anyone, places no limit on the number of bags of food a person can buy, as long as they do two hours of community service for each one.

"We buy in large quantities," said Patricia French, a SHARE regional manager in the group's Colton office in San Bernardino County, which opened two years ago. Southern California has 23,000 participants, 4,000 of whom are in Los Angeles County. Volunteers help distribute the food, picking up orders in Colton. In Los Angeles County , food is distributed at 25 sites, mostly churches and volunteer centers, such as the Calvary Community Church in Norwalk or the La Mirada Volunteer Center. The group, which will offer a vegetarian package next year, plans to open a warehouse in Los Angeles County.

Marion Standish, co-director of the nonprofit group California Food Policy Advocates, believes that SHARE has been highly effective at helping the working poor, a growing number of whom have been seeking food assistance in recent years. The truly destitute, she says, find it harder to surrender part of their cash at the beginning of the month with the promise of food several weeks later. "You need to be able to gather up some money at the beginning of the month," she says.

THE 'SHARE' PROGRAM

* COST: $14 a month, plus two hours of volunteer community work, for a package of food valued at $30 to $35.

* TO GET INFORMATION: SHARE headquarters in San Diego, (619) 525-2210. For Los Angeles, Kern, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and Ventura counties, call the SHARE regional warehouse at (909) 783-8896.

Seeking Solutions
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A Simple Idea Bears Fruit for the Poor

It was a simple idea, born of one man's disgust over wasted food: Take tons of still edible fruits and vegetables destined for choking landfills and give them to the poor instead.

Retired produce wholesaler Mickey Weiss got the idea after he passed by a homeless encampment on the way to the docks of his vegetable company at the Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market in 1987. When he saw 200 pallets of still edible strawberries waiting for the dump truck, he exploded. "Why are we throwing away berries when eight blocks away people are frying stale bread over open fires for their first meal of the day?" Weiss asked.

Weiss, who had been in retirement for six years, got managers of the produce market--the nation's busiest--to dedicate 2,000 square feet at the end of a dock for the project. He recruited high school students to call Los Angeles charities and ask, "Do you want produce for the poor?" The charity dock was born.

The fledgling operation handed out 60,000 pounds its first month; it now directs 26 million pounds a year--about 44,000 meals a day--to 400 charities. Weiss kicked in $40,000 annually for the first two years of operation. Since 1989, World Opportunities International, a Hollywood-based charity, has operated the dock, which receives no government funds.

In the first program of its kind nationwide, Weiss and two USC medical school professors, Susan Evans and Peter Clarke, have crisscrossed the country, using Los Angeles as a model to launch charity docks in 15 other cities. Their next targets: 30 more U.S. cities, as well as Australia, Canada and Mexico.

At dawn, nonprofit groups begin to arrive at the Los Angeles facility. A procession of rickety trucks and vans pulls up to the gray concrete dock, up to 50 a day. Each one hauls away up to 2,000 pounds of produce and donated bread. "There is nothing wrong with this," Weiss says, waving a wilted bunch of cilantro. "But it is nutritious food many people have never seen before."

"This helps," said Oscar Hernandez, backing a church van up to the dock. Hernandez, a volunteer with Sendero de la Cruz church, says that 500 people arrive at his charity for food each week, up from 100 five years ago. "Without this, people wouldn't eat," he says, heaving boxes of squash, bell peppers and cherry tomatoes into his truck.

CHARITY DOCK

* HOW IT WORKS: Charities pick up food weekly, usually about 2,000 pounds each.

* WHAT IT COSTS: Unlike many food banks, which charge nominal fees for food, charity dock food is free. Recipients must be nonprofit organizations. The charity dock is open five days a week.

* HOW MANY BENEFIT: 400 charities receive food. Thirty more are on a waiting list.

* TO GET INFORMATION: Call World Opportunities International, (213) 466-7187

Seeking Solutions
There are thousands of individuals and groups working against hunger in Southern California. Here are three approaches that stand out.
Vacant Lots Bloom Into Urban Gardens
Los Angeles Times Wednesday November 23, 1994

On vacant plots of land that once were sites for illegal dumping and drug sales, urban gardens are blossoming, providing food for the hungry.

More than 90 urban gardens now dot Los Angeles' landscape, providing more than sustenance: They create a sense of community, beautify neighborhoods and give parents in crowded homes a safe place to bring their children, said Brenda Funches, board president of the nonprofit L.A. Harvest. In Los Angeles' Mediterranean climate, a 64-square-foot plot can yield a family up to $600 worth of food a year.

The crowning jewel of urban gardens has emerged from 7 1/2 rubble-strewn acres surrounded by warehouses in South-Central Los Angeles, land the city owns but has not developed. The garden was begun last year by the Los Angeles Conservation Corps and the Common Ground Gardening Program with funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Water costs are paid by the Los Angeles Regional Foodbank and the city. The garden's 138 plots were claimed within days. Once blighted, the land is now a vibrant oasis. Walking amid its lush cornstalks, garden coordinator Norma Reyes says Latinos--many of whom tilled the soil in Central America--often plant corn and chilies. African Americans--many of whom learned to farm in the South--cultivate collard greens.

"This helps feed my family," says Alfredo Ledezma, a 40-year-old concrete worker and bricklayer with three children, as he gently weeds his plot of chilies, squash and tomatoes. Ledezma says he can usually get bricklayer work only three days a week, earning $125. He swaps vegetables with his garden neighbors. "I know a lot of people who go hungry in this

neighborhood," he says.

Several plots away, Marta Garcia, 33, who has four children, agrees. "I grow everything," she says, pointing to rows of cucumbers, tomatoes and radishes. Half her husband's $1,000 monthly pay goes for rent. "If it weren't for the garden, my children would do without," says the unemployed garment worker. "I couldn't buy these vegetables. They are too expensive," she says, adding that her children can consume eight cucumbers a day. "They love this food."

The biggest barriers to urban gardens are liability concerns, lack of access to land, toxic soils and water costs. There are at least 2,600 vacant lots in Los Angeles south of the Santa Monica Freeway that could be used as gardens until they are developed, Funches says. Under AmeriCorps, President Clinton's national service program, some of the 40 recruits assigned to combat hunger in Los Angeles this year will work to plant the seeds of three more urban gardens.

GARDEN WORKSHOPS

* TO GET INFORMATION: Common Ground Gardening Program operates gardens and has workshops on gardening, food preservation and setting up plots on Los Angeles County school grounds , (213) 744-4341.

* L.A. Harvest, (213) 742-0429

* L.A. Conservation Corps, (213) 749-3601

* PACE Neighborhood Garden Program, (213) 389-2373

Pledges of Food, Help Flood School
Hunger: About 250 volunteers take action after learning that a quarter of students at Edgewood Middle School in West Covina are coming to class undernourished.
By SONIA NAZARIO, TIMES URBAN AFFAIRS WRITER
Los Angeles Times Tuesday November 22, 1994

West Covina's Edgewood Middle School, profiled in a Times story Sunday as an example of a school that does not serve federally funded breakfasts to low-income students, was deluged by more than 250 phone calls Monday as people from as far away as Santa Barbara offered to donate their time and money to ensure that Edgewood students don't go to school hungry.

Meanwhile, the West Covina Unified School District's board, which has

not applied to the government for breakfast funds, said it will consider whether to do so at a Dec. 13 board meeting.

In its Sunday article, The Times detailed how teachers nationwide are grappling with an increasing number of students who come to class hungry, crippling their chances to learn. School officials estimate that one in four children come to Edgewood undernourished.

The Times story outlined how schools have failed to offer one available remedy: school breakfast, a federal entitlement program. Currently, 37% of the 13.6 million low-income children who get a subsidized lunch also eat a morning meal at school. Edgewood and the West Covina district's 10 other schools do not offer the morning meal to low-income students.

"There has to be action taken to make sure children are fed. We want to get a resolution to this," said West Covina Mayor Bradley McFadden, who said he has asked the city manager to look into whether the city can press the school district to start a breakfast program. "The goal is to make sure students have an environment they can learn in and aren't hungry," McFadden said.

Meanwhile, citizens took matters into their own hands at Edgewood on Monday. One parent offered to take hungry families to a supermarket and stock them with food staples. Four offered to adopt hungry families until they can get on their feet. Two families pledged 55 food baskets. Twenty turkeys arrived, with more on the way. Some simply donated cash. The local Kaiser Permanente hospital offered to permanently stock the school nurse station with snacks. And on Monday afternoon, another family dropped off 300 pounds of rice and promised to bring 30 turkeys to go with the rice Wednesday.

"I am enormously touched by the outpouring of concern," said Assistant Principal Amelia Esposito. "They ask me, "How much can I give? This is wrong. Children shouldn't be hungry in this country.' "

School board President Mike Spence said that, on philosophical grounds, he still opposes a government-paid school breakfast program for children. Some conservatives oppose the programs, calling them anti-family and a usurpation by schools of a parent's responsibility. Spence said he nonetheless believes that "there is probably a majority on the board" who would approve breakfast funds. He said board members had received an informational memo about breakfast programs two weeks ago.

If such a measure passed, Spence said, "we would be allowing parents to shirk their responsibilities. And we would send a message to kids that

is demeaning. We would say: 'Your parents can't take care of you, so we have to.' Some of these parents are on dope. They should be reported to social services (agencies) for neglect, as required by law."

Spence said an individual he declined to identify has offered to collect donations and have volunteers serve breakfast to students at Edgewood rather than rely on the government to address a social problem.