

“The Paradox of Plenty Amid Hunger”

16.8 pounds of food. That’s how much less food a 10-year-old child gets per week on the lowest rung of government food assistance, compared to a child in a better-funded program. In this episode, Left Over returns to the roots of our social welfare programs to understand how long-standing racism and classism play a role in limiting what the National School Lunch Program does for school children today.

Jessica Terrell:

One of the biggest barriers to improving the National School Lunch Program is that it is seen as charity rather than a public service. Let’s look at what happened in 2021 in the Waukesha School District in Wisconsin.

Karin Rajnicek ([in board meeting](#)):

Can we just get back to, if I have children I should be able to provide for them...

Terrell:

That’s school board member Karin Rajnicek speaking before a vote on the issue. Rajnicek was arguing for ending a Covid-era federal relief program that made school meals free for all children during the pandemic.

Rajnicek:

...I feel like this is a big problem and it’s really easy to get sucked into and to become spoiled and then to just think it’s not my problem anymore. It’s everyone else’s problem to feed my children.

Terrell:

The argument that free food would –quote– “spoil families” sparked enormous public pushback nationally—so much so that the board [eventually reversed](#) its decision. But it’s a viewpoint that has been entrenched in this country for centuries. Here’s [Andrew Ruis](#), a research scientist at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, reading [a comment about school lunch](#) made by the head of a Jewish charity organization in the early 1900s.

Andrew Ruis:

If any of the Jewish children go to school hungry, it is unnecessary and the parents should be dealt with and compelled to do their duty instead of being made even more dependent than they already are.

Terrell:

National support—or the lack of support—for improving the quality of meals and expanding access to the free lunch program is shaped in part by arguments the U.S. has been having for centuries about the role of the government in caring for its citizens and the root causes of poverty.

Angela McKee-Brown:

It's just kind of wild to me that we still hold these notions.

Terrell:

That's [Angela McKee-Brown](#), a former executive director of the Edible Schoolyard Project, who has worked on issues surrounding school lunch for more than a decade.

McKee-Brown:

They show up in our policies. They show up in how we talk about poverty. They show up and how we treat each other.

Terrell:

You're listening to *Left Over: How Corporations and Politicians Are Milking The American School Lunch*. I'm Jessica Terrell. This is episode two of a six-part series about one of the nation's biggest anti-hunger programs. In this episode, we're examining how long-standing, problematic views on poverty and unchecked racial inequality continue to influence how we feed students today.

Anita Garrett:

OK, so we're at the kitchen. It's a mess. I couldn't get these kids to do nothing. But I did prepare a meal for you so that you can see.

Terrell:

[Anita Garrett](#) is a 63-year-old woman from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She invited me to her home last fall to talk about what she says is the terrible state of school lunch in her city. She also wanted to show me the food she lovingly prepares at home for the five grandchildren she's been raising since the death of her son in 2011.

Garrett:

This is greens with smoked turkey. Some macaroni and cheese. You got baked chicken with basil and then you have cornbread dressing.

Terrell:

Anita, who wears her hair straightened in a short bob, and has a round friendly face framed by horn-rimmed glasses, is disabled and lives on a very limited income. She provides for her grandchildren through a combination of thriftiness, creativity and determination.

Garrett:

Everything that you see here comes from the food pantry. One food pantry might give you chicken. One might give you ground beef, one might give you pork chops. If the pantry gave me rice—I mean ground beef, I'll take the dirty rice and I'll add it into that. The kids love that.

Terrell:

Fresh fruits and vegetables are a little harder to come by. When she does get them from a pantry, she does everything she can to make sure they last.

Garrett:

I cut up and freeze my vegetables. Got green peppers in here.

Terrell:

Anita visits a circuit of food pantries several days a week, in part because her grandkids won't eat the free lunch at school. Anita says she doesn't blame them. The food that she picked up from the district when schools were closed during the pandemic was often undercooked or bland. She would re-cook the chicken and add the sauce, but it took a lot of effort to re-invent school meals at home.

Mekhi Harris:

It be cold, and it don't got no flavor to it.

Terrell:

That's Anita's 13-year-old grandson, Mekhi Harris, who's in the eighth grade.

Harris:

I always pack lunches from my grandma's house and take it to school.

Terrell:

Sometimes he forgets to bring lunch, but even then he doesn't eat in the cafeteria.

Harris:

I just be hungry at school. And when I come home and she got dinner, man, I just eat a lot of dinner.

Terrell:

The idea that her grandkids might be hungry at school upsets Anita.

Garrett:

Like I asked my grandkids, I said, when you don't eat, what happens then? He said, I can't focus. He said, I'm agitated. And it took me back to when I was a child. The purpose of going to school, like I told you before, it wasn't really even going about learning. It was about going to school so that I can eat. I looked forward to it because there was no food at home. The only meal that day that I was gonna be able to eat was when I went to school.

Terrell:

Even with good scratch-cooked school meals, it was hard to focus on learning. She lied about her age to get a job at a fast food restaurant when she was 12 to help her family make ends meet. She says the food insecurity she experienced as a child impacted her entire life.

Garrett:

If I would've got the education that I needed and that I'd deserved, I could have really been something in life. I think my life would've went a different way.

Terrell:

Making sure her grandkids have enough food at home and plenty to bring with them to school isn't easy for Anita.

Garrett:

I'll have to get up, uh, some of the food pantries start at seven in the morning. Sometimes I have to get up at 5:30 in the morning to be in line. It's embarrassing right today. But an old saying my grandma always told me, she said, "a closed mouth won't get fed." So with that being said, I have to do what I have to do.

Terrell:

As much as she's swallowed her pride over the years, there is one memory that really stings. A few years ago, she went to a food bank and was one of the last people in line.

Garrett:

So when I get in there, she gives me a box of baby food. It was actually baby food. And I told her, I said, well, I have teenagers. I don't have any babies. She said, "You should be grateful." It's bad enough that a person is breaking down, telling you that they need food. Do you know how embarrassing that is?

Terrell:

When she thinks about the school lunches offered to her grandchildren, the prepackaged and flavorless meals reheated in a microwave or served cold that kids don't want to eat, she thinks back to the woman at that food pantry.

Garrett:

The school lunches to me tells you that it's not about the kids. It's not about you as a person, it's about saving a dollar.

Terrell:

Switching to a central kitchen model in the late-2000s instead of cooking meals from scratch at individual schools [was projected to save](#) the Milwaukee school district millions a year. It has resulted in [numerous complaints](#) over quality. In 2021, [a group of student activists](#) in Milwaukee surveyed more than 1,000 high school students and found that the quality of school meals was ranked as the most pressing school environment issue among their peers.

Garrett:

But then again, like I said before, how's it saving money? And if it's going in the garbage, you're not saving anything. Give kids something that they're going to eat. Then you're saving, because you're saving them.

McKee-Brown:

So my work is always focused around the central question of why kids were choosing hunger over school meals.

Terrell:

That's Angela McKee-Brown again. Before she led a nonprofit focused on school gardens and nutrition education, she spent several years working with San Francisco Unified trying to remake the school cafeteria experience. She has a youthful and energetic appearance, but talks slowly and deliberately, careful to try and explain not only her opinions but the process she used to arrive at them.

McKee-Brown:

And the answer that I came to was simple but complex. And that is they were responding to a system that was never designed for them.

Terrell:

The National School Lunch Program was originally designed, in large part, [to be an agricultural subsidy program—a way for the federal government](#) to offload the crops that it was buying from farmers in order to stabilize food prices. It's gone through a lot of transformations in the last 70 years, but most school meal programs still don't center the needs and desires of children.

McKee-Brown:

It's meant to be a hunger relief program.

Terrell:

Which means the quality of the program is also inextricably entangled in national debates about how much help people experiencing poverty deserve. [Nearly 13% of Americans](#) lived under the poverty line in 2021, which means they had a household income of [less than \\$26,500 a year](#) for a family of four. While there are many systemic reasons for intergenerational poverty, [the Census Bureau found](#) that medical expenses were “the largest contributor to increasing the number of individuals in poverty,” in 2018.

McKee-Brown:

So when we think about our policies here in the United States, especially as they pertain to hunger, I'm completely baffled as to why we provide those who have the least with the least amount of resources, and expect the most from them.

Terrell:

Angela says one of the most appalling examples of this is the four meal plans that the federal government [uses to calculate food assistance benefits](#): the Thrifty, Low-Cost, Moderate-Cost, and Liberal plans. The Thrifty plan is an estimate of the bare minimum someone can spend on food and still have sufficient nutrition. The Thrifty plan is used for things like SNAP, the program formerly known as food stamps. On the other end of the spectrum is the Liberal plan, which sets [allowance rates for military members](#).

McKee-Brown:

But one of the, the wild things about this is that if you look at each plan, essentially the USDA has broken them down by age group. And so you can actually see the amount of food and what they're recommending for each age group within each plan.

Terrell:

Angela says the food allotment for a 10-year-old on the Thrifty plan versus a 10-year-old on a Liberal plan comes to [a difference of 16.8 pounds of food a week](#).

McKee-Brown:

And I just thought that was absolutely horrendous, to be honest. But then I looked over at the school lunch program and realized you could see similar trends there as well in terms of the allocation the federal government gives us to cover the cost of a school meal.

Terrell:

Policy language in school lunch today prioritizes thriftiness over student needs or addressing income inequality.

McKee-Brown:

Here in California, we're mandated to provide a nutritionally adequate meal to our children. And that comes from the federal government and the language that the federal government uses to describe the food that we are providing to our children. Adequate. Now imagine if someone came to your house for dinner, and at the end of the meal, they thanked you and said, "That was an adequate dinner." To think that adequate is what we should provide to those who are most in need, to me, is an injustice.

Terrell:

There are a lot of school lunch programs that serve delicious and even scratch-cooked meals despite the funding limitations. But many middle class families don't participate in school meals. They want something more than adequate for their kids.

Around the same time that the Waukesha District in Wisconsin was trying to opt out of the free federal lunch program so that families wouldn't get "spoiled," [parents in Warren Township](#), an affluent district in

New Jersey, were growing increasingly angry about the fact that their district had opted into the program.

Before the pandemic, the school district partnered with local restaurants to provide a rotating menu of tasty meals that didn't have to conform to the strict portion and nutrition guidelines of the federal program. When the district ended that partnership to enter the National School Lunch Program, parents were furious that their kids were being served free but lower quality food. Here's a parent speaking to the board, in [a video of the meeting](#) posted online by the district:

Warren Township Board of Education Meeting clip:

My son used to look forward to food days and now it's just a blah food. I saw this food, it does not look appetizing. I attempted to try it, but I honestly, I, I just, I couldn't. I was afraid I'm going to...I, I could not try the food.

Terrell:

That so few middle and upper class families eat school lunch further undercuts the program by removing any real incentives for a broader coalition of families to advocate for the system to improve. Here's [Priya Fielding-Singh](#), a sociologist and author of the book "How The Other Half Eats: The Untold Story of Food And Inequality In America."

Fielding-Singh:

As long as school meals continue to be a program that's just for lower income kids, it will still somehow always be okay for those meals not to be as high quality, which is horrible. But if we were to make it that all kids eat these meals, that actually might spur some governmental action to improve the overall quality of the meals.

Terrell:

Priya talked to dozens of families and nearly 100 teenagers for her book. Most of the lower-income mothers that Priya talked to for the book enrolled their children in the free or reduced-price meal program, but it wasn't providing them the relief that it was supposed to, because their children didn't want to eat it. School meals came up pretty infrequently with the middle and upper class mothers that she talked to, because their families didn't rely on them or wouldn't even consider them as an option.

Fielding-Singh:

And the more buy-in we would get from families, the better it would be for children's diets. But I think that universalizing and changing how we think about the school meal program is an important first step. Because as long as the quality of the meals remains low, and higher income families don't want their kids to eat those meals, then the promise of school meals remains really limited.

Terrell:

The perception of school meals as a program for poor children also adds to the stigma of school lunch for many children. The embarrassment that Anita Garrett experiences standing in line at a food pantry is the same one many children feel in the lunch line.

Jayla George:

So, at some schools, when you don't have money on your lunch account, you have to go to a different line to go receive a cheese sandwich, or something that the other students who have money on their lunch account don't have to eat.

Terrell:

[Jayla George](#) is a 16-year-old high school student in New Jersey, and current president of [Rays of Hope](#), a youth-led community service and leadership development nonprofit. Teens and parents in the organization are working in New Jersey to ban what's known as lunch shaming: refusing children meals if they don't have money on their lunch accounts, offering them lower-quality alternatives, or taking other measures that single students out in front of their peers.

George:

Having to move to that, that second line is, is very discouraging because you have all of those other kids who do have that money on their account. You don't know what they're thinking of you. You don't know if they're thinking, oh, she's broke, or, oh, her parents don't wanna pay her bill. Or her parents don't care about her because she doesn't have money on her lunch account.

Terrell:

While the federal lunch program is supposed to provide free or highly reduced-priced meals to students from low-income families, there are a lot of families who earn too much to qualify but still don't have enough to make ends meet. A family of four with a household income of \$37,000 a year [would not qualify for free meals](#). According to [research from the Education Data Initiative](#), prior to the pandemic the national school debt burden was around \$262 million a year, which comes to about \$170 per family. In some districts, children whose families have meal debt [aren't offered any food](#). In others, [a cheese or peanut butter sandwich](#) is often offered as a substitute until their families can pay the debt. Every youth leader in Rays of Hope has a story about personally experiencing or witnessing lunch shaming.

George:

I've had to go to the other line multiple times just because, you know, my mom's forgotten to pay the bill. It's not one of her main priorities, because I can bring something from home.

Terrell:

At Tyler Douglas's middle school, there was only one line, but students didn't have their card scanned for funds until after they had selected a meal.

Tyler Douglas:

When you went up to the cash register, there was a chance that that lunch could be taken away from you if you didn't afford that.

Terrell:

Tyler is a junior in high school now.

Douglas:

It's really sad to see that that happened to so many kids at our school. It also led to a lot of bullying from students. Like people would know that, oh, you can't buy lunch, you don't have enough money.

Terrell:

Zach Diaz says he went to a middle school with an even more embarrassing approach.

Zach Diaz:

They wouldn't just take your lunch from you, they would make you put it back yourself. And to me, in my opinion, that is even more degrading than them taking it from you. You have to take your lunch and go to the back of the line and put it back right where you got it. So that to me is way more degrading than them just taking it from you.

Terrell:

Some districts [ban students from attending prom or extracurricular activities](#) if their parents owe lunch debt. Then there's the approach a school district in Pennsylvania took in 2019.

[CNN News clip:](#)

"I really couldn't believe it." That's how state representative Tarah Toohil reacted when she heard about the letter sent to about 1,000 parents in the Wyoming Valley West School district. District officials say it was an attempt to collect some \$20,000 of unpaid lunch bills. That letter read that children could be removed from their homes and placed into foster care if their parents did not pay up.

Terrell:

The district's action was the subject of news stories on [National Public Radio](#), CNN and the [BBC](#), and generated a significant amount of public outrage. This was not an isolated incident. Organizers with Rays of Hope found multiple districts in New Jersey that modified their board policies to allow for similar actions. Here's Nancy Diaz, a parent organizer with Rays of Hope, and Zach's mom.

Nancy Diaz:

When we were in the Centerville School District, his middle school, we were one of the schools that actually incorporated in 2019 or 2018, they actually incorporated into their policy the threat of referral to, uh, protection services. They actually rewrote the policy to include that language.

Terrell:

Rays of Hope requested school meal policies across the state and found multiple districts that had added the same language.

Diaz:

We were pretty shocked. I don't necessarily believe that they're gonna refer parents to child services because what is child services is not in the business of separating families because a parent can't afford to pay bills. But the meanness of it is the purpose. You know, the threat is the purpose. It's to shame parents as they shame kids when their parents can't afford to pay the bills. It's a threat.

Terrell:

It's also a threat that is disproportionately wielded against families of color, who make up more than [two-thirds of participants](#) in the National School Lunch Program. School district nutrition leaders say that collecting money from families is one of the worst parts of their jobs, but most programs [can't afford to write off the debt](#). To understand why school meal programs are operated the way they are, to get to the heart of the ongoing financial struggles and tension over who this program is for and what it is meant to do, we need to look back at the origins of school lunch in the U.S.

Today's massive [\\$14 billion a year](#) National School Lunch Program in many ways owes its existence to the work of [women's groups in the 1890s](#), a time historians refer to as the Progressive Era. This was towards the latter part of the Industrial Revolution, when major shifts were happening in society, including the significant [expansion of public education](#). People were starting to pay a lot more attention to the problem of child labor. This era also marked [the start](#) of national attention to food safety. The Progressive Era was also marked by a lot of tension over the role of government in providing for citizens.

Ruis:

On one hand there's a real desire to create social supports for immigrants, and the poor, and children, and other people who traditionally received no support from government agencies or even much from private charity. On the other hand, a desire to avoid creating dependencies, or what they would call "pauperization," this idea that people who received some kind of social welfare support would grow to become dependent on them and would therefore have the opposite effect it was designed to have.

Terrell:

That's Andrew Ruis again. The moral conflict he describes informed the kinds of social programs that were developed in the 1890s and early 1900s, and planted the seeds for a lot of tensions within the school lunch program that reverberate today.

The first school lunch programs in the U.S. started out mostly as [private charity programs](#) operated by women's groups and activists who had some pretty progressive ideas. School gardens, meaningful nutrition education, universal free meals, higher quality jobs for women -- a lot of the ambitions held by school lunch activists today are all ideas from 125 years ago.

Ruis:

Early reformers really saw these programs as public health and social welfare programs in a much broader sense where the program would not only feed children, but also educate them about foods and cookery and nutrition. They saw them as programs that helped schools engage with local communities and families and create sort of tighter bonds with their communities.

Terrell:

None of these goals made it into the federal program, but I'll get to that in a minute.

The women's groups that were starting these early programs [had to convince](#) local school boards to let them boot out for-profit food vendors from school campuses and put a new system in place. To get district support, they often pledged to operate the program without costing schools any money, thereby setting the foundations for the underfunded system we have today.

For decades, most school lunch programs were a local affair. Then came the Great Depression. The agricultural industry in the U.S. in the early 20th century [had a pretty serious problem](#): surplus crops that led to prices collapsing.

Ruis:

And what happens during the Great Depression was that prices fell so much that it actually cost more to harvest, distribute, and market food than the food was worth, leading to what was often called "the paradox of plenty amid hunger."

Terrell:

Andrew says this is how the federal government really got involved in school meals -- by starting a commodity food surplus program to purchase and remove crops from the market, thus stabilizing food prices and supporting farmers. Destroying the food it purchased [caused a political nightmare](#), so the Roosevelt Administration started donating surplus food to school districts, enabling a major expansion of school meal programs.

The push for a National School Lunch Program intensified a decade later, when the U.S. entered WWII, and hunger became a national security issue.

[Archive newsreel:](#)

Food builds the muscle and health of your family. Food builds the strength of a nation.

Terrell:

The head of the draft board at the time estimated that [at least one-third of recruits](#) who were rejected by the Army were suffering from nutrition-related illnesses. The National School Lunch Act [became law](#) in 1946, but only after a lengthy battle over what the program should be, who it should benefit, and whether school lunches were the business of the Department of Education or the Department of Agriculture.

Ruis:

I mean on one hand, it's rather remarkable that we got a national school lunch program at all. Y'know, again, given the opposition to socialism certainly, which meant opposition to a lot of social welfare programs, and given the kind of scale of an entitlement program that would enable virtually any school to offer meals to children and to be reimbursed for meals.

Terrell:

On the other hand, the radical reformers who helped create local school lunch programs in the first place lost nearly everything they had fought to put in the national program.

Ruis:

They wanted there to be strong language, anti-discrimination language, to ensure that access would be high. They wanted the programs to be operated not out of the Department of Agriculture, but out of the Department of Education to ensure that there wouldn't be a conflict of interest between the needs of producers and the needs of consumers. In all of those cases, they ultimately failed in order to get the legislation passed at all. But what that meant was that school meal programs as they emerge in the 1940s and 1950s are no longer the kind of expansive social welfare and public health programs that were envisioned, and in some cases enacted, in the early 20th century. They were basically feeding programs that acted as [a kind of agricultural price support](#).

Terrell:

These compromises continue to play out in the school lunch program today. The USDA still oversees the program. Federal commodity foods still play [a significant role](#) in feeding students, although the program is now [a much smaller part](#) of how the federal government subsidizes agriculture.

Ruis:

So I think one of the threads that really runs through the entire history of school meal programs in the United States is that there has always been a tension between people who support school meal programs as kind of a fundamental human right—that all children have the right to be well-fed—and people that oppose sort of excessive support for school meal programs on the grounds that governments should have relatively low investment in social welfare and public health, both in the monetary sense, but also in the sense of just the level of responsibility assumed.

Terrell:

The school lunch program -- and concessions made to get the legislation passed -- also reveal a lot about the racial inequality that permeates so much of our society.

McKee-Brown:

So when we think about the school lunch program in the United States, the first thing I like to call out to people is the name of it.

Terrell:

That's Angela McKee-Brown again.

McKee-Brown:

Our school lunch program is called the [Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act](#). That's the policy piece that brought the school lunch program into fruition. And Richard B. Russell, many people don't know that he was a [staunch segregationist](#). And he's actually [credited with inhibiting the Civil Rights Movement](#) here in the United States. And yet he's the man that we have named our school lunch program after.

He was actually [the original architect of the program](#), and he's noted with ignoring civil rights groups, child welfare groups, women's groups in terms of labor, and instead created a policy and a program that favored middle class white residents and essentially ignored and neglected those who were experiencing poverty, and Black folks, and people of color here in the United States.

Terrell:

To keep school lunches from playing a role in advancing civil rights, Russell ensured that [states had oversight of how funds were allocated](#). For the first decades of the national program, individual states and districts got to determine who qualified for free meals -- if they offered meals at all.

McKee-Brown:

The Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act came about in 1946, and it wasn't until the late 1960s, early 1970s, that there was major reform to that policy where it transitioned from a states-based program.

Terrell:

The result was a program that was incredibly discriminatory, with lots of investment in building kitchens and meal programs for new suburban schools attended by middle class white families and much less spent on urban and low-income districts.

By the late 1960s, the majority of schools without a lunch program were [ones attended predominantly by Black and Latino students](#).

[Pacifica Radio Archives Documentary Clip:](#)

The United States government has acknowledged reluctantly the fact that not only do millions go to bed hungry every night in this country, but also that countless children are denied even the most basic nutrition needed to help them through a day of school.

Terrell:

That clip is part of a radio program produced in 1970 called ["Revolution for Breakfast"](#) about efforts by The Black Panthers and other social justice groups who took it upon themselves to do what the government would not.

Documentary Clip Host:

In New York City, a group of Puerto Rican activists called [the Young Lords Organization](#) asked a large church in the Spanish speaking community to open a free breakfast for school children. The church refused. The Young Lords seized the church, occupied it, and served at least 2,000 free meals. I spoke with some of the children who benefited from the revolutionaries' feeding program. Did you get enough to eat at home?

Child:

No. Sometimes I can't. Sometimes I could.

Host:

But you always get enough when you come here.

Child:

Yes.

Host:

Louie Nunez, a veteran and former Vietnam battlefield medic, ran the Young Lords Kitchen in the occupied church.

Louie Nunez:

It's their own people who is feeding them. So, you know. I'm not gonna give slop to my people. You know, I'm gonna make sure they get the best and fed the best way they can. Like, you know, they're gonna eat like a rich man when they come here. And as far as I'm concerned, you know, and as far, as long as I'm in that kitchen, they're gonna eat like the best kids eat, man. Like, let's say the white kids eat, man, they're gonna get the same kind of meal as long as I'm in the kitchen. Give them a chance to feel what it's like to eat, you know, bacon and eggs. And juice and cocoa and bread and jelly, and all sorts of things that they don't get sometimes at home.

Terrell:

While the Young Lords were occupying churches and the Black Panthers were operating [their wildly popular free breakfast program](#) in underserved neighborhoods, community activists—many of them Black mothers—were successfully drawing attention to the inequities in school meals. Some of this was done through the work of the [National Welfare Rights Organization](#), a coalition of mainly women-led groups working to improve the social safety net for mothers. Women also spearheaded [efforts with the NAACP](#) to survey existing school lunch programs and document the lack of access to meal programs in urban schools.

After considerable public pressure, Congress made [a round of changes](#) to the law to guarantee meals for students from families below a certain income. And urban districts like Milwaukee began a decades-long process of trying to reverse the damage from lack of investment in school facilities. That damage is still not fully repaired. Here's Angela again.

McKee-Brown:

When you think about those major reforms that didn't take place until the sixties or seventies, that meant there were decades where there wasn't investment in these communities of color, in low income communities, as it pertained to school meals and school meal access. And so, what you then see are some of those lingering effects, then, within the design of school sites.

Terrell:

Like the lack of kitchen space for scratch cooking in so many urban school communities. The right perspective can really help in this case.

Felicia Kornbluh:

Well, one of the things that's hardest for me as a historian, right, is that I'm always looking for change over time.

Terrell:

That's [Felicia Kornbluh](#), a historian who has written [several books](#) on poverty and gender justice issues in the U.S. She's in her mid-50s, with short gray hair and slender rectangular eyeglasses. She uses her hands to gesture frequently while she speaks.

Kornbluh:

That's what historians do, right? That's our, that's our business: studying change over time. But if you look at public policy around poverty, you don't see that much change over time. In fact, you see an enormous amount of continuity and not the good kind of continuity.

Terrell:

Continuity that dates back to before the U.S. was even a nation, and continues through today.

Kornbluh:

It's not only stingy about poverty and kind of dominated by this idea that somehow people should figure it out on their own and take care of themselves. But it also is always shaped by other social hierarchies around race and gender and family structure and about people's nationality or belonging in the community and their disability.

Terrell:

The Welfare Rights Movement of the 1960s and '70s, which was [a part of the expansion of the school lunch program](#), is a rare moment where that pattern was broken, Felicia says. And broken thanks to the advocacy of the people most impacted by those programs.

Kornbluh:

I've written a lot about the program that we call welfare. Today, the program is called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. TANF. It's a terrible program. It's tiny. And part of the reason that that

program is so, so marginal and has become such a mess is because people perceive it as a program for Black women and for Latinx communities.

Terrell:

If school meals were viewed as a standard part of the school day, if the expectation was that lunch was an excellent service for all kids rather than a mediocre offering for children with no other options, perhaps there might have been more public pressure on politicians to make the Covid-era universal meals program a permanent part of public education.

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Juleyka Lantigua is the editor and executive producer. Our sound designer is Erica Huang. Our fact checker is Kate Gallagher. This episode was reported and written by me, Jessica Terrell. Anne Lim is our associate producer. Paulina Velasco is our managing producer. Kori Doran designed our cover art. Emma Forbes is our digital designer. Our theme music was composed and performed by Blue Dot Sessions. Thank you for listening.

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