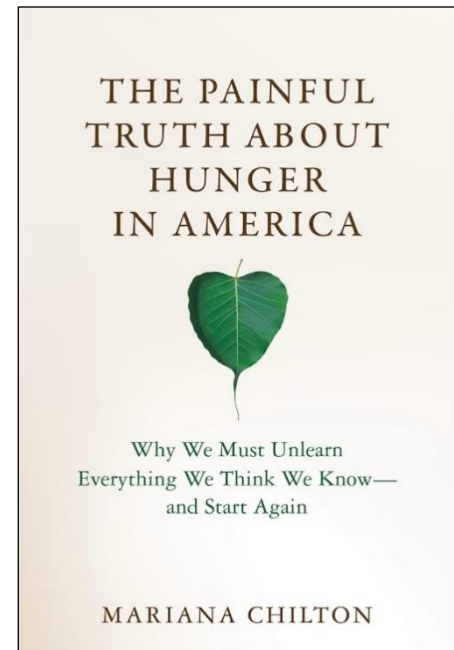


## Changing hearts and minds about food insecurity in the U.S. takes courage and love

*Book review by*  
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Review of *The Painful Truth about Hunger in America: Why We Must Unlearn Everything We Think We Know—and Start Again*, by Mariana Chilton. (2024). Published by MIT Press. Available as hardcover, audiobook, and eBook; 392 pages. Publisher’s website: <https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262048309/the-painful-truth-about-hunger-in-america/>



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The public health challenges associated with food insecurity in the United States are thoroughly researched and catalogued at regular

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intervals by public institutions, academics, and community-based organizations. The data provided is often used to design targeted interventions and advocate for policies to increase access to healthy foods, which are always worthy endeavors. Mariana Chilton’s mission in *The Painful Truth about Hunger in America* manages to take on this same project, while simultaneously working to transform the reader’s understanding of hunger in profound and personal ways in order to address the structural factors that produce hunger in America.

Chilton is a public health ethnographer, and leads a center focused on community-engaged research that aims to develop solutions to the deeply entwined conditions of hunger and economic insecurity. For this book she draws on the

decades of her research and policy work to paint an unflinching picture of the overwhelming pain and violence embedded in food insecurity in the U.S. Through the course of working with participants in these projects for many years, Chilton has established deep, trusting, and caring relationships that have allowed her entry into spaces many academics embodied as she is—a white, upper-class, educated woman—are not privy to. Chilton centers the voices of these individuals in ways that are both lovingly and starkly conveyed to the reader.

The intensity of this work is so great that Chilton provides an introductory “note on reading this book” that provides both some brief context and more importantly a “caution” to the reader. Readers are warned to take care of themselves as this work moves them to begin the process of cultivating compassion and a depth of understanding of the violence and trauma that are found in every aspect of this system. This system maintains a pervasive and brutal regime of injustice, poverty, and hunger, which disproportionately impacts women of color and their children. Indeed, throughout the book, this reviewer was frequently moved to tears at the sensitive but painful accounts of participants that share the author’s heartbreak at bearing witness to hunger and the physical, social, and structural violence that accompanies it.

Research, policy, and participants’ lived experience are deftly woven together throughout this book, which is organized into three themed sections: *The Trauma of Hunger*, *Reconsider Everything*, and *Nourishing Our World*. For readers with the great privilege of having never experienced true food insecurity, the first section takes you on the painful and frightening journey of participants navigating a system shaped by white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy that continues to weaponize food as a tool of oppression. In these opening chapters, Chilton provides a detailed background to help the reader understand the ways racism, rape culture, and genocide continue to shape food insecurity today. As she takes the reader along this journey, she provides the tools of abolitionist food justice, and Buddhism’s lessons of loving-kindness, to support this fraught work; she explicitly frames the efforts of solving hunger as *spiritual* work. At the conclusion of the first section, where we learn

of the lived experiences of participants such as Juleen’s—whose deeply personal art is shared both in the text and serves at the back cover art—we begin to get a glimpse of all that is needed to continue this effort.

Focusing on policy in section two, Chilton looks through the lens of trauma theory. Through this framing, she sharply recasts what many readers already realize is a woefully inadequate food safety system, to one that can be seen as perpetuating violence and trauma among the recipients it supposedly aims to assist. And it does so by design. Applying for, receiving, maintaining, and utilizing social benefits and food safety-net programs, such as SNAP or the National School Lunch Program, are clearly overly complicated and administratively burdensome for the under-resourced clients to whom they are targeted. Yet, although these programs aim to provide vital public health services, Chilton demonstrates the *parallel processes* embedded in these programs that reproduce injustices for participants who must depend on these programs while serving capitalist interests. She goes on to identify examples of corporations that are perhaps the true beneficiaries of these policies, wherein she deftly recasts the true “welfare queen” as Walmart, and similar large corporations, that not only double-dip but “quadruple dip” (p. 181) into these welfare benefits.

The book does not provide a conclusion so much as thoughtful and heartfelt reflections along with a variety of tools to dismantle the broken system that characterizes food insecurity and the tendrils of policies and programs that are wrapped around what Chilton refers to as the “trauma and death-dealing superstructure” (p. 211). This final section of the book is composed of four chapters, each in turn addressing the personal, the political (in two chapters), and the spiritual. Threaded through these chapters are an ethic of care, Buddhist loving-kindness, and a plea to remain present in the face of the pain of hunger, along with these participants’ experiences. This also includes the author’s own examination of her personal and intergenerational pain. This is not to soften or even contextualize the deep violence and horror that the processes of this death-dealing superstructure have dealt to her participants, but to signify that we all

have pain we wish to look away from but must confront in order to be able to truly see others' pain. Chilton shows us that self-awareness, particularly of trauma, allows us greater understanding and

compassion for others. These are some of the tools necessary needed to solve the ongoing challenges of hunger and make real and meaningful change in the superstructure. 