

FOOD CHOICES

FAMILIES OR CORPORATIONS?



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Food Choices: Families or Corporations?



Record-high unemployment rates and a prolonged recession have had a horrible impact on many American families. Sixteen per cent of the population, or 48.8 million people, confronted hunger or food insecurity in 2010 and had to choose between food and other basic necessities, including rent, utilities and medicines.¹ Many turned to nutrition programs and food banks for help. Meanwhile, many large agricultural corporations – those that constitute “Big Ag” – are enjoying healthy profits, as well as substantial subsidies from the federal government.

Despite the great need for food and nutrition programs, Congress is poised to cut funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC); the National School Lunch Program; and other programs meant to reduce food insecurity.

In 2011, a Congressional Super Committee was formed to make choices about how to reduce the federal deficit by \$1.2 trillion in the next 10 years. The Super Committee has the authority to make cuts to the Farm Bill, the source of funding for U.S. Department of Agriculture food and nutrition programs.² The Farm Bill also funds lucrative subsidies and commodity contracts to wealthy corporations, as well as programs that contribute to the consolidation of Big Agriculture to the detriment of family farmers.

This report highlights the choice before Congress, which will opt either for fewer people going hungry in the world’s wealthiest nation or for cutting food programs that benefit tens of millions of Americans and continuing Farm Bill subsidies for wealthy corporations.

Need for Food and Nutrition Programs Is at an All-Time High

Programs like SNAP are designed to be countercyclical. When the economy experiences a downturn and families face job loss and lower income, SNAP and similar programs see an increase in enrollment to meet growing need.

The current economic crisis has been characterized by persistent joblessness.³ Long-term unemployment is at record-level highs: 45.1 percent of all unemployed workers have been out of work for more than half a year; the previous post-World War II high was 26 percent in 1983. Since December 2007, the number of long-term unemployed workers has increased by 367 percent.⁴

Participation in SNAP has grown alongside these appalling joblessness rates. Of 435 Congressional Districts in the US, a staggering 368, or 84 percent, have at least one in six households with children struggling with food hardship.⁵ Many of these families have turned to the federal and state governments for help. As of November 2010, one in eight Americans—a record 43.6 million people—received SNAP, up from 16.8 million individuals in June 2000.⁶ By May 2011, nearly 46 million Americans were enrolled in SNAP, an increase of 34 percent since 2009. In the past year, more than 20 states have seen double-digit percent growth in individuals seeking food assistance benefits.⁷

Cities and states across the country are witnessing increased need for the assistance SNAP provides:

“Without the program we would probably be starving...”

Sonny Montgomery is a 47-year-old man living on the Nez Pierce Indian Reservation in Idaho. He is married to Mona Montgomery. Both Sonny and Mona are disabled, and both are unemployed. Mona is diabetic and suffers from back and neck injuries. Sonny has heart disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). They survive on \$950 a month, including SSI disability payments. Sonny and Mona struggle to pay for food, utilities and medicine.

Mona has special needs – she had back and neck surgery... I have to do all the house work because she can't... I am also injured in my neck and back... I am diagnosed with COPD, emphysema and chronic bronchitis.

I owe about \$150,000 in medical bills. I don't have insurance. I've [filed for] social security disability insurance, but I haven't gotten it. I have been assigned a court date to tell the judge why I need disability.

I get \$300 a month. Mona gets \$694 a month. With that we pay gas, food, rent, and phone. Every day, I get behind on my debts. I have a truck loan out right now. It's \$780 a month for our truck. I have disability insurance on my truck. The truck would be paid off if I died today. I think that if I die now, Mona will be better off because she'd get some money from the insurance, which is really sad just to think.

The Food Distribution on Indian Reservation Program helps tremendously. Four hundred dollars for food on a monthly basis. We get peaches, potatoes, meat, milk, all the basic food groups. Without them, we would probably be starving. I am doing without some of my medicine because I have to pay the bills. But I've been able to get an inhaler because of the food program.

Need for Food and Nutrition Programs Is at an All-Time High

- In New York City, 1.8 million residents—nearly one in five households—relied on food stamps in 2009.¹²
- In Massachusetts, the percentage of households receiving SNAP jumped from 238,000 in 2007 to 440,000 in 2011—an increase of 85 percent.¹³
- In Alabama, 36 percent of residents are receiving food aid.¹⁴
- In Tennessee, Mississippi, New Mexico and Oregon, one in five people is receiving food stamps. The demand for food stamps increased over last year by 39 percent in Idaho, 29 percent they're already cooking their beans from scratch.”¹⁸

Even at current funding levels, the SNAP program does not prevent hunger from adding to the burdens of poverty. Food pantries and food banks have become flooded with increased demand. For instance, the Greater Berks Food Bank in Reading, Pennsylvania expected to distribute six million pounds of food in 2011, up from 3.5 million distributed in 2007.¹⁶ The Greater Chicago Food Depository reports a 60 percent increase in visits to pantries, soup kitchens and shelters since 2008.¹⁷ The director of a food pantry in East Harlem has explained, “I know to survive on food stamps – let alone prepare nourishing meals – is nearly impossible. Almost all of our families receive SNAP benefits, but still need the food pantry to make it through the month. And they're already cooking their beans from scratch.”¹⁸

Overview of Family Nutrition Programs

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers 15 programs “to provide children and needy families better access to food and a more healthful diet.”⁸ The three largest programs are:

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) is the largest program. As a federal entitlement program, all those who qualify (based on income and assets) are entitled to receive benefits. Forty-nine percent of participants are children, seventy-six percent of benefits go to households with children, and a third of SNAP participants live in households with senior citizens or people with disabilities.

Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC) provides federal grants to states for supplemental foods, healthcare referrals, and nutrition education for pregnant women, infants and children who are found to be at nutritional risk. One of the most successful and cost-effective nutrition intervention programs in the US, WIC has lowered infant mortality and low birth weight rates.⁹ Nine million individuals participated in WIC every month in FY 2010; almost half of program participants were children.¹⁰

School Meals Program provides low-cost or free lunch and snacks to school children. In FY2010 the program served meals to 31 million children and cost \$10.8 billion.¹¹

Overview of Family Nutrition Programs

Other programs run by the FNS include the Summer Food Service Program (providing meals to low-income children when school is not in session), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (providing meals and snacks to pre-school children, homeless shelters and senior citizens attending non-residential day care), Food Assistance for Disaster Relief (providing emergency food in areas struck with disaster), and Food Distribution Program (providing nutrition assistance to emergency feeding programs, Indian Reservations, and the elderly).

Economic recession and high unemployment affect millions of American families. USDA Food and Nutrition Programs like SNAP, WIC and the School Lunch Program help families survive in a tough economic environment. Yet as the stories in this report show, SNAP and other programs provide for only the most basic necessities. Fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods are often beyond the means of families receiving federal food and nutrition assistance, and even those receiving benefits sometimes seek aid from food banks to ensure that their families do not go hungry. Even with SNAP at currently funded levels, struggling American families have to make choices between food and medicine, or other necessities like education and training, and between more costly healthy foods and less expensive, less healthy foods.

“We cannot survive without them...”

Kathy McNary from Caldwell Idaho is a 41 year-old Native American living with her husband, Mike, and her 21-year-old son, Anthony. McNary is a SNAP recipient and relies, as well, on area food banks.

I do not work. I am trying to get [on SSI]... I have several medications that I have to take daily. I had to fight to get Medicaid. I am fight[ing for] social security [disability insurance]. They said that I could work – but I can't work. My mental disabilities keep me from having jobs. I can't stay awake all day. I have to take naps throughout the day. I can't help it. It's because of the medications I am on. I have severe migraines – the medication makes me drowsy. If I take the medication, I can't adjust them so I can be awake. I have to take them at certain times to accomplish low pain that I have.

Anthony is autistic. He requires medication... My husband ... is on disability [and] needs medication... too; [he has] developmental disabilities, and they cannot retrain him at his age to do another job... Without my medication I would end up in the state hospital, without [anti-depressants] I would be lost, or in another mental institution. My husband would be in [such] severe pain that he would not be able to move around. And no one would be able to cope with my son.

[Since the recession] it has been harder for us to get food. Without food stamps and food banks, we wouldn't be able to afford food. We cannot survive without them. They are critical for your family and their wellbeing. [But,] the higher the cost, the better the food – [and] we don't have that kind of money to spend. We cannot get fruit and vegetables, because they are so expensive. The starches are the cheaper brands; that's what you have to buy in order to get by.”

When he signed his first Executive Order as President, creating the Food Stamp Program in 1961, John F. Kennedy said: “We are committed to expanding the variety and quality of surplus foods distributed to persons who, in a nation of unparalleled agricultural bounty, lack adequate diets.”¹⁹

SNAP is a Key Safety Net Program and an Economic Stimulus



SNAP is good for American families and good for the economy. In tough economic times, SNAP payments to struggling families are an economic stimulus. Every dollar of food stamp benefits “creates a ripple effect through the economy.”²⁰ SNAP puts money into local economies. Benefits can be redeemed at any of the more than 200,000 retail outlets in communities across the nation that are authorized to participate in the program. Because the benefits quickly reach families and communities in need, and because recipients are highly likely to spend the money quickly, economists view SNAP as one of the most effective forms of economic stimulus during an economic downturn. Mark Zandi, chief economist of Moody’s Analytics, estimates that for every dollar the Recovery Act spent on the temporary increase in SNAP benefits, the Gross Domestic Product increased by \$1.72, making it the strongest stimulus provision that Moody’s assessed.²¹ Furthermore, according to the USDA, for every \$1 billion spent through SNAP, between 8,900 and 17,900 full-time jobs are created.²²

“I just do not know how we could make it without these programs ...”

Maria Gonzalez is a 49-year-old Mexican American woman living in Edinburg, Texas. She is married to Genaro Rocha and the mother of three teenage girls. Gonzalez is an outreach worker earning \$10/hour; her husband is unemployed. Their monthly household income amounts to \$1,400 after taxes. They are enrolled in SNAP and the School Lunch Program. Although she is grateful for the assistance provided by SNAP, she also worries about her inability to buy the healthiest food.

The program’s allowed us to have enough food to feed our family. It has also helped our children eat at school, which helps us save money on food. I just do not know how we could make it without these programs. I have to buy the least expensive food, and that is not always the healthiest food... I know that fruits are healthy... but they are expensive, so we cannot afford [them] too much or too often... Our legislators should realize that these programs help keep our children strong and healthy. These children are the future of this country and are the ones that will contribute to make this country economically strong... [and] workers need to be paid a fair and living wage.

USDA Budget Subsidizes Big Agriculture

Families are not the only beneficiaries of the Farm Bill. The federal government subsidizes agricultural producers in various forms. They include direct payments to landowners or farm operators based on historic production patterns, as well as subsidies to compensate farmers for drops in market prices, loans to modify price and supply fluctuations, and crop insurance to compensate farmers who experience losses due to natural disaster.²³ As of 2007, ninety percent of federal subsidies went to traditional commodity crops, such as soybeans, corn, wheat and rice, while fruit and vegetable production was not subsidized at all.²⁴ Farm Bill subsidies also support increases in the value of farmland, a transfer of wealth that tends to accrue to large landholders, as opposed to farm operators and smaller, family-run farms.²⁵

The Farm Bill Feeds Big Ag Corporate Profits

In the past five years, the USDA gave out more than \$95 billion in agricultural subsidies, primarily for commodity crops such as corn, wheat, cotton and soybeans.²⁶

- Riceland Foods, Inc., a transnational corporation with revenues of \$1.3 billion in 2009²⁷ received \$554 million in subsidies in 1995-2010.²⁸

- In 2005, Tyson Foods, the largest meat producer in the US with revenues of \$26 billion, received \$46 million in USDA commodity contracts.²⁹
- Smithfield Foods, the fourth-largest meat producer, with \$11 billion in revenues, received \$18.2 million in contracts.³⁰
- Pilgrim's Pride, the seventh-largest meat producer, received \$42.4 million in contracts.³¹
- Hormel, the eighth-largest meat producer, received \$28 million in contracts.³²

Subsidies and Commodity Contracts Are Not Good for America's Health

Subsidies to commodity crops like corn and soybeans drive overproduction and results in the low cost to consumers of calorie-dense, highly processed foods. Unsubsidized crops (including fruits and vegetables remain more expensive and less accessible.

We would do well, at this time of budgetary impasse, to remember that a budget is a moral and spiritual document. Because of budgetary decisions, some will eat and some will starve.

The Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes Jr.³⁷

USDA Budget Subsidizes Big Agriculture



Subsidies Support Large Corporations

- In 2008, 70 percent of commercial farms received an average farm subsidy payment of \$30,483. Less than 30 percent of small farms received any payment at all.³⁴
- Rather than benefiting family farmers, Farm Bill subsidies make it harder for family farmers to compete. Subsidies flowing to larger farms give them a cash flow advantage that enables them to invest in additional land and technology. The inability of smaller farms to compete with this taxpayer-funded advantage contributes to the demise of family farms and to agribusiness consolidation.³⁵
- Farm Bill subsidies benefit owners at the expense of tenants and operators.³⁶

Subsidies Support Wealthy Landowners

Forty-five percent of U.S. farm land is operated by someone other than the land owner, and 57 % of agricultural landlords are non-farm corporations or individuals. However, Farm Bill subsidies allow land owners (regardless of whether they are actually farmers) to capture substantial benefits. Subsidies that increase land values that accrue to owners as opposed to operators and farmers imply an important transfer of subsidy benefits outside of agriculture.³³

Despite families' need for the help provided by SNAP and other food programs, food and nutrition assistance is in the crosshairs of Congress's current focus on budget-slashing. In fact, SNAP has come under attack for one of its most important features, the fact that the program guarantees eligible assistance in times of economic distress.

"We depend on it for survival..."

Ruth Idakula is a 39-year-old African American woman from New Orleans, Louisiana. A divorced mother of three teenaged children, Idakula lives in a neighborhood that is still feeling the effects of hurricane Katrina. Her family is enrolled in SNAP and the School Lunch Program.

I have lost two jobs in the past three years and have been unemployed a total of 18 months. My unemployment totals \$888 a month... We literally need [the programs] to eat! We depend on [them] for survival... I want to [believe] that we share a value in supporting families, but the truth is only some families are considered important in this country.

According to House Agriculture Nutrition and Horticulture Chair Jean Schmidt (R-OH), "The dramatic growth in SNAP participation and cost has strained our resources. Given our current budget situation, we have a responsibility to examine whether we can reduce the funding without compromising the integrity of the SNAP program."³⁸

Congress's Choice: Food for Families or Dollars for Big Ag

Opponents of cuts to SNAP have argued that economic recession and high unemployment rates have driven the increase in hunger and food insecurity, and that as the economy improves the cost of SNAP will decrease. Those opposed to decreasing eligibility for food stamps argue that proposals for cutting the SNAP budget could result in 10 million Americans going hungry.³⁹

The Super Committee, composed of six Democrats and six Republicans, is charged with making significant cuts in the federal budget to bring down the debt. If it fails to reach a deal, a “sequester” will automatically make the \$1.2 trillion in cuts, divided between domestic and defense spending. As entitlement programs, SNAP and the National School Lunch Program are exempt by law from sequestration. However, WIC is not protected from these automatic cuts. WIC is particularly at risk since it is not an entitlement⁴⁰ program and depends upon annual appropriations bills for funding.

Even federal entitlement programs like SNAP are at risk. A proposal that could serve as a guideline for the Super Committee was written by Paul Ryan (R-WI) and passed by the House of Representatives.⁴¹ It would radically change the structure of the SNAP program, converting it from an entitlement program⁴² to a block grant program. Under the current entitlement structure, families are guaranteed help as long as they are eligible. If SNAP becomes a block grant program, funding would be limited to a set amount, and the program would turn away appli-

“The economy just killed us...”

Rick Hernandez from Dayton, Nevada is 54 years old and has a grown daughter and one grandchild. He lives with his wife.

I do not work. I am trying to get [on SSI]... I have several medications that I have to take daily. I had to fight [When I lost my job] three months ago, I went to collect food stamps – \$200 a month... As soon as I got a job, I called and canceled. I think this a great system. They helped us when we needed it. I got it for only three months. I don't get them anymore because I went to work, but now I don't have [work] full time... Now I have to take a class to keep my job. The class costs money, but we don't have any. We are renting a house because we lost our house. It has been tough. If it wasn't for the food bank, I would be in really bad shape. It has been a blessing.

I am not going back [on SNAP] because I don't want to take advantage... The economy just killed us. It brought us to a standstill... people fighting for their lives... We have to be on a budget, so you have to pay attention. You are on survival mode because your meals are smaller... [Without food stamps,] the food bank is the only thing that keeps people alive. Without it, we would have chaos.

cants if the need for the program outpaces the funding. This funding structure would eliminate SNAP's ability to respond to rising need during economic downturns, and states would be forced to cut benefits or create waiting lists for needy families.

Congress's Choice: Food for Families or Dollars for Big Ag

- **The unrestricted block grant structure would enable states to shift funds away from food assistance to other purposes,** which they would be tempted to do when they face large budget shortfalls. Most significantly, fixed funding would provide no room to address one of the most significant issues facing the program today: low participation rates among eligible working-poor families with children and low-income seniors.⁴³
- **Cuts of this magnitude and the restructuring of SNAP as a block grant program would increase hunger and suffering among American families.** If cuts were based solely on eliminating eligibility, it would require cutting more than 8 million people. If the cuts were to come solely from reducing benefits, benefit levels would be reduced to 88 percent of the minimum amount a family needs for a bare-bones, nutritionally adequate diet.⁴⁴
- **There are already restrictions and fiscal controls in place.** The Food Stamp Program was cut by the 1996 welfare law, and roughly half of the benefit cuts enacted in 1996 remain in place, including eligibility limits for legal immigrants and unemployed childless adults.⁴⁵
- **Proposals for cutting farm subsidies are modest at \$30 billion** over the next 10 years, in contrast with the \$127 billion in cuts for SNAP proposed in the House budget.^{46,47}

“Without proper nutrition we are not able to heal from disease...”

Dr. Marleen Haverty has been practicing medicine for 14 year, currently in Portland, Oregon. Many of her patients struggle with staying healthy on limited incomes. She underscores the vital link between proper nutrition and good health.

Nutrition is a vital part of being healthy. Without proper nutrition we are not able to heal from disease. Many of my poor patients have difficulty eating healthful foods because they can't afford it... They eat Top Ramen and things off of the dollar menus at fast food chains. These foods have no nutrients, just calories. People on these diets are predisposed to high cholesterol, diabetes and heart disease... It's really a dysfunctional system. Many of the people who can't afford healthy foods often can't afford health insurance, either. Patients come in with diseases that could be improved by a healthier diet. But instead of being able to afford healthy foods, they spend the few dollars that they have on medications to manage their conditions... Many of the diseases that are burdening our medical system are preventable by healthful eating. Many of my patients are struggling now more than ever. It's a really hard time for people. I know that many of them rely on programs and services to help feed their families. I know that if these programs were to be cut, many of my patients would not be able to eat at all, let alone afford to eat the type of diets that they need for their health and medical conditions.

Recommendations

The Super Committee, charged with finding \$1.2 trillion to reduce the federal deficit, is scrutinizing the Farm Bill as a place to enact cuts. The Committee has a clear choice to make between supporting struggling American families at a time of economic hardship and continuing to funnel billions of dollars to wealthy corporations and landowners.

Members of the Super Committee should make budgetary choices that: ensure that American families never experience hunger; improve public health through nutrition; support small farmers; and sustain an agricultural system designed to produce fresh, healthy food. Specifically, the Super Committee should:

- Protect SNAP, WIC and the School Lunch Program. Cuts in food and nutrition programs would harm families already negatively impacted by the economic downturn. Cutting SNAP would mean hunger and increased food insecurity for millions of American families.
- Retain SNAP's status as an entitlement program. Cutting SNAP would not only be disastrous for families, but for the economy, as

well. SNAP is an economic stimulus. For every \$1 in payments to families, \$1.72 circulates back into the economy. According to USDA research, every \$5 in federal SNAP benefits generates twice that in economic activity.⁴⁸

- Shift USDA subsidies and commodity contracts toward promoting healthy, local, sustainably produced foods and seeking to align food prices with national nutritional priorities to create a fair playing field for healthy food.
- Encourage USDA food procurement programs and institutional food providers to consider the benefits of locally and sustainably produced, healthy and fair trade foods and to take steps to incorporate these into their programs. These programs include school breakfast, lunch, and snack programs and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children.
- Promote equity, justice and appropriate competition in the food and agriculture industries.
- Prioritizing expenditures that recognize the established link between nutrition and health.

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The Praxis Project is a national, nonprofit organization that builds partnerships with local groups to influence policymaking to address the underlying, systemic causes of community problems. Committed to closing the health gap facing communities of color, we forge alliances for building healthy communities.



Alliance for a Just Society convenes community and racial justice organizations nationwide on critical public policy issues, providing research and policy analysis and fostering public conversation.

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