

JustSouth QUARTERLY



FALL 2013



“I was hungry...”
MATTHEW 25:35

THE RELENTLESS ASSAULT ON AMERICA'S HUNGRY

BY FRED KAMMER, S.J.

There is widespread hunger in the land of plenty. In the United States, nearly 49 million Americans, including 16.2 million children, live in households where it is a struggle to put food on the table each month.¹ Among children, more than one in five children is at risk of hunger; among African-Americans and Latinos, nearly one in three children is at risk of hunger.²

While the nation's nutrition safety net includes special programs for children and nursing mothers and infants, as well as commodity programs for local food banks and soup kitchens, it is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that provides our “first line of defense against hunger.”³

SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, enables low-income families to buy food, using an electronic debit card in more than 246,000 approved retail stores, and to be able to consume it in their own family home—not in a soup kitchen. In FY2012, SNAP served around 46 million people monthly.⁴ One in seven people in the United States is enrolled in SNAP. Nearly half are children.⁵ About half of all children will receive SNAP benefits at some point

before age 20, and, among African-American children, 90 percent will participate in SNAP before age 20.⁶

The monthly SNAP benefit is based on family size and an estimate of costs to buy food to prepare nutritious, low-cost meals for various-sized households. Family eligibility depends on available financial resources and both monthly “gross income” (less than 130 percent of the federal poverty level) and “net income” after certain deductions (less than the federal poverty level).

Because eligibility is based on income and resources, a downturn in the economy causes a growing number of families to become eligible for SNAP; thus it really is the “last resort” for the unemployed or underemployed. For example, between 2007 and 2011, SNAP participation nearly doubled due to the Great Recession, increasing by 18 million people.⁷ When SNAP benefits are added to a family's other monthly income, it actually reduces the number of families and children living in poverty (income below the federal poverty line). In 2011, SNAP kept 2.9 percent of nearly 2.2 million children out of poverty.⁸

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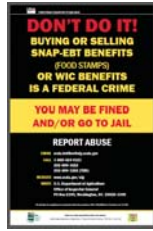
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Ironically, instead of applauding SNAP's effectiveness in reducing the number of families living in poverty and meeting basic food needs for millions of hungry families, some policy makers have reacted to the growth of SNAP over the years by making more and more hungry people ineligible. Those efforts have included the following:⁹

- ▶ In 1996, under so-called welfare reform, a House amendment limited food stamps to only three months out of every three years for unemployed people between the ages of 18 and 50 who were not raising minor children. Any month in which a person was not employed or in a work or training program for at least 20 hours a week would count against the three-month limit, and after three such months of receiving benefits, a person would be ineligible for the next 33 months.
- ▶ The 1996 law also removed SNAP eligibility for most lawfully present non-citizens. (Undocumented persons have never been eligible for food stamps or SNAP.) Laws enacted in 1998 and 2002 restored eligibility to certain lawfully present non-citizens, including children, persons receiving disability benefits, and those here for five years. SNAP participation historically has been low among eligible non-citizens: In 2008, the rate of participation for non-citizens was 51 percent and for citizen children living with non-citizen adults was 55 percent, compared to national participation rates of 67 percent for all eligible individuals and 86 percent for all eligible children.¹⁰
- ▶ On November 1, 2013, an across-the-board SNAP benefit cut for more than 47 million Americans, including 22 million children, will take effect. For instance, every family of four receiving SNAP will see its benefits cut \$36 a month or about \$400 for the rest of the fiscal year.

- ▶ In June 2013, the House Agriculture Committee proposed a severe bill to cut SNAP by more than \$20 billion over the coming decade—nearly all of it coming from ending or cutting benefits for low-income families and individuals. The bill would have knocked nearly 2 million people off SNAP, primarily those in low-income working families and elderly individuals. Some working-poor families would be cut adrift simply because they own a modest car needed to go to work. Hundreds of thousands of other poor recipients would see their benefits reduced.
- ▶ If that were not enough, when the committee's bill came to the House floor, lawmakers added one of the most extreme SNAP measures in history: It would allow states to end benefits to large numbers of low-income people who want a job but cannot find one and to keep half the savings to use for any purpose state politicians want, including tax cuts or plugging holes in state budgets.
- ▶ Then, on September 16, the House Republican leadership introduced a bill to combine \$20.5 billion in cuts over ten years from the unsuccessful June bill with an additional \$19 billion dollar set of cuts by ending state waivers under the 1996 welfare law that had allowed states to suspend the three-month cut-off in localities with high unemployment or insufficient jobs. The bill's \$39 billion dollar savings come by denying benefits to 3.9 million people in 2014 and an additional 3 million people each year of the following decade. These include some of our most destitute adults, as well as many low-income children, elders, and poor working families. On September 19, the House passed this bill by a 217-210 vote!

Earlier in July, Bishop Stephen Blaire, writing for the Catholic bishops, urged the

House to “resist harmful changes and cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program” and “prevent cuts and harmful structural changes to nutrition programs such as SNAP that will harm hungry children, poor families, vulnerable seniors and workers who are underemployed or unable to find employment.”¹¹ He continued:

Adequate and nutritious food is a basic need and a fundamental human right that is integral to protecting the life and dignity of the human person. SNAP is one of the most effective and important federal programs to combat hunger in the nation by helping to feed millions of persons in need every year.¹²

Bishop Blaire reminded us that Catholic tradition is strong on the need for government involvement in confronting hunger and poverty:

Government has an indispensable role in safeguarding the common good of all. SNAP, as a crucial part of the Farm Bill, helps relieve pressure on overwhelmed parishes, charities, food banks, pantries and other emergency food providers across the country who could not begin to meet the need for food assistance if SNAP eligibility or benefits were reduced.

Why, one then might ask, do we even need local efforts when we have the SNAP program and other governmental nutrition programs? First, millions of people are ineligible for SNAP. In addition, more than 90 percent of SNAP benefits are used up by the third week of the month.¹³ Charity workers across the country know well that government benefits generally are insufficient to get families through the month, and so hungry people crowd food kitchens and pantries near the end of each month.

When we look at the widespread reality of hunger in our own country, it is clear that our elected officials should be doing more, not less, to ensure our nutrition safety net. *As a nation, our assault should be on hunger, not on those who are hungry!*

—Endnotes on back cover

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The Relentless Assault on America's Hungry

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ENDNOTES

- 1 *Hunger and Poverty Facts, Bread for the World*, at <http://www.bread.org/hunger/us/facts.html> (accessed August 23, 2013).
- 2 Source: *Household Food Security in the United States, 2010*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, September 2011. (Table 1B, Table 3).
- 3 *Food and Nutrition Programs*, Briefing Paper, Office of Domestic Social Development, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, February 2011, p. 1.
- 4 *Key Facts about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*, USDA, p. 1.
- 5 *Bread for the World Sources: Monthly Program Data for October 2011*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2010*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, September 2011.
- 6 *Bread for the World Source: "Estimating the Risk of Food Stamp Use and Impoverishment During Childhood," Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, Vol. 163 (No.11), November 2009.
- 7 *Bread for the World Source: Monthly Program Data comparing July 2011 and November 2007*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.
- 8 Elise Gould, "SNAP Kept Over 2 Million Children Out of Poverty," Economic Policy Institute, August 1, 2013, at <http://www.epi.org/publication/snap-2-million-children-poverty/> (accessed August 23, 2013).
- 9 *Statement of Robert Greenstein, President, on the House Republican Leadership's New SNAP Proposal*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, August 2, 2013, at <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=4000> (accessed August 23, 2013).
- 10 *Guidance on Non-Citizen Eligibility Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*, USDA, June 2011, p. 2.
- 11 Bishop Stephen E. Blaire, Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, letter of July 10, 2013 to members of the U.S. House of Representatives.
- 12 See *Catholic Social Thought and Hunger* in this issue for background.
- 13 *Bread for the World Source: An Analysis of Food Stamp Benefit Redemption Patterns*, Figure 4. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, June 2006.

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The Jesuit Social Research Institute works to transform the Gulf South through action research, analysis, education, and advocacy on the core issues of poverty, race, and migration. The Institute is a collaboration of Loyola University New Orleans and the Society of Jesus rooted in the *faith that does justice*.



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