



IN THE NEWS

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SNAP in Danger

Congressional Funding for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program at Risk

Introduction

As we approach Thanksgiving, many eagerly anticipate family gatherings with abundant tables, recipes handed down through generations, and fellowship with loved ones. It is a time for savoring the gifts of God's earth and expressing our gratitude to God. This year, however, this feast day brings new significance for many people of faith and conscience across the United States who have taken the SNAP challenge.¹ In the SNAP challenge, participants elect to eat for one week on the average food stamp budget. In Georgia, a single person's average weekly SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) budget would be about thirty-four dollars.² What would you have to eliminate from your diet to maintain a food budget of thirty four dollars for one week?

Why would Christians do this, here in this season of abundance and feasting? The SNAP challenge offers those of us concerned about hunger in the United States an opportunity to experience firsthand the constraints faced by Americans who must live within such a budget on a weekly basis. Some other public leaders, such as former Newark mayor and U.S. Senator Cory Booker and Panera Bread CEO Ron Shaich, have already documented their experiences trying to live on the food stamp

budget.³ In June 2013, twenty-seven members of congress took the SNAP challenge.⁴ Of course, at the end of the week, voluntary participants in such SNAP challenges can return to their normal grocery budgets. For SNAP recipients, the challenge will persist and perhaps deepen.

On November 1, 2013, recipients of SNAP benefits (formerly known as food stamps) saw a small chunk of their monthly grocery budgets disappear as an across-the-board reduction took effect. This decrease will cut the annual SNAP budget (totaling almost \$80 billion) by about \$5 billion.⁵ Negotiations around the 2012 Farm Bill, which determines funding for SNAP, have collapsed on multiple occasions, and more cuts are on the horizon. The House of Representatives has proposed a \$40 billion cut to SNAP over the next ten years, and the Senate has proposed \$5 billion in cuts over the same period.⁶

Congress has been unable to agree on the best way forward to support the poorest Americans. Indeed, many competing commitments make food security a thorny and complicated issue to address.

- How does society ensure adequate and nutritious food for all while protecting the dignity associated with meaningful work and the capacity to feed one's family?

- How should Christians respond to the persistence of hunger in our society?

This essay introduces four important conversations: the definition and elusiveness of food security in the United States, biblical perspectives on hunger, facts and myths about the distribution and use of SNAP benefits, and a survey of major moral questions at stake in the debate.

Understanding Food (In)Security

From organizing food pantries to staffing soup kitchens, from planting urban gardens to preparing meals for the homeless, faith communities have long understood the moral demand to feed the hungry. As we engage in these practices, we hear the stories of people who do not have enough food and we learn more about the complexity of hunger and access to food in the United States. While hunger is a reality for too many families—and particularly children—in the United States, thousands more families experience general *food insecurity* on an ongoing basis. When a family lacks food security, they are “uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet the needs of all their members because they [have] insufficient money or other resources for food.”⁷

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While not all people who are food insecure experience physical hunger, they worry about running out of food, compromise nutrition, and skip meals. In 2012, 14.5 percent of all households experienced food insecurity, with an alarming 20 percent of households with children experiencing food insecurity.⁸

The problem of food insecurity, particularly among the working poor, raises questions about how food is distributed and accessed in the United States. While charitable ministries like food pantries and soup kitchens are important emergency responses, the prevalence of food insecurity requires a deeper look at the causes of food inequities. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is one way of addressing food security in a systemic way.

The Priority of the Hungry

Of course, hunger is not a new challenge. For Christians, the feeding of the hungry has always been one of the central moral demands of the gospel. Indeed, eating and sharing food figures prominently in our tradition: How many biblical stories are centered around a table or over a meal? When we gather around a table, we not only delight in the food shared, but we also build and nurture social relationships. For Christians, the same gifts are at the heart of the communion meal. Because a table—the communion table—sits at the center of our tradition, we are confronted on a regular basis with the theological and moral significance of eating. In her book *Eucharist and the Hunger of the World*, Monika Hellwig writes, “The simple, central

action of the Eucharist is the sharing of food—not only eating, but sharing. The simple, central human experience for the understanding of this action is hunger.”⁹

In other words, the communion table demands that we keep the hungry ever before us, remembering that the meals of abundance we share must connect, in a fundamental way, with the experience of those whose tables are empty. In the church at Corinth, this tension was palpably present. Paul was concerned about the state of

table fellowship in that community (as it was being practiced in gatherings in persons' homes) because while some approached the table with gluttony and drunken abandon, others went hungry. "Do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" cried Paul (1 Cor. 11:22). The most privileged individuals arrived first at the table, gobbling and slurping up everything laid out there with little concern for the poor and hungry in the community—this flew in the face of admonitions to give thanks, "discern the body," and "wait for one another" in that shared meal (1 Cor. 11: 29, 33). It was not acceptable, in Paul's view, for members of the faith community with economic privilege to consume extravagant meals while members of their own faith community (much less the larger community) went hungry.

Accounts of the celebration of communion in the New Testament represent only one kind of story in which food and the priority of the hungry are at stake. Take, for example, the admonitions in Leviticus to leave some of the harvest for the poor (Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22). Or consider Elisha's command that a farmer's first fruits be distributed among the poor (2 Kgs. 4:42–44), a story mirrored in the feeding stories of the Gospels in which Jesus insists that the hungry receive food shared by the disciples (Matt. 14:13–21; 15:32–39; Mark 6:31–44; 8:1–10). The biblical witness makes plain the moral imperative to care for the hungry and poor.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

From the earliest biblical texts to present Christian practice, concern for the poor and hungry has been at the heart of ministries of charity and justice. Christians might disagree, however, on the best means of addressing food insecurity in our time. In recent months, some of this disagreement has been focused around the funding and expansion of SNAP, formerly known as "food stamps."

Nutritional assistance programs have constituted as much as 68 percent of spending. This is determined by the Farm Bill, and the figure perhaps reveals that "Farm Bill" is something of a misnomer!¹⁰

Federally-supported food assistance began with a temporary food stamp program during the Great Depression and was signed into federal law in 1964. Although now SNAP benefits are distributed through a special debit card, originally benefits were distributed as actual stamps that participants could purchase as a discounted rate, thus the origins of the popular name.¹¹ The recipients of the benefits could use their stamps, coupons, or debit cards to purchase food at authorized outlets, including grocery stores, convenience stores, and even farmers markets. As the program has expanded and governmental regulations have developed, questions have inevitably emerged concerning the cost of the program and the efficiency of its administration. Although many issues are at stake in evaluating and funding SNAP, three questions frequently arise: Who is eligible for and who receives SNAP benefits? How are SNAP benefits spent? And is SNAP the most efficient way of addressing food insecurity? While people of faith and conscience might disagree about some of the fundamental assumptions at the core of federal assistance programs, it is important to be sure we understand the facts about the program as we seek to evaluate it.

Who receives SNAP benefits? Although unemployed persons are eligible for SNAP benefits for a short time while they look for work, most recipients of SNAP benefits are among the working poor.¹² United States citizens and some documented immigrants who meet particular income and work requirements are eligible to apply for benefits. Benefits are determined on a sliding scale, according to income. The maximum monthly gross income to qualify for benefits is generally set at 130 percent of the federal poverty line. With the November 2013 reductions in

benefits, the maximum level of SNAP benefits a single-person household might receive is \$189 per month.¹³ In 2013, more than twenty-three thousand households received benefits.¹⁴ Since 2009, the number of households receiving benefits has swelled as a result of 2009's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which increased the benefit levels and expanded eligibility for jobless adults without children. This temporary expansion of the program both reduced the incidence of food insecurity and increased consumer spending on food during the recession.¹⁵

How are SNAP benefits spent? Even supporters of SNAP sometimes find themselves in disagreement on the best means of structuring the program. For example, from time to time, antihunger and nutrition advocates disagree on how SNAP benefits can be spent.¹⁶ Currently, SNAP benefits may not be spent on hot, prepared foods (even healthy vegan cuisine) but may be spent on potato chips or soft drinks. Increasingly SNAP benefits are accepted and spent at local farmers markets.¹⁷ An analysis of how SNAP benefits are spent, however, must consider the issue of food costs. On a tight grocery budget, it is quite difficult to choose more expensive, healthy whole foods over cheap, ready-to-eat but nutritionally-deficient foods. One nonprofit organization, Wholesome Wave Foundation, offers grants for farmers markets to double the value of customers' SNAP benefits when purchasing fresh produce. At markets participating in the Double Value Coupon Program, the amount of SNAP benefits spent almost doubled between 2010 and 2011, from \$1 million to \$1.89 million, as customers were realizing more value for each SNAP dollar.¹⁸

Is a federally-administered program really the most

efficient way to address food security? While there may be many reasons why people object in good conscience to the federal administration of food assistance, the program is remarkably efficient.

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The percentage of the total budget for SNAP (about \$81 million in 2012) allotted to administrative costs is about 5 percent.¹⁹ When one considers administrative overhead costs for other food distribution charities, 5 percent is notably low. The program offers the additional benefit of redirecting those funds back into local economies through food vendors rather than administering the direct provision of food. The USDA also reports an error (both overpayment and underpayment) rate of only 3 percent and has demonstrated evidence of effective efforts to curb benefits fraud.²⁰

Moral Issues at Stake

As noted above, people of faith may disagree—and passionately!—about the most responsible way to engage hunger and food security issues in our time. Here are just two of the moral issues that must be addressed whenever we attempt to think carefully about a program like SNAP.

The church's responsibility to feed the hungry. In many congregations we find much agreement here, across the political spectrum—we have a moral responsibility to address hunger. Where we might find disagreement is about whether the

church or the state should be the “first responders.” The church is a charitable organization, one might argue, while the government is not. Within every congregation, we find people deeply committed to ministries of feeding and food provision even though they believe strongly that the government should not perform this role. We also find people who believe strongly that the church should engage in political advocacy, holding the government accountable for its responsibility to “promote the common welfare,” as stated in the preamble to the U.S. constitution. And yet others wonder how the church will handle the uptick in need as a result of cuts in federal food assistance. It is important to remember, in heated political conversations, that even in the midst of disagreement, many of us share this common commitment to feeding the hungry.

Seeking justice in the food system. While government programs like SNAP and private sector charities like food pantries and feeding ministries address the immediate needs of the hungry and food insecure, they are addressing a symptom of the systemic issues facing us. In other words, they are programs and ministries of charity, which step into the gap to address emergency needs. We also, however, need programs and ministries of justice that seek to both address underlying causes of poverty and honor the voices of all people—particularly the food insecure, whose interests are most at stake in these conversations. People of faith must ask questions that precede the need for sustainable sources of healthy food: Why, as the economy has recovered from the recession, have jobs not reappeared at the same rate? Why are fresh and nutritious foods more difficult to find in some neighborhoods than others? What is necessary to address issues of chronic unemployment and underemployment? How do inequities in education and wages contribute to persistent poverty rates? Asking these questions necessarily places us in political discourse, and this sometimes makes us uneasy. But after considering the

many capable and thoughtful people who are caught in the context of food insecurity, we must ask why climbing out of this situation proves so difficult for so many. As a result, we eventually are thrust into consideration of more systemic questions about economic and political power. Here, too, even where we agree that underlying issues of employment, education, wages, and community development must be addressed, we may honestly disagree on the best means of addressing them.

Without presuming ignorance, indifference, or malice on the part of those with whom we disagree on such important issues as nutritional assistance, let us be courageous in engaging in such deep and faithful conversation. In the midst of disagreement, Paul’s cautions to the church at Corinth should haunt us. Let us not forget the plight of the hungry!

Endnotes

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How is your local church involved in feeding the hungry? How is your denomination involved?
2. Which is more important at the local church level: directly feeding the hungry or advocating for governmental assistance and justice for those who are hungry?
3. What is a concrete action that you can take during the next week regarding this issue?
4. Consider engaging your whole church in this discussion, perhaps with a church-wide screening of a documentary addressing food security such as *A Place at the Table*.
5. Discuss the possibility of your group taking the SNAP challenge together for a week.