Jeffrey Austin

Fortifying the U.S. Nutrition Safety Net

Chapter 2

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Preventing people in the United States from going hungry is the single most important objective of federal nutrition programs. In times of high unemployment and reduced incomes, government spending on nutrition programs increases to help people cope with these difficult economic conditions.

In the past three years, since the country plunged into a severe recession, participation in nutrition programs has skyrocketed. The economy continues to stumble. Millions of people can't find work or can't find sufficient work to support their families. The programs are doing precisely what they're designed to do: counteract the impact of the recession on families and help prevent the recession from getting worse. Once the economy begins growing again at a steady and sustainable rate, the number of people eligible for nutrition programs will be closer to what it usually is.

Federal nutrition programs go a long way towards reducing hunger, but they accomplish much less by way of ensuring a healthy, well-balanced diet. This is especially troubling since more than half of all participants in nutrition programs are children. Dietary habits form early in life and tend to last a lifetime. Rates of obesity and other diet-related health conditions are soaring, and the medical costs associated with obesity have risen to hundreds of billions of dollars a year. Thus, nutrition programs need to make greater efforts to enable low-income families to overcome barriers to purchasing healthy foods.

In the upcoming farm bill, policymakers have an opportunity to make the needed improvements to nutrition programs. The nation's largest nutrition program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the Food Stamp Program, is reauthorized in the farm bill. Most importantly, SNAP benefits must be maintained.

In addition, SNAP should continue to scale up incentives to use benefits to purchase healthy foods. The farm bill can also provide more healthy foods to schools and day care centers. Allowing schools to purchase more locally or regionally sourced foods when possible would benefit struggling small farmers and rural communities.

Recommendations

- SNAP, formerly food stamps, should be able to protect all family members from hunger for the duration of their monthly benefits. SNAP should also include incentive programs that make it easier for recipients to afford healthy foods.
- Child nutrition programs should provide meals that meet established dietary guidelines.
- Farm policies should help to build markets for domestic farmers to provide nutrition programs with healthy foods.

Margaret W. Nea

One in Four

At this point, it is hard to imagine the United States without a federal nutrition safety net. Still reeling from the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, the country has millions of people who are out of work or working for far less money than before. Families have lost homes, depleted savings, or put dreams like purchasing a home or enrolling in college on hold. Hunger lurks in our nation's distressed communities. Nutrition programs like SNAP, National School Lunch and Breakfast programs, and WIC (for pregnant women, babies, and young children) help keep hunger at bay.

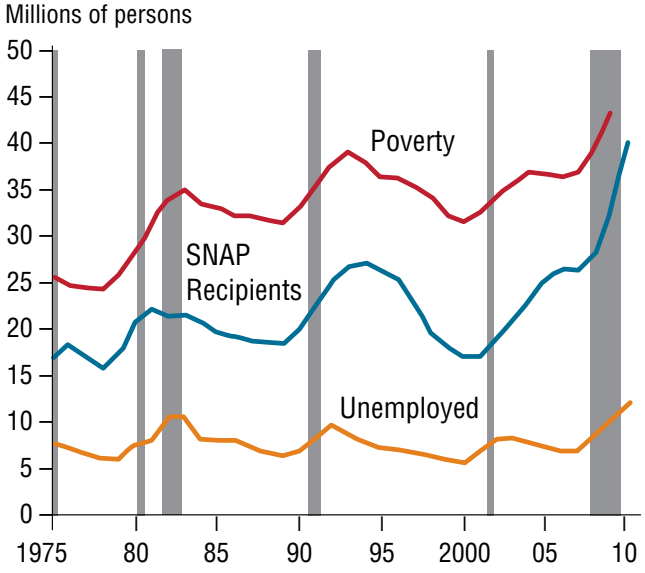
In May 2011, the number of people receiving SNAP benefits, already at an all-time high of more than 44 million, climbed by another million. It was the largest single-month increase since September 2008, when the Wall Street firm Lehman Brothers collapsed and the country spiraled into financial crisis.

In April, tornados pulverized sections of the country, destroying homes and property in areas that were already struggling. SNAP participation in Alabama increased by 102 percent, mostly because of a powerful tornado that touched down in Birmingham, the largest city in the state, destroying homes and businesses.[1] Just one month after the increase in participation, the number of SNAP participants in Alabama fell by 37.5 percent, as people affected by the storm started to recover and no longer needed assistance.[2]

When drought or floods destroy crops, Americans expect the federal government to be there to help farmers recover, and the government comes through. When natural disaster wipes out communities, Americans also count on government to be there to help families and businesses recover. The nutrition programs are one of the fastest, most effective lines of disaster response.

Few people realize that *one in four Americans* participated in a federal nutrition program in 2011.[3] Nutrition programs pay for food purchased in grocery stores and at farmer's markets; served in schools, day care, and senior centers; provided at food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens; prescribed to women by their doctors for pre- and postnatal care.

Figure 2.1 **Number of SNAP Recipients, Unemployed People, and People in Poverty, 1975-2010**



Note: Vertical bars indicate recessions.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service.

$731 The average monthly gross income for all SNAP households in 2010.

In 2010 the majority of SNAP participants were children or elderly. *Nearly half (47 percent) of SNAP participants were under age 18 and another 8 percent were age 60 or older.*

In 2010 the official U.S. poverty rate was 15.1%

Nutrition programs fortify America's families, students, and workforce. They keep families together, children learning, and the economy going. Without them, millions more households would be struggling to put food on the table.

There are undoubtedly holes in the safety net. Not everyone who needs help is eligible to participate in the programs. Some families aren't prepared to spend all their savings to meet the low asset limits that program participants are allowed. As noted earlier, federal nutrition programs could do more to help people eat healthy foods as well.

However, improvements in child nutrition programs as part of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 are making it possible to reach more low-income children and to raise the nutritional quality of the food served. Bread for the World members and many partner groups pushed for these and other improvements—the most significant in 16 years. In spite of this success, much more progress is possible and needed, particularly at a time when more children than ever before depend on these programs as their primary source of a healthy diet.

In recent years, health professionals in the developing world have concluded that nothing is more important to human and social development than good nutrition at critical stages of a person's life, especially in childhood. Countries that have expanded nutrition programs, such as Bangladesh, Brazil, and Ghana, have made extraordinary progress in areas ranging from children's health and school performance to national economic growth and political stability. The United States, too, has used national nutrition programs to fight malnutrition. The first major U.S. nutrition program, the National School Lunch Program, was authorized in 1946, following World War II, when officials realized how many would-be soldiers had been rejected for military service because of malnutrition.[4]

Clearly, conditions in the United States today are much different than in developing countries. But the United States, like other countries, must sustain the progress it has made and adapt to changing circumstances. "Obesity is now the leading medical reason why young Americans today are unable to qualify for the armed forces," reads a statement signed by dozens of retired generals and other senior Armed Forces officials and sent to leaders of Congress in 2010, on the eve of the most recent child nutrition reauthorization.[5] The statement urged policymakers to support robust improvements in child nutrition programs. "At least 9 million young adults, or 27 percent of all young Americans ages 17 to 24, are too overweight to enlist," they noted.[6]

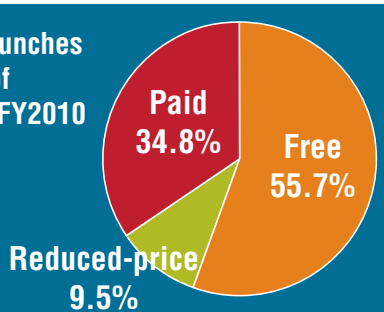
Childhood obesity and hunger both demand our attention since they carry serious consequences for individuals and for the country as a whole. The two

USDA

Highlights of Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010

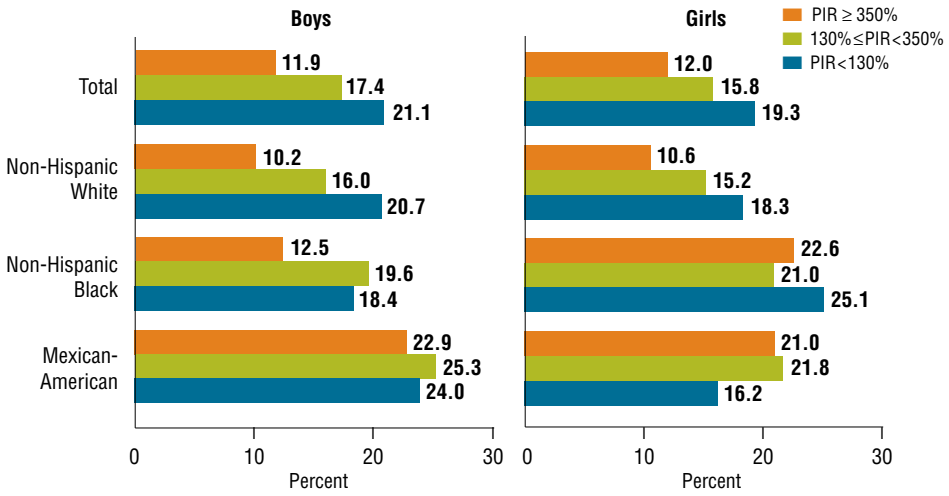
- Makes significant nutrition improvements in school meals.
- Prevents junk foods from being sold in vending machines on school grounds.
- Reduces red tape so schools can serve more free and reduced-price meals to low-income children.
- Makes it easier for nonprofits to serve more children in Summer Food programs.
- Makes it easier for parents and childcare providers to obtain nutrition education resources.
- Allows state agencies to serve children in WIC for a full year, rather than six months.
- Expands the Afterschool Meal Program to 50 states, up from just 13 states.

Share of school lunches served, by type of reimbursement, FY2010



14.5% or 17.2 million households were at risk of hunger in 2010.

Figure 2.2 **Prevalence of Obesity Among Children and Adolescents Aged 2-19 Years, by Poverty Income Ratio(PIR), Sex and Race and Ethnicity, U.S. 2005-2008**



Poverty income ratio: The ratio of a family's income to the poverty threshold defined by the U.S. Census Bureau that applies to the family's composition.

Source: CDC/NCHS, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2005-2008.

problems are frequently interconnected. Philadelphia, for example, is one of the poorest cities in the United States, which makes it one of the hungriest as well. The obesity rate of Philadelphia's poor children is higher than that of children who are not poor.[7] In this, Philadelphia is not atypical but representative. According to a national survey of children's health, "The odds of a child's being obese or overweight were 20–60 percent higher among children in neighborhoods with the most unfavorable social conditions." *Unfavorable* social conditions, in plainer language, are the many problems that add up to what it means to live in a poor neighborhood. These include high levels of food insecurity, intermittent hunger, and limited access to supermarkets or to easy transportation to higher-income neighborhoods where healthy foods are readily accessible.[8]

Shopping for Healthy Foods—Access Barriers in Low-Income Neighborhoods

It's clear that the kind of food people eat, as well as whether they have enough, makes a big difference to their health. U.S. households purchase most of the food they consume in grocery stores, supermarkets, or superstores (e.g., Wal-Mart). This is particularly true of the 18.6 million low-income households participating in SNAP;[9] 90 percent of SNAP benefits are redeemed in grocery stores, supermarkets, or superstores.[10] Program rules prohibit redeeming SNAP benefits in restaurants and fast food establishments.[11]

Good access to supermarkets is associated with a healthier diet and reduced risk of obesity.[12] But in low-income communities, supermarkets and superstores are scarce. Other food outlets, such as small groceries or corner stores, carry a limited selection of healthy foods, especially fresh fruits and vegetables. In the 1990s, the term "food desert" was coined to describe such communities. Food deserts are found in both urban and rural contexts.[13] The most obvious and dramatic cases are in remote rural areas—places such as Indian reservations where some homes are more than 100 miles from the nearest supermarket. In an urban food desert, the distances may be much shorter, but lack of transportation still poses a barrier to shopping for healthy foods.

In New Haven, CT, the West River and Dwight neighborhoods have gone from being a food oasis to a food desert and back again. These neighborhoods have a high concentration of low-income residents. When Shaw's Supermarket opened in 1998, it was the first full-service store seen in West River or Dwight in almost 20 years.[14] Shaw's closed in March 2010 as part of a decision by corporate headquarters to cut back the number of stores. Once again, it became difficult for thousands of low-income residents to gain access to a diverse selection of healthy foods. What occurred in the West River and Dwight neighborhoods is noteworthy because it illustrates so clearly the challenges low-income neighborhoods face in gaining access to a source of healthy foods and holding onto it once they have it.

Todd Post

Nationally, low-income zip codes have 25 percent fewer chain supermarkets and 30 percent more convenience stores than middle-income zip codes. Convenience stores stock fewer healthy foods than supermarkets.

"Given that these neighborhoods aren't much more than a stone's throw from one of the world's wealthiest educational and medical complexes, Yale University, it was ironic that people in this low-income area had to endure such hardship to secure their daily sustenance," wrote Mark Winne, author of *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty* and cofounder of the Connecticut Food Policy Council. In the 1990s, Winne and the Food Policy Council supported the Greater Dwight Development Corporation (GWDC), a neighborhood nonprofit that led the effort to attract Shaw's to the neighborhood. GWDC also received support from Yale.

In a 2010 study on health conditions across the entire city of New Haven, the Yale School of Medicine found that residents of the West River/Dwight neighborhoods consumed more fruits and vegetables than people in other city neighborhoods. The study concluded, "This suggests that residents have benefitted from Shaw's and its closing will make it harder to find fresh produce in these neighborhoods."[15]

"It went beyond being a place to buy food," said Linda Thompson-Maier, a member of the GWDC when Shaw's opened and now the organization's president. "The supermarket provided a space in the community to see neighbors and socialize. There were few places elsewhere to do this. You could meet someone at the bakery counter or in the aisles and start a conversation that continued in the parking lot. Seniors came there during the day to use it as a gathering place."[16]

The store also brought the community together around food issues, Thompson-Maier told Bread for the World Institute. At the beginning of the month when SNAP/food stamp benefits were issued, store managers took advantage of this infusion of money into the neighborhood to promote certain foods, mainly junk foods. Customers found this practice distasteful and organized a petition to get the management to end such campaigns.[17]

GWDC persuaded the store's management to provide a share of store jobs to people from the community. The loss of the store was an economic blow to everyone, not just the employees who lost jobs. "Before the Shaw's

BOX 2.1 OBESITY AND THE FOOD ENVIRONMENT

Some communities have particularly high, concentrated obesity levels—nutrition experts call these obesogenic environments. Such environments are not confined to low-income areas, but they are more common there. Where there's a scarcity of full-service food outlets such as supermarkets, there are also fewer healthy food choices. A lack of places to shop is combined with a large number of fast food outlets—also common in low-income communities.

Fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods tend to be more expensive than low-nutrient, calorie-dense processed foods. Low-income households are by definition those with fewer resources to spend on food, so healthy food choices are often simply out of reach. Buying less healthy food is dictated by economic conditions in the community. Food retailers in low-income communities understand this dynamic and select the products they will carry accordingly.

Nutrition programs help to bridge access gaps; for example, SNAP boosts the purchasing power of eligible households. But participants who live in low-income communities still face the problem of finding places to shop that carry a broad selection of healthy foods.

Brian Duss

opened its doors, it was estimated that almost all of New Haven's $115 million in annual residential food expenditures were leaving the city for the suburbs," explained Winne. "By keeping a much greater portion of that wealth in neighborhoods that are starved for economic activity, the supermarket not only provided people with access to quality food at affordable prices but was also a good-size economic engine."[18]

Fortunately, this story ends on a positive note. In February 2011, the community succeeded in attracting another supermarket chain, Stop and Shop, to occupy the vacant space left by Shaw's.[19] Once again, GWDC provided the leadership and Yale offered support. It's important to note, though, that most low-income communities do not have such well-organized or powerful friends.

Philadelphia's Witnesses: Listen to the Voice of Hunger!

Funding for nutrition programs comprises 74 percent of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) budget. These programs serve mainly families living in poverty or near the poverty line, helping them get the food they need to stave off hunger. Income determines eligibility. But it's more than lack of purchasing power that puts families at risk of hunger. The environments in which low-income families are forced to live pose additional risks.

In some neighborhoods of Philadelphia, as many as half of all residents live below the poverty line. Tianna Gaines-Turner and her family live in one of the most distressed neighborhoods in the city, the Frankford neighborhood in northeast Philadelphia. She and her husband are raising six young children, and the family is dogged by hunger most of the time.

The family moved here two years ago when they were offered subsidized housing after spending 10 years on a waiting list. On their first day in the new home, Gaines-Turner was sitting on the stoop with her children when a man approached from the sidewalk and told her to take the children and go inside. She understood what this meant and complied at once. Minutes later, the street exploded in gunfire.

The Gaines-Turner family has benefited from federal nutrition programs. Gaines-Turner has participated in WIC, her eldest child receives subsidized meals at school, and the whole family has participated in SNAP from time to time as their income fluctuates.

Currently, Tianna is the sole breadwinner in the family, working a combination of three jobs. Her husband, Marcus, was laid off during the recession and has not been able to find work.

Tianna Gaines-Turner was featured in a series of articles in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* about hunger in the city. She is part of *Witnesses to Hunger*, a research project developed by Children's HealthWatch and led by Dr. Mariana Chilton of the Center for Hunger-Free Communities at Drexell University's School of Public Health. *Witnesses* launched in 2008 with photographs taken and stories told by Philadelphia women living in poverty.

"Speak. Teach." read the invitation to participate in the project. "We want to learn from you." The women who participate in *Witnesses* know what it means to be hungry and are better teachers than anyone. As a Witness, Gaines-Turner has spoken a number of times to various groups of people who want to understand hunger in the United States.

The images that convey hunger to those who know it most intimately are often not the images that other people might associate with hunger. Hunger through a Witness' eyes may be a blood-soaked sidewalk, reflecting the dangers of walking from home to the grocery store. Hunger could be a triptych of bus stops, because that's what it takes to get to a store with healthy food choices.


Todd Post

Philadelphia resident Tianna Gaines-Turner of *Witnesses to Hunger* has appeared on national television and in other major media to discuss her experience of being hungry.

Many of the *Witnesses* volunteers were born into poor families where hunger was a constant presence. In many ways, hunger stole their childhoods from them, and now as adults, they are raising families that continue to battle hunger. "They are the ones who actually have the answers," said Chilton. "Families are not just passive recipients of aid and advice. They are purposeful agents [who] want to break the cycle of poverty and despair, and they have a variety of needs."

Witnesses was born out of Children's HealthWatch, a multi-city research project that is studying the effects of hunger on the health and well-being of young children.[20] Chilton serves as the principal investigator of its Philadelphia site. The project screens children in emergency rooms and ambulatory care clinics at five medical centers around the country—good places to initiate contact with the children and their parents since undernourished children have higher rates of hospitalization. At each Children's HealthWatch site is a GROW Clinic, which treats children with "failure to thrive," the clinical term for a child who is severely underweight for her age.[21] If failure to thrive goes untreated, the consequences are lifelong, because so much of brain development occurs in the first years of life.

"In the GROW Clinic," says Chilton, "there is a pediatrician, nutritionist, psychologist, and social worker on staff, and the social worker and psychologist are the most important members of the team."[22] She cites a Children's HealthWatch finding that children in families on a waiting list for a housing

subsidy were 52 percent more likely to be underweight than those whose families had the subsidy.[23] "Hunger is about so much more than food," she says. And it is more than physical anguish; it punishes its victims mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. "It's horrible when you see your kids not eating," says Tianna Gaines-Turner, "and you say to them why aren't you eating and they say because we want to make sure you can eat, Mommy."

"The idea that children are somehow protected from food insecurity by parents is a myth," says Ed Frongillo, professor of public health at the University of South Carolina. "Children are aware of the inadequate quantity or quality of food, the struggles that adults are going through to meet food needs, and the limitations of resources for meeting those needs."[24]

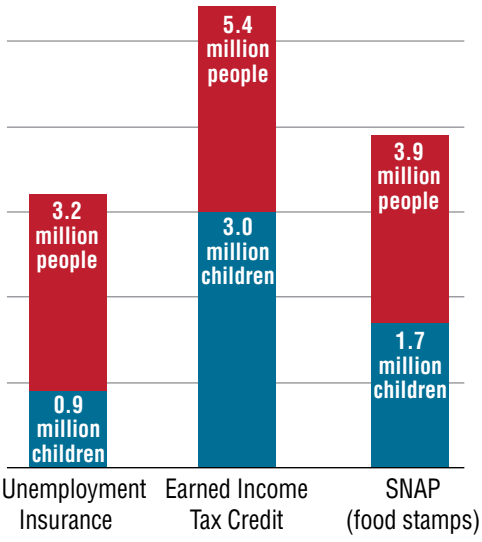
The effects of multiple hardships on children have been well documented by Frongillo, Chilton and her colleagues at Children's HealthWatch,[25] and researchers elsewhere—and portrayed more bluntly in the images and words of *Witnesses to Hunger*. Violence, evictions, parental anxiety rising to crescendo as the month comes to an end and the refrigerator empties—the list goes on.

There is only so much any one program can do to soften the effects of these problems on children. But an analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities shows that SNAP lifts more families with children out of poverty than any other assistance program except the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).[26] (See Figure 2.3.) About half of all Americans will receive SNAP benefits at some point before age 20. Among African-Americans, the figure is 90 percent.[27]

The EITC offers a tax refund, a lump sum payment that comes once a year and is ideal for paying down debt, fixing a busted car, dealing with a lingering medical problem, or other such expenses. Low-income working families find it difficult or impossible to budget for these items, because all their resources are simply consumed by day-to-day needs. SNAP and other nutrition programs, on the other hand, come through for low-income families all year long. They also help the many people who have short-lived scrapes with hunger without experiencing the other hardships of poverty. This is why programs such as SNAP are so vital to meeting the needs of all families, regardless of the harshness of their environment.

Figure 2.3 **Government Programs Kept Millions Out of Poverty in 2010**

People kept above the poverty line in 2010 when selected benefits are counted as income



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Nutrition Programs Struggle to Stave Off Cuts—Despite Success and Public Support

Each year, USDA updates the official data on hunger in the United States in a report, *Household Food Security in the United States*. It's based on the results of a survey conducted at the end of the previous year. The survey asks heads of household if during the past 12 months, due to economic hardship, they or any of their family members were forced to go without eating for any length of time or to reduce their food consumption to unacceptable levels. Those who respond affirmatively are considered "food insecure."

In 2008, 14.6 percent of all U.S. households were food insecure[28]—the highest rate since USDA began reporting food security data in the mid-1990s. One might have expected to see the percentage of food insecure households rise significantly in 2009 and 2010. But, in fact, there was no significant change—which seemed unlikely given the continued rise in unemployment.

Food insecurity did not rise dramatically *mainly because enrollment in SNAP increased*–by 25 percent in 2009. The average monthly participation in the program grew to more than 33 million people in 2009.[29] In 2010, enrollment climbed above 40 million people per month, and in 2011, it topped 45 million—about one in seven Americans.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), enacted in February 2009, boosted monthly SNAP benefits by 13.6 percent. This meant that starting in April 2009, a family of four received an increase of approximately $80 per month.[30] The increase in benefits led to a 2.2 percent drop in food insecurity among low-income households that qualified for SNAP. But food insecurity did not decrease at all in low-income households just above the SNAP threshold,[31] which is 130 percent of the poverty level.

SNAP (or food stamps) participation has increased in part because of improvements in how the program is administered; for example, by providing benefits electronically through a debit card, as shown here, reducing stigma and lowering the cost of administering the program.

The Great Recession was the impetus for the increase in benefits, but it was long overdue in any case. Years before, USDA research on SNAP usage was already indicating that more than 90 percent of participating households run out of benefits well before the end of the month.[32] In households with children, it is common for parents to forgo food themselves so that children do not have to miss meals. Research points to this as a factor in why obesity occurs at higher rates among female heads of poor households. Periods of food scarcity lead to overconsumption once food becomes available again. This condition, known in clinical terms as "post-starvation hyperphagia," wreaks havoc on people's metabolism and makes them susceptible to weight gain.[33]

In 2010, as the news emerged that the boost in SNAP participation and benefits had done so much to hold the line against hunger in 2009, Congress was already in the midst of debating whether to cut the benefits back again. When Congress initially boosted monthly benefits, legislators decided to let inflation erode the value of the increase over time. First came an $11.9 billion cut in SNAP benefits to help pay for a $26 billion state aid package.[34] This decision made little sense for two reasons. The SNAP increase was, of course, intended to fill in the food gaps for households that come up short at the end of the month.[35] Unemployment was still hovering near 10 percent and was expected to remain high for some time. The additional resources meant that fewer parents had to make the choice to go without food to pro-

BOX 2.2 CLOSING THE HEALTHY FOOD GAP IN RURAL OREGON

ACTIVIST SHARON THORNBERRY'S QUEST TO EMPOWER RURAL OREGONIANS TO RECLAIM THEIR FOOD SYSTEM

Matt Newell-Ching
Bread for the World

In Grant County, Oregon, it's expensive to be poor.

The average cost of a meal in the county is $2.83, which is 23 cents higher than the state average in Oregon, according to a 2011 study by Feeding America. For a family of four, this comes to an additional $82 per month.

Combine the high cost of food with unemployment averaging more than 13 percent in 2011, and it's easy to see why many of the 7,400 residents of this rural county tucked away in the mountains of eastern Oregon struggle against hunger. The food insecurity rate in the county is nearly 20 percent.

"There are a lot of isolated communities in Grant County that don't have access to affordable, nutritious food," said Sharon Thornberry, community resource developer for the Oregon Food Bank. Residents in the most isolated parts of the county face the choice of paying higher prices for food that is closer or driving the longer distance and paying more for gas. "There's a Thriftway in John Day [the Grant County seat], but it's 70 miles south, or they can go 100 miles north to the next closest grocery stores," said Thornberry.

Through her work with the Oregon Food Bank, Thornberry is helping communities and towns across Oregon organize to increase their access to healthy, affordable food. This comes at a time when many groups around the country are reassessing their local

Nancy Kirks

BOX 2.2 CLOSING THE HEALTHY FOOD GAP IN RURAL OREGON

ACTIVIST SHARON THORNBERRY'S QUEST TO EMPOWER RURAL OREGONIANS TO RECLAIM THEIR FOOD SYSTEM

food systems through a tool—the Community Food Security Assessment—offered on the website of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Advocates can use the tool to analyze their community's food-related resources—from grocery stores to farms, soup kitchens, food pantries, and more—and evaluate residents' access to affordable, nutritious food. The only problem, according to Thornberry, is that many of these assessments have been completed but are now sitting on the shelf. The challenge is moving from assessing the needs to organizing for action.

Thornberry developed an organizing process for Oregon's communities called a Community FEAST (Food, Education, Agriculture Solutions Together). The idea is simple: bring together farmers, grocery store owners, emergency food providers, nutritionists, educators, community leaders, elected officials—as many stakeholders as possible—for a conversation about improving the local food system. At the end of the six-hour FEAST workshop, the seeds of a strategic organizing plan emerge.

One of the essential elements of the program is that it is led by a steering committee comprised of local stakeholders. "We [at the Oregon Food Bank] give advice," said Thornberry, "but it's the steering committee that continues the work long after the FEAST is done."

The efforts pay off. For example, before Grant County's FEAST in 2010, there was one emergency food pantry in the entire county and it was open only one day a month. Today, not only are there four food pantries, but a summer meals site, a community garden, and a farmer's market have recently been added.

Across the state, the idea is gaining traction. So far, 18 communities in Oregon and towns along state borders have held FEASTS, and 18 more have been planned for 2011 and 2012.

The first FEAST was held in 2009 in Clatsop County in the northwestern part of the state. Afterward, advocates formed a nonprofit called the North Coast Food Web with the goal of sustaining the work of the convening group. A newly formed farmer's market in the town of Astoria accepts SNAP benefits and has cooking demonstrations onsite. Workshops on seafood canning are also underway.

Elected officials are getting involved too. A city council member in the town of Klamath Falls came to the local FEAST and is now seeking grant funding to establish a downtown city food center. The entire city council of Forest Grove showed up for the community FEAST.

In 2009, Thornberry was honored as a Public Health Genius, an award given by the Oregon Community Health Partnership. She has her own personal experience of being hungry. In the late 1970s, she found herself homeless with two small children. "As a mother, there's no worse feeling than not knowing what to feed your kids. My motivation for this work is that no one should have to be in that situation," she said.

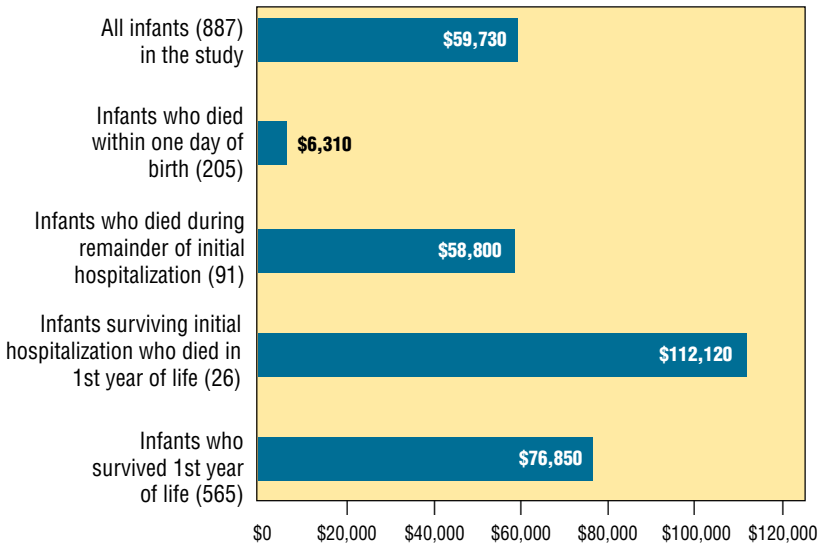
Matt Newell-Ching is an organizer in Bread for the World's western regional office.

Pictured on opposite page: Sharon Thornberry, community resource developer for the Oregon Food Bank, leads a FEAST in Lebanon, Oregon, in 2010.

tect their children from hunger. Second, the raise was intended to help state and local economies recover from the recession: every dollar spent on SNAP generates an additional $1.74 of economic activity.[36] The SNAP benefits moving through communities save jobs, making it possible for state and local governments to avoid layoffs of teachers, police officers, and other public employees, and preventing layoffs in the private sector as well.

A separate $2.2 billion in cuts to SNAP was the price of getting Congress to agree to the improvements in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Many viewed it as a quid pro quo, since the child nutrition programs benefit many of the same households that participate in SNAP. But according to Jim Weill, president of the Food Research and Action Coalition, this is not entirely true, because the money taken from SNAP had been benefiting whole families and would now be going primarily to school-aged children. Little was done to cushion the financial blow for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers,[37] for example—even though the most important developmental stage in life is early childhood.[38]

Figure 2.4 **Average Cost of Caring for Very Low Birth Weight Children During Their First Year of Life**



Source: Rand Corporation (1998).

Currently, all of the nutrition programs are at risk of additional cuts as Congress prepares to slash federal spending under the terms of an agreement forged with the White House in August 2011 to raise the government's debt ceiling. At the time of this writing, we do not yet know the breadth and depth of cuts or proposed cuts to nutrition programs. Many other programs that help low-income families, such as the EITC and other work supports, could also face cuts.

Thus far, SNAP as an entitlement program has managed to escape further cuts. WIC and other programs for low-income people have not been as lucky. In April 2011, $504 million was cut from WIC as part of a deficit reduction deal between the White House and Congress to avoid a government shutdown. Cuts to WIC are appalling considering all that is now known about the critical window of human development during the 1,000 days between pregnancy and age 2. The nutritional status of the mother and child at this time makes all the difference for the rest of the child's life—from school achievements to work productivity.

Cutting WIC also makes little sense economically. In addition to providing foods needed for a healthy pregnancy and early childhood, WIC includes nutrition education and access to health care. The program has been proven to reduce rates of fetal mortality and low birth weight and to enhance the nutritional quality of a baby's diet.[39] A landmark study in 1991 showed that every dollar spent on WIC saves the government between $1.77 and $3.13 in Medicaid costs for newborns and their mothers. The findings

in the study and the strong support for the program from doctors and other medical professionals[40] contributed to bipartisan support for steady increases in WIC funding to ensure that no family would be denied participation. But 20 years later—in spite of volumes of additional research that confirms the value of WIC[41]—it seems that ideological differences among elected officials threaten funding for a cost-effective program with broad public support (94 percent in a 2010 study).[42]

Cutting WIC, SNAP, and other nutrition programs goes against everything we know about the value of preventive care in saving on long-term healthcare costs. (See Figure 2.4.) Nutrition programs are one of the most cost-effective ways to control rising healthcare costs, which in the long run are a much greater threat to the nation's economy than the cost of nutrition programs. Hunger makes people more vulnerable to chronic health problems. Intermittent hunger also contributes to binge eating and overeating to cope with stress and depression. Hunger in babies wreaks havoc on their metabolism and makes them susceptible to obesity later in life. And hunger among children affects cognitive development and leads to lower academic achievement.[43]

District of Columbia WIC Director Gloria Clark shown with DC's new mobile WIC clinic, which will travel to underserved parts of the city to provide needed services.

Getting Serious About Obesity

SNAP is authorized through the farm bill, usually every five years. This is the most likely time for any significant changes to be made to the program. While deliberating the 2008 farm bill, members of Congress considered a proposal to ban the purchase of soda and other soft drinks with SNAP benefits. The proposal was ultimately rejected, but those who supported a ban pledged to try again during the next reauthorization.[44] Such restrictions are only one battle that defenders of SNAP will have to fight. There will also be fierce political pressure to reduce benefit levels in order to protect funding for farm programs.

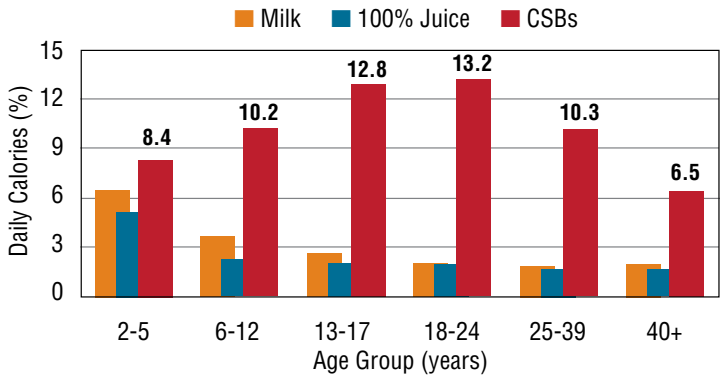
SNAP doesn't have restrictions on food purchases, with the exception of prepared foods. Also banned are alcohol and cigarettes. What has led some legislators to consider soft drinks on a par with alcohol and cigarettes is an obesity epidemic that now claims more than a third of U.S. adults and 17 percent of children.[45] U.S. healthcare costs related to obesity are estimated to be $147 billion per year,[46] and there is no disagreement among public health specialists that overconsumption of soft drinks is a factor in soaring obesity rates.[47]

The farm bill is not the only time the subject of banning the purchase of soft drinks has arisen. States and municipalities that administer SNAP can seek a waiver from USDA to operate outside federally mandated rules. In 2010, New York City asked USDA for a waiver to ban purchases of soft drinks with SNAP benefits for two years in order to study the effects. As early as 2004, Minnesota sought a similar waiver to restrict purchase of soft drinks and other junk foods with food stamp benefits.[48] In both cases, USDA rejected the waiver request.

The New York and Minnesota decisions were the right ones. When the farm bill is reauthorized, Congress should resist public pressure to limit choices in SNAP. SNAP participants are an easy group to single out, because government benefits help them buy food, but changing SNAP rules is an ill-targeted way to try to reduce obesity. The obesity epidemic affects all income groups. In the last 20 years, obesity rates have risen among all demographic groups—*except* SNAP/food stamp recipients.[49]

Singling out SNAP participants for restrictions on purchases implies that SNAP contributes to obesity, but there is no such causal relationship. It's a logical leap to assume that SNAP contributes to obesity simply because many low-income households participate—on the contrary, research suggests that female SNAP participants have lower obesity rates than women who are eligible for SNAP but do not participate.[50] SNAP may in fact help fight obesity in low-income households.

Figure 2.5 **Percentage of Daily Calories from Various Beverage Types by Age Groups**



Source: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey data, 2003-2006.

We know that not all neighborhoods contain equally accessible amounts of healthy foods. We know that in low-income households, the quality of food too often must be sacrificed for quantity. Professor Christine Olson of Cornell University has spent much of her career studying food insecure families. She reports, "I can't tell you how many women say, 'I buy a 2-liter bottle of sugared soda for 99 cents, and that's what I consume for the day when things really get tight.'"[51] Angela Sutton, a volunteer for *Witnesses to Hunger*, puts her own situation in simple, stark terms: "I'm fat so I can make sure my kids have healthy foods."[52]

The nation is rightfully concerned about obesity, especially childhood obesity. Presently, children ages 2 to 5—from all income groups—get most of their beverage calories from calorically sweetened beverages (CSBs), as do all other age groups.[53] (See Figure 2.5.) Soda and other CSBs are the most popular beverages in all age groups, and Americans from all walks of life drink soda and other CSBs. They are considered normal beverage selections. Singling out SNAP participants as the only people soda is "bad" for would stigmatize them without confronting the nation's obesity epidemic. It could add to the number of eligible households who choose not to participate in SNAP—ironic since for years, USDA has worked to boost participation and reduce the stigma associated with food stamps/SNAP.

The soft drink industry spends more than a billion dollars a year marketing its products to Americans—with much of the advertising aimed at children.[54] The Federal Trade Commission said in a 2008 report to Congress that nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of the money spent marketing foods to children is used to sell soft drinks.[55] So far, Congress has allowed the soft drink industry to regulate itself. The industry has responded to public pressure by removing soda from vending machines in schools, but other CSBs, such as Gatorade and similar sports drinks, continue to be sold.

Researchers at Yale's Rudd Center on Food Policy and Obesity estimate that a one-cent-per-ounce tax on sugar-sweetened beverages would generate $79 billion in revenue between 2010 and 2015. It would also reduce soda consumption by about 24 percent and individuals' calorie consumption from sugar-sweetened beverages by an average of 150-200 calories per day.[56]

A tax on soft drink purchases would reflect the scope of the obesity epidemic—all who choose to consume soft drinks would help pay. Given the large amounts of soft drinks consumed in this country, the tax would also raise significant resources to aid in a national anti-obesity campaign.

Nearly two-thirds of the money spent on marketing foods to children is for soft drinks.

Incentives to Help SNAP Households Purchase Healthy Foods

"Lower prices for some healthier foods, such as low-fat milk and dark green vegetables, are associated with decreases in children's Body Mass Index," concluded researchers at USDA in a 2011 report. "These results show that the effect of subsidizing healthy food may be just as large as raising prices of less healthy foods."[57]

Incentives make a lot more sense than restrictions if the goal is to encourage SNAP participants to choose healthy foods. As the research above suggests, for example, incentives could achieve the same goal intended by restricting soda purchases, but without stigmatizing families and making decisions on the details of daily life for working adults.

The 2008 farm bill authorized $20 million for a Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP) to test whether SNAP households would take advantage of matching funds to purchase more fruits and vegetables.[58] State agencies from across the country were invited to compete to host the pilot. Hampden County, MA, was selected on the basis of a proposal submitted by the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance.[59] Hampden County is home to two of the poorest cities in Massachusetts (Springfield and Holyoke) and has the second-highest obesity rate of the state's 14 counties.[60]

The pilot will begin in November 2011 and run for 15 months. For every dollar that SNAP households spend on fruits and vegetables, they will receive an additional 30 cents in benefits, up to a limit of $60 per month. "What this is doing is leveling the playing field for low-income folks, so that a healthier diet is within their reach," explains Julia Kehoe, state commissioner of the Department of Transitional Assistance.[61]

To stretch their food budgets, poor households have little choice but to sacrifice the quality of food. Healthy foods like fruits and vegetables are more expensive and less filling than calorie-dense, processed foods. The latter are simply better at keeping hunger pangs at bay. For example, a dollar's worth of potato chips buys five times as many calories as a dollar's worth of vegetables—and seven times as many as fresh fruit.[62]

In 2010, 43 percent of SNAP participants lived on incomes that were 50 percent or less of the poverty level[63]—the definition of "deep poverty" in the United States. For a family of four, 50 percent of the poverty line means $7.55 per person per day for all expenses: food, housing, transportation, utilities, healthcare, and everything else.[64]

Incentive programs within SNAP are not new. State and local governments partnering with private industry and nonprofits have tied "bonus bucks" to making purchases at farmer's markets. Wholesome Wave, a Connecticut-based nonprofit, sponsors an incentive program around the country to encourage SNAP recipients to shop at farmer's markets, including one in Abingdon, VA. "The incentives get people to the market," says Sara Cardinale, manager of the Abingdon Farmer's Market. "We know that people are coming back, so eating habits appear to be changing."[65]


Laura Elizabeth Pohl

Marie Crise and her son Lee shop at the Abingdon Farmer's Market in Abingdon, VA, taking advantage of a "bonus bucks" program with their SNAP benefits to purchase healthy foods at a discount.

Marie Crise is one of those who uses her SNAP benefits at the Abingdon farmer's market. Crise's situation is all too common. She fled an abusive husband with her 4-year-old son Lee. Currently homeless, they are staying with a relative, using a "couch-surfing" approach until they can afford a room or apartment. Crise is a nursing student at the local community college and she understands how important good nutrition is for Lee at this stage of his life. The farmer's market is important to her because of the quality of the food. With the bonus bucks, she can feed her son well without having to sacrifice as much healthy food for herself.

After deciding how much she wants to spend from her SNAP benefits, Crise purchases tokens from the market's manager. For every $10 in SNAP benefits that she converts to tokens, she receives an additional $5 to spend at the market. The manager swipes the SNAP debit card through a wireless point-of-sales machine, the same one used to swipe customers' credit and bank debit cards.

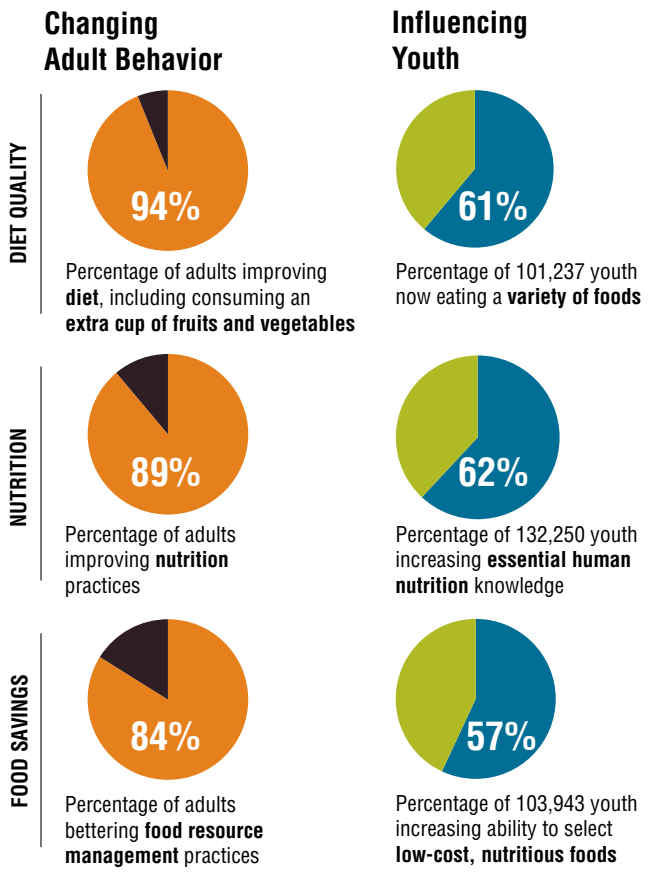
Over the past decade, the Food Stamp Program/SNAP has made many changes to reduce the stigma once associated with the program. Perhaps the most significant has been the change from paper coupons to an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card. At the grocery store, customers can access their SNAP benefits inconspicuously, as though they were using a bankcard. The EBT card has reduced the potential for fraud and the use of SNAP benefits for purposes other than food, but unfortunately the card has also made it harder for SNAP recipients to shop at farmer's markets. Purchases made with SNAP benefits at farmer's markets have plummeted since the introduction of EBT,[66] because most vendors at the markets still deal in cash only. The Abingdon Farmer's Market is among the small fraction able to handle electronic transactions.

Farmer's markets offer an ideal opportunity to strengthen the relationship between U.S. nutrition and farm policy. USDA offers help to farmer's

markets that want to process SNAP benefits, but the technology to do so is expensive—the point-of-sales machine at the Abingdon Market cost $3,000—and the help USDA offers is mostly instructional, not financial. There are government programs that provide benefits for seniors and WIC families to shop at farmer's markets, but not yet a similar program for SNAP participants. The United States has more than 40 million people receiving SNAP benefits. If the program provided participants with greater incentives to shop at farmer's markets, markets across the country would have a powerful reason to invest in the necessary technology, while SNAP families would have more incentive to shop at farmer's markets.

Nutrition education is key to getting people to try new foods. Most people don't decide to improve their diets before they know what their options are. Farmer's markets are an optimal environment for nutrition education. In fact, most are already engaged in some form of it, such as offering samples and recipes—nutrition education by another name could be just plain direct marketing. For the best results, trained personnel should be leading outreach efforts. In 2010, USDA's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) provided nutrition education to more than 600,000 adults and youths. The impressive results reported—at least 84 percent of adults and 57 percent of youth made improvements in diet, nutrition, and/or food savings—are typical for the program since its launch 40 years ago.[67]

Figure 2.6 **2010 Impacts: USDA's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP)**



Source: USDA, National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

The School Cafeteria: Where the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act and the Farm Bill Meet

Together with SNAP and WIC, the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs and the Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP) make up more than 90 percent of the federal funding for nutrition programs.[68] Schools and daycare centers play a central role in making sure healthy foods are available to low-income children. To do this, they depend on the foods provided through the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs and CACFP. The federal government became a much better partner with the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which includes the first significant improvements to child nutrition standards in 16 years.

Improving the quality of meals served to U.S. children shouldn't end with the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, though. Additional improvements could be made through the farm bill. The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, for example, is funded though the farm bill. It provides fresh produce to schools in neighborhoods where children might never have seen such foods before.

BOX 2.3 FARM-TO-SCHOOL PROGRAMS HELP KIDS EAT BETTER AND BENEFIT LOCAL FARMERS AND COMMUNITIES

At Platte River Elementary School in Benzie County, MI, 65 percent of the children qualify for free or reduced-price meals. And thanks to a farm-to-school program, children are also able to take fresh fruits and vegetables home with them.

The farm-to-school program also helps keep the school salad bars stocked. Twelve-year-old Alex Reed loves the salad bar at school. Fresh vegetables are rarely available at home for him and his five siblings because the family has trouble affording them. The family receives SNAP benefits to help pay for food. "A family of eight, you buy fresh fruits and vegetables and it is gone in a day and a half," says Alex's mother, Shannon Reed.[69]

Renee DeWindt (pictured below) came on board as food service director for Benzie County schools (and for two other districts in northwest Michigan) in 2005. Students at one of the middle schools had just gone on strike to protest the low quality of the meals served there. On the day of the strike, not a single student went through the lunch line.

When the school superintendent hired DeWindt, he asked her to look into a new farm-to-school program. He'd learned about the fledgling effort from the Michigan Land Use Institute, which links local farms with cafeterias. There are two objectives: helping schoolchildren gain access to healthier food, and supporting local farmers and ranchers and their communities. Renee DeWindt was the right person for the assignment.

"The first thing people assume is [that] serving healthy, higher quality food costs more than schools can afford," she says. But it turned out to be the exact opposite. When she took over the management of the school food services budget in Benzie County, it was more than $100,000 in the red. DeWindt has turned it into a profit-generating enterprise—*and* the foods she serves are higher quality. Students and their parents are more satisfied, and the lunch lines aren't empty.

Todd Post

DeWindt's recipe for success comes down to cultivating strong partnerships with the children, their parents, and the local farmers she purchases food from. For example, a local dairy farmer had no market for some of his milk; he asked DeWindt if she could use it at a reduced cost since he would otherwise have to dump it. They worked out a deal: he provided her with a dispenser, and she now buys milk from him regularly. The milk is fresher than what she had been purchasing, and the children think it tastes better. In fact, the farmer told DeWindt that his customer base has grown because parents are buying it from him to give their kids at home.

All schools are eligible to participate, but the program gives priority to those with the highest proportion of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. The program was launched in the 2002 farm bill as a pilot in just four states. Because the pilot was a success and demand for the program began to come in from across the country, the 2008 farm bill made the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program permanent and available in all 50 states.[70]

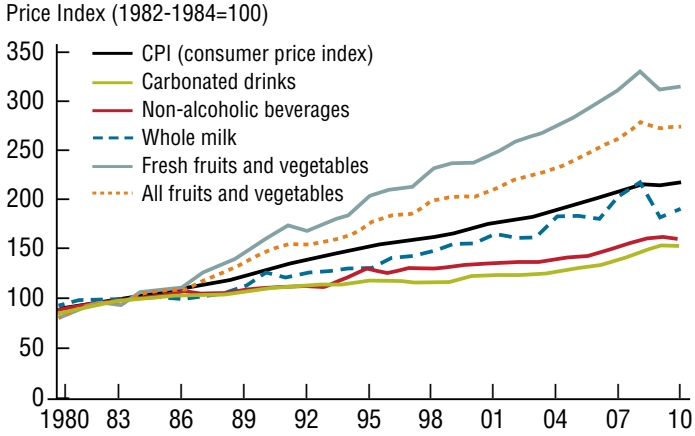
Fresh fruit and vegetable consumption in schools has been on the rise for the past decade in Burlington, VT, where nearly half the children qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Burlington is one of 15 school districts in the nation to be named a USDA model farm-to-school program, an effort where local farms are tapped to provide a share of the foods served in schools.[71] Burlington's program has now grown beyond the cafeteria to bring healthy, fresh snacks into the classroom.

"If you put a bowl of grapes in a classroom, kids will eat them," says Doug Davis, food services director of Burlington Public Schools. "By the same token, if you put a bowl of chips there, they'd eat those too. But I'm not convinced that if you had a bowl of chips and a bowl of grapes, that they'd choose the chips instead of the grapes."[72]

Davis doesn't believe it's his job to stop kids from eating chips, or to get them to prefer grapes to chips. Instead, he wants to expose them to healthy foods they might not see at home. He sees that as his role as an educator. "In five or 10 years, these kids will be making their own food purchases. I hope when they go shopping for themselves or for their families, instead of two bags of chips they might decide to get a bag of grapes and a bag of chips. If we don't expose them to these foods early, we lose the opportunity to affect that decision."

Parents choose not to serve their kids certain foods for many reasons. For low-income parents, it may first be an economic decision: when food dollars are scarce, families simply can't afford to waste money on foods that kids might refuse to eat. Exposing children to healthy foods in the child nutrition programs reduces that risk somewhat. It can support parents who crave healthy foods but don't feel they can give themselves permission to buy them without knowing that their children will eat them—this lack of knowledge is part of what makes food choices tougher than they should be. Yet parental fruit and vegetable intake is one of the strongest predictors of fruit and vegetable consumption in young children.[73]

Figure 2.7 **Price Indexes for Selected Foods and Beverages, 1980-2010**



Notes: Prices for each group are annual average prices for all urban consumers. All fruits and vegetables include fresh, canned, and frozen. Base period 1982-84=100.

Source: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey data, 2003-2006.

Fruits and vegetables are often spoken of in one breath as if they are one and the same, but research shows that children gravitate more naturally towards fruits than vegetables.[74] One way schools have gotten children to sample unfamiliar vegetables is by including them on salad bars. Schools that want a salad bar find they have a supporter in First Lady Michelle Obama, whose "Let's Move" campaign is championing public-

BOX 2.4 SMALL FARMERS CAN MAKE LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS HEALTHIER

Joshua Cave of Cave Family Farm packs peppers at Pilot Mountain Pride Cooperative in Pilot Mountain, North Carolina. To provide an opportunity for predictable and sustainable income, Pilot Mountain Pride Cooperative, a local food movement group, provides a network of suppliers and end users. Hospitals, restaurants, and supermarkets in western North Carolina benefit from consistent delivery, better prices, certified safe handling, and a unified supply from a variety of local farmers. Pilot Mountain Pride was able to secure a Rural Business Enterprise Grant from USDA to purchase a refrigerated truck to distribute its produce. The grant program is an example of how USDA could scale up support for development of local food systems.

Bob Nichils/USDA

private partnerships to add thousands of new salad bars to school cafeterias.[75] A salad bar in every school may sound like a dream, but there are measures USDA can take to help make it a reality. The agency shouldn't relax its rules on food safety or ignore salad portion sizes, but it should work with food service directors to help them make rules and standards work "on the ground."

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act requires schools to add more fruits, vegetables, and whole grain products to their lunch and breakfast programs. The federal government has agreed to help by increasing reimbursements by 6 cents per meal. However, meeting the new nutrition guidelines carries an estimated cost of an extra 15 cents per lunch and 51 cents per breakfast.[76] The additional 6 cents provided by the government is helpful but leaves schools scrambling to come up with their share.

The farm bill includes some sources of additional funding that can be applied toward school meals. Section 32, a commodity distribution program, allows the Secretary of Agriculture to spend a little more than $1 billion on domestic nutrition programs,[77] including $400 million earmarked for fresh fruits, vegetables, and nuts.[78] Spending all the Section 32 funding on school meals wouldn't close the gap between what schools need to meet the new nutrition requirements and what the government has pledged to reimburse them, but it would help ease the burden. The problem with this idea, though, is that other institutions relying on the Section 32 program—such as food banks and daycare centers—would then be completely cut off from their funding.

Streamlining farm policies, as described in Chapter 1, would free up resources to improve school meal programs. The Environmental Working Group estimated that in 2009, California could have doubled the quantity of fruits and vegetables served in its schools for the equivalent of just 2 percent of the cotton subsidies received by farms in the state ($75 million).[79] Most of the cotton subsidies go to the largest and most profitable farms. With one in four Americans participating in a federal nutrition program, and farm income holding steady at the highest level in decades, it's harder than ever to argue that the most profitable farms are most in need of financial support. The poverty levels in our country today make it critical to align national farm and nutrition policies.

CHARITY CAN'T DO IT ALONE

Vicki Escarra
President and CEO, Feeding America

If you ask someone to imagine what hunger looks like, many people conjure up the images they have seen on TV—starving and malnourished children with distended bellies living in foreign lands. While hunger in the United States may not look the same as those images displayed on TV, hunger is an all too prevalent reality facing many of our neighbors right here at home. As Feeding America's recently published *Map the Meal Gap* study shows, hunger can be found in every county, congressional district, and state in the country.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the number of people at risk of hunger increased by nearly 12.6 million during the recent recession—from 36.2 million people in 2007 to 48.8 million people in 2010. This spike mirrored the dramatic rise in unemployment: the 111 percent increase in the number of unemployed people from November 2007 to November 2010 was mirrored by a 61 percent increase in participation in SNAP (formerly food stamps), the largest federal nutrition program, over that period. Likewise, food banks saw a 46 percent increase in clients seeking emergency food assistance between 2006 and 2010.

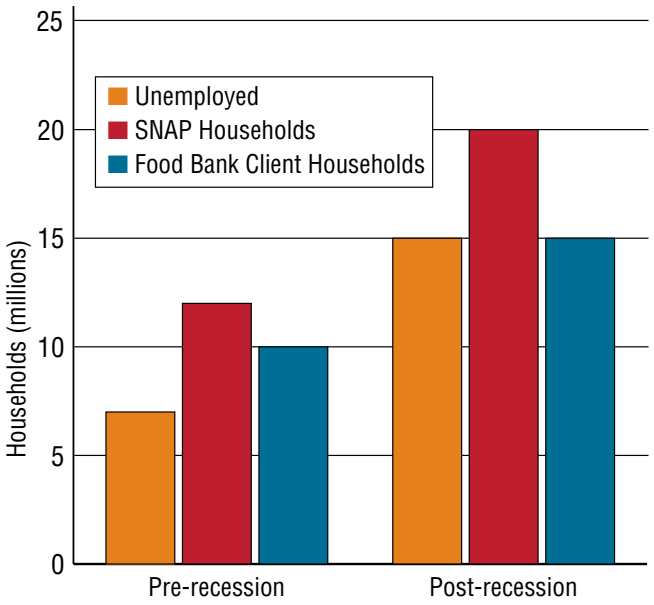
As a result of widespread unemployment, many people who previously considered themselves to be comfortably middle-class found themselves in need of assistance to provide enough food for their families. For many of those in need of food assistance, charity is often the first place they turn to for help. As the nation's leading domestic hunger-relief charity, Feeding America annually serves more than 37 million people through a national network of more than 200 food banks and the local agencies they support—more than 61,000 of them, including food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, and others. Of these, 55 percent are faith-based. Together we now serve one in eight Americans.

Richard Lord

Unfortunately, we are increasingly being called upon to provide more than short-term food assistance. Struggling families often turn to local charities as both the first line of assistance when they fall on hard times and the last line of defense when other supports are exhausted. As *Map the Meal Gap* shows, only about 55 percent of the food-insecure population have income levels eligible for SNAP. Newly unemployed people are often income eligible but exceed the limit on household assets to qualify for federal nutrition programs. Many working families have some employment, but lack the hours and wages necessary to be economically stable. These workers either do not qualify for federal nutrition programs, or do not qualify for enough assistance to fully meet their family's nutritional needs. In both cases, they

have nowhere to turn but to the charitable food network to make sure their family has enough to eat.

Figure 2.8 **Hardship Levels, Pre- and Post-Recession**



Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics; USDA, Food and Nutrition Service; Feeding America.

While we rely heavily on generous charitable contributions, Feeding America would be unable to maintain its current levels of service without the support of federal nutrition assistance programs. The most critical program to food banks and the local agencies they support is **The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).** TEFAP is a means-tested federal program that provides food commodities at no cost to low-income Americans in need of short-term hunger relief; it's distributed through organizations like food banks, pantries, kitchens, and shelters. Healthy and nutritious food commodities provided through TEFAP make up approximately 25 percent of the food distributed by Feeding America food banks; they are an essential resource for the emergency food system. Food banks combine TEFAP commodities with privately donated foods to maximize TEFAP benefits far beyond the budgeted amount for the program. In this way, food banks exemplify an optimum model of the public-private partnership.

Another critical federal nutrition program is the **Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)**, operated by more than one-third of all Feeding America food banks. CSFP provides nutritionally balanced food packages to approximately 604,000 low-income people each month, nearly 97 percent of whom are seniors with incomes of less than 130 percent of the poverty line (or approximately $14,000 for a senior living alone). CSFP provides important nourishment, helping to combat the poor health status commonly found among food-insecure seniors. CSFP leverages government buying power so that the $20 federal cost of each monthly food package provides a $50 retail value to participants. CSFP food packages are specifically designed to supplement nutrients typically lacking in participants' diets, such as protein, iron, and zinc; they play an important role in meeting the nutritional needs of low-income seniors.

An increasing number of Feeding America food banks are conducting outreach to inform clients of their potential eligibility for the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**. SNAP is the cornerstone of the U.S. nutrition safety net, ensuring families have adequate resources for groceries until their household economic conditions stabilize and improve. SNAP outreach connects clients who require more than short-term emergency food relief with the longer-term benefits they need. Were SNAP benefits not available, even greater numbers of people in this country would be at risk of hunger, and even greater numbers of people would be forced to rely solely on the charitable sector to meet their food assistance needs.

Feeding America food banks also operate an array

CHARITY CAN'T DO IT ALONE

of programs aimed at the nearly one in four children at risk of hunger in this country, providing nourishment to children during out-of-school times when they might otherwise go without meals—after school, in the summer, on weekends, and during long school holidays. Many food banks receive federal funding for after-school and summer feeding programs. **The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** and the **Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)** help defray the cost of providing meals and snacks, enabling food banks to leverage private resources to reach even more children and families in need of food assistance.

For the one in six Americans at risk of hunger, food banks and their local agency partners are truly the first line of defense, and many times the only resource standing between being able to put food on the family dinner table and going to bed with an empty stomach. However, the charitable food assistance network cannot meet the needs of these families alone. It is only through our public-private partnership with the federal government—through programs like TEFAP, CSFP, CACFP, and SFSP, and sustained support for SNAP and other programs in the nutrition safety net—that we are able to protect families from hunger.

Vicki Escarra is the president and CEO of Feeding America, the nation's leading domestic hunger-relief charity, serving 37 million people each year. The Map the Meal Gap *study can be found at www.feedingamerica.org/mapthegap.*

Richard Lord