

Hunger in America

Should the government spend more on food aid?

More than 40 million Americans need government help to keep from going hungry, and some 6 million households lack adequate food or nutrition at least occasionally. While hunger has abated since the 2007-09 recession, advocates for the poor say the federal government still needs to do much more to provide food aid and access to healthy food for the needy. But many conservatives say food-aid programs are rife with waste and fraud and need major reforms. They want to stiffen work requirements for able-bodied recipients, and some conservatives and liberals argue that food stamps should not be used to buy junk foods lacking in nutritional value. President Trump wants to slash federal spending on food aid and scientific research into nutrition. But some of his budget proposals — described as draconian by critics — face an uphill battle in Congress. Advocates for the poor, meanwhile, are expanding innovative programs that bring healthy foods to low-income areas, and celebrity chefs are joining the fight against hunger.



Demonstrators in New York on May 24, 2017, urge Mayor Bill de Blasio to increase the city's food aid to compensate for President Trump's proposed food stamp cuts. Advocates for the poor say the cuts would worsen the nation's hunger problem. Many conservatives say food-aid programs are rife with waste and fraud and need reform.

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Hunger in America

BY TOM PRICE

THE ISSUES

Johnnie Lindsey, a 72-year-old grandmother, said she never turned to welfare while working and raising a family in Alabama. Now, she lives on Social Security, food-pantry donations and \$66 a month in food stamps.

“I can eat for a month on \$66, as long as my grandkids don’t come over,” she said jokingly. But she worries how she will eat if her benefits are reduced. “It’s a struggle, for real,” she said. “You’ve got to be penny-pinching to survive, and it’s still hard to survive. I would hate for them to cut mine off.”¹

Lindsey is unlikely to see her food stamps totally disappear. But President Trump has proposed slashing federal food stamp spending by \$193 billion over 10 years, and advocates for the poor say such a deep cut would worsen a serious problem: hunger in America.

At stake is the well-being of more than 11 million Americans who live in households that experience hunger from time to time, and the more than 40 million who fend off hunger with federal assistance. Also at stake is the health of some half-million children who occasionally go hungry — a crisis that experts warn is a demographic time bomb because today’s hungry youths could become tomorrow’s poor and hungry adults.²

The bipartisan National Commission on Hunger, appointed by Congress in 2014, defines two categories of hunger in America:

- “Very low food security” — households that had to eat less at times during the previous year because they didn’t have enough food.



AP Photo/The Southern/Byron Hetzler

The food pantry at the Victory Dream Center, a church in Carbondale, Ill., serves some 200 families each week. More than 40 million Americans a year fend off hunger with federal assistance. The president has proposed cutting the federal food stamp program by \$193 billion over 10 years, but experts say Congress is unlikely to approve the cuts.

- “Low-food-security” — households that sometimes face a diet of reduced quality, variety or desirability but don’t have to reduce their eating. Thirty-one million people, including nearly 6 million children, are in this category.³

American hunger is dropping because of an improving economy, according to the Agriculture Department, but it is still higher than before the severe 2007-09 recession because of the uneven economic recovery and other factors.

Most of the hungry are non-elderly adults, although the National Foundation to End Senior Hunger, an anti-hunger group in Alexandria, Va., reported that the number of elderly facing the threat of hunger exceeded 10 million last year for the first time. Households below the poverty line are more than three

times as likely to experience very low food security than average households. Other groups with higher-than-average hunger are single parents, women living alone, blacks, Hispanics and people living outside metropolitan areas. The South and Midwest had slightly higher levels of hunger than the Northeast and West because of regional economic differences.⁴ (See map, p. 560.)

Besides cutting food stamp spending by \$193 billion over 10 years, Trump’s 2018 budget proposes enacting stricter work requirements for able-bodied food-aid recipients, cutting federal programs that help finance Meals on Wheels and implementing tougher rules about who qualifies for food assistance and how long they can receive the help.

The cuts would be “cataclysmic,” said James Weill, president of the Food Research and Action Center, a research and advocacy organization in Washington, although congressional observers say Trump’s budget cuts face stiff opposition.⁵ Many anti-hunger activists say federal spending on food aid already is too low. Mariana Chilton, a professor of health management at Drexel University and co-chair of the National Commission on Hunger, proposes a 30 percent increase in food stamp benefits. Many food stamp recipients “just can’t make it” on existing benefits, she says.

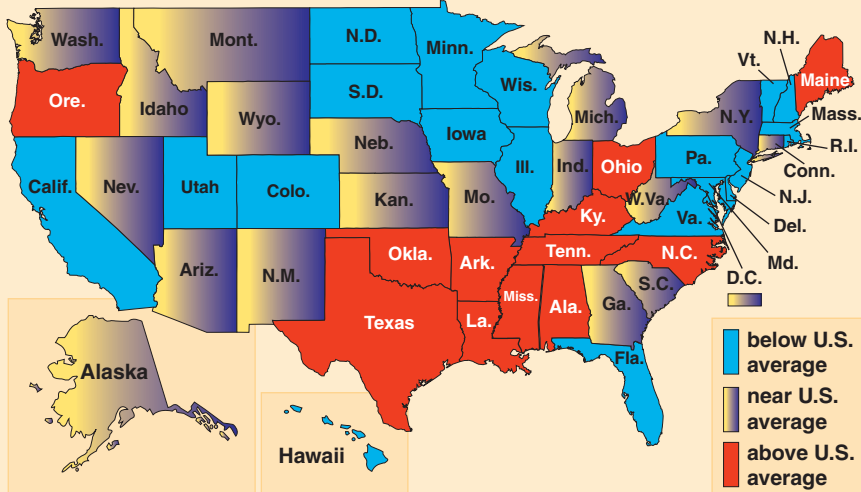
White House Management and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney, however, said the proposed cuts are necessary because some spending is going to people who don’t need help, and some of the programs don’t work.⁶

“You’re only focusing on half of the equation, right?” Mulvaney said to re-

Food Insecurity Is Highest in South

Households in 12 states, mainly in the South, have above average “food insecurity,” which means they sometimes go hungry. Mississippi has the nation’s highest rate, at 21 percent, and North Dakota the lowest, at 8.5 percent. According to the U.S. Agriculture Department, 16 million U.S. households are food insecure.

Food Insecurity by State, 2013-15



Source: “Prevalence of food insecurity, average 2013-15,” Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, <http://tinyurl.com/yavkdvvu>

porters as he unveiled the budget in March. “You’re focusing on recipients of the money. We’re trying to focus on both the recipients of the money and the folks who give us the money in the first place. And I think it’s fairly compassionate to go to them and say, ‘Look, we’re not going to ask you for your hard-earned money anymore, unless we can guarantee to you that that money is actually going to be used in a proper function.’”⁷

Robert Rector, a senior research fellow in domestic policy at the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank, says it is important that capable recipients work for their benefits. “Food assistance for able-bodied adults should not be a one-way handout,” Rector says. “It’s reasonable to expect recipients to engage in constructive activities for the aid.”

Chilton disagrees, calling food “a basic human right” and saying food stamps should not contain work requirements.

Current federal rules require able-bodied adults between the ages of 18 and 49 with no dependents to work at least 80 hours per month, participate in an educational or training activity or comply with a workfare program.⁸

Conservatives want to give states more responsibility for anti-hunger programs, while liberals fear that states’ pockets are not deep enough to handle activities funded by the federal government.

Many food-aid recipients worry about potential cuts.

Barbara Makris, 94, said “the only way I can stay in my home” is with the six Meals on Wheels deliveries she receives weekly. The Georgia retiree is blind and can’t cook, and “if you can’t cook, you can’t stay at home” without help, she said.⁹

Tim Keefe, a 49-year-old Navy veteran, lost his job at a plow factory in Rockland, Maine, after a wrist injury left him unable to lift more than 25

pounds. When Maine toughened its work requirements in 2015, Keefe also lost his food stamps and turned to catching, skinning and roasting squirrels over an open fire beside his tent in Augusta. “I hope they understand that people fall through the cracks,” he said of government policymakers.¹⁰

A study published this year by the University of Wisconsin found surprisingly high levels of hunger among community college students, and there were anecdotal reports of student hunger at Ivy League schools. The Wisconsin HOPE Lab, a research organization that focuses on reducing inequality in education, surveyed 33,000 students at 70 community colleges in 24 states and said a third had experienced very low food security.¹¹

While the proportion of hungry students may seem high, many community college students come from lower-income families, says Sara Goldrick-Rab, who founded the lab and now teaches in the Temple University College of Education in Philadelphia. “Adding in college tuition and housing prices, it is possible they run out of money for food at a higher rate” than the general population, she says.

Many studies have found that hunger, particularly in childhood, leads to physical, mental, behavioral and financial problems.

Experts of all political persuasions agree that poverty is the top cause of hunger and that an improving economy can reduce it. Federal food aid has declined steadily in recent years because of the economic rebound. In 2013, 47.6 million people received food stamps at a cost of \$76 billion. Those figures dropped in March to 42 million people at an annualized cost of about \$63 billion.¹²

“A good-paying job is the best anti-hunger program,” says Rebecca Middleton, executive director of the Alliance to End Hunger, an association of more than 90 service and advocacy organizations that work for food security in the United States and abroad.

Other factors contributing to hunger include lack of access to healthful food, ignorance of good nutrition practices and unwise behavior. Malnutrition — not consuming the proper amount of nutrients — is widespread in the United States, usually the result of individuals eating too much or eating the wrong things rather than eating too little. More than two-thirds of American adults and nearly one-third of children are overweight or obese. About 85 percent of Americans' diets do not meet U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommendations for the most important vitamins and minerals.¹³

Obesity among the poor, which can lead to diabetes and other ailments, stems from “famine-or-feast” eating practices, unhealthy diets and the stresses of poverty and food scarcity, experts say.

Noting that the poor often live in areas that lack well-stocked grocery stores, Middleton says that “if an individual cannot get somewhere to buy fresh produce, it makes it impossible to provide a healthy balanced diet.” (See sidebar, p. 568.)

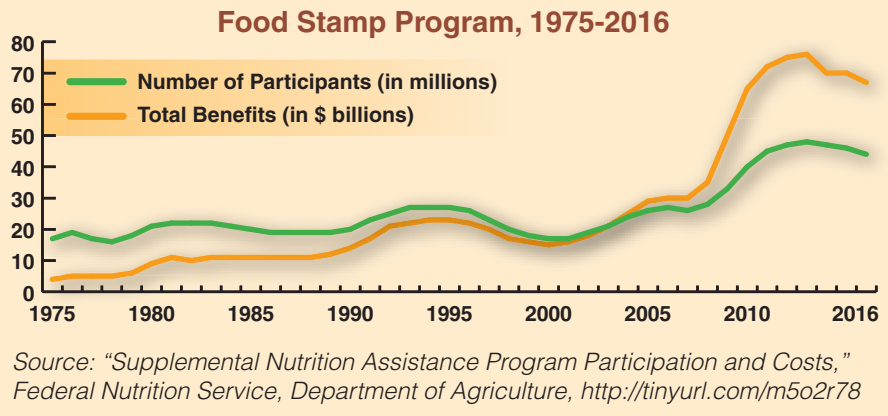
Many poor people don't understand the components of a nutritious diet and don't know how to shop efficiently, Rector says. Adults with very low food security drink an average of nearly two cans of soda each day, and more than 40 percent of them smoke 19 packs of cigarettes a month, which threatens their health and wastes money that could go toward more and better food, says Rector, who got his data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹⁴

Cultural heritage also can steer people to unhealthy diets.

“Cultural tradition and the preferences of family members influence food stamp participants to continue serving high-fat meat products and other traditional foods,” according to an Agriculture Department survey of food stamp recipients that was published last year.¹⁵

44 Million Americans Used Food Stamps in 2016

The number of people using food stamps dropped about 10 percent since 2013, to 44 million, but that figure remains far higher than in the years before the 2007-09 recession because of the slow recovery. In 2007, 26 million Americans were relying on food stamps.



As government officials debate making changes to America's anti-hunger programs, here are some of the questions they are considering:

Should the federal government spend more on anti-hunger programs?

Health care providers, educators and grocers have noticed trends among beneficiaries of the food stamp program, formally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Life seems better shortly after recipients receive their monthly allowance than it does near the end of the monthly cycle when their benefits may have run out.¹⁶

Comparing the last week of the month with the first week, California hospitals reported that 27 percent more poor people sought treatment for hypoglycemia, a low-blood-sugar condition related to diabetes that can be caused by lack of food, according to research at the University of California, San Francisco.¹⁷

Third- through eighth-grade students in North Carolina whose parents received food stamps scored best on math and English tests between the

15th and 24th day of the monthly food stamp cycle, when they likely would have benefited from having the most food in the home, Duke University researchers reported. And grocers in poor neighborhoods commonly report higher sales when food stamps are distributed than at the end of the cycle.¹⁸

For advocates of the poor, this is prima facie evidence that food aid is inadequate. Others, however, say recipients don't manage their benefits wisely.

The formula used to calculate food-stamp benefits — called the Thrifty Food Plan — is “wildly insufficient and outdated,” says Drexel's Chilton, and fails to account for regional differences in food, housing and other costs.

Last revised in 2006, the plan is based on the Agriculture Department's dietary guidelines and federal surveys of what low-income families pay for the food they purchase. The plan follows a benefit level established in 1999 for “a nutritious, minimal-cost diet” and is adjusted for inflation. It assumes all food is prepared at home.¹⁹

Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, a professor of human development and social policy at Northwestern University who studies the long-term effects of

child poverty, notes the formula assumes a family can spend 15 hours a week preparing meals from scratch. While food prepared this way tends to be healthier and less costly, “no one spends that kind of time cooking anymore,” Schanzenbach says, “and I don’t think it’s reasonable to expect low-income families to spend that amount of time cooking while they’re also working.”

Far more mothers work outside the home — and thus have less time to cook — than when the Agriculture Department devised the formula in 1999, said economist James Ziliak, director of the Center for Poverty Research and of the Kentucky Research Data Center, both at the University of Kentucky. Time pressures are heavier for food-stamp families because they are more likely to be headed by a single mother, he said. Elderly recipients also face difficulty preparing meals from scratch.

The formula doesn’t consider advances in nutrition research, Ziliak said. And it doesn’t recognize that teenagers need more food than younger children.²⁰ A family with two teenage boys would need \$50 a month more than the current benefit, the Agriculture Department calculated, he said.²¹

Schanzenbach says the federal government could improve recipients’ well-being by basing the SNAP formula on the Agriculture Department’s Low Cost Food Plan, which would be about 25 percent more expensive. While a Thrifty Plan dinner might include baked beans and hotdogs, the Low Cost dinner could allow for roast beef.

SNAP is not meant to cover a family’s total food costs, says Robert Doar, who studies poverty at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C., and was co-chair of the hunger commission. “It’s always been intended to be a supplement to other forms of income,” he says. “Viewed that way, I think the benefit amounts are adequate.”

Angela Rachidi, an AEI research fellow in poverty studies, says recipients

may run out of benefits before the end of the month because of “short-term impatience” rather than inadequate benefits. They might spend their allotment when they get it, rather than parcel it out throughout the month, she says. She and Doar suggest SNAP distribute the benefits more frequently rather than raising them.²²

Rachidi says federal food aid is meeting most people’s needs. She pointed to a 2015 study that looked at regional variations in food prices and found that 70 percent of SNAP households received sufficient benefits to provide a diet determined adequate by the Agriculture Department.

Some conservatives also argue that eliminating fraud and waste could cut food-aid costs.

Ohio state auditor David Yost released a report last year that concluded “there are likely millions of dollars in fraud” in his state’s \$2.5 billion SNAP program. “I do not believe fraud is rampant in Ohio,” Yost said, “but it does exist and it is significant.”²³

Yost said he found 1,800 instances of dead people receiving benefits, including 36 who died before 2014 and remained on the rolls in 2015. Suspicious transactions during the first six months of 2015 included more than 96,000 instances of the entire monthly benefit spent at once and more than \$28.5 million in even-dollar sales, which he said are uncommon for food purchases.²⁴

Nationally, the U.S. Agriculture Department reported the program had a fraud rate of 1.3 percent in 2014, down from 4 percent 15 years earlier when paper food stamps were still used. In contrast, the Government Accountability Office estimated Medicare and Medicaid programs have a fraud rate at nearly 10 percent.²⁵

Would better nutrition education decrease hunger?

Tammy Whitmire of Rabun Gap, Ga., described herself as “a good Southern girl” whose family diet was limited because

“the only way we knew how to eat vegetables was fried.” Since taking cooking classes at the Food Bank of Northeast Georgia in Clayton, however, she has learned how to prepare a variety of foods and has lost 84 pounds. She also has changed her husband’s habits “from everything fried to, ‘Oh, this [non-fried food] is really pretty good,’ ” she said.²⁶

Education plays an important part in reducing hunger and malnutrition by helping low-income families learn how to “maximize their food budget and make healthier food choices,” said Billy Shore, founder and chief executive officer of Share Our Strength, a Washington-based anti-hunger organization that sponsors cooking classes nationwide.²⁷

David Ludwig, director of the New Balance Foundation Obesity Prevention Center at Boston Children’s Hospital, says lack of knowledge has created “a generation that for the first time in human history has largely not learned how to cook and has become dependent on the food industry, not just to provide the food but to cook it for us. One can’t get the same nutritional quality [from processed foods],” says Ludwig, who also teaches at Harvard Medical School and its School of Public Health.

Since 1993, Share Our Strength has provided cooking, nutrition and shopping education to more than 265,000 low-income families. Typically the program, “Cooking Matters,” is staffed by volunteers, including chefs, and offers one-day-a-week cooking classes for six weeks, a field trip to a grocery store to learn effective shopping techniques and nutrition education.

The shopping trip teaches such skills as reading nutrition labels, comparing unit prices and identifying whole grains. Participants take home groceries after each class to practice at home. After the last class, they receive a booklet with recipes and shopping tips, a reusable grocery bag and \$10 worth of grocery coupons.²⁸

“Instead of just heating up pizzas and Hot Pockets,” Cara-Lee Langston, who teaches Cooking Matters classes in

Georgia, “helped the guys understand what goes into preparing a meal, how to eat on a budget and how to eat nutritious food,” said Shane Pauley, ministry facilitator at Pilgrim Ministries, a faith-based organization in Georgia that works with troubled men. “All guys like meat and potatoes, but she made us throw some greens and yellows and oranges in there.”²⁹

But given the many challenges facing the poor, others say, education can’t make a significant dent in hunger.

“No amount of nutrition education by itself is going to help anybody,” Drexel’s Chilton says. “You can have a family who knows that white bread is bad. But when the cost of white bread is half that of whole grain, they’re going to go for the white bread. From my perspective, that’s not an unwise choice given your economic situation.”

Northwestern’s Schanzenbach says of SNAP’s education component: “There’s not a lot of evidence that it works,” but it may be possible to make it work better.

An evaluation of Cooking Matters found real but modest improvements in participants’ behavior. Six months after completing the course, according to a survey by the Altarum Institute, a nonprofit health research and consulting organization in Ann Arbor, Mich., participants were 8 to 11 percent more likely to reduce salt consumption and to increase consumption of low-fat dairy products, lean protein and whole grains.³⁰

In a paper last year for the Heritage Foundation, Rector said evaluations have found that federal programs are as effective as Cooking Matters. One evaluation compared low-income women who participated in the Agriculture Department’s Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program with a control group who did not participate. The program participants reduced their food spending by \$10 to \$20 a month while improving the quality of their diet, he wrote. A study of the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program in Indiana found “modest but significant

reductions in food insecurity among participants,” he said.³¹

Rector said the government could improve its education programs by using interactive computer technology where people apply for food stamps. All recipients should be required to complete a course covering such topics as the cost-effectiveness of different kinds of food and the importance of buying non-perishable staples in bulk, he said.



Getty Images/Chip Somodevilla

White House Management and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney defended the Trump administration’s proposed food-aid cuts. “We’re trying to focus on both the recipients of the money and the folks who give us the money in the first place,” he said. “And I think it’s fairly compassionate to go to them and say, ‘Look, we’re not going to ask you for your hard-earned money anymore . . . unless we can guarantee to you that that money is actually going to be used in a proper function.’”

Educational materials—including recipes for preparing food quickly—should be distributed to recipients and made available at food banks, he said.³²

According to *Washington Post* food columnist Tamar Haspel, peanut butter, whole-grain pasta, whole-wheat flour, eggs, pearly barley, corn flour, brown rice and dried black beans are among cheap, nutritious foods that can be turned into healthy meals.

A person can “eat pretty well for under \$4 per day (about the average food stamp benefit) by combining those

foods with somewhat more expensive chicken thighs, sweet potatoes, carrots, frozen corn, walnuts, yogurt or frozen broccoli, Haspel said. But, she said, that requires time and skill, which many food stamp recipients don’t have.³³

Some experts suggest that physicians should play a bigger role in nutrition education for the poor. New treatment guidelines from the American Diabetes Association, for instance, urge clinicians

to ask patients about food insecurity. And doctors began setting up tables at the Houston Food Bank and offered blood-sugar tests, enrollment in a blood-sugar reduction program and bags of healthy food.

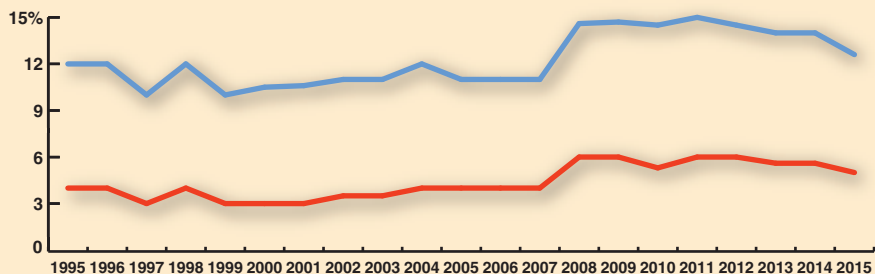
A study of such programs in Texas, California and Ohio found modest improvements in participants with the worst blood sugar readings. But behavior of some participants also illustrated the hurdles education efforts can face.

At a Corpus Christi, Texas, food bank, for example, 61-year-old Bruce

Hunger Falling in U.S.

Food insecurity among U.S. households has been declining since 2011 after jumping in 2008 during the height of the 2007-09 recession. In 2015, 12.5 percent of the nation's households suffered from food insecurity, or went hungry at times, and 5 percent had very low food security, or reduced food intake at times during the year.

Percentage of U.S. Households With Food Insecurity or Very Low Food Security, 1995-2015



Source: "Trends in prevalence rates of food insecurity and very low food security in U.S. households, 1995-2015," Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, <http://tinyurl.com/y7nnawkc>

Food Insecurity (includes low and very low food security)
Very Low Food Security

Cook enrolled in the anti-diabetes program and picked up his bag of healthy vegetables. The next day, however, he returned to pick up a dozen chocolate-chip-and-M&M cookies. "I know what I'm supposed to eat and not supposed to eat," he said. "But I still eat what I want."³⁴

Should federal aid programs stop paying for junk food?

Running late for a medical checkup, the Salas family scoured their kitchen for a quick breakfast. The 9-year-old picked sweetened cereal and chocolate milk, the 4-year-old cheddar potato chips and a granola bar. For the 40-year-old single mother, it was an insulin injection to treat her diabetes.

Living on food stamps in southernmost Texas, Blanca Salas was feeding her children the way she herself ate, and she was passing on the expected health consequences, her doctor said. A 13-year-old-daughter showed the symptoms of early-onset diabetes, while the 9-year-old was taking cholesterol medicine.

Their doctor gave them a stark warning about the need to change their diets: "Either you address this now or it will be too late. I can give you medicine, but that's not the permanent solution."³⁵

The Salas family's eating habits mirror those of many other food stamp recipients. Overall, recipients spend 20 percent of their food budgets on junk, according to a 2016 Agriculture Department study of purchases at a nationwide grocery chain. Soft drinks alone account for 5 percent of their purchases. Another 5 percent goes for other sweetened beverages, such as energy drinks, sweetened teas and fruit juice, which health experts say is not a healthy alternative to the other sweet drinks. The remaining 10 percent buys desserts, salty snacks and candy.³⁶

Another study, published last year in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, found that 61 percent of low-income Americans had unhealthy diets during 2012-13, compared with 36 percent of affluent Americans. Americans are eating more whole grains, fruits, nuts and seeds, while consuming fewer

white potatoes and sugary beverages, the researchers said. But the improvement is greater among the affluent than among those living in or near poverty.³⁷

Health advocates say such findings demonstrate that food stamps, the nation's largest nutrition program, support unhealthy eating by the nation's poor, which contributes to obesity, diabetes and other diet-related illnesses among low-income Americans. Those advocates want to restrict food stamps, school lunches and other federally funded food aid to healthy foods.

Nutrition standards already apply in the \$17.8 billion-a-year school feeding programs and the \$6 billion Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, which is known as WIC. But the Trump administration has delayed the implementation of stricter school-meal standards, and food stamps can buy anything that can be consumed except alcoholic beverages, nonfood items and food prepared in restaurants and other businesses.³⁸

Opponents of tougher restrictions say the poor should be able to purchase whatever foods they want. Besides, some opponents say, restrictions wouldn't prevent the poor from continuing unhealthy eating habits.

"As an economist I can tell you that, if I say you can't purchase sugar-sweetened beverages with your food stamp money, people still will likely purchase sugar-sweetened beverages with their own cash," Schanzenbach says. "We should focus on policies that are likely to change behavior, not on symbolic actions that are not likely to change behavior."

The debate has spawned unlikely alliances, with liberals and conservatives found on both sides of the dispute.

The food and beverage industries, not surprisingly, have spent millions of dollars to lobby against restrictions. But the Obama administration's Agriculture Department also opposed food stamp standards, insisting that states and cities prove that nutrition requirements would work before imposing

them. (No state has done so to the department's satisfaction.) Department officials have said the proposed restrictions would be unfair to food stamp recipients by limiting their choices and would be too complex to administer.

At the same time, though, the Obama administration imposed requirements on school meal programs, which feed more than 31 million children, and proposed raising the number of healthy foods that stores accepting food stamps must carry.³⁹

Among those who have called for food stamp standards are mayors of 18 major cities, members of at least 14 state legislatures, the American Medical Association and the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a liberal consumer organization in Washington that focuses on nutrition and health. Two U.S. senators — conservative Republican Tom Coburn of Oklahoma and liberal Democrat Tom Harkin of Iowa — offered an unsuccessful amendment to the 2013 farm bill that would have allowed states to test junk-food restrictions.⁴⁰

Federal food programs should follow the Agriculture Department's healthy-diet guidelines, which are updated every five years, the Obesity Prevention Center's Ludwig says. Because food stamps can buy unhealthy foods, he says, "the public winds up paying twice — once purchasing sugary beverages and the second time for diet-related diseases and higher Medicare and Medicaid and insurance costs for everybody." If government food programs promoted nutritious eating, he adds, "it would pay back the whole society in a healthier, more productive work force and lower food related diseases."

In addition to opposing SNAP standards and stiffer school-lunch requirements, food industry organizations fought proposed regulations to increase the variety of fruits, vegetables and other healthy food that would have to be stocked by stores that accept food stamps. While supermarkets could have met the requirements proposed by the



Getty Images/Portland Press Herald/Gabe Souza

Volunteers deliver Christmas dinner to a home in Westbrook, Maine, as part of a Meals on Wheels program in the state. The Trump administration wants to reduce spending on federal programs that help finance Meals on Wheels, as well as impose tougher eligibility rules for food assistance.

department early last year, the National Association of Convenience Stores said, more than 90,000 smaller markets would not have enough shelf and refrigeration space to comply.⁴¹

Small grocers were able to meet WIC's nutrition requirements and could meet new food stamp standards as well, the Center for Science in the Public Interest argued. Foods stamps currently perpetuate "food deserts" — areas without easy access to fresh, healthy, affordable food — by "paying retailers for stocking junk foods," the group said. "A healthier SNAP would help communities overcome the food-desert problem by creating demand for healthy foods."⁴²

Congress in 2014 told the administration to promulgate grocery standards, but this year lawmakers said the requirements were too strict. The Agriculture Department then delayed implementing the new standards, which would have required stores to carry 84 healthy-food items, up from the current 12 but half of the 168 the department initially proposed in February 2016.⁴³

BACKGROUND

Early Aid

When Mabel McFiggan walked into Joseph Mutolo's store in Rochester, N.Y., on May 16, 1939, she became the first person to use a food stamp. At that time, recipients purchased the stamps at a discount. They came in two colors — orange for buying any food, and blue for buying food that the Agriculture Department designated as surplus. The stamps were intended not only to feed the hungry during the Great Depression but also to boost the sale of food that farmers couldn't sell in an economy reeling from 25 percent unemployment, low wages and other problems.⁴⁴

As Milo Perkins, the first food stamp administrator, put it: "We got a picture of a gorge, with farm surpluses on one cliff and undernourished city folks with outstretched hands on the other.

We set out to find a practical way to build a bridge across that chasm.”⁴⁵

While the food stamps of 1939 were the precursor of today’s largest food-aid program — renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in 2008, but still commonly called food stamps — they were far from the earliest American attempts to feed the hungry.

The federal government’s first forays into food and nutrition sought to encourage and improve food production.

In 1862, the Agriculture Department was created. The Homestead Act that year gave away 160-acre plots to applicants who agreed to live on and farm the land for five years, and Congress passed the Morrill Act to support land-grant colleges, which would research and teach “agriculture and the mechanic arts.”

The land-grant system eventually grew to encompass more than 100 state colleges and universities, as well as the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, which distributes the findings of agricultural research to farmers and others interested in the topic. The Agriculture Department itself began conducting research in 1883.⁴⁶

Early feeding programs were aimed at children. In 1853, the Children’s Aid Society of New York was serving meals to vocational school students. Around the beginning of the 20th century, school meal programs were begun in Philadelphia and Boston, and by 1918 schools were serving lunch in at least 86 cities, according to a survey by the New York Bureau of Municipal Research.⁴⁷

Only five cities aimed the programs at the needy, however. Instead, most of the programs were begun because school executives had concluded that many high school students lived too far from school to go home for lunch. By 1937, 15 states authorized public schools to serve lunch, but just four made special provisions for the poor.

By then, the Depression had drawn the federal government into action. In 1932 it began making loans to pay school lunch employees in a few com-

munities and expanded the lending to 39 states two years later. In 1933, the Federal Surplus Relief Corp. began buying surplus commodities from struggling farmers and distributing the food to hunger relief agencies around the country. In 1936 the corporation began giving surplus food to school lunch programs.

It also used funding from the Works Progress Administration — the federal agency that put the unemployed to work on public works projects — to pay lunch workers in almost every community in the country, and it supplied part-time lunch workers through the National Youth Administration.⁴⁸

To encourage Americans to eat healthy, the Agriculture Department released its first dietary recommendations in 1941. They urged Americans to eat meals that met specific targets for calories, protein, iron, calcium and several major vitamins. The 1940s also saw the birth of the Green Revolution of scientifically based agriculture improvements that greatly increased production and dealt major blows to hunger around the world.⁴⁹

Federal school lunch participation peaked at 6.2 million children in 93,000 schools in the 1941-42 academic year, during which the United States entered World War II and food and money were diverted to the military. The food stamp program ended in 1943, when the government determined that “the conditions that brought the program into being — unmarketable food surpluses and widespread unemployment — no longer existed.”

Congress authorized \$60 million to feed 1.5 million children in 1943-44, support that grew to a new high of 6.7 million students two years later. Schools participating — more than 45,000 — remained below the 1941-42 rate, however. In 1946, Congress required that the meals meet “minimum nutritional requirements.”⁵⁰

Congress authorized creation of a new food stamp program in 1959, but President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s administration didn’t follow through.

Shortly after his inauguration in 1961, President John F. Kennedy announced a pilot program for food stamps that sold the stamps at a discount. These stamps could purchase all items intended for human consumption except alcoholic beverages and imported food.

The Agriculture Department — which recorded Mabel McFiggan’s first purchase of the original food stamp program — also recorded Mr. and Mrs. Alderson Muncy’s purchase of a can of pork and beans with discounted stamps at Henderson’s Supermarket in Paynesville, W.Va., on May 29, 1961.⁵¹

‘Great Society’ Era

Just as the Depression spurred creation of food programs in the 1930s, President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society, which aimed to eliminate racial injustice and poverty, increased government food aid in the 1960s and made food stamps permanent in 1964. “In a land rich in harvest, children just must not go hungry,” Johnson said in his 1965 inaugural address.⁵²

The actions were inspired in part by journalistic and congressional exposés of significant hunger in impoverished urban and rural areas. Among the most famous was a description of then-Sen. Robert F. Kennedy of New York crying as he rubbed the distended belly of a hungry child who sat on his lap in the Mississippi Delta region in 1967. Also influential were reports from doctors about “Third World diseases and hunger in the South,” according to Weill, of the Food Research and Action Center.⁵³

The government began to issue food stamps for free in 1979 to those who qualified. By 2004, all states had replaced stamps with plastic cards similar to debit cards. In addition to being less cumbersome to manage than stamps, they were expected to reduce theft and fraud because they required use of a personal identification number and created a record of all transactions, making it possible to

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Chronology

1900s-1940s

Government action to alleviate hunger waxes and wanes.

1918

School lunches served in at least 86 cities.

1932

Federal government makes loans to schools to pay their lunch employees.

1933

U.S. government buys surplus commodities from farmers, redistributes the food to hunger relief agencies.

1936

School lunch programs receive federal surplus food.

1939

First food stamps issued.

1941

Agriculture Department releases its first dietary guidelines.

1943

First food stamp program ends.

1960s-1993

President Lyndon B. Johnson's anti-poverty programs expand efforts to relieve hunger.

1961

Modern food stamps distributed in pilot program; becomes permanent in 1964.

1966

Federally funded school breakfast program begins as pilot project; becomes permanent in 1975.

1968

Federally funded summer meals program for children begins.

1972

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) created.

1981

Federal Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program distributes surplus commodities to the needy.

1993

Share Our Strength anti-hunger organization begins nutrition-focused cooking and shopping classes for low-income families.

1995-Present

Republicans and Democrats battle over anti-hunger policies, and major recession worsens the hunger problem.

1995

Republican-controlled Congress begins cutting funds for food stamps, school breakfasts and summer feeding programs for children. Food charities report jump in requests for emergency assistance.

2004

Food stamps replaced with electronic cards.

2007

Deep recession begins; ends in 2009.

2008

Hunger rises sharply. . . . Food-stamp program renamed Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

2009

First lady Michelle Obama plants White House garden.

2010

Congress allows high-poverty school districts to serve free meals to all students, requires chain-restaurant menus to list calories by 2017, calls for phase-in of stricter nutrition rules for school meals starting in 2012-13.

2014

President Barack Obama and Republican-led Congress agree to 10-year, \$8.7 billion cut in food stamps. . . . Government reports food stamp fraud rate of 1.3 percent, down from 4 percent 15 years earlier.

2015

Hunger declines as nation continues economic recovery.

2016

Pilot program allows Medicaid-eligible children to automatically qualify for school meals. . . . Food and Drug Administration mandates more informative nutrition panels for packaged foods by 2018. . . . Federal study finds food stamp recipients spend one-fifth of their food budgets on junk food. . . . *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports 61 percent of low-income Americans have unhealthy diets compared with 36 percent of the affluent.

2017

President Trump begins to reverse Obama-era hunger and nutrition initiatives, including postponing implementation of the 2018 nutrition-label mandate, the requirement that restaurant menus show calorie counts and stricter school lunch nutrition rules. Trump also proposes deep cuts in anti-hunger programs, including SNAP, Meals on Wheels and nutrition research. . . . Study shows that one-third of community college students go hungry at times. . . . U.S. counts 60,000 private, nonprofit anti-hunger organizations serving 46 million people.

Offering Fresh Produce to the Poor

Programs bring healthy foods to low-income areas and “food deserts.”

The Dollar Fifty Plus convenience store in a low-income neighborhood in Toledo, Ohio, used to be a fresh-produce-free zone. Now the store carries fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain bread and healthy snacks such as baked chips and nuts.

“It’s something new for me and for my customers because we’re so used to having unhealthy food,” owner Erma Blakely said about a year after she began offering the healthy items in August 2015. “I enjoy it because I’ve dropped some pounds myself.”

Blakely is offering healthy foods with help from the Toledo-Lucas County Healthy Corner Store Initiative, part of a nationwide campaign begun by The Food Trust, a Philadelphia-based organization that works to increase access to nutritious food. The initiative is part of an effort to bring healthy foods to “food deserts,” which the Agriculture Department defines as areas without easy access to fresh, healthy, affordable food. Stores in those areas typically do not stock many, if any, healthy groceries.

The department estimates that 23.5 million Americans live in food deserts and that the lack of access to produce contributes to poor diet and higher levels of obesity and other food-related ailments, such as diabetes and heart disease.

When small stores in Lucas County join the initiative, they receive a wooden produce stand, access to a wholesale distributor of fresh foods, free marketing assistance and a kickoff event that includes tastings of fresh-food dishes, recipes and nutritional advice from dietitians of the Toledo-Lucas County Health Department.

Seventeen stores in the Toledo-area have joined the project,¹ and about 700 are participating in New Jersey, Delaware and

Pennsylvania, according to Candace Young, the Food Trusts’ associate director for research and evaluation. Because the project is decentralized, the trust doesn’t know how many stores participate nationwide, but there is “quite a number,” says Karen Shore, the organization’s director of consulting and technical assistance.

The Food Trust has evaluated the project’s effectiveness in the Philadelphia area, finding that produce sales increased more than 60 percent at two stores studied and that produce sales more than doubled at a store on days when cooking classes and other programs were offered.

Shore says the trust has not attempted to determine the projects’ impact on customers’ health because “we would not look to a healthy corner store program alone to improve diet quality. But we also want to improve access to supermarkets, help farmers’ markets flourish, connect our farmers, ranchers, and fishermen with our schools, help food pantries stock delicious fresh foods, and so on.”

Studies say poverty and crime make low-income neighborhoods less attractive to supermarket chains. Other studies have shown that small stores are less likely than larger markets to stock healthy foods, in part because of limited space on shelves and in refrigerated compartments.

Low-income families also may eat poorly because they lack knowledge of good nutrition.

Researchers say that families with higher levels of income and education tend to eat healthier. After a 17,000-square-foot supermarket opened in a Bronx, N.Y., food desert in 2011, residents didn’t change their diets. Food experts say healthy diets don’t have to cost more than unhealthy ones, but low-

Continued from p. 566

flag nonfood purchases.⁵⁴

Congress created a pilot school-breakfast program in 1966 to help schools with “nutritionally needy” children and permanently authorized it in 1975. Schools with “severe need” received extra aid.⁵⁵ The Summer Food Service Program was established in 1968 to feed children when school is not in session.

WIC was created in 1972 to improve the nutrition of pregnant women, new mothers and their young children. The Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program was started in 1981 to distribute surplus commodities to the needy.⁵⁶

Under pressure from health organizations and the Clinton Foundation

— founded in 1997 by then-President Bill Clinton — the soft-drink industry in 2005 and 2006 agreed to severely limit the sale of its products in schools, beginning a process that now sees few soft-drink sales there.⁵⁷

Republican Cuts

The robustness of federal food aid rose and fell over the years depending on economic conditions and whether liberals or conservatives held Congress and the White House. After Republicans took control of Congress in 1995, for example, they cut spending on food stamps, school breakfasts and summer

feeding programs for children. Food charities subsequently reported a jump in requests for emergency assistance.⁵⁸

Food aid increased significantly during the 2007-09 recession, and SNAP work requirements were waived across the country until last year, when 22 states either lost their waivers due to an improving economy or voluntarily gave them up.⁵⁹

President Obama sought major reforms of both hunger and nutrition programs during his time in the White House (2009-2017). Much of the effort was led by first lady Michelle Obama, who planted a White House garden to encourage Americans to grow and eat fresh produce, promoted exercise and advocated for healthier school meals.

income families may not have the knowledge, facilities and time to cook well from scratch.

To address some of these issues, the corner store initiative offers in-store nutrition education, cooking demonstrations and blood-pressure checks. It also teaches nutrition at nearby schools.²

To help food stamp recipients prepare healthy meals, the Arlington Food Assistance Center in Virginia demonstrates how to cook foods that are being distributed at the time, says Rebecca Middleton, executive director of the Alliance to End Hunger, an association of more than 90 service and advocacy organizations that work for food security in the United States and abroad. “Folks can taste it and get advice,” she says.

The Agriculture Department early next year plans to roll out a two-year pilot project to test using food stamps, formally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to purchase groceries online. The test will occur in urban and rural parts of Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Alabama and Washington state.

“Online purchasing is a potential lifeline for SNAP participants living in urban neighborhoods and rural communities where access to healthy food choices can be limited,” outgoing Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said when announcing the project in January.

The department already has tested online ordering, but payment had to be made in person upon delivery. In the new test, payment can be made when the order is placed.³

In the Boston area, “food rescue” organizations get fresh produce to 85 food programs by collecting unsold items from grocery stores, wholesalers and farmers. Regular contributors include Whole Foods, Trader Joe’s, Costco and smaller grocers.



AP Photo/Matt Rourke

A customer learns about the nutritional advantages of whole grain tortillas at the Indiana Food Market in Philadelphia, one of hundreds of small grocery stores nationwide that bring fresh produce to so-called food deserts in poor neighborhoods.

“The same way recycling has become second nature, so should food rescue,” said Ashley Stanley, founder of Lovin’ Spoonfuls, one of the rescue organizations.⁴

— Tom Price

¹ Michelle Liu, “Store expands selection through health-food initiative,” *Toledo Blade*, June 22, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/yboyctvj>; Jillian Kravatz, “Fresh food closer to home,” *Toledo Blade*, Aug. 10, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/y8h6s43t>.

² “What We Do: In Corner Stores,” The Food Trust, <http://tinyurl.com/chgaj2b>.

³ “USDA Announces Retailer Volunteers for SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot,” U.S. Department of Agriculture, Jan. 5, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/yajb7jm7>.

⁴ Lisa Zwirn, “Recovering wholesome food and getting it to those in need,” *The Boston Globe*, Feb. 5, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/khk4lfb>.

The 2,800-square-foot garden — planted where Eleanor Roosevelt tended a Victory Garden during World War II — fed the Obama family, guests at White House dinners and clients of Miriam’s Kitchen, which provides food and shelter to the homeless about a mile from the White House.⁶⁰

For his part, the president appointed a national task force on childhood obesity; established pilot programs to provide electronic cards to buy food during the summer for children eligible for free and reduced-price school meals; started an experimental program to streamline eligibility for school meals by allowing states to automatically enroll students for free and reduced price lunches if

they qualify for Medicaid; allowed schools in high-poverty areas to provide free meals to all students without collecting eligibility documents from each family; and added a cash benefit to WIC for purchase of fruits and vegetables.

Obama’s Food and Drug Administration approved a revised Nutrition Facts panel on packaged foods that would have, among other things, displayed calories more prominently. The agency also required calorie counts on vending machines and chain-restaurant menus by mid-2018. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention increased its promotion of breast feeding to improve the nutrition of young children.⁶¹

Obama compromised with the

Republican-controlled House to pass the 2014 farm bill, which included an \$8.7 billion cut in food stamps over the following decade — a reduction that some on the left harshly criticized.⁶² But the administration’s most controversial action — promoted by the first lady — was strengthening nutrition requirements for food sold in schools.

School Nutrition

Initially not contentious, the requirements passed the Senate unanimously in 2010. The provisions doubled the amount of fruits and vegetables that had to be served at lunch, required

Celebrity Chefs Fight Hunger

“We feed the few, but we need to be taking care of feeding the many.”

Early in his working life, Michael Babin was a congressional aide and a lobbyist. Later, after he entered the restaurant business, he maintained his interest in public policy. Still later as a business success — 2014 “Restaurateur of the Year” and owner of 11 Washington-area restaurants, a wine shop, a bakery, a butcher shop and a catering service — Babin found himself able to act on that interest.

In 2010, he founded the Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food and Agriculture, which delivers fresh food to low-income neighborhoods and operates a farm. The effort is one of the many ways American restaurateurs are fighting hunger, from raising money for food charities to running food-service operations in low-income schools.¹

“Every responsible business tries to do something positive in its community,” Babin says. “We decided we could have the biggest impact in the food system. You just open your eyes, and you see all of the issues and problems.”

Arcadia is based at Woodlawn Plantation in Alexandria, Va., once part of George Washington’s Mount Vernon estate, where Martha Washington’s granddaughter Nelly and her husband, Lawrence Lewis, built a Georgian/Federal-style house. In 1952 the house became the first site operated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.²

On the plantation, Arcadia tends a garden that doubles as a teaching tool for children. It also runs a farm at Woodlawn that demonstrates sustainable agricultural techniques and produces food for two “mobile markets” — converted buses that sell affordable food in low-income areas.

At mobile market stops and in schools, Arcadia teaches people how to prepare the food in inexpensive and nutritious ways.

Another restaurateur from the Washington area, chef Daniel

Giusti, is trying to improve school lunches, beginning in New London, Conn., where 91 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced-price meals. Giusti said he went to New London because of the district’s small size, which would make it easier to implement change, and the partnership he could forge with schools Superintendent Manuel Rivera.³

Giusti, who was executive chef at 1789, one of Washington’s most prominent restaurants, had been the No. 2 chef at Noma in Copenhagen, a two-star Michelin awardee that is listed as one of the top dining spots in the world and where a couple can drop \$1,000 on food and drink.⁴

“I got into cooking because I come from a big Italian family,” Giusti said. “I like the idea of feeding people,” but he became weary of the high-pressure world of fine dining.⁵

Giusti and two other chefs prepared the meals at New London High School and a local elementary school in the just-completed academic year. He is planning to run the kitchens at four other schools in the fall.

Students have been treated to chicken curry; roasted sweet potatoes; spiced chicken tacos; pizza with barbecue chicken; and apples or pears poached in green tea for dessert.

The challenge is to make healthy food that children will eat, Giusti said. He tells his chefs that “it’s not about you, it’s about the kids. . . . You need to just make food that they like.”

The kids give most of Giusti’s meals a thumbs-up.

“The food didn’t taste this good last year,” 11-year-old Fortune Adekoya said. “The old cheese was like plastic,” seventh-grader Mallory Suprenant said of the pizza. “Now it tastes real.”⁶

Not all of Giusti’s offerings hit the spot, however. Of his butternut squash soup, he said: “They hated it — thought it was revolting,” so it’s not on the menu anymore.

use of whole grains and cut the amount of salt, sugar and fat that could be offered. The new rules covered not just lunches but all food offered at schools, including in vending machines.

The School Nutrition Association, which represents school food managers and vendors, initially supported but then turned against the legislation, complaining that it was unpopular with students and cost too much. The association asked the Agriculture Department to allow more salt and less whole grains, saying students would find that tastier.⁶³

When the regulations began to take effect during the 2012-13 academic year,

some schools said some students — especially those who pay for their food — were not buying school meals. Some schools reported significant revenue declines because of lower consumption.

Missouri reported that the number of lunches served statewide dropped 11 percent from 2009-10 to 2013-14. In Georgia, the Gwinnett County school district reported the percentage of students eating lunch regularly fell from 81 percent in 2010 to 69 percent in 2016.⁶⁴

Some students started posting online photos of food they didn’t like with the hashtag “ThanksMichelleObama.” The first lady dismissed the students’

complaints, saying, “You know what? Kids don’t like math either. What are we gonna do, stop teaching math?”⁶⁵

The rules came under ideological attack as well, with Daren Bakst, a research fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, declaring that “it’s not up to the government to dictate the personal dietary choices of individuals.”⁶⁶

There were signs, however, that time might change the students’ tastes.

“The little guys are eating more fruits and vegetables than they were three years ago,” Marlene Pfeiffer, director of food services for Missouri’s Parkway School District, west of St. Louis, said

Because cooking from scratch is more labor-intensive and can use more-expensive ingredients than cooking with canned or processed food, Giusti and Rivera need private donations. So far, Target has kicked in \$100,000.

Giusti's newly formed company Brigaid has a \$130,000-a-year contract to feed the students. In addition, each chef costs the district about \$60,000 annually.⁷

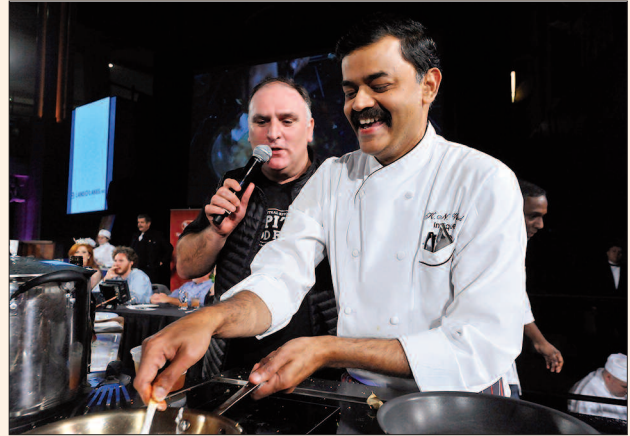
Superstar chef José Andrés — with 26 restaurants from South Beach, Fla., to Hollywood, Calif., to Mexico City — has been a leader in the chefs-against-hunger movement, raising funds for local food programs and heading anti-hunger efforts in Haiti and other poor nations.

“We feed the few, but we need to be taking care of feeding the many,” he said.⁸

Andrés began his anti-hunger work with DC Central Kitchen, which prepares 3 million meals a year for homeless shelters, public and private schools that serve low-income children and other nonprofit organizations. The kitchen also trains homeless and low-income people for careers in the food industry.⁹ Andrés said he was drawn to the organization because “it does more than feed people — it employs and trains people to put them on a new path in life.”¹⁰

Andrés founded World Central Kitchen, a global network of 60 chefs who promote health, education, employment, food safety and healthy school meals, as well as distribute clean cookstoves to replace indoor cooking fires, and train low-income people for jobs in the hospitality industry. They are active in Brazil, Cambodia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Nicaragua, Zambia and the United States.¹¹

— Tom Price



Getty Images/Larry French

Renowned chef José Andrés, left, has been a leader in the chefs-against-hunger movement, raising funds for local food programs in the United States as well as in Haiti and other poor nations.

¹ “Our Programs,” Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food & Agriculture, <http://tinyurl.com/yazp5k7a>.

² “Explore Woodlawn,” Woodlawn and Pope-Leighey House, <http://tinyurl.com/yaeady69>.

³ Sophie Haigney, “Why is a chef from one of the world’s top restaurants cooking in public school kitchens?” *The Boston Globe*, Oct. 25, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/y8d84tp8>.

⁴ Tim Carman, “Noma chef Daniel Giusti keeps the world’s top restaurant running,” *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/y7x6mo4w>.

⁵ Haigney, *op. cit.*

⁶ *Ibid.*; Greg Smith, “Chefs transforming New London school lunches,” *The (New London, Conn.) Day*, Sept. 23, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/ybkz5r59>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Tim Carman, “José Andrés gets political at food conference in D.C.,” *The Washington Post*, March 28, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/yb6b3qfn>.

⁹ “About Us,” DC Central Kitchen, <http://tinyurl.com/yd8c26yl>.

¹⁰ Tovin Lapan, “With citizenship in hand, chef now ready to focus on SLS Las Vegas opening,” *Las Vegas Sun*, Dec. 30, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/ya3e2ovb>.

¹¹ “About,” World Central Kitchen, <http://tinyurl.com/yc7rmwqw>.

in 2014. “It takes a few years to get the palate turned around, and that’s harder for older students.”⁶⁷ ■

CURRENT SITUATION

Rules Delayed

Critics of the Obama nutrition requirements are encouraged by the

steps the Trump administration is taking to reverse those rules.

Earlier this year, the administration delayed the menu rules until next May and the new Nutrition Facts label indefinitely.

Nutrition and consumer advocates condemned the delays, while industry groups gave mixed reactions to the labels decisions.

“We’re very pleased that our voices have been heard” on the menu rules, said Tim McIntyre, chairman of the American Pizza Community trade group. But Cicely Simpson, executive vice president of the National Restaurant Association,

said the delays leave the industry under a “patchwork” of state and local regulations that is “even more burdensome for restaurants to implement.”⁶⁸

“To ease the regulatory burden on the economy,” a coalition of 17 food industry organizations had asked the administration to postpone implementation of the new Nutrition Facts panel. But some companies — including Mars Inc., known for its candies — had begun producing the new label and said the delay would harm them.⁶⁹

“The fact that we’ll have the added-sugar declaration and the percent daily value, but our competitors won’t? That

just ends up confusing consumers,” said Brad Figel, vice president of public affairs for Mars in North America.⁷⁰

Jim O’Hara, director of health promotion policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, noted the industry divisions over nutrition reforms. “Just like with the menu-labeling delay, this [Trump] administration is denying consumers critical information they need to make decisions, and [delaying the new Nutrition Facts panel] is throwing the food industry into disarray.”⁷¹

with little federal regulation, further weakening them.⁷²

Budget Cuts

The president has not moved to create block grants, but his proposed 2018 budget seeks cuts to food-related programs, with some conservatives joining liberals in supporting the programs. Because food aid is in the same legislation that funds farm subsidies, Congress

food aid to families earning more than 130 percent of the federal poverty threshold, which for a family of four is \$32,319; charging fees to stores that accept food stamps; capping aid to large families at the level received by a family of six; and slashing funding for scientific research.⁷³

“Requiring states to have “skin in the game” will improve efficiency because “red states and blue states manage their own money better than they do federal money,” the Heritage Foundation’s Rector says of shifting food-stamp costs.

Budget Director Mulvaney said Meals on Wheels is among “programs that don’t work.” “Meals on Wheels sounds great,” he said, but “we’re not going to spend on programs that cannot show that they actually deliver the promises that we’ve made to people.”⁷⁴

Mulvaney said the administration proposes cutting research funding at the National Institutes of Health [NIH] because “we think there’s been mission creep. We think they do things that are outside their core functions.”⁷⁵

Noting that food stamp rolls remain substantially above prerecession levels, Mulvaney asked whether “there [are] folks on SNAP who shouldn’t be.”⁷⁶

Some say this is because the recovery has been slow. Those who say “yes” point to Maine, where a tougher work requirement in 2015 led 80 percent of those affected by the requirement to drop out of the program. Rector says that indicates a significant number of able-bodied adult recipients “had an off-the-books job” or “other resources the government doesn’t know about.”

Among those arguing against the proposed cuts is the Obesity Prevention Center’s Ludwig. The NIH budget should not be reduced, he says, because it is “the main sponsor of nutrition and obesity research,” and obesity is “the No. 1 nutritional problem and the most important medical problem in the United States, now exceeding tobacco as a cause of death and disability.”

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Getty Images/Win McNamee

First lady Michelle Obama tends the White House garden with Florida fifth-grader Emilio Vega in 2013. President Obama sought to reform food programs during his eight years in office, including improving nutrition for schoolchildren and offering more free and reduced-price school meals. Many of the president’s efforts were led by the first lady, who first planted the garden in 2009.

Schools can request exemption from the whole-grain requirements and can wait until 2020 to resume implementing the rules on salt.

School Nutrition Association Chief Executive Patricia Montague praised the administration for giving schools needed flexibility. But Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, said the postponement will be “locking in dangerously high sodium levels” in school meals. Wootan also worried that Trump might turn school-meals programs into block grants to the states

is unlikely to make big reductions, Doar of the American Enterprise Institute says. “By being combined, it buys off urban support for expensive subsidies for the agriculture industry and it gets rural, conservative support for a very expensive safety net.”

The biggest proposed cut in federal food stamp spending would come from requiring states to cover a quarter of the costs by 2023. Other reductions would come from decreasing the time unemployed able-bodied adults without minor children can collect benefits; prohibiting states from providing federal

At Issue:

Should the federal government stop funding free school lunches for students who aren't poor?



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the federal welfare system is being turned on its head. American taxpayers are now being forced to provide welfare to wealthy families.

Through the Community Eligibility Provision of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, students from middle-class and wealthy families can receive free school meals courtesy of taxpayers, as long as 40 percent of students within a school, group of schools or school district are deemed eligible for free meals.

The system is so extreme that it is possible that a school could provide free meals to all its students without having a single low-income student enrolled. In fact, all the students could come from wealthy families.

Congress needs to eliminate the Community Eligibility Provision immediately.

There's really only one critical point for policymakers and the public to remember: eliminating the Community Eligibility Provision wouldn't change the fact that all students who are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals would remain eligible.

Admittedly, such a change would mean free meals wouldn't go to those who aren't in need, but that's the entire point. Usually, when welfare benefits are going to those who are not in need, this draws serious concern over mismanagement of taxpayer dollars. Just because the federal government has given its blessing to handing out free meals regardless of need doesn't change the fact that this is still waste and abuse, and it undermines the legitimacy of the school meal programs.

Proponents of the Community Eligibility Provision claim it will reduce the administrative burden on schools. This is a worthy goal. However, it's amusing that these proponents are generally the same individuals who want to maintain the biggest school meal-related burden on schools: the federal school meal standards.

Further, while reducing administrative burden is important, it doesn't justify ignoring the necessary requirements of operating a means-tested welfare system. For any such system, the government must determine the means of potential welfare recipients.

Congress is taking taxpayer dollars from lower-income households to funnel welfare benefits to higher-income households, creating a "reverse Robin Hood" policy. This inexcusable wealth transfer is creating even greater dependence on government.

The federal school meal program, which is designed to help those in need, should help only those in need. It's sad that such an obvious and common-sense point even has to be made.



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all of us, in good conscience, know that everyone deserves to have adequate nutrition. So this question is a little problematic: It implies a judgment of who is "deserving," especially when not everyone agrees on who is "poor."

Food hardships go far beyond the federal poverty line, which is just \$24,600 for a family of four. Poverty is not a static condition. Income volatility among low-wage earners living close to the poverty line can lead to food insecurity. Almost half of food-insecure households have incomes between 130 and 200 percent of the poverty line. Food insecurity accounts for poor health, truncated child development, poor school performance and suicidal ideation among teenagers. On top of that, school breakfasts and lunches reduce absenteeism and improve cognitive performance, grades and standardized-test scores.

At the core is the Community Eligibility Provision. It allows schools with more than 40 percent of students eligible for other public assistance programs to apply to provide free meals to all students. The provision reduces administrative costs and helps buoy communities with concentrated poverty through hard times.

Children in high-poverty areas are hit hard by exposure to violence, stress and environmental hazards that affect everyone who lives there, not just those classified as poor. Remember, a few hungry kids can disrupt an entire classroom.

Because of Philadelphia's high concentrated poverty, categorical eligibility was in place years before the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 implemented a more efficient way of funding school meals. The Agriculture Department found that before 2010, when the Philadelphia School District was piloting community eligibility, the district had saved 20,480 hours of staff time, an average 19 cents per meal, in a single year. That's a great return on investment: more-effective administrators, less red tape, less hunger, smarter kids.

The provision has been adopted in every state, with high take-up rates in Kentucky, Georgia, Tennessee, North Dakota and Wisconsin. Across America, school districts are taking more control over how they choose to nourish their kids; they are investing in America's brain trust.

Still can't see the wisdom? Go to a high-poverty area and stand in the cafeteria. Stare down those hungry kids whose parents are doing their best — often working multiple jobs — but can't get ahead and otherwise wouldn't qualify for a free lunch. Pulling their meals away from them would be shortsighted.

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Drexel's Chilton says she is especially worried about making states shoulder more of the food stamp burden because "I'm not sure state legislators are protective of the most vulnerable people."

"The federal nutrition programs are set up to be countercyclical," said Duke Storen, senior director for research, advocacy and partnership development at Share Our Strength. "They expand to meet increased need during down times and contract when the economy and the economic profile of Americans improves." States — most of which are constitutionally required to balance their budgets every year — can't run deficits when their tax revenues decline.⁷⁷

"If you look at what happened during the Great Recession, SNAP responded to meet the need and TANF didn't," Middleton of the Alliance to End Hunger says, referring to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, a block-grant program that provides aid to needy pregnant women and to families with one or more dependent children.

Capping aid to large families is "totally inconsistent with the goals of SNAP as an anti-hunger program," said Craig Gundersen, an agricultural economist at the University of Illinois who studies food stamps. "This all derives from that old canard that people have more children to get more welfare benefits."⁷⁸

Weill at the Food Research and Action Center said he worries that participation fees would cause small retailers in poor communities to stop accepting food stamps.⁷⁹

Among the conservative Republicans opposing some of the cuts is Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, the former Georgia governor. Perdue told the House Agriculture Committee that SNAP is "a very important, effective program" and that "you don't try to fix things that aren't broken."⁸⁰ He reaffirmed that position after the White House released the budget, which was prepared before he assumed his administration post.⁸¹

Rep. Mark Meadows, R-N.C., chairman of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, defended Meals on Wheels, saying "I've delivered meals to a lot of people [for whom] perhaps it's their only hot meal of the day."⁸²

The federal government provides 35 percent of the funding for locally operated Meals on Wheels programs. Other support comes from private contributions and state and local governments. Some of the local organizations get all of their money from Washington; some get none. The program serves 2.4 million seniors a year, and the volunteer visits provide social interaction as well as nutrition.⁸³

"With volunteers going to the senior's house several times a week, this means someone is putting eyes on them," said Jason Tucker, director of meal services for the program in Atlanta. "They can tell if there's a decline in their health or if something else is wrong."⁸⁴

Many private organizations provide food aid that supplements federal assistance. And some are applying new tactics to increase the amount of aid they give, to improve the quality of the food they deliver or to serve new kinds of clients. Examples include efforts to make more fresh produce available in poor neighborhoods in cities and isolated rural communities, tapping the expertise of professional chefs and turning college campuses into sources of aid for the nearby poor and for needy college students themselves. (*See sidebar, p. 568.*)

Move for Hunger, a nonprofit based in New Jersey, has enlisted 750 moving companies throughout the United States and Canada to retrieve nonperishable foods that their clients otherwise would throw away. Facebook, Google, Hewlett-Packard, Bridgestone and Sodexo have agreed to incorporate Move for Hunger into their employee-relocation processes. The organization has delivered more than 8 million pounds of food to food banks and other programs since 2009.⁸⁵

The Campus Kitchen Project — an offspring of the DC Central Kitchen food program in Washington — retrieves unused food from college and high school dining halls on more than 60 campuses, prepares meals and distributes them to the needy near campus. Some of the student volunteers also garden and teach nutrition in the community around their campus. During the last academic year, nearly 29,000 volunteers salvaged 1.3 million pounds of food and prepared 350,000 meals. Students at one secondary school in the coalition — Gonzaga College High School in Washington — volunteer at a homeless shelter on campus.⁸⁶

Swipe Out Hunger, another campus-based program, collects unused meals from dining-hall cards and converts them into groceries for nearby food programs or into free meals for needy students. The College and University Food Bank Alliance has members serving hungry students on more than 450 campuses.⁸⁷ In Massachusetts, 25 of the 29 public college campuses have a food assistance program for students. In Ohio, eight colleges and four community colleges host food pantries.⁸⁸ ■

OUTLOOK

Continued Decline?

Both liberals and conservatives agree that hunger will continue to diminish if the economy keeps strengthening. Many on both sides of the political spectrum also see employment as the key to reducing hunger. As a family's income increases, so does its ability to purchase food.

"Ultimately, I think we're going to revamp the welfare system to make it much more supportive of work and marriage, and that will be an effective policy for increasing income," which will cause hunger to fall, the Heritage Foundation's Rector says.

In addition to holding jobs, people need their workplace to pay a living wage, Drexel's Chilton says. "I'm deeply concerned that wages will not increase and living costs will continue to increase and people will not keep up with that, and we will see more homeless and more suffering," she says. For that reason, the poor need "a really good safety net that focuses on their health and well-being."

Schanzenbach, of Northwestern University, says she is "gravely worried about the future of the safety net in this country" because of President Trump's proposed cuts. On the other hand, she says, Congress did a reasonable job of passing food-stamp legislation for the current budget year, although "I would argue it's underfunded."

Like Rector, Doar of the American Enterprise Institute expects "a little more focus on work" in federal food programs, and "that will lead to reductions in food insecurity and poverty. I think people will still use food stamps as a supplement to their earnings to make work pay more, and I think that will be good."

Calling herself "an eternal optimist," Middleton of the Alliance to End Hunger expects that as Americans "become more aware that food fuels people's potential — that children learn more on a full stomach, that seniors stay healthy longer when they have access to good meals — we're going to make this a national priority and we're going to hold our elected officials accountable."

Similarly, Goldrick-Rab of Temple University says awareness probably will lead to extension of school meals to community college students.

"I harbor no illusion that this is going to happen in this [Trump] administration," she says. "But I think the move to making community college free is going to help establish it as the next level of schooling" and that it logically should be the next level of school meals. "The college-affordability challenge is getting greater and it will become more visible

and it is clear to me that when confronted with these challenges there's more likely to be action."

Michael Babin, a Washington-area restaurateur, also doesn't expect the Trump administration to increase federal anti-hunger efforts. But he is optimistic about broader society.

"If the forces that have animated Trump's rise are in ascendance, I don't see the political will to deal with these issues," he says. But, he adds, "I don't think those forces are ascendant. There are so many people activated on these issues — so much more awareness now — I don't think you can put that genie back in the bottle." ■

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Alliance to End Hunger, 425 3rd St., S.W., Suite 1200, Washington, DC 20024; 202-688-1157; <http://alliancetoendhunger.org/>. Association of more than 90 service and advocacy organizations that works for food security in the United States and abroad.

American Enterprise Institute, 1789 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20036; 202-862-5800; www.aei.org. Conservative think tank whose focus includes poverty and hunger.

Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food and Agriculture, 9000 Richmond Highway, Alexandria, VA 22309; 571-384-8845; <http://arcadiafood.org>. Nonprofit whose nutrition programs in the Washington area include a farm and children’s garden, mobile food markets, nutrition-education programs for children and low-income adults.

Bread for the World, 425 3rd St., S.W., Suite 1200, Washington, DC 20024; 800-822-7323; www.bread.org. Christian organization that lobbies for the United States to take action against hunger at home and abroad.

Campus Kitchens Project, 19 I St., N.W., Washington, DC 20001; 202-234-0707; www.campuskitchens.org. Nonprofit organization that coordinates more than 60 student-run chapters on college and high school campuses that retrieve unused food from school dining halls, prepare meals and distribute them to the needy.

Food Research & Action Center, 1200 18th St., N.W., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20036; 202-986-2200; www.frac.org. Nonprofit organization that researches hunger in America and advocates at the federal, state and local levels.

Share Our Strength, 1030 15th St., N.W., Suite 1100 W, Washington, DC 20005; 800-969-4767; www.nokidhungry.org. Education and advocacy group that teaches low-income families to cook nutritiously and efficiently and campaigns for action against child hunger.

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Additional Articles from Current Periodicals

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