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Doing What Works to End U.S. Hunger

Federal Food Programs Are Effective, but Can Work Even Better

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Introduction and summary

In this era of both soaring budget deficits and escalating poverty, there is a great need for the federal government to ensure it is spending its resources as wisely and effectively as possible on the needs of those Americans who require a helping hand during hard times. This objective fits within the mission of the Center for American Progress's Doing What Works project, which was inaugurated by CAP earlier this year to ensure that each dollar government spends advances ambitious and carefully selected progressive goals.

There is no question that government must address the most basic of human needs—hunger and nutrition. Some federal programs focused on these needs are already very cost effective, among them the SNAP (formerly Food Stamp) and school meals programs, but they could be run even more efficiently.

These and other federal food programs are critical to millions of low-income Americans who are in crisis because of longstanding structural problems with the U.S. economy alongside existing holes in the nutrition and antipoverty safety nets. Both sets of problems are now exacerbated by the devastating consequences of the Great Recession. As recently as 2008 (before the worst of the economic downturn), 49.1 million Americans, including 16.6 million children, lived in households that suffered from food insecurity or hunger—unable to fully afford the food their families needed.¹ This number exceeded the combined populations of the states of Illinois, Missouri, Indiana, Iowa, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Wisconsin.

Combating hunger and food insecurity is an important goal in itself. But it is also a sound investment. Voluminous data proves that hungry children learn less effectively, hungry workers work less productively, and food insecurity costs the nation tens of billions of dollars annually in health care costs. A 2007 study by the Harvard School of Public Health found that domestic hunger and food insecurity cost the American economy \$90 billion annually.² Given the massive increase in food insecurity since then, this paper calculates that the cost of domestic hunger to our economy now likely exceeds \$124 billion. The price we pay for food insecurity in children alone is at least \$28 billion.³

Make no mistake, the federal nutrition safety net has saved countless lives and provided much-needed assistance to millions. Its creation and expansion in the 1960s and 1970s all but wiped out severe hunger in America. This same safety net greatly reduced the suffering caused by the Great Recession and other events such as Hurricane Katrina.

But it is also clear that the safety net is in desperate need of reform. The current safety net is a confusing array of programs, with 15 different nutrition assistance programs run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture alone, each of which have different eligibility requirements, application procedures, and physical locations that people must visit to apply. This system requires far-reaching bureaucracies and vast mountains of paperwork to administer, discouraging many low-income Americans from seeking the benefits they are entitled to, and costing the government billions of dollars in unnecessary administrative costs. Meanwhile, antifraud measures, inspired more by misguided fears than actual evidence of widespread cheating, cost the government more to implement than they save.

There is a far better way. This paper reiterates a previous proposal for the federal government to combine all these programs into one streamlined, seamless entitlement program available to all families at 185 percent of the poverty line or below.⁴ This means any family of three with a yearly income below \$33,873 would be eligible. My colleague, Thomas Z. Freedman, suggested calling this idea the “American Family Food, Opportunity, and Responsibility” program, or AFFORD. Doing What Works embraces that title as emblematic of the recommendations contained in this paper.

In the pages that follow, this paper will look at the 20th century history of hunger and food insecurity in the United States alongside the key reforms that led to significant gains against these two scourges by the end of the 1970s. We’ll then briefly examine how these programs failed to keep pace with a changing U.S. economy but also highlight how well they worked during recent crises, specifically Hurricane Katrina and the Great Recession. We will then detail our recommendations.

Whatever reforms we choose to implement, there is no question that federal nutrition programs must be modernized and their bureaucracies must be streamlined. Especially in these difficult economic times, when more and more families must rely on the nutrition safety net for food security, America cannot afford inefficiency. We owe it to hungry families to spend every dollar allocated to this safety net on fighting food insecurity, not on unwarranted paperwork or burdensome hurdles to receiving benefits.

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