

“TOO POOR TO EAT”:  
A SOCIO-POLITICAL HISTORY OF FOOD STAMPS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1964 -  
1996

by  
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I dedicate this dissertation to my husband Joe, our pups Ollie and Hobbs, and my parents Greg and Val. It is with their unconditional love and support that I completed this journey.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Signed on August 31, 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson's Food Stamp Act intended to deal with farmer surplus and provide a more nutritious diet for all Americans. Run by the United States Department of Agriculture, and operated as an agriculture program, food stamps remained separated from Johnson's War on Poverty legislation. As the politics of the program played out, food stamps became a battleground where politicians, the public, and the media debated whether food access was a right of privilege of all citizens.

This dissertation explores the interplay between policy formation and implementation and public organizing around food stamps. In the mid-1960s, it was clear that many Americans lived in starvation and experienced malnutrition. I analyze how anti-hunger activists and grassroots and private organizations helped define food stamp policy by forcing the expansion of more liberal policies like nationalized eligibility standards and the elimination of the purchase requirement.

I examine the formation of gendered and racialized stereotypes around work and food. Ideas about gender and race in America informed the pervasive negative stereotypes of food stamp recipients. Opponents of the FSP fought to narrow the parameters of citizenship by proposing legislation to privatize food aid or shift the agriculture program to welfare status. The resulting policies — like strict workfare requirements — punished those people trapped in a cycle of poverty that stemmed not from their individual behavior, but from systematic economic, political, and social inequalities. Despite poor people identifying themselves as workers, they did so in ways that were on the perimeter of traditional American conceptions of work. By claiming their right

to eat through federal food aid and pushing the boundaries of ideas about what it meant to work, they tested the limits of citizenship. Receiving food stamps symbolically signaled their worth, autonomy, privacy, and their rights and citizenship status in American society in more tangible ways than previous federal food programs. How they lived, provided for themselves and their families, and what they ate became the center of debates around whether food for survival was a right or a privilege, a debate that still matters today.

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## Introduction: “It Isn’t True That Nobody Starves in America”

In 1967, at the height of public consternation about claims that many Americans did not know how they would procure their next meal, a *New York Times* writer declared, “it isn’t true that nobody starves in America.”<sup>1</sup> That same year, anti-poverty activist and lawyer Marian Wright Edelman accompanied Senator Robert Kennedy (D-NY) to the Mississippi Delta so he could see for himself “whether it was true that people were starving.”<sup>2</sup> Because of his visit, Kennedy became one of the leading voices fighting for the expansion of the Food Stamp Program (FSP) and the eradication of hunger in the United States. Edelman remembered in an interview some years later, “he made hunger an issue.”<sup>3</sup>

Hunger exists in America. Despite the abundance of food in the richest country in the world, Americans continue to deal with food insecurity, starvation, and malnutrition. Inadequate access to food stems from problems of low-wage or inconsistent employment, barriers to access like transportation, and the politicization of food where lawmakers, the media, and the public fight to define food rights through the lens of citizenship. I define citizenship as the “social rights and

<sup>1</sup> Robert Sherrill, “It Isn’t True that Nobody Starves in America, *The New York Times*, June 4, 1967, Folder CM/Food 1/1/67-6/20/67, Box 4, EX CM/Food 3/1/66-6/21/67, White House Central Files, Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Archives, Austin, Texas (hereafter cited as WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL).

<sup>2</sup> “Interview with Marian Wright Edelman,” conducted by Henry Hampton, *Blackside, Inc., Eyes on the Prize Interviews*, December 21, 1988, for Henry Hampton Collection, Film and Media Archive, Washington University Libraries, digitized. <http://digital.wustl.edu/e/eii/eiiweb/ede5427.0676.044marianwrightedelman.html> (hereafter cited as EOTP Interviews, Hampton Collection, FMA, WUL).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

protections” provided by the state and federal government to Americans.<sup>4</sup> When low-income people participated in the FSP, they asserted their right as citizens to rely on the federal government as a safety net in times of financial crisis. However, opponents of federal food aid protested their right to do so. In the context of supporting the livelihoods of the poor, some people believed that federal entitlements — like access to food — should only be available to those people who performed their citizenship in narrowly defined ways. If a poor person could not or would not function within socially accepted constructions based on gender and race, then they did not deserve food for survival. Food access became a debate about the rights or privileges of all Americans.

In this dissertation, I explore food stamp legislation and constituent interpretation of policy implementation to illuminate the link between food rights and citizenship. I begin by examining President Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1964 Food Stamp Program and conclude with President Bill Clinton’s 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (welfare reform). In the three decades between these landmark laws, persistent themes shaped understandings of food rights and citizenship. These include meanings of work and public surveillance that pathologized the poor. Created in a time of economic prosperity, Johnson’s 1964 FSP drew on a broader — now outmoded — liberal ideology. It required a central government that functioned, in part, to help individuals secure economic independence.

Although the laws passed in the same year, Johnson’s FSP was not part of the War on Poverty bill. The FSP was an agricultural program designed to deal with farmer surplus and

<sup>4</sup> Alejandra Marchevsky and Jeanne Theoharis, *Not Working: Latina Immigrants, Low-Wage Jobs, and the Failure of Welfare Reform* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 6.

enhance the diets of low-income people. Johnson attempted a comprehensive federal food aid program that operated within existing modes of food production and distribution. It drew, in part, on aspects of previous federal food aid programs. As a result, the framers of the 1964 FSP established unique eligibility requirements, rules, and regulations that differentiated it from existing social welfare programs.

In 1939 Franklin D. Roosevelt's food stamp pilot program aimed to combat widespread economic insecurity in a time of crisis. Similarly, the depression era Surplus Commodity Program — controlled by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture — purchased and distributed surplus farm goods to county welfare departments which then donated the food directly to needy families. The main purpose of the program was to subsidize farmers, aid business owners, and get rid of surplus goods, not necessarily prioritizing poor people.<sup>5</sup>

This dissertation will show the historical legacies and pervasiveness of the politics of food access in America. I argue that the 1964 FSP marked a moment where citizenship and civic identity were unintentionally reimagined or reconstituted based on food rights. This reimagining of citizenship — through varied perspectives of work — happened because of the disconnect between policy formation and the interpretation of that policy in poor communities. Those people who could not afford to purchase food without the help of federal aid were increasingly perceived — not as victims of socioeconomic inequality — but as people who shirked hard work and circumvented the system. The process of politicizing food enabled politicians and the public

<sup>5</sup> Louis Heren, "Americans who are too poor to be helped," *The Times*, June 20, 1967, Folder CM/FOOD 1/1/67-6/20/67, Box 4, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

to entrench a hierarchy that dehumanized individuals in certain socioeconomic strata.

Anthropologist Carole M. Counihan argued that, “class, caste, race, and gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through differential control over access to food. One’s place in the social system is revealed by what, how much, and with whom one eats.”<sup>6</sup> Food is more than a core component of survival. It also acts as a political tool whose production and distribution serve to maintain a status quo and form ideas about who “deserves” adequate amounts of healthy food in a society.

At every level, the public and politicians reinforced standards of citizenship when they policed grocery shoppers, accepted, or rejected food stamp applications, refused service, or raised prices for welfare recipients.<sup>7</sup> One Oklahoma man complained to his congressman of “people driving better cars, nicer clothes than me using food stamps.”<sup>8</sup> Another man stated, “It sickens me to see the parasites buying groceries with food stamps that I feel I cannot afford and do not need.”<sup>9</sup> The public saw poor people as “tax eaters,” who received special privileges from the federal government.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Food and Gender: Identity and Power*, edited by Carole M. Counihan and Steven L. Kaplan (Reading, UK: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Constituent Polling Card, June 18, 198, Folder 22, Box LG 88, Food Stamp Program, Agriculture, Office of James R. Jones, Carl Albert Center Congressional Research and Studies Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman (hereafter cited as CACCRSC, OU).

<sup>9</sup> Constituent Letter to Congressman James R. Jones from Glenn C. Stover, June 19, 1981, Folder 22, Box LG 88, Food Stamp Program, Agriculture, Office of James R. Jones, CACCRSC, OU.

<sup>10</sup> For information on “tax eaters” versus “tax payers” see, Molly C. Michelmore, *Tax and Spend: The Welfare State, Tax Politics, and the Limits of American Liberalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

Opponents of an expanded food stamp system viewed the distribution of benefits as appropriate only when given to those who did not work because of mental or physical disabilities. Ideas about citizenship converged on the image of the ideal worker. For those food stamp recipients who did not work or whose work did not cover their expenses, they reflected a fear that poor Americans sought to dismantle the parameters of appropriate citizenship. Opponents of the FSP accused those people who did not fulfill their duties as workers as “using” a system where they could claim no rights. Because of these stereotypes, people who accepted food stamps increasingly gave up a right to privacy and gained a negative stigma as individuals unwilling to help themselves. By the late-twentieth century, the public viewed food stamps as part of the welfare system and recipients as second-class citizens.

The semiotics and physical distribution of food stamps strengthened an existing hierarchy of citizenship based on whiteness, masculinity, and the nuclear family trope that manifested in the image of the ideal worker. After 1964, the way that people obtained food and what they chose to buy signaled their worth and autonomy more so than previous federal food programs. By the mid-1970s, the public policed food stamp recipients through a culture of surveillance. By culture of surveillance, I mean that some ordinary Americans embodied their citizenship by reporting on poor people, who they believed operated outside of acceptable social norms. More affluent Americans — often housewives in grocery stores — stalked people who they believed to be food stamp users and reported to their elected officials the items that the stranger purchased, their family size, and the cars they drove off in. Because participation in the FSP reinforced an image of irresponsible tax-eaters, the public assumed a duty to police recipients. In this way,

public opinion influenced more restrictive food aid policies, as much, if not more than, lawmakers.

Analyzing the evolution of the FSP shows how Americans understood and reshaped ideas about citizenship and identity. Operated through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the architects of the FSP considered it an agricultural program stemming from farmer surplus. From the creation of the 1964 FSP through the 1996 welfare reform package, politicians kept food stamps separate from welfare programs. Eligibility standards and the operation of the program remained distinctly different from welfare. However, even though on the policy-level, food stamps were different from welfare, opponents of the program realized that talking about food stamps in welfare rhetoric helped classify and stereotype FSP users as the same welfare queens that abused the welfare system.<sup>11</sup> This, in turn, allowed opponents to craft more restrictive policies on the food program despite its unique status as a farm program.

This is most clear in debates about structuring food stamps as either a “cash-out” program or a “block grant” program. Many anti-poverty activists fought for policies where welfare recipients received a monthly check or a “cash-out” in lieu of separate forms of government benefits. However, because the FSP did not operate like other welfare programs, the cash-out system was less desirable. For example, Edelman, in July 1994, wrote a letter to Washington, D.C. senators urging them to “oppose any floor amendment” that would change the FSP to a

<sup>11</sup> Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America's Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 102.

cash out system.<sup>12</sup> While she agreed that cashing out worked for welfare programs, it would “undermine the effectiveness of the food stamp program.”<sup>13</sup> She explained that although cashing out welfare money might “empower” poor people, food stamps proved effective in helping those people “facing overwhelming financial pressures to protect an adequate portion of their meager budget for food.”<sup>14</sup> However, policies that singled out food stamp benefits reinforced negative perceptions of food access and food recipients became vulnerable to their own gamut of criticisms and stereotypes.

I argue that to fully understand the politics of food and the links between food access and poverty in America, scholars must unpack the 1964 FSP laws — and grassroots activism that influenced it — on its own terms. While it is imperative to make the connections between food access, poverty, and welfare programs, I contend that realizing the uniqueness of food stamp laws illuminates a new way of thinking about how Americans have come to understand citizenship and rights for poor people. There remains a historiographical gap linking the politics of food with the pervasiveness of American poverty. I offer new ways of thinking about food access and poverty and how the enactment of welfare policies during the mid-twentieth century rise of entitlement liberalism affected American citizens. I also suggest that poor people found

<sup>12</sup> Dear Senator letter from Marian Wright Edelman, July 11, 1994, Folder 6 – Welfare – Torrey – Food Stamps Cash Out November 23, 1993-July 19, 1994, Box 548, Series 6, Robert J. Dole Senate Papers, Dole Institute of Politics, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

ways to survive both as beneficiaries of welfare policies and as proprietors of their food distribution networks if the system failed them.

Scholars writing about social welfare policies have concentrated on the origins of the welfare state, its gendered construction, implementation, and expansion over the century. I expand this historiography by showing the elasticity of welfare programs in the mid-to-late twentieth century through the lens of food access and politics. Noted scholars Theda Skocpol and Linda Gordon debated the origins of the welfare state and how assumptions about gender and women's roles worked to define the distribution of benefits.<sup>15</sup> Other historians concerned themselves with the increased demands for entitlements in the 1960s and the backlash that followed. Gareth Davies argued that Johnson's Great Society marked a moment where more radical liberals broke away from mainstream liberal thought and instead demanded entitlement programs sensitive to the unique discriminations that poor people faced based on race and gender. Historian Robert O. Self agreed that liberalism declined, in part, because of the demand for more radical legislative, economic, and social change based on entitlement programs and human rights as seen through politicized ideas of the family. This fractured thought in liberal ideology led to the Democratic Party's decline.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013). Also see: Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York:



Scholars of welfare reform, like noted historian Kenneth Baer, analyzed conservative triumph and the emergence of neoliberalism while noted historian Bruce Miroff located this crisis with the failed presidential campaign of George McGovern.<sup>17</sup> Neoliberals in the early 1990s relied on privatized social programs led by the states and that catered to corporate interests.<sup>18</sup> The rise of conservative political power worked in tandem with the decline of liberalism to alter the parameters of food policy and cement assumptions about the people who participated in government programs. An increasingly popular conservative ideology about work and citizenship contributed to the formation of more restrictive and exclusionary FSP rules. Politicians, the public, and the media questioned the worthiness of the hungry poor. In addition to historian Susan Levine's analysis of the school lunch program, there is need for more work on food aid as a primary issue that frames American poverty and identity politics.<sup>19</sup>

Americans understand both rights and government aid as directly linked to constructions of racial and gendered identity. I show how these social constructions shape the FSP and food

Harper & Row, 1984); Steven M. Gillon, *"That's Not What We Meant to Do": Reform and Its Unintended Consequences in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000); Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960 – 1972* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013); Nancy Beck Young, *Why We Fight: Congress and the Politics of World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013); Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth S. Baer, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000); Bruce Miroff, *The Liberal's Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007); Gwendolyn Mink, *Welfare's End* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Marchevsky and Theoharis, *Not Working*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Levine, *School Lunch Politics*.

policy more generally. Judith Sklar's work analyzes the creation of citizenship in direct opposition to chattel slavery and argued that the right to vote and right to employment operated through an unequal distribution of rights based on race and gendered discrimination.<sup>20</sup> Rogers M. Smith and Evelyn Nakano Glenn similarly contend that American citizenship formed around identity politics. Political scientist Rogers M. Smith illuminated the "multiple traditions view of America" to show that American lawmaking illuminated a civic identity that categorized race, gender, and ethnicity into a hierarchy of citizenship.<sup>21</sup>

Although Smith's book concluded with the Progressive Era, his argument on the blending of liberalism, republicanism, and other theories of democracy show that when defining citizenship legally, lawmakers have upheld a status quo of the heterosexual Protestant white male, resulting in unequal rights based on gender, race, and ethnicity in a democracy. Glenn argued that institutions like citizenship and labor shaped race and gender relations. In her study of three ethnic groups from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era, Glenn shows the manifestation of inequality in America by both the exclusion of white women and people of color and of their inclusion based on jobs that maintained their dependence to the "white male privilege" status quo.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Judith N. Sklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). Also see: Michael B. Katz, *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American Welfare State* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001); Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998); T.H. Marshall,

My dissertation shows that access to food and government benefits reaffirmed certain assumptions about citizenship while also cementing ideas about non-white and poor people as less deserving of federal aid. Americans used ideas about civic identity to maintain the hierarchy of citizenship. In fact, historian Helen Zoe Veit argued that Americans perceive food as “moral choices” that “are regularly pointed to as vital factors in public health, social justice, national security, climate change, and even geopolitics.”<sup>23</sup> People performed their roles as citizens when they used government help to access food. However, their inability to act autonomously as consumers tied them to the public’s broader animosity towards entitlements. Historian Lizabeth Cohen argued that citizenship worked in tandem with one’s ability to act as a consumer in the postwar world. Molly C. Michelmores concluded that ideas about citizenship and welfare stemmed from American’s contradictory feelings about taxes and government benefits.<sup>24</sup> Mae

“Citizenship and Social Class,” in *Class, Citizenship and Other Essays* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1950); Martha Gardner, *The Qualities of a Citizen: Women, Immigration, and Citizenship, 1870-1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State,” *Signs* 19 (Dec. 1994): 309-36; Renato Rosaldo, “Cultural Citizenship in San Jose, California,” *PoLAR* 17 (Nov. 1994): 57-64; Jose M. Alamillo, *Making Lemonade out of Lemons: Mexican American Labor and Leisure in a California Town, 1880-1960* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006); George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Henry Louis Gates Jr., Claude Steele, Lawrence D. Bobo, Michael Dawson, Gerald Jaynes, Lisa Crooms-Robinson, Linda Darling-Hammond, editors, *The Oxford Handbook of African American Citizenship, 1865-Present*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Helen Zoe Veit, *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); Michelmores, *Tax and Spend*. Also see: Kim Phillip-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen’s Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009); Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America’s Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul:*

Ngai's work on immigration showed the importance of low-level bureaucrats and their implementation of government rules. These bureaucrats worked directly with groups deemed unworthy of full citizenship and often allowed their own biases and discriminations to dictate how they interpreted federal law.<sup>25</sup>

Historians argued that gendered and racialized social constructions informed the nature of social welfare policies. Assumptions about the politicization of the family and, specifically, a woman's role as wife and mother limited female autonomy and the ability to secure adequate government benefits. Contentious ideas about women and work informed federal food aid and welfare policies and on some levels worked to demonize women not acting within the constructed parameters of motherhood and womanhood. Historians like Annelise Orleck explored the gendered construction of welfare policies like Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) and showed how grassroots coalitions of non-white, poor women demanded a redefining of work and family while Sonya Michel and Elizabeth Rose analyzed the push for federally-funded daycare and its consequences for how women found employment and were characterized as mothers.<sup>26</sup> Regina E. Kunzel's history of social work examined ideas about immigration, cultural

*The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). Also see: Eric Tang, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2015); Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> For gendered analysis on work and welfare see: Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own Way on Poverty* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005); Jennifer Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare: The Unintended Consequences of Liberal Reform, 1945-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North

assimilation, and surveillance of deserving and undeserving poor women.<sup>27</sup> My work adds to these existing treatments by highlighting how bureaucratizing access to food aid had implications for ideas about womanhood and motherhood that further constricted women from full rights as citizens.

Exclusion based on identity went beyond gender, however, and my dissertation will also focus on race and class politics, specifically on hierarchies of citizenship and access to federal food aid.<sup>28</sup> More recent works explored the nuances of white privilege by showing how ideas about race and class shaped discriminatory laws that fueled the Jim Crow era. This historiography is integral to most studies of social history in the United States. Historians, sociologists, and political scientists, by the early twenty-first century, focused on a black/white

Carolina Press, 2005); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Joanne Goodwin, "Employable Mothers' and 'Suitable Work': A Re-evaluation of Welfare and Wage-earning for Women in the Twentieth-Century United States," *Journal of Social History* 29 (Winter 1995): 253-74; Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). For gendered analysis on federally-funded daycare see: Sonya Michel, *Children's Interests/Mothers' Rights: The Shaping of America's Child Care Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); Elizabeth Rose, *A Mother's Job: The History of Day Care, 1890-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage-Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Felicia Kornbluh, "Food as a Civil Right: Hunger, Work, and Welfare in the South after the Civil Rights Act," *Labor: Studies in Working Class Histories of the Americas* 12 (2015): 135-158; Marchevisky and Theoharis, *Not Working*.

dichotomy based on inequality in housing, employment, and education. Between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, historians like Thomas Sugrue, Robert Self, and Kevin Kruse analyzed white flight and urban decline in the Rust Belt, the West, and the South, respectively. They complicated the narrative by arguing that urban decline, poverty, and overwhelming black unemployment were not simply unavoidable but rather, that white anxiety over housing, employment, and economic security, led to an entrenched postwar system of racial discrimination.<sup>29</sup> By 2009, historian Peggy Pascoe, among others, widened the narrative about race and ethnic hierarchies by exploring how non-white people received unequal treatment under the law. Her work focused on bureaucratic levels of power that consistently reinforced racial stereotypes and hierarchies and helped embed a system of difference through marriage.<sup>30</sup>

Less explored by historians, however, is how food became a cultural and political tool that shaped ideas about race and class. In this dissertation, I show how the Food Stamp Program was created and altered over time based on assumptions about the ideal American trope. Sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists have written at length on subjects including food justice, sustainability, food deserts, urban farming, and temporary aid programs and their

<sup>29</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and The Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). Also see: David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy & White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960 – 1972* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>30</sup> Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

effectiveness in alleviating poverty.<sup>31</sup> How poor people accessed food and what they were allowed to purchase cemented specific ideas of how Americans should eat and live. Conversations about welfare, citizenship, and gender are integral to food studies scholarship. Historians since the 1980s analyzed and historicized studies about food to better understand American culture. Early histories about food culture examined food choices and diet as it related to race and identity.<sup>32</sup> Increasingly food studies scholarship has been a critical lens through which to view citizenship, identity, and gender.<sup>33</sup> Historians have become more interested in food culture particularly in the Deep South.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, there remains a historiographical gap in that few have written about the culture and politics of food accessibility. In fact, studies on food accessibility dominate scholarly fields like anthropology, sociology, and economics.<sup>35</sup> Their

<sup>31</sup> Alison Hope Alkon, *Black, White, and Green: Farmers Markets, Race, and The Green Economy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Natasha Bowens, *The Color of Food: Stories of Race, Resilience and Farming* (Canada: New Society Publishers, 2015); Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Autumn K. Hanna, "Rethinking Urban Poverty: A Look at Community Gardens." *Bulletin of Science and Technology* 20 (June 2000): 207-216; Psyche A. Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, & Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, edited by Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); *Food and Culture: A Reader*, Edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Harvey A. Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> One major example is: Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> For cultural food histories about the American South see: Angela Jill Cooley, *To Live and Dine in Dixie: The Evolution of Urban Food Growth in the Jim Crow South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015); Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt, *A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Marcie Cohen Ferris, *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Scholars include sociologist Alison Hope Alkon and anthropologist Carole M. Counihan. Carole M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999);

work tends to focus on food distribution statistics, food justice movements, urban farming, and poverty. My socio-political history of food stamps will build on these scholars to show both the national story of food aid politics and how culture and gender constructions help form ideas about food access, surveillance, and poverty.

The following five chapters analyze federal policy development and constituent policy interpretation of citizenship and the right to food. I explore contested meanings of work and changes in the ways that Americans viewed worthy and unworthy poor people through federal food aid. In each chapter, I weave together two narrative arcs that show the interplay between federal policy interpretation of the Food Stamp Program and the grassroots perspective of food aid implementation. I juxtapose policy creation, negotiation, and implementation with the work of anti-hunger, grassroots, and community activists to highlight and increase food access and enforce better treatment of poor people. Chapter five analyzes the watershed 1996 welfare reform package.

Chapter one describes the passage and implementation of the 1964 Food Stamp Act, and juxtaposes this legislation against Kennedy's tour of the Mississippi Delta. After Kennedy's trip, he became one of the leading lawmakers to prioritize the expansion of anti-hunger legislation Washington, D.C. The Civil Rights-era legislation reinforced debates about the responsibility of

Alison Hope Alkon, *Black, White, and Green: Farmers Markets, Race, and The Green Economy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Alison Hope Alkon, "Food Policy," *The Routledge History of American Foodways* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 248-260; Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998); Warren Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts* (New York: Berg, 2008); Warren Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*, second edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).



the federal government to citizens. In a time of economic prosperity, the government's willingness to focus on poverty problems centered on proactive social justice strategies rather than a state of emergency during the Great Depression.

Chapter two tracks localized surveillance, application, and pressure organizing intended to change the scope of the FSP. The public understood their power as constituents to reshape the program and define acceptable parameters of citizenship based on the right to food. The image of the responsible American worker stayed intact by demanding that recipients act like consumers not charity cases. Americans saw it as their right to police food stamp users and demand policy changes. However, ignoring the unique circumstances of individual food stamp recipients meant that public surveillance served more to solidify stereotypes about poor people rather than catch actual instances of fraudulent behavior.

In chapter three, I show the struggle to define the intentions of the FSP, allowing conservatives to constantly change policies under the guise of fixing an administratively chaotic program. The policy inconsistencies represent two underlying themes. First, the public did not trust the post-Watergate government and viewed social welfare programs as ineffective and costly. If government was not working for anyone, then disgruntled groups, like housewives, saw it as their duty to report on others. Second, politicians and the public entrenched stigmatizations of poor people and relegated them to "other" status because they often did not operate within the male breadwinner, nuclear family trope.

In chapter four, I continue my analysis of constituent policy interpretation between the 1970s and 1980s. I show the influence of local organizations and individuals, who acted as

interpreters of the legislation and drivers of policy change when they organized against — and defeated — President Gerald Ford’s attempt to slash over \$1 billion from the FSP. I also illuminate the shift from the efforts of anti-hunger advocates to affect change to the entrenchment of conservative rhetoric — by the public and politicians — in criminalizing food stamp recipients.

Chapter five examines both federal policy and constituent influence to show how food stamps became part of the welfare conversation and suffered under the 1996 legislation to “end welfare as we know it.” I argue that welfare reform labeled most poor people as unworthy of the right to food. The legislation, signed by President Bill Clinton, changed the FSP to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) which enforced stricter work requirements and introduced time limits for recipients. Unlike the new Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) — or welfare — lawmakers avoided making SNAP a block grant.

Proponents of federal food aid argued that poor people faced insurmountable barriers to access healthy food. Opponents of the FSP steeped their frustrations with federal aid in notions about the ideal worker trope, the perceived irresponsibility of single mothers, and the belief that taxpayer money should not contribute to feeding *certain* poor people. They ignored the unique circumstances that the poor faced when living in poverty and, instead, created imagined pathologies of them and homogenized their plight. Despite pervasive stigmas about these people, the politicization of food — by all sides of the FSP debate — further contributed to an entrenched hierarchy of citizenship that kept some people trapped in a persistent cycle of poverty.

## **Chapter One: “Building a Better Life for Every American”: The Creation, Implementation, and Political Reactions to the Food Stamp Act, 1960s – 1970s**

“I want to talk to you today about the most fundamental subject in life – food,” said Senator John F. Kennedy (D-MA) during a spring 1960 presidential campaign speech to a crowd in Mount Hope, West Virginia. He insisted that millions of Americans were starving. He criticized the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson for relying on the depression-era Surplus Commodity Program, which reduced farm surplus by donating it to needy families and individuals. Kennedy argued that the surplus foods consisted of “flour, rice and corn-meal – sometimes some butter, cheese and dry skim milk – and more flour, rice and corn-meal,” and declared, “that diet is the cause of rotten teeth and shattered hopes.” Kennedy promised that as president he and fellow Democrats would ensure “that every American is fed and fed right.”<sup>1</sup>

On the second day of his presidency, he issued an executive order to expand and improve federal food distribution programs.<sup>2</sup> This included a small purchase program that offered items like canned meat, dried eggs, peanut butter, and dried edible beans. Over the next year, participation rose from three and a half million to five and a half million people. Kennedy and

<sup>1</sup> “Food for West Virginia,” Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Mount Hope, West Virginia, April 20, 1960, Folder “Food for West Virginia,” Mount Hope, West Virginia, 20 April 1960, Series 12 Speeches and the Press, Pre-Presidential Papers, Senate Files, Papers of John F. Kennedy, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Massachusetts, Digitized Materials (hereafter cited as JFK Papers, JFKL).

<sup>2</sup> John F. Kennedy, Executive Order 10914 – Providing for an Expanded Program of Food Distribution to Needy Families, January 21, 1961, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, University of California Santa Barbara. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/237158> (hereafter cited as TAPP, UCSB).

Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman also initiated a \$14 million pilot food stamp program.<sup>3</sup> Access to food thus became central to an expanding liberal agenda in the 1960s.

On August 31, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Food Stamp Act into law calling it “one of many sensible and needed steps” to “the task of building a better life for every American.”<sup>4</sup> He proclaimed that the new legislation “weds the best of humanitarian instincts of the American people with the best of the free enterprise system.”<sup>5</sup> Policymakers in 1964 upheld the idea that federal food distribution programs acted as a “consumer stimulus,” much like the ideas behind FDR’s 1939 pilot program.<sup>6</sup> Low-income people purchased a portion of their stamps and shopped in grocery stores.<sup>7</sup> The FSP had a minimum purchase requirement of two dollars per person.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the FSP made use of the “highly efficient commercial food

<sup>3</sup> “Testimony of the Honorable Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman before the Sub-Committee on Employment and Manpower of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare”, July 11, 1967, Folder CM/Food 6/21/67 to date, Box 4, EX/CM Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, White House Central Files, Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Archives, Austin, Texas (hereafter cited as WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL).

<sup>4</sup> Remarks of the President on the Occasion on the Signing of the Food Stamp Act of 1964, Office of the White House Press Secretary, August 31, 1964, Folder Office Files of Horace Busby: Food Stamp Act Signing August 31, 1964, Box 43, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Rachel Louise Moran, “Consuming Relief: Food Stamps and the New Welfare of the New Deal,” *The Journal of American History* 97 (March 2011): 1001-1022.

<sup>7</sup> Maurice MacDonald, “Food Stamps: An Analytical History,” *Social Service Review* 51(December 1977): 642-658.

<sup>8</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 385.

distribution system” in ways that the still-active depression-era Surplus Commodities Program did not.<sup>9</sup>

Government officials hoped that operating the FSP through regular grocery stores would help families avoid the stigma of welfare.<sup>10</sup> However, the FSP did not address social problems like localized discrimination, problems of transportation, or language barriers that hindered poor people from accessing food. And for the poorest people around the country, the two-dollar charge was unaffordable.<sup>11</sup> FSP legislation also gave state and local officials the power to initiate programs in their counties and create eligibility requirements. This aspect worked especially well for conservative politicians who knew their states could decline to offer the program.<sup>12</sup> Counties set up distribution office and caseworkers in local welfare agencies accepted applications and distributed the stamps.<sup>13</sup>

Caseworkers determined eligibility based on household size and income of the applicants. Eligible recipients had incomes “below 130 percent of the family-size adjusted poverty guideline and net income below 100 percent of the guideline.”<sup>14</sup> Participants paid the purchase requirement

<sup>9</sup> Remarks of the President on the Occasion on the Signing of the Food Stamp Act of 1964, August 31, 1964, Folder Office Files of Horace Busby: Food Stamp Act Signing August 31, 1964, Box 43, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>10</sup> Moran, “Consuming Relief”: 1001-1022.

<sup>11</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 385.

<sup>12</sup> MacDonald, “Food Stamps”: 642-658; *Snap Matters: How Food Stamps Affect Health and Well-Being*, edited by Judith Bartfeld, Craig Gundersen, Timothy M. Smeeding, and James P. Ziliak (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Lawrence F. O’Brien, Special Assistant to the President to Paul G. Rogers, House of Representatives, July 1, 1964, Folder BE 5-5/AG7/ST, Box 36 GEN BE 5-5/AG 7, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>14</sup> *Snap Matters*, edited by Bartfeld et al, 4.

and received food stamps worth more than the payment. Recipients could only buy domestic food products and it was illegal to use the stamps for alcohol, tobacco products, non-food items like laundry detergent or paper products, or any imported meat.<sup>15</sup> Food retailers redeemed the food stamps for cash through the commercial banking system funded by the Federal Treasury.<sup>16</sup>

The FSP proved an exciting new venture for businesses and politicians.<sup>17</sup> For the poor people that could afford the purchase requirement, the FSP offered a greater variety of healthier and fresher foods. However, in the first four years of program implementation, communities dealing with destitute poverty, joblessness, and discrimination, found that the FSP did not reach them. The year 1968 served as turning point in conversations about food policy, when the media and grassroots organizations, angered that the FSP did not work to alleviate hunger, starvation, and malnutrition throughout the country, demanded that the Johnson administration re-evaluate the goals of the program. But their vision for the FSP went beyond its intended scope. The FSP became a battleground where Americans fought over food rights and the responsibility of the government to its citizens.

<sup>15</sup> “A Mother Goes Shopping: U.S. Food Stamps Plan Begun Here; Freeman Hails It,” *Chicago Sun Times*, April 12, 1965, Folder Food Stamp Program Feb. 19 – April 6, 1965, Box 4300, Food Products 2 – Food Stamp Program, General Correspondence, 1906-75, RG 16 Records of the Office of Secretary of Agriculture, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (hereafter cited as RG 16, NARA).

<sup>16</sup> Testimony of the Honorable Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman Before the Sub-Committee on Employment and Manpower of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, July 11, 1967, Folder CM/Food 6/21/67 to date, Box 4, EX/CM Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>17</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen’s Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).

Neither Johnson nor Freeman expected the 1964 Food Stamp Act to eradicate the nation's hunger problem. Designed to use farm surplus to offer a greater variety of healthy food to low-income people, the FSP empowered recipients to become consumers.<sup>18</sup> In the original legislation, Johnson and Freeman focused on increasing the power of consumers and producers, not on developing comprehensive policy change to alleviate an enduring and generational cycle-of-poverty. Johnson's FSP did more to appease long-held views of New Deal liberalism than inspire radical change in the way that Americans thought about food rights and starving American citizens. Indeed, the legacy of the FSP reshaped perspectives on citizenship by upholding New Deal values that "de-emphasize the role of men and women as producers and to elevate their roles as consumers."<sup>19</sup> Freeman called the money spent by low-incomes families to purchase the stamps an "investment" whereby the families participated in their own health and welfare on the way to self-sufficiency.<sup>20</sup> Historian Meg Jacobs argued that the "consumer" was a

<sup>18</sup> Lizbeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003). The structure of the FSP propped up what historian Lizbeth Cohen termed "citizen consumer" and "purchaser consumer." After World War II, a fundamental shift occurred in how Americans understood their place as both citizens and consumers.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 269.

<sup>20</sup> Statement of Orville L. Freeman before the Committee on Agriculture, U.S. House of Representatives, March 15, 1967, Folder 1 Agriculture Bills – Food Stamp Extension, Box 109, Page H. Belcher Collection, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma (hereafter cited as CACRSC, OU).

shifting category and that “government-assisted consumer mobilization” had a long history in the United States. The FSP acted as another exercise in “state building from the bottom up.”<sup>21</sup>

Congress passed the FSP, in part, because it attracted Deep South Dixiecrats who felt the program met the needs of farmers, conservative politicians, and grocery store owners who were all concerned – to varying degrees – with upholding capitalism by stemming the flow of social welfare spending. To pass the FSP, liberal politicians negotiated with conservatives concerned that the food program would become another social welfare program. The resulting legislation limited the scope of fixing the hunger problem to boosting the buying power of people who already had enough money to purchase the stamps. This, in part, explains why the USDA ran the FSP. Never intending for it to be a welfare program, Johnson did not include the FSP in his War on Poverty legislation. Indeed, food stamps passed as its own bill and future amendments to the program happened during the Farm Bill negotiations that took place every four years.

This chapter examines the implementation of the 1964 Food Stamp Act and analyzes the immediate reactions of politicians, the public, and the media. Less than three years into the operation of the FSP, Americans rediscovered hunger as a prominent national issue and demanded that the federal government work harder to eradicate hunger. The tensions between conservative and liberal politicians, the media, and public opinion played out in several major events. First, this chapter will explore the Mississippi Delta where some of the worst hunger

<sup>21</sup> Meg Jacobs, “Pocketbook Politics: Democracy and the Market in Twentieth-Century America,” in *The Democratic Experience: New Directions in American Political History*, edited by Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 251.



problems in America existed. Destitute people — mostly black Americans — suffered from severe cases of starvation and malnutrition. Federal food distribution programs were not reaching them because of social and economic barriers like the ability to meet the purchase requirement or local discrimination by caseworkers who had the power to approve or deny their applications. Historian John Dittmer argued that a combination of several factors led to inadequate distribution of social welfare programs in the state. These included “impersonal economic forces, the unintended consequences of federal policies, and the determination of white Mississippians to block or control federal poverty programs.”<sup>22</sup> Civil rights activists fought these inequalities by strengthening access to federal food programs.<sup>23</sup>

Second, this chapter will broaden the scope of the hunger crisis to show that problems of food access were not unique to the Mississippi Delta. The media and grassroots organizations fought to elevate the problems of hunger to the national stage. People demanded that Johnson and Freeman expand the FSP past its original intention. The initial function of the FSP reinforced what historian Rachel Louise Moran called a “consumer-oriented welfare state.”<sup>24</sup> Progressive constituents, politicians, and the media challenged FSP’s core mission of creating consumer citizens. They demanded a wider focus on alleviating hunger nationwide by addressing deeper issues of localized discrimination, barriers to food access, and lack of gainful employment.

<sup>22</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 363.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 364.

<sup>24</sup> Moran, “Consuming Relief”: 1001-1022.

Making decisions about the future of the FSP and the politics of food more broadly proved inescapable for the Johnson administration.

The FSP forced American citizens to articulate the meanings of citizenship through food rights. At the center of this debate was whether the federal government had a responsibility to feed all hungry people. Johnson and Freeman's 1964 FSP allowed state and counties the power to decline the program in certain areas and to decide eligibility requirements. Like previous New Deal and Great Society social programs, the success of the FSP depended on local and state policymakers and constituents who fought "over the meaning and implementation of federal policies."<sup>25</sup> In other words, the FSP became a battleground for deciding whether access to food was a right or privilege.

In July 1964 – one month before Johnson signed the FSP into law – the *Wall Street Journal* reported that 43 million people benefitted from the Surplus Commodities Program. The article signaled a postwar "public recognition of the social welfare responsibilities of Government to improve the diets and nutritional diets" of poor people and because of the need to deal with farm surplus.<sup>26</sup> While low-income communities preferred the donated foods of the Surplus Commodity Program, politicians and businessmen recognized the profitability of the proposed FSP. Grocery store owners, retailers, small business owners, and farmers all stood to

<sup>25</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, "All Politics is Local: The Persistence of Localism in Twentieth-Century America," in *The Democratic Experience*, edited by Jacobs et al, 302.

<sup>26</sup> "About 43 Million Persons in U.S., Territories Got Surplus Food in Fiscal '64," *Wall Street Journal*, July 6, 1964, Folder Action Memos Feb. 4 thru Aug. 31, 1964, Box 1, Personal Papers of Orville L. Freeman, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Archives, Austin, Texas (hereafter cited as OLF Papers, LBJL).

increase profit margins when food stamps bolstered the purchasing power of new consumers. The program fit neatly within the parameters of capitalism and businessmen noticed when grocery store owners enjoyed an increase in sales.<sup>27</sup>

In anticipation of the Food Stamp Act, a May 1964 *Florida Food and Grocery News* headline read, “Surplus Food – Sell it to Russia? – Let it Rot? – Or Feed it to Low Income Families?” The by-line assured readers that “Grocers Would Profit – Farmers Would Profit – Low Income Consumers Would Profit! This Would Be a Good Deal For One and All!”<sup>28</sup> President of the Lewis Grocer Company confirmed the efficacy of the program when he wrote to Senator James O. Eastland (D-MS) and argued for the FSP’s ability to operate “in the proper channels of distribution rather than in competition with private enterprise.”<sup>29</sup>

An Oklahoma man, whose father owned a small grocery store, demanded to know why his “Republican governor” refused to operate the FSP. Arguing that “this stamp program would have helped his business tremendously,” the man wondered if they would just “have to wait on a democratic governor,” to meet the needs of store owners.<sup>30</sup> Despite Oklahoma governor Henry

<sup>27</sup> Statement by the President on the Food Stamp Program, August 2, 1964, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, TAPP, UCSB.

<sup>28</sup> “Surplus Food – Sell it to Russia? – Let it Rot? – Or Feed it to Low Income Families?” *Florida Food and Grocery News*, Vol. xxx, No. 5, May 1964, Folder BE 5-5/AG7/ST, Box 36 GEN BE 5-5/AG 7, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Morris Lewis, Jr. to James O. Eastland, April 10, 1967, Folder 1967 – Welfare Food Stamp Program, Box 165, Subseries 1, File Series 3, James O. Eastland Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi (hereafter cited as DASC, UM).

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Jack Thompson to Fred Harris, November 22, 1964, Folder Food Stamp Program, Box 2, FRH-AG (1965), Fred R. Harris Collection, CACRSC, OU.

Bellmon's (R-OK) resistance to "any part of the poverty program," other Dixiecrat congressmen saw the value. Freeman recalled in his diary that Representative Harold Dunbar Cooley (D-NC) who was once "indifferent" to the FSP, now backed the program because he realized that "the people on his own farm and in his own neighborhood were benefitting enormously." Freeman proclaimed that Cooley was now "red hot for it."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Dixiecrats praised the program for its ability to increase cash flow in business.<sup>32</sup> But the power that state officials held to implement the FSP as they saw fit meant that many poor people suffered even more.

### **The Mississippi Delta**

In 1967, NAACP lawyer and antipoverty activist, Marian Wright Edelman brought the concerns of the Mississippi Delta poor to Congress.<sup>33</sup> Set to testify about Mississippi Head Start programs before the Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty, Edelman instead decided to talk about hunger and starvation in the Delta region. She described how poor sharecropping families had no income and that the switch from the Surplus Commodities Program to food stamps negatively affected them because of their inability to afford the purchase

<sup>31</sup> "Diary, Orville L. Freeman, Secretary of Agriculture," November 1963 – May 25, 1964, Vol. 3, Box 9, OLF Papers, LBJL.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from Jack Thompson to Fred Harris, November 22, 1964, Folder Food Stamp Program, Box 2, FRH-AG (1965), Fred R. Harris Collection, CACRSC, OU.

<sup>33</sup> Felicia Kornbluh, "Food as a Civil Right: Hunger, Work, and Welfare in the South after the Civil Rights Act," *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 12 (2015): 135-158; Ellen B. Meacham, *Delta Epiphany: Robert F. Kennedy in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018); Dittmer, *Local People*.

requirement. Recalling that testimony many years later, Wright remembered that it was “very hard to get people from Washington to believe that there were families that could not afford a dollar or two.”<sup>34</sup> A member of the subcommittee, Kennedy agreed to accompany Wright and others to visit the Mississippi Delta and see the problems firsthand. Senators Joseph S. Clark (D-PA) and Kennedy led the trip to Mississippi on April 11, 1967. Wright recalled their visits to sharecroppers’ homes and remembered specifically one residence where Kennedy saw a baby boy “with a bloated belly sitting on a dirt floor.” Kennedy attempted to engage with the baby but he was so malnourished that he could not respond. Wright remembered Kennedy becoming “palpably angry,” coming out of the house “furious,” and with a determination to get food access to the region immediately.<sup>35</sup> In a report to Johnson later that month the committee detailed their findings of “acute malnutrition and hunger” and they recommended that Congress and the Johnson administration increase food access for those people.<sup>36</sup>

According to Wright, Clark and Kennedy urged Freeman to go see the situation for himself, partly because “they knew that the Agriculture Department officials might not believe even the senators when they were told that there were people down in Mississippi with no

<sup>34</sup> “Interview with Marian Wright Edelman,” conducted by Henry Hampton, *Blackside, Inc., Eyes on the Prize Interviews*, December 21, 1988, for Henry Hampton Collection, Film and Media Archive, Washington University Libraries, digitized. <http://digital.wustl.edu/e/eii/eiiweb/ede5427.0676.044marianwrightedelman.html> (hereafter cited as EOTP Interviews, Hampton Collection, FMA, WUL).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty to John W. Gardner, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, June 19, 1967, Folder 3-3 Joseph S. Clark, U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania, Subseries 18, File Series 1, Box 3, Eastland Collection, DASC, UM.

income.”<sup>37</sup> On April 17, 1967, Joe Califano, special assistant to the president, reported the meeting among Kennedy, Clark, and Freeman. He stated “as Freeman explains it, the negroes in Mississippi in the delta that are complaining want to get food outside of the Food Stamp Program. They do not want to pay that amount of money they have which they ordinarily spend for food stamps.” Indeed, Mississippi Delta activists pushed for a lower purchase requirement or the elimination of the purchase requirement altogether to people who had no money at all. But, as Califano went on to say, “Freeman does not want to upset the entire program by either giving free food to these negroes in the delta or by lowering the amount of money they have to pay for food stamps.”<sup>38</sup> Less than a week later, the Executive Director of the New York-based National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers (NFSNC) urged Johnson to send “immediate Federal action” to Mississippi in the form of surplus food in addition to the Food Stamp Program “to help overcome the extreme deprivation and malnutrition suffered by the people of Mississippi’s Delta region.”<sup>39</sup>

Kennedy’s highly publicized visit to the Delta offered a platform for grassroots organizations and anti-hunger activists to demand that the Johnson administration expand the FSP’s resources to address these problems. Members of the Council for Christian Social Action

<sup>37</sup> “Interview with Marian Wright Edelman,” EOTP Interviews, Hampton Collection, FMA, WUL.

<sup>38</sup> Memo to the President from Joe Califano, April 17, 1967, Folder BE 5-5/AG 7/ST, Box 36, GEN BE 5-5/AG 7, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>39</sup> Letter to the President from Margaret E. Berry, April 26, 1967, Folder BE 5-5/AG 7/ST, Box 36, GEN BE 5-5/AG 7, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

and an Anti-Poverty Task Force, based in New York, telegraphed Johnson in February of 1967 upon hearing reports that “thousands” of poor people throughout Mississippi did not have enough money for the FSP purchase requirement and found themselves without access to food when their counties switched programs. In addition, they alleged, state welfare administrators were “notoriously contemptuous of the welfare of the poor, particularly in the Negro population,” and were “making the change without giving notice and cannot be relied upon to assist the people in making the adjustment.”<sup>40</sup> They recommended that the Johnson administration and the USDA allow both the Surplus Commodities Program and the FSP to operate simultaneously in the state.

Some Mississippians pushed back on the negative image about the hunger crisis that their state received. One man expressed his frustration with the Kennedy-Clark visit to the Delta and the Senate hearings in Jackson more specifically. In his letter to Senator James O. Eastland (D-MS) he stated that it was “unfortunate” that “our fine state” received, what he felt, was undeserved negative publicity from the senators’ visit. Advocating for greater state control of the FSP, the man recommended that “we should take care of our own problems without the unwelcome interference from outside ‘do-gooders.’”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Telegram from H. Ray Gibbons and Hubber F. Klemme to Lyndon B. Johnson, February 21, 1967, Folder BE 5-5/AG7/ST, Box 36, GEN BE 5-5/AG 7, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from B. T. Wood to James O. Eastland, July 7, 1967, Folder 1967 Welfare – Food Stamp Program, File series, 3, Subseries 1, Box 165, Eastland Collection, DASC, UM.

In late May, six physicians, as part of the Field Foundation —a private company established in the 1940s to help people in poverty — conducted their own research in the Delta and reported their findings to the president. The physicians hailed from Harvard, Yale, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and two from private practices in the Deep South and treated, in some capacity, malnourishment, and starvation in their daily practices. They described the state of children in the Mississippi Delta as “shocking” and listed vitamin and mineral deficiencies, skin infections and ulcerations, eye, ear, and bone diseases, bacterial and parasitic disease, severe anemia, heart, and lung problems requiring surgery, epileptic and neurological disorders, kidney ailments, problems with body tissue, chronic diarrhea and sores, and severe malnutrition.<sup>42</sup> They also reported a “psychological state of fatigue, listlessness, and exhaustion” in the children because of their starvation of malnutrition.”<sup>43</sup> They alleged that children drank contaminated water, lived in homes infested with mosquitos and flies, and “were lucky to eat one meal a day.” When they were fortunate enough to eat, the children subsisted on “starches – grits, bread, and Kool-Aid.”<sup>44</sup> The physicians argued that it was “no wonder” that Mississippi’s infant mortality rate for black people – who comprised about forty-two percent of the state’s population – was more than twice that of white people.<sup>45</sup> The physicians also noticed

<sup>42</sup> “Children in Mississippi,” *A Report to the Field Foundation*, June 1967, Folder 3-3 Joseph S. Clark, U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania, Subseries 18, File Series 1, Box 3, Eastland Collection, DASC, UM.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



that FSP caseworkers made families ineligible for the stamps when they considered the men to be “able-bodied” enough to get a job and earn the money needed for food.<sup>46</sup>

As states held the power to dictate some eligibility standards, the caseworkers who administered the programs, like the “white Mississippi bureaucracy,” could, with relative ease and little oversight – turn families away from accessing healthy food based on their own views of race, work, and poverty.<sup>47</sup> A single mother in Mississippi wrote to governor John Bell Williams asking for help regarding her troubles in accessing food stamps at her local welfare agency office. In her letter, the mother of two claimed that caseworkers confirmed her need and eligibility for food stamps but refused to distribute them to her. The caseworkers asked the woman questions beyond the scope of the eligibility requirements including information about her mother and grandparents who were not part of her application for food stamps.<sup>48</sup>

In Mississippi, the Field Foundation physicians recommended that the USDA make food stamps free to rural Americans, monitor food distribution programs in Mississippi more closely, and, if necessary, urged the federal government take over the operation of the program. In a statement, they declared that “the government should change its system of welfare support, so

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 385; *Snap Matters*, edited by Bartfeld et al, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Letter from Elizabeth Luckett to John Bell Williams, Nov. 1967, Folder Food Stamp Program November 1, 1967 to December 31, 1967, Box 4667, 1967 Food — Food Stamp Program, General Correspondence, RG 40 General Records of the Department of Commerce Office of the Secretary, National Administration of Records and Archives, College Park, Maryland (Hereafter cited as RG 40, NARA).

that its funds directly reach those who needs them, without political or racial bias, and reach them in an amount adequate to their minimum needs for food, clothing, and medical care.”<sup>49</sup>

However, reports of racial discrimination continued. The NFSNC reported that in rural Mississippi, the USDA denied many black grocery store owners approval to operate as an FSP retailer. When poor families of color shopped at white-owned grocery stores, they faced discriminatory practices. Because white store owners worried about the lag time it would take for the federal government to reimburse the food stamps, merchants loaned money in lieu of the stamps and then required the family to pay the money back with interest. Sometimes the merchants would randomly pick which days to accept the stamps and would increase the price of food while lowering the quality. According to the NFSNC, merchants also refused to make exact change and instead took more stamps than necessary from the customer. Because these families feared for their “personal and family’s safety” they refused to offer exact examples or proof to the NFSNC which could have helped bring charges against these violations.<sup>50</sup>

Senate testimony by two grassroots organizations, the Delta Ministry and the NFSNC claimed that retailers in Mississippi only accepted food stamps for “expensive items” and spontaneously raised prices on stamp issue days.<sup>51</sup> In the Mississippi Delta and other poor

<sup>49</sup> “Children in Mississippi,” *A Report to the Field Foundation*, June 1967, Folder 3-3 Joseph S. Clark, U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania, Subseries 18, File Series 1, Box 3, Eastland Collection, DASC, UM.

<sup>50</sup> Letter from National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers to Ben Zimmerman, Director Community Services, Office of Economic Opportunity, April 26, 1967, Folder Food Stamp Program May 1967, Box 4669, 1967 Food Stamp Program, General Correspondence, 1906-76, RG 16, NARA.

<sup>51</sup> Letter from Hester P. Condon, Inspector General to Rodney E. Leonard, Deputy Assistant Secretary, July 14, 1967, Folder Food Stamp Program July 1 to July 15, 1967, Box 4668, Food Stamp Program, General Correspondence, RG 40, NARA.

regions in the Deep South, an entrenched system of racial oppression and white power combined with economic forces and the intended and unintended consequences of highly bureaucratic federal food programs. This dynamic hindered the effective administration of food aid programs to the poor.<sup>52</sup>

The media firestorm about the injustices in Mississippi continued. On June 14, 1967, the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty (CCAP), a grassroots organization, released a detailed “Facts about Food Programs” report. The report detailed why the United States still had so many people who lived in poverty and faced issues of hunger and starvation. Researchers argued that welfare programs were “comprised by our reluctance to admit we have those families whose standard of living is embarrassingly low.” The result of this denial was a “mammoth welfare structure with fifty state subsidiaries, widely varying in their dedication, and often operating in spastic and ineffectual ways.”<sup>53</sup> Businessman and lobbyist, Robert Choate pointed out that before the depression-era food stamp program, food and welfare relief was the responsibility of private citizens to their fellow Americans. As the states and federal government took on the responsibility of feeding its poor, Choate pondered if they were doing enough. He asked, “with both the commodity and food stamp programs in operation, could there be American children, numbering in the millions, growing up hungry?”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 363.

<sup>53</sup> “Facts about Food Programs: A Lean and Hungry Look at the Food Distribution Systems of the United States Government,” Prepared for the Citizens’ Crusade Against Poverty by Robert Choate, Frances S. Pelzman, and Caryl-An Barker, June 14, 1967, Folder CM/Food 1/1/67 – 6/20/67, Box 4, EX/CM Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Then, on July 9, 1967, Walter Reuther, chairman of the CCAP and president of United Auto Workers announced the formation of a 22-person inquiry board tasked with investigating and reporting on hunger, starvation, and malnutrition in the United States.<sup>55</sup> Motivated by the investigative efforts of Kennedy and Clark and the Field Foundation physicians who visited the South, the CCAP focused part of their community activism on food access. In the face of the report, Freeman held steadfast in his belief that the FSP was making a difference. If poor people still lacked adequate food, Freeman reasoned, it was because they used the stamps incorrectly. In his testimony to the Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty on July 11, 1967, Freeman stated that the United States had “all the physical resources necessary to ensure that every person has the opportunity to a full and nutritious diet.” He outlined the three steps required for the program’s successful implementation. First, established programs must secure funds. Second, the government must ensure that the program operated “effectively and efficiently.” Finally, Freeman argued that food stamp recipients needed guidance in “planning meals and preparing the food required for an adequate diet.”<sup>56</sup> Freeman conceded that Mississippi was one of the six states that had either the Surplus Commodities Program or the FSP in all its counties but did not offer up reasons as to why there might still exist swaths of Americans living in destitute poverty. Freeman stated that the “real task” lay in educating and

<sup>55</sup> Nan Robertson, “Panel to Report on Hunger in U.S.: 22-Man Citizens’ Crusade Board Listed by Reuther,” *The New York Times*, July 9, 1967, Folder CM/Food 1/1/67 – 6/20/67, Box 4, EX/CM Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>56</sup> Testimony of the Honorable Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman Before the Sub-Committee on Employment and Manpower of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, July 11, 1967, Folder CM/Food 6/21/67 to date, Box 4, EX/CM Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

motivating more low-income people to join the FSP.<sup>57</sup> But he did not directly address the problems of poor people with no income or who faced problems of discrimination.

As a stopgap measure, the USDA reduced minimum food stamp purchase requirements from two dollars to fifty cents a person. The USDA also initiated an “intensive effort” to hire low-income people to work as food stamp aides in the hopes that they could better describe the program and its value to their community members.<sup>58</sup> In that same memo to the White House, Rodney Leonard, deputy assistant secretary of agriculture, rationalized that “there is no question that some people are hungry in Mississippi, and that malnutrition is a serious problem,” but that “starvation, in the sense that people are dying from lack of food, is not.”<sup>59</sup>

Representative William F. Ryan (D-NY) remarked that although the reduction in the purchase requirement helped in alleviating starvation in the Mississippi it still did not help the people who had no money at all.<sup>60</sup> But Freeman was already on record – in a meeting with Civil Rights activists in Mississippi – that the FSP was “not a relief program, it is a food program.”<sup>61</sup> Freeman and Johnson did not associate the FSP with welfare programs. As they understood it, food stamps empowered low-income people to act as consumers and increased the profitability

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Memorandum from Rodney Leonard to Joe Califano, August 5, 1967, Folder Starvation in Mississippi, Box 31, Presidential Task Forces, Subject File, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from William F. Ryan to Rodney Leonard, July 3, 1967, Folder Food Stamp Program July 1 to July 15, 1967, Box 4668, Food Stamp Program, General Correspondence, RG 40, NARA.

<sup>61</sup> Meeting minutes, “Stopover in Greenville, Mississippi,” June 26, 1967, Folder Food Stamp Program July 1 to July 15, 1967, Box 4668, Food Stamp Program, General Correspondence, RG 40, NARA.

of business owners while moving farm surplus. Fixing problems of discrimination, unemployment, and low-wages went too far. Unwilling to acknowledge the connections between access to food and the cycle-of-poverty, Freeman steadfastly defended the limited scope and success of the program.

In July 1967, the executive director of the Scholarship Education and Defense Fund for Racial Equality — formed in 1962 by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) — wrote to Leonard and posited of the FSP, “these arrangements consist of the nickel and dime contributions from the Negro community to pay white social workers to administer a federal program designed to benefit the poor.” He went on to say that “this seems to me an utterly shameful procedure which cannot be countenanced by any American.” He agreed that the existing local and state level control was a “stopgap measure” and asked, “when can we expect that the administrative cost will be borne by Government rather than by the poor?”<sup>62</sup> The frustrations of Mississippi activists and the continued debate between their understanding of government responsibility often conflicted with how the creators of the FSP understood the program. Proponents of a more universal feeding system demanded that the FSP expand in ways that provided for all Americans.

Dismayed with the slow progress of getting emergency food relief to the destitute in the Mississippi Delta and other regions in the Deep South, Kennedy, Wright, and Martin Luther King Jr. continued their mission to push Freeman and Johnson to do more. They believed that no

<sup>62</sup> Letter from Marvin Rich to Rodney E. Leonard, July 11, 1967, Folder Food Stamp Program July 1 to July 15, 1967, Box 4668 Food Stamp Program, General Correspondence, RG 40, NARA.

American citizen should go hungry in a rich country with plenty of food. In late 1967, King led the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in organizing a Poor People's March to Washington as a strategy to reignite interest by politicians and the public in the plight of the poor.<sup>63</sup> Kennedy recommended that King "bring the poor people to Washington." He stressed, "it's time for some visible expression of concern for the poor."<sup>64</sup> As Wright remembered in an oral history interview some decades later, activists understood the late 1960s as a time of "White reaction and backlash," divisive war, and where "the problems of Black and poor people were being left behind," or seen as "annoyances."<sup>65</sup> But as historian Alondra Nelson argues, black activism and the long duree of the Civil Rights movement remained active far beyond the mid-twentieth century era of protests.<sup>66</sup> For food access specifically, grassroots organizations, sympathetic politicians, and anti-hunger activists continued to push for visibility and worked to reimagine and expand the scope and purpose of federal food programs.

In attempting to investigate and respond to the allegations that hunger and malnutrition existed in the Mississippi Delta, Califano and his assistant, Jim Gaither, asked for statistics from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), Agriculture, and the Office of

<sup>63</sup> Meacham, *Delta Epiphany*, 208-9.

<sup>64</sup> "Interview with Marian Wright Edelman," EOTP Interviews, Hampton Collection, FMA, WUL.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and The Fight Against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 7. Nelson argued that the objectives of civil rights activists were more comprehensive than challenging racial oppression. Rather, they understood that "economic oppression and racism together" limited the ability of blacks to successfully realize full rights as citizens.

Economic Opportunity (OEO). They wanted concrete answers about who was starving in Mississippi and how badly. After investigating, Gaither reported that “the short answer” to their question was “we do not know.” He confirmed that “we do not have data on starvation or malnutrition in those counties,” but that the OEO predicted “substantially less than half” of the poor people living in the counties in question participated in a federal food program.<sup>67</sup> The OEO made their prediction based on the only statistics they had, that of Leflore County. According to the OEO, Leflore County switched from the Surplus Commodities Program to the FSP in May 1967. Approximately 20,571 poor individuals participated in the Surplus Commodities Program but when the county switched to the FSP, that number dropped to 8,331 participants.<sup>68</sup> Contrary to the OEO’s report, Gaither also noted that Freeman continued his steadfast denial of serious hunger problems in the Deep South stating, “agriculture, however, asserts that while there may be some malnutrition, there is no starvation.”<sup>69</sup> On October 5, 1967, the House Committee on Agriculture requested that the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of HEW conduct a joint study on the “incidence and location of serious hunger and malnutrition and health problems”

<sup>67</sup> Memorandum from Jim Gaither to Joe Califano, August 17, 1967, Folder Starvation in Mississippi, Box 31, Presidential Task Forces, Subject File, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>68</sup> Memorandum from Betrand M. Harding to James C. Gaither, August 15, 1967, Folder Starvation in Mississippi, Box 31, Presidential Task Forces, Subject File, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>69</sup> Memorandum from Jim Gaither to Joe Califano, August 17, 1967, Folder Starvation in Mississippi, Box 31, Presidential Task Forces, Subject File, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.



and then report their findings and recommendations for fixing the problems they found. The cabinet members had six months to deliver their report to the congressional committee.<sup>70</sup>

### **Americans Re-Discover Hunger**

By the new year, the nation's hunger problems had become full-fledged political issues. On March 18, 1968, two days after he announced his candidacy for president of the United States, Kennedy addressed an audience at the University of Kansas. Because of his work the previous year in the Mississippi Delta, Kennedy made federal food aid a central issue of his campaign platform. He addressed ideas about invisible poverty and brought attention to the millions of Americans "living in the hidden places, whose names and faces are completely unknown."<sup>71</sup> He called out the hypocrisy of starving citizens in a country "with a gross national product of \$800 billion dollars."<sup>72</sup> Kennedy recalled the 1967 "field trip" to the Delta where he had "seen children in Mississippi starving, their bodies so crippled from hunger" with "distended stomachs, whose faces are covered with sores from starvation." He wondered why "we haven't developed a policy so that they can get enough food so that they can live, so that their children, so that their lives are not destroyed." Speaking of the federal food aid programs and the Johnson

<sup>70</sup> "Incidence and Location of Serious Hunger and Malnutrition and Health Problems Incident Thereto," Report by the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, November 14, 1968, Folder HE 2 Food – Nutrition, Box 13, EX HE 1-1 4/6/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>71</sup> Robert F. Kennedy, *Remarks at the University of Kansas*, March 18, 1968, JFK Papers, JFKL.  
<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/remarks-at-the-university-of-kansas-march-18-1968>

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

administration, Kennedy remarked, “I don’t think that’s acceptable in the United States of America and I think we need a change.”<sup>73</sup>

With Kennedy and Clark’s 1967 tour of the Mississippi Delta, the public saw elite, rich, white men fighting to bring FSP access to starving, poor, black Americans. Their interest in problems of hunger and starvation catapulted the issue to forefront of American politics. Kennedy’s perseverance in the fight for adequate distribution of food aid and subsequent employment opportunities for the poorest citizens influenced how politicians framed their policy initiatives on the campaign trail. His growing commitment to fighting racial discrimination and increasing food access to communities, like in the Mississippi Delta, put pressure on the leaders of the FSP to clarify the program’s parameters and clean up bureaucratic inefficiencies to increase FSP access.

Kennedy’s trip helped Americans to “rediscover” the pervasive hunger problems that plagued the country. The public renewed their interest in alleviating hunger, not just in the Mississippi Delta, but throughout the country. Because of this, the 1968 election year was a watershed moment for the FSP. As the program’s architect, Freeman increasingly became marred by controversial and emotional media stories and public outrage about the perceived ineffectiveness of food stamps to reach people in need. Confronted with the idea that American citizens starved despite the nation’s wealth, constituents demanded that the government take

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

better care of its people. Freeman fell from grace and politicians campaigning for the presidency knew that they had to prepare to talk about the issue of food insecurity and hunger.

Presidential advisor Charles S. Murphy, warned Johnson in early 1968 that “the issue has ‘surfaced’ and is certain to be kept before the public. It will inevitably be an issue in the coming campaign. I don’t see how any national candidate or party can fail to support a major program for ‘eliminating hunger’ in the U.S. I believe the American people will take action to correct this situation...the more spotlight is turned on it, the clearer the case for action will be.”<sup>74</sup> Feeding poor citizens, effectively and efficiently, became a top national priority. Freeman predicted that the administration would be “getting more political heat this year from Clark, Kennedy, Javits and Walther Reuther’s ‘Citizens Crusade Against Poverty’ on the ground that our domestic food programs are inadequate.” As the volume of needy Americans became clear to policymakers, tension around the subject only intensified. Indeed, by Spring 1968, the FSP “exceeded expectations” and the USDA requested an additional \$6.7 million in appropriations including a \$two million transfer of funds from the OEO’s “emergency food fund.”<sup>75</sup> The USDA could not keep up with demand.

In April 1968, public unrest about the FSP targeted Freeman. The media and activist organizations claimed that the FSP excluded many white and non-white people in the poorest

<sup>74</sup> Memo to LBJ from Charles S. Murphy, May 1, 1968, Folder CM/Food 6/21/67 to date, Box 4, EX CM/Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>75</sup> Memo for the President, March 15, 1968, Folder FG 150 2/1/68-3/31/68, Box 213, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

counties of the country. Moreover, they alleged that Freeman and the federal government not only knew this but did nothing to remedy the situation. The CCAP formed a task force to investigate hunger nationwide. The five academic and professional researchers that made up the task force, called the Citizens Board on Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition (CBI), reported findings of serious hunger and malnutrition in Mississippi. However, the goal of CBI's final report, *Hunger, U.S.A.* was to investigate if the problems of starvation and malnutrition existed only in the Deep South region or if poor Americans, nationwide, experienced similar problems. In the report, they also laid out policy recommendations for the president and Congress to alter existing federal food aid programs in ways that were more equitable to poor Americans and people suffering around the world.<sup>76</sup>

The CBI conducted their research based on five objectives. First, they examined the scope of poverty in regions around the country. Secondly, they investigated the extent of “nutritional knowledge” at medical schools, among doctors, and within the United States Public Health Service. They then analyzed the quality of public and private food distribution programs that worked to address hunger issues. Their final two objectives were to provide immediate and long range policy recommendations based on their findings.<sup>77</sup> The report's six chapters chronicled the deprivation in Mississippi and around the country with the CBI arguing that the failure to feed American citizens was mostly due to inefficient federal food programs run by the

<sup>76</sup> *Hunger, U.S.A.*, A Report by the Citizens' Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States (Washington D.C.: New Community Press, 1968).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Department of Agriculture whose most powerful politicians were advocates of commercial agriculture not feeding programs.

In Congress, top southern Democrats held much of the power in deciding how to allocate federal money. Senators Jaime Whitten (D-MS), John Stennis (D-MS), and James Eastland (D-MS) all served on the Appropriations Committee. Allen Ellender (D-LA) chaired the Senate Agriculture Committee. Their interests stood firmly in protecting commercial farmers and bolstering mechanization and they routinely sided with these efforts over using funds to help starving Americans access emergency temporary aid or work towards forming a more efficient food stamp distribution system. The researchers who created *Hunger, U.S.A.*, called this conflict of interest into question, arguing that “hunger and malnutrition in a country of abundance must be seen as consequences of a political and economic system that spends billions to remove food from the market, to limit productions, to retire land from production, to guarantee and sustain profits for the producer.”<sup>78</sup> In fact, many proponents and critics of the FSP had long argued that the Department of Agriculture should not administer welfare feeding programs due to this conflict of interest. Some policymakers argued that HEW operate the FSP instead of the USDA.

*Hunger, U.S.A.* motivated public officials and anti-hunger activists alike, especially when the report included, on its last page, a color-coded map of the United States indicating “Emergency Hunger Counties” and “Additional Counties with Serious Hunger Problem.” The shading for both categories blanketed the southwestern and southeastern regions of the United

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 9.

States. Stating that the “desolate poor are heavily weighted on the side of old inhabitants,” the report listed the most destitute Americans as “Indians, Negros, Appalachian whites, Spanish speaking residents of the Southwest.”<sup>79</sup> Mechanization of farming in the Appalachian region, over-reliance on the sharecropping system in the Deep South and migrant labor in Arizona and New Mexico combined with the persistent destitution of Native Americans living on reservations meant that these people struggled with deep poverty. The agendas of policymakers and large corporate farming clouded their need for an adequate standard of living.<sup>80</sup>

The report did not stop there. With pictures of starving children sprawled throughout the report and intimate stories of the financial troubles of families who detailed what they ate each day, *Hunger, U.S.A.* tugged at the emotional heartstrings of its readers. The report made fourteen recommendations on how the Department of Agriculture and the federal government should address the problems found in their research as well as from Kennedy and Clark’s Mississippi Delta tour and the findings of the Field Foundation physicians. Among their recommendations, they called for a commitment by the government to ensure that every American, child or adult, received an adequate diet. They also demanded that medical practitioners learn to properly diagnose and treat malnutrition, and to ensure that the food served in the school lunch program would allow children to maintain a healthy diet.<sup>81</sup> The scientific nature of the *Hunger, U.S.A.*,

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>80</sup> For information on the postwar decline of the Appalachian region’s small farms and the rise of mechanization, see Melissa Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919-1941* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

<sup>81</sup> *Hunger, U.S.A.*, A Report by the Citizens’ Board of Inquiry, 86-7.

report prompted policymakers and the public to take it seriously. The release of the report, just one month before another barrage of media exposes on the problems of hunger in the United States, was no coincidence.<sup>82</sup> Anti-hunger activists and policymakers knew that the report gave credence to their claims. Indeed, hunger constituted the forgotten issue of their time and many people believed that the government had a responsibility to aid poor Americans who were starving to death.

The next month, on May 21, 1968, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) aired the documentary *Hunger in America*. The hour-long special followed investigators and interviewed families and doctors in four areas of the United States. These included the Mexican-American poor in San Antonio, Texas and the Native Americans on the Navajo Reservation stretching across the Arizona and New Mexico deserts. Both groups subsisted on the donation-based Surplus Commodity Program. It also included the white rural poor in Loudoun County, Virginia, who had no federal assistance programs at all, and African-Americans in Hale County, Alabama, where food stamps were available for purchase. Displayed across televisions throughout the country, Americans saw images of starving mothers and babies. They witnessed long lines at welfare offices and saw white workers distributing food stamps to non-white people. They viewed dilapidated shacks that served as shelters for families. Viewers heard from doctors who claimed that diseases derived from severe malnutrition and starvation only seen in Third World countries were afflicting America's poor. CBS reporter Charles Kuralt, who narrated the

<sup>82</sup> Larry Brown, "Hunger USA: The Public Pushes Congress," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 11 (June 1970): 115-126.

documentary, argued that despite the federal government's Surplus Commodity Program and FSP, the poorest American citizens were not reached, alleging, "we are talking about ten million Americans."<sup>83</sup> Claiming that for farmers and the government the Commodities program was a convenience but for the poor, it was an "inadequate dole," Kuralt argued "the Department of Agriculture protects farmers not consumers, especially not destitute consumers."<sup>84</sup>

The day after *Hunger in America* aired, thousands of citizens reached out to the government.<sup>85</sup> The public expressed a wide array of reactions in telegrams to Johnson and Freeman the day after the documentary aired. Some were emotional. One New Jersey woman in an "affluent suburban northern town" admitted that she had "heard of the plight of the poverty-stricken millions in various localities of our nation" but that it "had not been made so clear" to her until viewing the documentary. In a letter to President Johnson she declared, "I as a citizen of the richest nation on earth, am appalled and angered at the condition of these peoples." She went on to threaten that if any of "her elected officials" did not attempt to fix the problem, she would not vote for them in coming elections.<sup>86</sup> The same day, a Virginia man telegraphed the White

<sup>83</sup> CBS Documentary, *Hunger in America* (1968), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h94bq4JfMAA>

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Memo from Orville Freeman to LBJ, June 29, 1968, Folder Chronological File 4/1/68 – 9/30/68, Box 7, Papers of OLF, LBJL.

<sup>86</sup> Letter from Cornelia A. Muse to President Johnson, May 22, 1968, Folder CM/Food, Box 10, GEN CM/Firearms (CM/L), WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.



House and implored that Johnson, Freeman, and HEW take direct action adding that he, personally, was “prepared to pay increased tax in any amount requested.”<sup>87</sup>

A Michigan woman, concerned about the lack of food access for poor people challenged government spending on social programs. She believed that the federal government had an obligation to ensure a basic standard of living for all Americans.<sup>88</sup> She begged for policymakers to make food stamps more accessible to the poorest people and while she defended spending in Vietnam, she felt that funding space exploration to the moon went beyond responsible government spending.<sup>89</sup> She reasoned that if government appropriations could support space exploration, then the existence of hungry Americans proved unjustifiable.<sup>90</sup>

A Connecticut woman demanded to know “what in the name of God are we doing to our own people in Texas, the people are starving, and so are the Indians in Arizona” and declared “I am ashamed may your soul and your offspring rest in peace I am 67 years old and I may not.”<sup>91</sup> An Ohio man asked “How do we as a country justify spending three billion dollars a month in

<sup>87</sup> Telegram to LBJ from George Leone, May 22, 1968, Folder CM/Food 6/21/67 to date, Box 4, EX CM/Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>88</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and The Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017), 24.

<sup>89</sup> Letter from Verna K. Crowley to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, May 7, 1969, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program 1/1/71, Box 60, Welfare (WE) EX WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program to EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans, Subject Files, White House Central Files, Papers of Richard Nixon, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California (hereafter cited as WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Telegram from Catherine Nackowski to LBJ, May 22, 1968, Folder CM/Food 6/21/67 to date, Box 4, EX CM/Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

Vietnam and permit ten million fellow Americans to suffer the ravages of malnutrition?”<sup>92</sup> A couple from Oregon addressed the debate about deserving and undeserving poor when they stated “these people need food not investigations. We know all the arguments as to why they have no money. We are not talking about guaranteed income. We’re talking about hungry babies who need food now.”<sup>93</sup>

Others called for Freeman’s resignation. A man from New Jersey declared “the picture of starving Americans is sickening. The fact of the gross mismanagement of the U.S. Department of Agriculture by not preventing this, cries for justice. Mr. Orville Freeman must resign, and you Mr. President must lead Congress and all Americans to fix these crimes against all our people. Help these innocents. The horror must be stopped.”<sup>94</sup> Some juxtaposed the government’s foreign policy with domestic hunger. A San Francisco couple telegrammed Johnson and demanded that he “eliminate hunger in America first. Forget about Vietnam and space satellites.”<sup>95</sup> A Pennsylvania constituent stated, “it is intolerable hypocrisy to cheer the glories of this country while in it children are needlessly starving.”<sup>96</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Telegram from Ed Roth to LBJ, May 22, 1968, Folder CM/Food 6/21/67 to date, Box 4, EX CM/Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>93</sup> Telegram from Mr. and Mrs. Richard Case to LBJ, May 22, 1968, Folder CM/Food 6/21/67 to date, Box 4, EX CM/Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>94</sup> Telegram from John Henry Griffin to LBJ, May 22, 1968, Folder CM/Food 6/21/67 to date, Box 4, EX CM/Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>95</sup> Telegram from Mr. and Mrs. J. Buchwald to LBJ, May 22, 1968, Folder CM/Food 6/21/67 to date, Box 4, EX CM/Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>96</sup> Telegram from C.A. Condit to LBJ, May 22, 1968, Folder CM/Food 6/21/67 to date, Box 4, EX CM/Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

On May 27, 1968, six days after the documentary aired, Freeman sent out two urgent letters. The first was to Dr. Frank Stanton, the president of CBS. Stating that his “disappointment . . . is matched only by my indignation,” Freeman directed his rage at the content of the documentary and what he viewed as lax journalistic integrity. He called *Hunger in America* “a travesty on objective reporting.” Freeman argued that “it presented to millions of viewers a distorted, oversimplified and misleading picture of domestic hunger and what is being done to combat it – and it served to further disillusion, disappoint and disenchant those hungry people who now have been told that no one cares, that no one is doing much to help them.”<sup>97</sup> He delivered the second letter to Representative Carl Perkins (D-KY), the chairman of the Education and Labor Committee. Freeman claimed that the documentary was “a biased, one-sided, dishonest presentation of a serious national problem.”<sup>98</sup> Stanton ceased responding to Freeman’s angry letters and outright denied his “request for network time to correct the many mistakes” of the documentary.<sup>99</sup>

Despite Freeman’s arguments, reports of starving and malnourished people across the country proliferated. “I’m sick of starving,” lamented a woman in Monroe County, New York. The woman and her family lived off their county’s Surplus Commodity Program. They received

<sup>97</sup> Letter to Dr. Frank Stanton from Orville Freeman, May 27, 1968, Folder WE 5/21/68-6/30/68, Box 2, Welfare EX WE 2/16/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>98</sup> Letter to Carl Perkins from Orville Freeman, May 27, 1968, Folder WE 5/21/68-6/30/68, Box 2, Welfare EX WE 2/16/67, WHCF, LBJ Papers, LBJL.

<sup>99</sup> Letter to Dr. Frank Stanton from Orville Freeman, June 12, 1968, Folder IIA3 Donations, Low-Income GRPS. '68, Box 1.4/7, USDA History Collections, Manuscript Collections 182, National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, Maryland.

the donated food once a month but argued that it only “lasts about a week” because the couple and “16 relatives lived in a four-room house.” When the food was available the couple made sure to feed their children before themselves stating, “I can do without. If they go hungry, they’ll start to getting in trouble.” Once they finished the food from the Surplus Commodity Program, the family lived off the husband’s welfare check and their diet consisted of “spam and cheese, beans and ketchup or rice and onions.”<sup>100</sup>

Other citizens in Monroe County reported going completely without food at least twice a week. A 38-year-old man reported his firing from several jobs because seizures, high-blood pressure, and lack of food combined to render him unfit to stay on task. When he could afford food it usually consisted of “pork chops, bread, lard and spaghetti.” After the man was dropped from the welfare rolls for missing two doctor’s appointments he relied on his mother to send money when she could.<sup>101</sup> A 40-year-old man who lived alone and subsisted on “lots of soup, vegetables and pork,” reported that he did not work and was sick a lot. He relied on help from the SCLC for food donations. From the SCLC, he could obtain “tomatoes, corn and pineapple juice.”<sup>102</sup>

When the CBI’s *Hunger, U.S.A* report listed 256 emergency counties that dealt with severe cases of malnutrition and starvations, Monroe County, New York was not mentioned.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Congressional Record – House, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, H5813, July 1, 1968, Folder 1 July 1968 “Temporary Emergency Assistance to Provide Nutritious Meals to Needy...”, Box 2, Series 1, Jaime Whitten Collection, DASC, UM.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

The Monroe County Health Director confirmed that “plenty of malnutrition” exists here but argued that malnutrition could exist “in the richest of families merely because they don’t eat enough of the right foods-by choice.” The Health Director believed that “malnutrition sometimes grows out of different racial and ethnic groups’ liking for foods low in nutritional value.”<sup>104</sup> Framing malnutrition as a choice rather than a symptom of larger social, economic, and political inequalities empowered local, state, and federal lawmakers who opposed the FSP to deny that the government had any responsibility to help feed poor people.

Progressive policymakers who focused on expanding the scope and purpose the FSP persisted in their fight to alleviate hunger despite these claims. A long-time supporter of federal food aid programs and director of JFK’s Food for Peace Program, Senator George S. McGovern (D-SD) also served as chairman of United States Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs.<sup>105</sup> Often called the McGovern Committee, it investigated hunger and malnutrition throughout the United States. The McGovern Committee, like Kennedy and Clark before them, faced barriers in Congress by policymakers who were indifferent to the issues of starvation and malnutrition throughout the United States. Although statistics, medical reports, and anecdotes by local poor people and politicians gave testimonies before the new McGovern Committee, powerful congressmen representing Deep South states, found ways to block legislation intended

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> The original McGovern committee consisted of eight Democrats and five Republicans: George McGovern (D-SD), Allen Ellender (D-LA), Herman Talmadge (D-GA), Ralph Yarborough (D-TX), Philip Hart (D-MI), Walter Mondale (D-MN), Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), Claiborne Pell (D-RI), Jacob Javits (R-NY), Charles Percy (R-IL), Peter H. Dominick (R-CO), Marlow Cook (R-KY), Robert Dole (R-KS).

to make the FSP accessible to more people. Whitten consistently worked against the efforts of top politicians who tried to bring increased aid to impoverished counties. His powerful position in Congress meant that Freeman negotiated between groups like the McGovern Committee who fought for the expansion of the FSP and the wishes of southern congressmen who had the power and resolve to block federal funding for the program.

On October 4, 1968, Freeman wrote to Whitten concerning the \$90 million dollars in supplemental appropriations for the FSP for the remainder of that fiscal year. The money, Freeman stated, would aid 1.5 million people not currently reached by the FSP and of that group, one million of those people did not yet have a FSP operating in their county. The remaining half million people did not have access to the programs. In proving his case that the USDA needed supplemental funds to feed more starving Americans, Freeman recalled his own 1967 trip to the Mississippi Delta which he had taken at the urging of Kennedy and Clark. Freeman remembered “the hunger and malnutrition,” and argued that “bringing the Food Stamp Program into new communities” could fix the problem. Freeman finished his letter to Whitten pleading for approval of the supplemental funds but ensuring the department’s “prudent and frugal administration” of the FSP but that if denied the money, they would have to take funds from other important programs to meet the urgent needs of starving citizens.<sup>106</sup>

In many ways, proponents of the FSP found themselves hamstrung by policymakers who did not view issues of starvation and malnutrition as top priorities. Freeman acted as the go-

<sup>106</sup> Letter from Orville L. Freeman to Jamie L. Whitten, October 4, 1968, Folder Chronological File 10/1/68 – 1/20/69, Box 7, Papers of OLF, LBJL.

between the McGovern Committee's calls for direct and swift action and Deep South congressman who held little interest in strengthening or expanding any of the federal food aid programs. On October 28, 1968, Freeman wrote to Judith Randal, a journalist with *The Evening Star* in Washington, D.C. In response to the implication that the USDA favored large subsidy payments to farmers over using that money to feed the poor through increased federal food aid spending, Freeman argued that "we have plenty of food in the United States. Our problem is to get the money to distribute it through the machinery which at long last we are now perfecting."<sup>107</sup>

### **The Limits of the Food Stamp Program**

Postwar liberals, like Johnson and Freeman created a food program where the federal government temporarily aided families on a path towards self-sufficiency. More progressive liberals, like RFK, operated with the view that food access was a right – not a privilege – of all people and that the government had a responsibility to help its citizens survive. From 1964 to 1968, Johnson and Freeman's FSP enjoyed widespread popularity. However, as the program expanded and more people learned about the benefits of food stamps, it became increasingly difficult to ignore larger problems of starvation and malnutrition amongst America's poorest citizens. By spring of 1968, the media and the public's perception of the FSP turned from admiration to outrage. They wondered why the program did not feed all Americans and they

<sup>107</sup> Letter from Orville L. Freeman to Judith Randal, *The Evening Star*, October 28, 1968, Folder Chronological File 10/1/68 – 1/20/69, Box 7, Papers of OLF, LBJL.

challenged the fundamental purpose of the original Food Stamp Program by arguing for more progressive legislation that made food access of fundamental right of humanity not a privilege of good citizenship.

As changes to federal food policies gradually became more liberal and reached more poor citizens, a shift in public opinion about starving Americans veered towards anger, deeming most poor people unworthy of food aid. Between the years 1968 and 1976 the public invested in the plight of starving and malnourished Americans. Their public awareness amplified – for a short time – the invisible poverty of hunger. In the long arc of federal food aid, 1968 was a watershed moment where the idea of hungry Americans proved unacceptable to many people. Affluent citizens worried about their neighbor’s ability to buy healthy food and demanded that the government take responsibility in feeding them. For them, access to food was a right of humanity not a privilege bestowed on those citizens seen as deserving by top lawmakers.

Grassroots organizations, medical experts, and popular media continued to expose the invisible poverty, initiated by Kennedy and other politicians during the 1967 “field trips” to the Mississippi Delta. Indeed, hunger and starvation in America were certainly not new issues, but the events of 1968 created a space where the politics of food became more visible and, in turn, mattered to more constituents. But with Kennedy’s assassination, in June 1968 – in the middle of the presidential campaign – elite politicians stopped prioritizing hunger issues as one of their main concerns. The public and media interest in helping to expose the problems of hunger fizzled out as a result. While many people still cared about feeding starving Americans, the general attitude about poor people living off federal food aid underwent a significant shift.



On a 1969 trip to Immokalee, Florida, members of the McGovern Committee went to see the hunger issue first-hand. After the trip, conservative senator Ellender, remarked in the *New York Times* article that “the committee was touring only the worst areas,” and that the poor people they spoke with that day “seemed to be happy.” In fact, Ellender argued, “I haven’t seen anyone who isn’t contented.”<sup>108</sup> The McGovern Committee visited migrant laborers in Immokalee who suffered at the hands of local and state agencies that held the power to administer the FSP as they saw fit. These local and state policies often resulted in a distribution process that was discriminatory and negligent.

According to a *New York Times* article published the next day, they found “squalor,” “empty refrigerators,” and, people “ducking under clotheslines outside dilapidated shacks,” that sometimes housed more than ten people.<sup>109</sup> Local farmers in conjunction with state agencies had, for years, fended off all attempts at implementing the FSP in the region. They argued that the aid was expensive and that “migrant farm laborers might be tempted to settle down here,” or that the poor would “refuse to pick crops if they received free food stamps.”<sup>110</sup> Ideas about who deserved the right to food permeated the region. The poorest people who needed the federal aid the most suffered in a perpetual state of submission that allowed farmers to access cheap labor and states to maintain a status quo based on a hierarchy of race, gender, and class.

<sup>108</sup> Marjorie Hunter, “Senators on Hunger Tour See Squalor in Florida,” March 11, 1969, *The New York Times*, digitized. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1969/03/11/90063634.html?pageNumber=31>

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

Florida governor Claude Kirk, equally surprised and furious by the visit, flew to Immokalee to confront them and defend the actions of the state. But the McGovern Committee had chosen Immokalee as the launching point for their national hunger investigation because they questioned the politics of the surrounding counties. In other words, they wondered if specific counties experienced problems because of flaws in the FSP policies or more localized bureaucratic chaos. Freeman reiterated his belief that the program performed as expected and that its success lay in its relative effectiveness to aid more people in reaching a nutritious diet while also reviving the farming industry in rural areas. But increasingly, more people challenged that idea. Constituents, once loyal to the Johnson administration, “abandoned a venerable tradition of liberal individualism,” and were now angry because the FSP was not progressive enough.<sup>111</sup> Their demands that the federal government feed all people was inherently at odds with Johnson’s postwar liberalism that relied on “the traditional connection between work and economic security.”<sup>112</sup>

Nevertheless, local anti-hunger activists, religious organizations, and grassroots coalitions worked within their communities to help potential food stamp recipients gain access to the program despite any administrative red tape. For example, members of an Illinois-based, Catholic charities organization called the Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition (CMFSC) attempted to break down the barriers that prohibited adequate food stamp distribution. Written in

<sup>111</sup> Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 243.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

both English and Spanish, one of the coalition's promotional flyers read "you have a right to food."<sup>113</sup> This message challenged a foundational problem with the FSP in that many eligible citizens faced barriers to access the stamps like not speaking English or not possessing the ability to read. Local organizations, like the CMFSC stressed the rights of poor people to utilize government aid. However, as local and state officials implemented the FSP in more counties across the U.S., opponents of federal food distribution propagated stereotypes of the people receiving aid. Reports, investigations, public surveillance, and individual anecdotes accused food stamp users of abusing a system that taxpayers propped up. They called out those poor people who they saw as undeserving of aid. At the same time, recipients of food stamps exercised their rights both by participating in the FSP and by shirking traditional meanings of work and family to better manage their unique circumstances.

Although there was never a clear golden age of liberalism that defined the FSP, frenetic debates about its function and validity allowed for policymakers and shifting public sentiment to reshape the program in major ways. Richard Nixon's election to president of the United States signaled the beginning of major shifts to FSP policies. Nineteen sixty-eight and 1969 marked a turning point in how the public and politicians thought about federal food aid and the poor. The apex of the debate happened in these years when conservatives gained a foothold in Washington, D.C. Politicians sympathetic to the plight of poor people — like those in the Mississippi Delta —

<sup>113</sup> "Proposed Program" by the Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition, 1976, Folder 5-6: Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition, 1972-1983, n.d., Box 5, 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice Records, Women and Leadership Archives, Loyola University – Chicago, Illinois.

confronted a White House that sought to pathologize individual behavior rather than tackling the systematic inequalities that keep them in poverty.

Conservatives continued to oppose food vouchers and pushed for a cash-out system. Rather than issuing coupons limited to food purchases, participants received a lump sum of money to budget for all their monthly needs. Arguments for this altered system hinged on the growing perception that many recipients were currently abusing the food stamp system through fraudulent practices. Moving to the cash out system also bolstered a free market economy strategy that, on the surface, provided more freedom to needy individuals who could spend the money as they wished. However, this system proved antithetical to the original intent of the FSP to provide for increased buying power of poor people to purchase fresh, healthy foods thereby allowing them a more nutritious diet.

## **Chapter Two: “You Have a Right to Food”: Grassroots Organizing and the Push for Federal Food Aid Expansion, 1960s – 1970s**

In a letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967, Secretary of Agriculture, Orville L. Freeman wrote of the Food Stamp Program (FSP) that “the Administration has done more for the people of this country than any other in its history. Now that conditions are improved, people want more and faster.” Freeman continued, “we inadvertently ‘out-promised ourselves.’” But, he cautioned of the opening of FSP distribution centers, “it takes time to put them into effect and to get the results that we seek. People are impatient. They flare up. Some get disillusioned, but in the long run I’m confident that they will buckle down and do the job.”<sup>1</sup> Convinced of the success of FSP, Freeman argued that the program fulfilled the Johnson administration’s promise to address food insecurity.

The problems of food access and the poor occurred in surprising corners. Even those groups whom most Americans considered the epitome of patriotism and morality suffered from unequal and distorted ideas about work, fair wages, and access to life’s basic necessities, like food. Their inability to model their lives after more affluent Americans meant that they lost their rights as full citizens. For example, in 1969, seventeen deputy sheriffs of the Orleans Parish Deputy Criminal Sheriffs Association in Louisiana, applied for food stamps to protest the low wages that put their incomes below the poverty level. As law enforcement employees, these

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Orville L. Freeman to LBJ, March 31, 1967, Folder Chronological File: Jan 1 – March 31, 1967, Box 5, Food Stamp Program AG 7 – LE/AG, Personal Papers of Orville Freeman, The Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter cited as Papers of OLF, LBJL).

people juxtaposed their reputable careers with their low wages by applying for food stamps because that “was the only way we can get the city and state governments to look at us.”<sup>2</sup> The spokesman for the deputy sheriffs argued that their work entitled them to fair wages meaning that their salaries should “pay our bills and feed our families without sacrificing one to accomplish the other.”<sup>3</sup> Policymakers and their constituents who opposed certain groups from receiving food stamps focused on stigmas of lazy, unemployed poor people unmotivated to work towards the American Dream. Yet, examples like that of the Louisiana deputy sheriffs show that even wage-earners struggled to meet the basic standards of living.

The FSP illuminated broader and more widespread problems of food access and citizenship rights in the United States. Because the implementation of the program did not match the expectation of the public, the FSP became the foundation on which debates around food rights centered. Through the politicization of food, low-income and poor people fell victim to a hierarchy of worthiness based on social constructions of race, class, gender, and meanings of work. However, their stories complicate the well-known stereotypes around food stamp users.

The confusion around the original intent of the FSP and the problem of inadequate wages and food access stemmed from its history as primarily a program to subsidize farm income by providing surplus food stuffs to the poor. A Washington, D.C., reporter for *The Evening Star*

<sup>2</sup> “Deputies Ask Food Stamps: 17 Claim Salaries Below Poverty Level,” undated, *The Time Picayune* – *New Orleans*, Section 3 – Page 20, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program, Box 60, EX WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program – EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans Begin 7/17/69, Welfare, Subject Files, White House Central Files, Papers of Richard Nixon, Nixon Presidential Materials Staff, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California (hereafter cited as WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

pointed out that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s primary mission focused on helping the farmer and that the federal food distribution programs never intended to meet *all* the needs of *every* poor family. The reporter pointed out that the "nation must deal with bureaucracy and a problem of undefined dimensions in trying to feed the poor."<sup>4</sup> A friend of Johnson and foreign correspondent for the, *The Times of London*, argued that there existed a comprehensive denial of starvation and malnutrition in the United States despite the evidence and reports surfacing that year. He stated that "in the land of the free there is considerable reluctance to admit that men, women and children may be free only to go hungry."<sup>5</sup>

The FSP became a battleground for defining the so-called deserving and undeserving poor. Americans debated access to food as a right or privilege that marked an individual's place in a hierarchy of citizenship. Policymakers, the public, and the media attempted to differentiate between the "truly needy" and those people perceived as abusing the system. On one level, this meant defining and quantifying terms like hunger, starvation, and malnutrition. But politicians and the public also talked about food stamps in qualitative terms that reinforced images of good citizenship through contested meanings of work.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Judith Randal, "The "Why" of Hunger in U.S.," *The Evening Star*, July 13, 1967, Folder CM/Food 1/1/67 – 6/20/67, Box 4, EX/CM Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, White House Central Files, Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter cited as WHCF, Papers of LBJ, LBJL).

<sup>5</sup> Louis Heren, "Americans Who Are Too Poor to Be Helped," *The Times*, June 20, 1967, Folder CM/Food 1/1/67 – 6/20/67, Box 4, EX/CM Food 3/1/66 – 6/21/67, WHCF, Papers of LBJ, LBJL.

<sup>6</sup> Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 8.

In this chapter, I argue that Americans defined work and citizenship in ways that created and constantly reimagined federal food aid policies. Was access to healthy food a right endowed by citizenship status or a privilege of hard-working people who embodied American values?<sup>7</sup> Historian Gareth Davies argued that “government policies and popular attitudes have upheld the conviction that employment should be a prerequisite for economic security.”<sup>8</sup> He analyzed why “entitlement liberals” fought against the firmly entrenched ideology of income and work.<sup>9</sup> For many Americans, “work” defined their status as parents, caretakers, or enrollment in higher education. For those people who did earn a paycheck for their labor, they often did not earn enough money to cover all their bills while also accessing food and medications. Migrant farm laborers and other seasonal employees suffered from a loss of income during winter months when food was especially hard to find. I argue that debates about eligibility for the FSP prioritized certain types of workers that aligned with restrictive meanings of work.

I analyze four groups of people – women, striking union workers, hippies and the New Left, and the elderly poor – who suffered from, opposed, or directly challenged the inadequacies of the Food Stamp Program on the local, state, and federal levels. These four groups illustrate how some poor people fell outside of accepted ideas about work and the right to food. Governor

<sup>7</sup> Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*; Jennifer Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare: The Unintended Consequences of Liberal Reform, 1945 – 1965* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America’s Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 9.



Ronald Reagan (R-CA) solidified the welfare queen trope as the irresponsible single mother looking for handouts. But poor women actively organized their communities and fought harmful stigmas around their inability to afford food for their families. How women of each socio-economic class negotiated debates about food rights and citizenship shaped food stamp policy. Additionally, the actions of striking union workers, hippies, and the New Left in working to define their citizenship based on increased autonomy came to symbolize for many people the lack of work ethic in modern American citizens over-reliant on government help. In some cases, like the elderly poor, their inability to access federal food aid showcased the flaws in the distribution of food stamps. Often, the elderly poor faced barriers like transportation to distribution centers or decided not to apply for the stamps for fear of being stereotyped as welfare freeloaders.

I also track localized surveillance, application, and pressure organizing, and show the turn away from progressive politics before any conservative “attack,” through chronicling constituents’ understanding of food rights as citizenship rights. The 1964 Food Stamp Act and its architect, Freeman, had fallen out of favor by 1968 when people debated the intentions of the FSP. Central to the debate was how much responsibility taxpayers and the federal government had towards hungry people and if the purpose of the FSP was to alleviate all forms of hunger, starvation, and malnutrition in the United States or to simply bolster the purchasing power of a few Americans. Politicians and the public created, altered, and debated food stamp policy through multiple lenses of citizenship and meanings of work. The public — whether for or against the FSP — did not simply react to constant policy changes. They influenced food

distribution policies by asserting their own power as voters, citizens, and taxpayers.<sup>10</sup> For example, affluent women embodied their rights as citizens by policing and stalking female food stamp recipients in grocery stores and reporting their findings to their elected officials. The interplay between politicians, bureaucrats, anti-hunger activists, and the poor continuously reimagined the intentions and structure of the FSP. In this chapter, I challenge popular stereotypes about food stamp recipients by analyzing how they organized and fought to dismantle the barriers to food access.

## **Women**

Cast into specific gender roles, American women, operated in a society that attached meaning of food access and family health to their success as citizens. Women across all socioeconomic backgrounds invested in debates about food access. Both female food stamp recipients and the more affluent women who opposed them had long been the main drivers of change in food policies.<sup>11</sup> Affluent women challenged food prices and the function of large-scale supermarkets and were responsible for planning, buying, and preparing meals, caring about the nutrition, health, and physical fitness of family members, and the politics of food more generally.<sup>12</sup> Conscious of their power to influence policy, women engaged in protest, constituent

<sup>10</sup> Molly C. Michelmore, *Tax and Spend: The Welfare State, Tax Politics, and the Limits of American Liberalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> For more on women and the gendered politics of food see: Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of

letter writing, withholding their vote, and boycotting companies where they usually shopped. These housewives also played out their assumed roles as good citizens when they stalked food stamp users in the grocery store, often writing to their congressmen about what they viewed as inappropriate food choices or evidence of abusing the system. Women policing other women on the micro-level of food politics illuminated how they circumvented their designation as “private” non-workers to attempt to enforce their beliefs about federal food aid laws.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, poor women fought against demeaning definitions of work that further entrenched their poverty status. The assumption that women had an obligation to the home and their families based on gendered ideas of work, womanhood, and motherhood, helped to demonize any woman who could not or would not conform to those societal norms. The construct of gender created strict binary male and female roles to maintain a status quo of paid, productive work versus domestic duties. Mid-century social movements – like the push for better access to the FSP – challenged that binary by demanding that policies cater to the specific discriminations that individuals and communities faced in accessing and using federal aid

North Carolina Press, 2011); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012); Levine, *School Lunch Politics*; Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and Family, From Slavery to Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Carole M. Couinhan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Psyche A. Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, & Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Alejandra Marchevsky and Jeanne Theoharis, *Not Working: Latina Immigrants, Low-Wage Jobs, and the Failure of Welfare Reform* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Angela Jill Cooley, *To Love and Dine in Dixie: The Evolution of Urban Food Culture in the Jim Crow South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Self, *All in the Family*, 105.

programs.<sup>14</sup> In the 1970s, as eligibility requirements expanded, social welfare programs symbolized entitlements. The public and politicians judged recipients as worthy or unworthy based on meanings of work and ideas about race and gender.

Gendered assumptions about work formed through the lens of white, upper-and middle-class culture.<sup>15</sup> Government aid took the place of the male breadwinner but only for women deemed deserving and who could qualify. For example, single mothers receiving food stamps faced several stigmas. Through a gendered and racial lens, they lacked a working husband to financially provide for the family. This made their place in the workforce especially contentious. By working in the male “public” sphere, poor women shirked their prescribed motherly duties.

<sup>14</sup> For more on mid-century social movements that focus on gendered constructions of work and citizenship rights, see: Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005); Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Work in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare*; Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Marchevsky and Theoharis, *Not Working*; Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Elizabeth Rose, *A Mother's Job: The History of Day Care, 1890-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Melissa Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919-1941* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession, 1890-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000); Helen B. Marrow, *New Destination Dreaming: Immigration, Race, and Legal Status in the Rural American South* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*.

<sup>15</sup> Gail Bederman *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Martin Summers, *The Black Middle Class & The Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Self, *All in the Family*; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991).

But by maintaining a stay-at-home-mother status and using the FSP, they embodied deviant women living off the welfare system and without a breadwinner husband.<sup>16</sup> As policymakers and constituents adhered to ideas about work along this gendered binary, both men and women who needed food access found themselves trapped by negative stigmas and a flawed bureaucratic system that kept them firmly entrenched in poverty. Women — both affluent and poor — actively fought back against these binary roles. While housewives protested food prices and their right to police other shoppers in grocery stores, poor women demanded equality and full citizenship by arguing their right to food. Successful in providing more people with the ability to afford a greater volume of food, the expansion of the FSP inadvertently strengthened the welfare queen trope that already existed among other federal welfare services.<sup>17</sup>

Women on both sides of the food access debate became “uniquely moral political actors,” by exhibiting effective and powerful forms of protest to demand change.<sup>18</sup> Whether they saw food as a right or a privilege, women wrote to politicians describing their frustrations, offering up suggestions for change. Housewives stalked women in the grocery stores who they expected were on food stamps and detailed their counterparts’ purchases, family makeup, and material

<sup>16</sup> Self, *All in the Family*; Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 14-5; Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 321; Alejandra Marchevsky and Jeanne Theoharris, *Not Working: Latina Immigrants, Low-Wage Jobs, and the Failure of Welfare Reform* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*; “A Short History of SNAP,” updated September 11, 2018, *USDA Food and Nutrition Service*, digitized. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap#1960s>. In 1966, food stamp participation reached 1 million people and less than a decade later, in 1974, the program reached 15 million people.

<sup>18</sup> Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 529.

goods like the cars they drove. In their letters to policymakers, women who policed female food stamp users described the types of food that poorer woman purchased and passed judgement on the individual confirming that “food choices” were “moral choices.”<sup>19</sup> More affluent women saw it as their right and responsibility to police the FSP on the local level and to report what they saw as misuse of a federal program that they paid into with their taxes. A Texas housewife, after witnessing a female using food stamps for her purchases, “waited outside” to watch to her drive off in a “1973 Oldsmobile.” The self-identified “working housewife,” in comparing her own 1967 Chevrolet to the car of the food stamp user, demanded that potential recipient undergo investigations before becoming eligible for food stamps. She even advocated for follow-up investigations during a person’s food stamp usage tenure.<sup>20</sup>

A New Orleans woman, in the summer of 1974, wrote to President Gerald R. Ford and copied the governor of Louisiana, several local and state officials, three television news stations and one newspaper to explain her perspective of the shoppers at a local grocery store. The woman described a “healthy black female in her thirties” purchasing items “only the rich people can afford.” Listing some of the items as “duckling, steak, bacon, sausage” and “the more expensive kinds of oranges and apples,” she concluded that the bill of the stranger in front of her

<sup>19</sup> Helen Zoe Veit, *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Barbara Quarles to Gerald R. Ford, October 11, 1974, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamps Program 8/9/74 – 11/30/75, Box 28, WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program 8/9/74 (General) to WE 11 Homosexuality 1/20/77 (General), Subject File, White House Central Files, Gerald R. Ford Papers, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan (hereafter cited as WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL).

totaled \$89.00.<sup>21</sup> Claiming that she was single, the New Orleans woman complained that it was more expensive for her to live than a married person and that the laws of the time prohibited her from claiming herself as “head of household” because she had no dependents. She argued that although it was hard for her to make ends meet, her income kept her from becoming eligible for food stamps. Her perception that the food stamp “give-away programs, such as these, take the incentive out of wanting to work,” combined with the discriminatory laws she faced as a single woman in the 1970s led her to compare and judge people who she saw as benefitting more with less effort.<sup>22</sup> This example paralleled the critiques by conservative politicians that the increase in food stamp participation since the 1964 Food Stamp Act directly correlated with a rampant rise in fraudulent and abusive behavior where people who were not poor enough were simply trying to get out of work.

The woman’s frustration showed that, whether intended or not, her plight and that of the stranger in front of her using food stamps, were, on a basic level, the same. The root causes of the challenges they each faced began with a multitude of discriminatory laws that kept people — especially non-white people who lived outside of the nuclear family on the periphery of full citizenship.<sup>23</sup> While this is most clear in the examples of low-income people – especially people

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Ms. Mary Alice Flores to President Ford, August 14, 1974, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamps Program 8/9/74 – 11/30/75, Box 28, WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program 8/9/74 (General) to WE 11 Homosexuality 1/20/77 (General), Subject File, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); Martha

of color and single mothers – unmarried women with jobs and some autonomy still lived outside of society's standards of normal.

Women on both sides of the issue of federal food aid realized the inadequacies of food policies. They embodied their citizenship and autonomy in many ways, whether they policed fellow shoppers or formed grassroots organizations to spread awareness and access to the FSP. Far removed from Washington, D.C. politics, these women knew how to influence change. Amidst the accusations that the FSP had become unwieldy, women organizers in the mid-century, found ways in their local communities to increase access to healthy food. They understood the flaws in the federal distribution programs and fought against the pathologization of poverty. As well-informed citizens who were deeply involved in their communities, women sought resources to effectively help their neighbors deal with poverty and, in turn, find ways out of economic blight. They looked to reform federal food aid legislation by gaining resources that helped poor people without relying on male breadwinners or government aid acting as surrogate family members.<sup>24</sup>

African American women continued a long tradition of promoting community action and self-help philosophies in their everyday lives to stimulate job growth and lift themselves out of

Gardner, *The Qualities of a Citizen: Women, Immigration, and Citizenship, 1870-1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Self, *All in the Family*; Rebecca Klatch, *Women of the New Right* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987).

<sup>24</sup> Self, *All in the Family*, 4. Self argued that “the white middle-class nuclear family headed by a patriotic and heterosexual male was central to political contest.” And that the creators of Johnson’s War on Poverty sought to enforce a “Breadwinner Liberalism” making the “idealized nuclear family...attainable for more Americans than ever before.”



poverty.<sup>25</sup> For example, in February 1969, Fannie Lou Hamer launched her Freedom Farm Cooperative in Sunflower County, Mississippi.<sup>26</sup> The Freedom Farm ultimately consisted of 680 acres and a “pig bank” providing pigs to be raised and slaughtered for food for poor sharecroppers in the Delta.<sup>27</sup> First, it would provide low-cost housing for approximately 100 black families who had lost their jobs as tenant farmers because of increasing mechanization. Second, it would grow vegetables to address chronic malnutrition in the region and eventually bring a profit through selling the goods locally.

The Freedom Farm Co-op addressed economic problems and created self-sufficiency by promoting social and political autonomy.<sup>28</sup> Partially because of Hamer’s notoriety at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, the Freedom Farm drew attention from the black community

<sup>25</sup> Felicia Kornbluh, “Food as a Civil Right: Hunger, Work, and Welfare in the South after the Civil Rights Act,” *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 12 (2015): 135-158; MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough*; Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace*; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and The Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 – 1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); *Cultivating Food Justice: Race Class, and Sustainability*, edited by Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); A’Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007); Monica M. White, “A Pig and A Garden’: Fannie Lou Hamer and The Freedom Farm Cooperative”, *Food and Foodways* 25 (2017): 20-39; Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014); John J. Green, Eleanor M. Green, and Anna M. Kleniner, “From the Past to the Present: Agricultural Development and Black Farmers in the American South,” in *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, edited Alkon et al, 47-64.

<sup>27</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 365.

<sup>28</sup> “Miss. Farmers Fight for Co-op,” by James M. Fallows, January 27, 1969, *The Harvard Crimson*, Folder 4.1 Freedom Farm 1968-9, Box 4, Freedom Farm Cooperative, Fannie Lou Hamer Collection, University of Mississippi Department of Archives and Special Collections, Oxford, Mississippi (hereafter cited as DASC, UM).

on a national scale. Harry Belafonte urged interested parties to donate money to the farm which would give “hundreds of landless poor people a chance at self-help, economic self-sufficiency and political power.”<sup>29</sup> Belafonte continued that “in keeping with Fannie Lou Hamer’s stubborn principal that black and white can rise together, the farm cooperative will include poor white families.” He agreed with Hamer that “this example of initiative, racial cooperation and political militancy is worth of the support of all decent Americans.”<sup>30</sup>

The success of local communities in finding ways to make the federal food programs work for them was due, in part, to their personal knowledge of the specific barriers that poor communities faced. Federal level administrators for food programs did not acknowledge the locals’ relevant expertise in circumventing barriers to food access. The Delta Ministry, created by the National Coalition of Churches in 1964 to address civil rights issues, wrote to Nixon and several people in Congress to address these problems. The March 1969 letter reminded top politicians that “hunger, malnutrition and undernourishment and the human damage that results

<sup>29</sup> Form letter signed by Harry Belafonte, Belafonte Enterprises, Inc., May 1969, Folder 4.1 Freedom Farm 1968-9, Box 4, Freedom Farm Cooperative, Hamer Collection, DASC, UM. A combination of forces including farm mechanization and the discriminatory practices of white property owners in the Mississippi Delta left many poor white and African American people landless. For more on farm mechanization see: Walker, *All We Knew was to Farm*; Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1995); Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); For more civil rights activism see: Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Dittmer, *Local People*; James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> Form letter signed by Harry Belafonte, Belafonte Enterprises, Inc., May 1969, Folder 4.1 Freedom Farm 1968-9, Box 4, Freedom Farm Cooperative, Hamer Collection, DASC, UM.

from these conditions,” were still major issues in Mississippi.<sup>31</sup> The Delta Ministry’s letter outlined problems that still existed with the federal food aid programs. The ministry claimed that the structure of the FSP meant many of the poorest citizens were not able to participate. In addition, they claimed, the free “food commodities program,” which many poor citizens relied on when they could not afford the FSP, was nutritiously inadequate. They urged a restructuring of the FSP eligibility requirements so that the poorest citizens could obtain the stamps for free. The Delta Ministry also wanted more studies and hearings conducted, specifically to investigate the degree to which malnutrition existed in the region.<sup>32</sup>

Whether members of grassroots organizations like the Delta Ministry or acting autonomously, women found various ways to protest food policies. In 1965, a Washington, D.C. woman, who had recently moved from the suburbs to “mid-town,” penned a complaint letter to the manager of the local Safeway grocery store. Calling the store “one of Washington’s most depressing and discouraging food stores in the city,” she noted the inferior meat, broken eggs, bruised fruit, and overflowing garbage bins in-and-around the store. The woman alleged that “the quality and general nature of products” in the mid-town store was “markedly lower than that of your stores in other, more ‘affluent’ neighborhoods.”<sup>33</sup> While designed to help more people

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Reverend Andrew Young, Chairman of the Commission on Delta Ministry to Richard Nixon, et al., March 14, 1969, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program, Box 60, Welfare (WE) EX WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program to EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans, Subject Files, WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Diana S. Hart to B. M. Winstead, August 9, 1965, Folder Segregated Food, Box 17, President’s Committee on Consumer Interests and the Committee’s Consumer Advisory Council 1962-1969, United States Government Records, WHCF, Papers of LBJ, LBJL.

obtain greater financial power and the ability to buy more and different kinds of food, the FSP did not address the bigger problems that low-income people faced: fewer options and opportunities than middle income people who could freely exercise their rights. For example, without transportation a low-income individual did not have the option to choose a different grocery store when their local store was dirty or offered inferior products.

Inferior products in grocery stores was only one example of the hurdles faced by poor people. One woman complained that Prince George County in Maryland – a traditionally African American suburb where she resided and was eligible for stamps – was proof of “poor planning and policies of administration.” She cited obstacles like having to use a portion of the money she allocated for food stamps on public transportation to get to the distribution office in the first place. Officials suggested she carpool, an idea she found “totally unrealistic.” She elaborated that having to seek out and travel to a food stamp distribution center was a “handicap” specifically for the aged, disabled, and families with small children who did not have reliable access to babysitters. The woman recommended that the USDA cut through the “army” of “unnecessary” clerical workers while also promoting more “realism and humanity” in the program.<sup>34</sup>

Other barriers to food access included poor families dealing with their local food stamp administrators. An unbalanced relationship defined by localized racism combined with the power to decide who deserved food aid and to what degree proliferated in local and state welfare

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Margaret S. McLeod to Page H. Belcher, August 21, 1967, Folder 1 Agriculture Bills – Food Stamp Extension, Box 109, Page H. Belcher Collection, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma (hereafter cited as CACRSC, OU).

agencies. Poor people, who had limited-to-no power – whether financially or socially – were often at the mercy of government employees who had the autonomy to operate the distribution centers through their own discriminatory lens. They encountered problems of access when administrators interpreted and implemented federal policies according to their own understanding of the law. Indeed, many bureaucratic workers, at every level, reinforced standards of citizenship when they accepted or rejected food stamp applications, refused service, or raised prices for welfare recipients.<sup>35</sup> These workers held a modicum of power that allowed them to block access to food stamps when they felt the recipient to be undeserving. The implementation of FSP policies by low-level bureaucrats also resulted in a reaffirmation of a gendered and racialized hierarchy of citizenship. In 1970, after first writing to the FBI, an Arkansas man reached out to Jerris Leonard, Assistant Attorney General of the Civil Rights Division complaining of discrimination and that, although his family of ten was eligible for food

<sup>35</sup> Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 133. Pascoe, when talking about marriage license clerks and miscegenation laws, argued that because these clerks were at “one remove from the center of attention,” that they were then “crucial to the enforcement of miscegenation law.” She went on to say that “they were a fine example of the ways in which state officials worked quietly, persistently, and as comprehensively as possible to make individuals ‘legible’ to the state through processes of government that seemed too ordinary to merit comment or challenge even as they imposed considerable control over individual lives.” Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and The Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 90. Ngai, when talking about turn-of-the-century immigration reform argued “in the context of immigration law that foregrounded territoriality and border control, and in the hands of immigration officials operating within the contingencies of contemporary politics and social prejudices, the exercise of administrative discretion served to racialize the specter of the illegal alien.” Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 48. Lee, speaking of San Francisco Immigration officials policing the Chinese argued “The immigration officials in San Francisco fit the model of lower-level government workers or ‘street-level bureaucrats’ who became ‘de facto policy makers.’” Lee continued “left to themselves, the early immigration officials in San Francisco had the power to decide how to implement laws and to establish specific regulation and procedures.”

stamps, their local office denied them seven times. The man stated that he was charged eighty dollars for two and a half dollars of food stamps and when he could not pay, the two female food stamp workers told him to just take his family and leave “the country if we didn’t like it.” On his next attempt, the man claimed that the same two ladies told him and his wife that if they “adopted our baby to them they might help us.”<sup>36</sup> The ability of local officials to make decisions about who deserved food aid based on their own set of discriminations highlighted the barriers to access that many poor people faced when attempting to access food stamps.<sup>37</sup> Because the 1964 Food Stamp Act stipulated that local and state welfare agencies had the power to define eligibility standards, case workers maintained a freedom to inject their own personal perspectives on a person’s right to food when deciding if applicants were eligible for food stamps.

Federal food stamp policies forced many poor people to make decisions about how to spend the little money they had. Sometimes, those choices dictated whether they could eat on a consistent basis. A Michigan woman, in May 1969, wrote to President Richard Nixon’s Domestic Policy advisor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, about her struggles. She cited problems with transportation, especially in the winter months where there was “extreme hardship.” The woman also recommended that banks sell food stamps because that is where people also bought their bus tickets and it could therefore streamline the process. Finally, she listed out her bills to highlight

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Ted R. Enloe to Jerris Leonard, Assistant Attorney General Civil Rights Division. June 30, 1970, Folder Food Stamp Program February 1 – March 8, 1971, Box 5400, RG 16 Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, General Correspondence 1906-1971, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (hereafter cited as RG 16, NARA).

<sup>37</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

the decisions she made every month. In receiving \$156.00 per month public assistance for medical disability from the state of Michigan, she spent \$90.00 per month on “rent (with heat).” The remaining \$66.00 of her disability payments had to cover “phone, electricity, transportation, clothing, etc.” She admitted, “I know that I am not eating properly and am feeling the affect,” and she recognized that “there are people who are worse off than I, but nevertheless this is very demoralizing.”<sup>38</sup> While more affluent citizens debated whether food was a right or privilege, poor people made daily choices about paying their bills or starving.

### **Striking Union Workers**

Union workers who made the choice to strike for better wages and working conditions to better provide for their families suffered from public outrage when they received food stamps. Public vilification of striking union workers who applied for federal food aid happened as early as 1959 in Houston, Texas. A state audit of the early Harris County Commodity Welfare Distribution Program revealed that because of the steel strike in the area, Union workers applied for the food distribution program. According to the audit, caseworkers routinely ignored their applications. In charge of the audit, The Assistant Director of the Commodity Distribution Division made clear that union-men’s applications warranted the same acknowledgement

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Mrs. Verna K. Crowley to Mr. Moynihan, May 7, 1969, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program [69/70], Box 60, Welfare (WE) EX WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program to EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans, Subject Files, WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL.

“without regard to the cause of the need.”<sup>39</sup> However, constituents and opponents of the FSP demonized union employees for striking and not working to obtain their breadwinner status.

In fact, union strikers, nationally, faced public outrage at their eligibility status for food stamps well into the 1970s and 1980s. Strikers became the epitome of un-American values when they legally applied for and received food stamps during labor disputes. Their right to argue for improved workplace conditions were fundamentally at odds with the “dichotomy between the rights and privileges of citizenship and the power of concentrated capital.”<sup>40</sup> Local and state administrators determined – and the USDA approved – food stamp eligibility based on household size on the immediate family in relation to their combined incomes.<sup>41</sup> Where an individual or family fit on the federal government’s poverty line determined the amount of food stamps the individual or family received.

The decades-long push to bar striking union workers from receiving federal food aid never succeeded in any food stamp legislation. However, the constant work of the public and politicians to exclude hungry people from the FSP based on meanings of work remain essential to understanding the frenetic policy changes of food stamps to present time. As an assistant to Freeman noted, there was “no sound basis” for excluding “strikers as a group, without regard to

<sup>39</sup> Letter to T.G. Britton from W.E. Moore, November 5, 1959. Folder 29 Surplus Commodities, Box 2121, Harris County Judge CR 31 (1959-1974), Harris County Clerk’s Office, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as HCCO).

<sup>40</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Richard Lying to Verna K. Crowley, May 20, 1969, Folder EX WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program [69-70], Box 60, EX WE 10-4 [Food Stamp Program] [69/70] to EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans Begins 7/17/69, Welfare [WE], Subject Files, WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL.



individual circumstances of their need.”<sup>42</sup> The FSP advanced the power of the federal government over local food stamp administrators by limiting their powers to block individuals from food aid based on their specific work circumstances. Food stamp eligibility requirements blurred the cause of poverty and provided aid for all people that qualified regardless of their specific working situation. While the anonymity allowed more needy people to access food aid in the short term, it also “ignored the most important cause of postwar poverty: structural changes in the economy that made it increasingly difficult for poor people to earn a decent living.”<sup>43</sup>

Regardless of the reasons why union workers chose to strike, politicians and business owners judged them – like other potential workers – on their physical fitness and ability to work. As governor Reagan helped perpetuate stereotypes of undeserving and fraudulent poor people living off food stamps because they were lazy or immoral. A press release quoted Reagan stating, “many taxpayers find it difficult to understand why a seemingly able-bodied and otherwise self-supporting individual can walk up to the grocery store counter with a basket full of prime T-bone steaks and lay out free food stamps – while they (the taxpayers) are buying hamburger for their own dinners with hard-earned cash they have left after paying taxes to cover the cost of those food stamps.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Rodney E. Leonard to Howard W. Cannon, May 6, 1969, Folder Food Stamp Program June 1, 1968 – September 31, 1968 [1 of 2], Box 4817, 1968 Food Prod. – Food Stamps Program, General Correspondence 1906 – 1976, RG 16, NARA.

<sup>43</sup> Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 194-5.

<sup>44</sup> Press Release, Office of Governor Ronald Reagan, August 9, 1974, Folder Research File – Health & Welfare – Food Stamps, Box GO 182, Health and Welfare – Insurance (1), GO – Research Files (Molly Sturgis

Union workers on strike faced widespread condemnation when they invoked their right to food stamps based on standard eligibility requirements. In the 1970s, workers stopped “acting in an autonomous, collective fashion.” Instead, “the law, the managerial ethos, the opinion-forming pundits, indeed many workers themselves, have marginalized and ridiculed the idea that democratic norms should govern the workplace.”<sup>45</sup> In terms of food rights, many Americans associated the right to food with engaging in paid work. They understood the right to food – regardless of citizenship status – as a privilege of those who earned an income. Only those people who did not have the ability to work – children, the elderly, or the disabled – deserved federally funded access to food.

One constituent, writing to Senator Bob Dole (R-KS) described his “shock, disbelief, and downright anger,” at the eligibility of striking union workers for food stamps. Not only did he argue this would “obstruct the collective bargaining process,” but that it “showed a blatant disregard for the truly needy, the elderly, the sick, the disabled and those who lack the skill needed for gainful employment.”<sup>46</sup> According to some, striking union workers chose not to work and therefore had no right to federally funded food access. If they needed money to afford food, the logic went, then they should not have gone on strike.

Tuthill) Health & Welfare – Employment – Manpower Task Force, Governor’s Office Files 1966-75, Ronald Reagan Papers, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (hereafter cited as GOF, RR Papers, RRL).

<sup>45</sup> Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from Jack Fitzsimmons to Bob Dole, December 2, 1970, Folder 10 – Agriculture – Food Stamps – 1970, Box 229, Series 4, Constituent Issue Mail, Robert J. Dole Senate Papers, Dole Institute of Politics, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas (hereafter cited as Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU).

In a country where the “American Dream” stipulated that through hard work one could achieve prosperity, those who chose to strike for more and better rights in the workplace seemed ungrateful or lazy. Calling union strikers’ eligibility for food stamps “contrary to the American tradition,” the Executive Secretary of the Indiana Retail Grocers Association urged the USDA and White House in 1967 to consider changing eligibility standards. The man stated that the union strikers “were not working by their own choice,” and that he objected “to the nation’s working force picking up the tab for strikers.”<sup>47</sup> A New Jersey man argued that strikers on food stamps was an example of “tax supported financial subsidy given to one participant in an economic struggle,” therefore making the “federal government a participant in collective bargaining on the side of the striker.”<sup>48</sup>

In 1972, Reagan labeled striking union workers as persons engaging in “voluntary unemployment” and stated that their eligibility was “morally wrong” because the federal government was involved in subsidizing the strike.<sup>49</sup> Two years later, Reagan doubled down on his claims of strikers abusing the FSP when he declared that “businessmen have been angered – with justification – because food stamps and the welfare system are being used to finance prolonged strikes,” he argued, making “government a partner on one side of labor disputes rather

<sup>47</sup> Telegram from Harvey C. Hagelskamp to LBJ, Oct. 18, 1967, Folder BE 5-5/AG7/ST, Box 36, GEN BE 5-5/AG 7, WHCF, Papers of LBJ, LBJL.

<sup>48</sup> Letter from H.J. Wagner to Robert Dole, April 27, 1971, Folder 25 – Nutrition – Food Stamps – 1971 – 1972, Box 288, Series 4, Constituent Issue Mail Subject Nike Missile Site – Nuts, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>49</sup> Form letter from Ronald Reagan, February 15, 1972, Folder Research File – Health & Welfare – Food Stamps, Box GO 182, Health and Welfare – Insurance (1), GO – Research Files (Molly Sturgis Tuthill) Health & Welfare – Employment – Manpower Task Force, GOF, RR Papers, RRL.

than a referee.”<sup>50</sup> Historian Molly C. Micheltore argued that conservative efforts to slash welfare spending was not a radical break with liberal values but rather “it built on and full realized the anti-tax logic first articulated by liberal state builders in the New Deal and World War II eras.”<sup>51</sup>

Union workers on strike denounced the male breadwinner stereotype in favor of better working conditions. Some people saw this labor activism as unnecessary and as pushing against the boundaries of American citizenship. A social worker at the Catholic Welfare Services in Mobile, Alabama, noted that the families of union workers would suffer without access to food stamps if exclusionary legislation passed that barred the strikers from eligibility “regardless of other considerations.”<sup>52</sup>

Two strikes reveal the tensions around the rights of union workers and food stamp eligibility. Public anger peaked during the 1967 Ford Motor Strike and the 1970 United Auto Workers (UAW) Strike against General Motors (GM). Because of these labor disputes, conservative lawmakers —influenced in part by their frustrated constituents — increased their efforts to introduce legislation that made strikers ineligible for food stamps despite their other

<sup>50</sup> “Excerpts of Remarks by Governor Ronald Reagan”, Sacramento Host Breakfast, September 6, 1974, Press Release, Folder Research File – Health & Welfare – Food Stamps, Box GO 182, Health and Welfare – Insurance (1), GO – Research Files (Molly Sturgis Tuthill) Health & Welfare – Employment – Manpower Task Force, GOF, RR Papers, RRL. See: Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen’s Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> Micheltore, *Tax and Spend*, 4-5.

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Sister Joan Hardy to Bob Dole, July 17, 1973, Folder 25 – Nutrition – Food Stamps – 1971 – 1972, Box 288, Series 4, Constituent Issue Mail Subject Nike Missile Site – Nuts, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

qualifications. They used the debate about striking union workers and food stamps as a platform to enforce narrow meanings of work and citizenship rights.

In mid-September of 1967 union workers for the Ford Motor Company went on strike in protest over wages and work environment. Members of the UAW in the strike against the Ford Motor Company applied and received food stamps during the 68-day strike. Critics of the striking union workers' eligibility for food stamps argued that they had no right to food given by the government because the strikers were *choosing* not to work. An Ohio lawyer also wrote to Johnson that same month arguing that the Department of Agriculture was "financing" the strike against Ford Motor Company because they were allowing food stamps to strikers. An engineer at the Walker Manufacturing Company in Michigan declared that "our government is not responsible for providing for everyone." He went on to say that the UAW members had "elected by themselves not to work," and added that he could not afford to "support these people" by "reducing" his own income."<sup>53</sup> These angry constituents rejected the FSP's approach to the issuance of food stamps based on an individual's household size and income. Rather, they felt that it was the government's responsibility to evaluate a recipient's worth based on their ability to find and keep work.

Large-scale strikes and work stoppages continued to dominate the attention of the media and popular culture. Political alliances shifted, unions continued to assert a powerful foothold in the Democratic Party, and working-class citizens demanded more equitable treatment from their

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Karl Kerns to Charles E. Chamberlin, October 4, 1967, Folder 1 Agriculture Bills – Food Stamp Extension, Box 109, Belcher Collection, CACRSC, OU.

employers.<sup>54</sup> For sixty-seven days, beginning in September of 1970, the UAW conducted one of the longest-running strikes in labor history against General Motors (GM). While on strike, many of the union workers applied for – and received – food stamps. Because all applicants had to meet the same general eligibility requirements to obtain the stamps as all other citizens, not everyone affected by strikes had the opportunity to benefit from the FSP. Employees at an Oldsmobile – Cadillac dealership in Arlington, Texas, expressed their outrage that the strike had “completely cut off” their “source of income.” They urged Nixon to find a way to end the strike. Claiming that they were victims of the strike “since they had nothing to do with it,” these employees were not eligible for federal aid like food stamps and experienced their own hardships as a result.<sup>55</sup>

A Cadillac dealership in Lakeland, Florida, communicated the plight of retailers. They declared that the UAW did not “consider what we do when we had no cars to sell and no parts to install.”<sup>56</sup> Declaring themselves “victims” of the strike they wondered why they could not also access food stamps and asked, “or are we to be discriminated against because we do not belong to a union or the hard-core unemployed?”<sup>57</sup> From the perspectives of non-union members, food

<sup>54</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and The Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010).

<sup>55</sup> Letter from the Salesmen at Butts Oldsmobile-Cadillac Co. Arlington, Texas to Richard Nixon, October 19, 1970, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program [69-70], Box 60, EX WE 10-4 [Food Stamp Program] [69/70] to EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans Begins 7/17/69, Welfare [WE], Subject Files, WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL.

<sup>56</sup> Letter from M.P. Tomlinson Company to Richard Nixon, October 21, 1970, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program [69-70], Box 60, EX WE 10-4 [Food Stamp Program] [69/70] to EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans Begins 7/17/69, Welfare [WE], Subject Files, WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

stamp access to strikers provided unfair leverage that the UAW harnessed through their connection with the federal government. Most people angry about the values of strikers and their refusal to work overlooked the standard eligibility requirements of food stamps. FSP policy stipulated that income and household size determined participation in the program not on the reasons why an individual did not work.

Between September and November of that year, constituent letters poured into Nixon's office highlighting those debates. Deeply embedded into the debates was the idea that people who did not work, regardless of their circumstances, did not deserve federal food aid. An October 1970 petition originating in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma landed on Nixon's desk and argued that while people "don't want to see children go hungry," strikers "deliberately REFUSE to work." The signers of the petition labeled this practice as "government subsidization of inflation" and insisted that not only did they have to "pay for the welfare" but that they would be susceptible to increased prices on commodities due to the higher wages that union workers would potentially receive.<sup>58</sup>

The UAW strikers succeeded in gaining more money and better working hours out of the labor dispute with GM. However, they still lacked any real control or power over their place of work or the union that represented them.<sup>59</sup> Nixon embraced the animosity of those opposed to

<sup>58</sup> Petition to President Nixon, October 29, 1970, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program, Box 60, Welfare (WE) EX WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program to EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans, Subject Files, WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL.

<sup>59</sup> Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 44.

strikers using food stamps as part of his campaign to rally working people against “a new kind of cultural elite” who relied on the government to provide a basic standard living regardless of work status.<sup>60</sup> Working with a divided government, Nixon perpetuated an individualistic ideology based on imagined meanings of morality and citizenship.<sup>61</sup> Many people no longer viewed the FSP as a great achievement by the federal government to provide necessities for survival to citizens. Instead, they demeaned the program as promoting greed and waste, and condoning lazy citizenship. Union workers faced backlash for accepting food stamps no matter how small the labor dispute. Writing to Senator James O. Eastland (D-MS), a Laurel, Mississippi man, concerning the strike against the Masonite Corporation, saw the eligibility of strikers for food stamps as a “blatant misuse of our tax money,” especially for the “already over-burdened taxpayer.” The man made clear to Eastland that he “resented” his tax money going “to feed people who refuse to work.”<sup>62</sup>

In the years since the implementation of the FSP, conservative lawmakers opposed to striking union workers receiving the stamps had repeatedly introduced legislation to block strikers and other who “chose” not to work from eligibility to the federal food program. None was successful but they continued to press for amendments to limit food stamp access. In late 1970 as a reaction to the UAW strike against GM, Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC) introduced a

<sup>60</sup> Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 127; Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>61</sup> Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 127.

<sup>62</sup> Letter from B. T. Wood to James O. Eastland, July 7, 1967, Folder 1967 Welfare – Food Stamp Program, File series, 3, Subseries 1, Box 165, James O. Eastland Collection, DASC, UM.



bill that would make anyone “voluntarily engaged in labor disputes” ineligible for food stamps regardless if they met the main requirements.<sup>63</sup> Thurmond’s bill was popular among conservative constituents. A Kansas man urged Dole to vote for the bill stating that the bill would keep “parasites off the food stamp gravy train.”<sup>64</sup> Another man argued in favor of the bill and reasoned that strikers on food stamps meant “taxpayers” would “help subsidize the UAW in its strike. He called this “immoral” and urged that strikers’ eligibility for food stamps become “illegal.”<sup>65</sup> One such bill, defeated in Congress in 1977, prompted Representative Sidney R. Yates (D-IL) to reply to a constituent describing why it failed. He explained that such a law was “against the intention of the food stamp program,” which was to provide food for those who need it – not why they need it.”<sup>66</sup>

As Reagan took over the presidency in 1980 and implemented the values and rhetoric of an increasingly conservative nation, he revived the fight against union workers on strike and their ability to receive food stamps. Once more, opponents of public welfare, unions, and breadwinner males who “chose” not to work, had a clear voice in top echelons of policymaking. In May 1981, the Public Service Research Council in Virginia in conjunction with the Director

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Warren E. Meyer to Robert Dole, December 15, 1970, Folder 10 – Agriculture – Food Stamps – 1970, Box 229, Series 4, Constituent Issue Mail Subject Agriculture, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>64</sup> Letter from B.E. Hodgdon to Robert Dole, December 15, 1970, Folder 10 – Agriculture – Food Stamps – 1970, Box 229, Series 4, Constituent Issue Mail Subject Agriculture, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>65</sup> Letter from Charles M. White to Robert Dole, December 11, 1970, Folder 10 – Agriculture – Food Stamps – 1970, Box 229, Series 4, Constituent Issue Mail Subject Agriculture, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>66</sup> Letter from Sidney R. Yates to Ms. Mary E. Mako, August 2, 1977, Folder LEG – Food Stamps, Box 334, Bib 66991, Sidney R. Yates Papers ca. 1931 – 1998, Archives and Manuscripts, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter cited as AM, CHM).

of Congressional Affairs penned a letter to the House of Representatives making their case against union workers on strike receiving food stamps. They argued that the federal government should be impartial in all private sector disputes which included employees affiliated with a union and the company for which they worked. Therefore, union workers receiving food stamps meant that “we risk either government control of private industry, or anarchy.”<sup>67</sup>

### **The New Left and College Students**

Those who rebelled against the male breadwinner status quo and delayed or renounced the nuclear family directly challenged the accepted framework of American citizenship. Seen as outcasts choosing to live on the edges of societal norms, young people who delayed traditional meanings of work were circumventing assumed notions of responsible citizenship and appropriate ways to participate in American life. Conservative policymakers viewed Richard Nixon’s election to the presidency as a path to amending food stamp policy to reaffirm exclusionary beliefs about family makeup, definitions of work, and parameters of citizenship. Increasingly vilified for shirking traditional ways of living, these groups faced condemnation because of their decisions to operate outside of accepted ideas about American citizenship.

To many people, anarchy came in the form of hippies and New Left college students. Older generations conceived of work and the duties of responsible citizenship in narrow terms of

<sup>67</sup> Letter from the Public Service Research Council to the House of Representatives, May 27, 1981, Folder 32 Jones Legislative, Agriculture, Food Stamp Program, 1980, Box LG 46, James R. Jones Collection, CACRSC, OU.

earned income and establishing a nuclear family. These “radicals” who received food stamps directly challenged ideas of work and family. Writing to the Secretary of Agriculture Clifford M. Hardin, this constituent also expressed his frustration that some leading Republicans including Dole were voting against legislation that would restrict people from food stamps based on those lifestyles and the perceived “choice” to not work. “Day after day, we have strong-backed young people, call them ‘hippies’ or call them ‘new life stylists,’ throwing Frisbees hours on end on the beach, and then 5 p.m. or later, they make it to the Alpha Beta or Albertson’s to spend government food stamps.” And if they weren’t buying food, he argued, they would “sell the stamps on street corners to support pot or smack habits.”<sup>68</sup>

The man’s desire to see food stamp eligibility restricted centered on a deeper societal acceptance of the meanings of work, good citizenship, and ideas about which poor people were most deserving of aid. In the 1970s conversations about food stamp policy juxtaposed the burden of taxpayers and the perceived unwillingness of welfare recipients to work by non-recipients. The Republican constituent testified, “I work like hell, pay my taxes, support community programs, do indeed believe in helping the poor, the elderly, the blind,” however, he expressed his “outrage” that the “government makes it possible for young people who have no desire to work, and do not intend to work, to live rather well off the efforts of others.”<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Letter from Theodore Taylor to Secretary Hardin, May 10, 1971, Folder 25 – Nutrition – Food Stamps – 1971 – 1972, Box 288, Series 4, Constituent Issue Mail Subject Nike Missile Site – Nuts, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

One man from the Institute of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota wondered why “good-for-nothings” or hippies “are eligible for food stamps at my expense.” The man clarified by stating, “I resent very much the use of a portion of my salary to subsidize the destruction of my country, our capitalist system and of the democratic institutions for which I have worked, fought in a foreign land and deprived myself of many material things.” He continued by saying, “I help purchase food stamps for able-bodied parasites who are sucking the sap out of their hosts.”<sup>70</sup>

He reiterated an argument expressed by many Americans who sought to change eligibility standards in ways that considered an individuals’ application not based on their income and household size – as FSP policy stipulated – but more specifically at their personal situations and why they needed food stamps. While he had “no quarrel with providing some assistance to people who are genuinely in need of help – those who are physically or mentally incapable of providing for themselves,” he was not interested in understanding the cultural, economic, or personal reasons why a group of people might be unwilling to participate in the capitalist system he so admired.<sup>71</sup> Rather he argued that if the generation of hippies was truly the “most highly educated, most aware, blah, blah, blah, generation in the history of the world,” and they needed public assistance to eat, “then I say let him go right ahead and starve.”<sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Letter from William M. Breene to Richard Nixon, July 26, 1970, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program, Box 60, EX WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program – EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans Begin 7/17/69, Welfare, Subject Files, WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Hippies living in communes turned away from a traditional American lifestyle and the “New Left” challenged family, class, and gender roles in even more progressive ways. As more high school graduates found paths to college after World War II, they delayed traditional avenues to work and family life that generations before them proved uncomfortable to challenge the status quo.<sup>73</sup> Forming on and around college campuses, New Left groups were viewed as bastions of radical thought that cultivated and perpetuated protest, unrest, and a desire to alter the status quo.<sup>74</sup> The New Left rebels were mostly white and from middle class families and “they fused their desire for individual empowerment with their dissident cultural politics.”<sup>75</sup> For example, in 1969 San Diego law students and faculty called out Nixon and Hardin for refusing to disperse surplus foods to needy Californians despite a federal court order.<sup>76</sup>

While law students leveraged their skills to help communities access federal food aid, conservative politicians and constituents attacked those students who received food stamps. In 1974, governor Reagan in a press release suggesting ways to quell “abuses and outright fraud” in

<sup>73</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 199; Rosen, *The World Split Open*; Doug Rossinow, “‘The Revolution Is About Our Lives’: The New Left’s Counterculture,” in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s & 70s*, edited by Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York: Routledge, 2002), Self, *All in the Family*; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York, Bantam, 1993); Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of the Eighties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*.

<sup>74</sup> Doug Rossinow, “‘The Revolution Is About Our Lives’: The New Left’s Counterculture,” in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s & 70s*, edited by Braunstein et al, 99.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>76</sup> Petition from University of San Diego Law School to Richard Nixon, April 15, 1969, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program [69/70], Box 60, EX WE 10-4 [Food Stamp Program] [69/70] to EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans Begins 7/17/69, Welfare [WE], Subject Files, WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL.

the FSP, called out the eligibility of high school and college students for federal food aid. Reagan offered several examples. Recommending that a minimum age be set for an individual to qualify for the stamps, Reagan presented a scenario where a “17-year-old student no longer desiring to live with his parents moved out and stays with a group of friends. He received \$46 a month in free food stamps and five others in the same household are also drawing free stamps.”<sup>77</sup>

Reagan’s implication in this example was that students living away from home represented another type of person who was not fulfilling their duties as a citizen. A male student – as in Reagan’s example – who chose to go to school and not live with family rather than work a paying job and participate in a nuclear family was shirking the traditional “family values” that conservatives preached as the recipe for good citizenship.

Verifying that it was legal to obtain food stamps as a college student living away from home, Reagan stated that even attending college part-time “excuses them from work requirements imposed on the less fortunate whose main problem is unemployment, age, an inadequate pension, or illness.”<sup>78</sup> Reagan continued his story by postulating that the college student in the scenario was accessing the stamps without his affluent father’s knowledge. Reagan rhetorically asked, “What do you say to an irate father in another state who phones to tell us he

<sup>77</sup> Press release Office of Governor Ronald Reagan, August 9, 1974, Folder Research File – Health & Welfare – Food Stamps, Box GO 182, Health and Welfare – Insurance (1), GO – Research Files (Molly Sturgis Tuthill) Health & Welfare – Employment – Manpower Task Force, GOF, RR Papers, RRL.

<sup>78</sup> Excerpts of Remarks by Governor Ronald Reagan to the National Young Republicans, South Lake Tahoe, Nevada, Press Release, August 11, 1974 Folder Research File – Health & Welfare – Food Stamps, Box GO 182, Health and Welfare – Insurance (1), GO – Research Files (Molly Sturgis Tuthill) Health & Welfare – Employment – Manpower Task Force, GOF, RR Papers, RRL.

earns \$100,00 a year and is sending his son to college in California?” Reagan continued, “he wants to know why we are giving his son food stamps,” and, “all we could tell him was that food stamps are a federal program and the rules are established in Washington.”<sup>79</sup>

In the same speech, Reagan accused “an enterprising young lady” who allegedly tried to bypass the work requirements necessary for receiving food stamps.<sup>80</sup> According to Reagan, the college student studied “witchcraft” and after the “county welfare department called to see if this was an approved course of study,” she received the stamps.<sup>81</sup> He compared college students to his characterizations of other welfare recipients as lazy and deceitful. To the audience he declared, “Americans are a generous and compassionate people, they do not deserve this kind of abuse and fraud.”<sup>82</sup>

Some community members that worked closely with food stamp recipients understood the nuanced situations of college students in a different way. A social worker at Catholic Welfare Services in Mobile, Alabama, protested proposed food stamp legislation that would deny food stamps to college students over the age of 18 unless they came from low-income families or had dependents. The social worker argued that college students applying for food stamps should qualify for aid based on their own circumstances because “housing, food, etc., are always expensive in a college town resulting in high expenditure for these residents of eight to ten

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

months.” She went on to say that allowing college students to qualify for the stamps would foster their “independence” from their parents and allow for the “growth of the individual.”<sup>83</sup> However, the Food Stamp Amendments of 1980 eliminated most college students from the FSP.<sup>84</sup> All students lost food stamps unless they had a disability, worked more than 20 hours a week, claimed status as the head of household with dependents, or had enrolled in a federal work study program or the Work Incentive Program (WIN).<sup>85</sup> By September 1, 1980, 150,000 college students lost food stamp benefits.<sup>86</sup>

## **The Elderly Poor**

One contradiction among arguments of work and reserving food stamps for the truly needy was in the case of the elderly poor. No longer able to work and living on fixed incomes, the elderly poor faced barriers unlike any other group. Although categorized as the “truly needy” by conservatives and liberals alike, they experienced issues accessing and affording food stamps while also fending off the negative stigmas associated with the aid program. In 1970, an 87-year-old woman from Texas had to decide how to spend the little money she had. Each month she

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Sister Joan Hardy to Bob Dole, July 17, 1973, Folder 25 – Nutrition – Food Stamps – 1971 – 1972, Box 288, Series 4, Constituent Issue Mail Subject Nike Missile Site – Nuts, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>84</sup> “Amendments to the Food Stamp Act, PL 96-249, 94 Stat. 357-370,” May 26, 1980, *USDA Food and Nutrition Service*, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/leghistory/food-stamp-act-1980-amendments>

<sup>85</sup> Press release, United States Department of Agriculture, July 9, 1980, Folder Food Stamps, Box 1.5, Series I, Manuscript Collection 182, USDA History Collection, Special Collections of the National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, Maryland.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*



questioned if she would have the ability to pay for her rent and utilities, afford her medicine, and buy food to live on. The woman mailed a handwritten note to the Harris County Department of Welfare stating, “I do want to buy the stamps when I pay my rent an utility bills an buy my medicine I don’t have enough to buy the stamps I’m still under the Dr. Care if I could have money left over I would be glad to buy them.”<sup>87</sup>

Her struggle to afford food stamps is one example that illuminated the disconnects between food stamp policy implementation and the negative stereotypes surrounding poor and hungry elderly Americans. At 87-years-old, her challenges in obtaining necessities proved indicative of the experience that many elderly Americans faced. No longer able to work and living on fixed incomes, these Americans dealt with additional barriers to accessing federal food aid. These barriers included the inability to continue working, a lack of transportation, increased medical and health costs, and not understanding how to apply for and obtain the stamps, or even if they qualified for them. Additionally, they were aware of the stigmas attached to food aid recipients more generally and they worried about attracting stigmas of abusing the system.

But for many of the elderly poor, the situation proved even more complicated. They tried hard to find ways to live off fixed incomes and afford the purchase requirement attached to food stamps all while trying to grapple with the irony that some people worked all their lives and yet they were still falling short of the promise of the American Dream. In 1975, a retired Illinois man asked of his congressman, “what’s to be done with us poor ‘shnooks’ who haven’t got anything

<sup>87</sup> Letter from Mary M. Burnett to Harris County Welfare Department, January 4, 1970, Folder 349-47, Box 0349, Harris County Social Services, Cr08 (1946-1978), HCCO.

here, in the richest country in the world; it has so much food, it can feed half of the world, why not take care of our people first.” He continued the letter concerning his inability to afford food stamps by acknowledging that, “my wife and I worked all our life producing goods and services to make our country rich and productive; we believe it owes us a decent standard of living for our last few years.” The Illinois couple was living on a fixed income of Social Security and Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) payments and had “cashed in all their valuables” which included their “life insurance, their car, all their savings to pay doctor and hospital bills and living expenses,” before they could figure out to afford food stamps. That summer, one of their Social Security checks increased from \$225.70 to \$246.10. Both individuals in the household saw a decrease in their SSI check from \$6.60 to \$5.10. Because of the increase in their monthly income, they saw a decrease in their food stamp allotment. For \$50.00, the couple usually received \$84.00 worth of food stamps but now only received \$62.00 worth of food stamps.<sup>88</sup> The couple had to make decisions about paying living expenses, medical bills, or buying food. They could not afford it all.

An elderly Chicago woman living in public housing worried about proposed cutbacks to FSP. She reiterated her frustration that food stamps could only purchase food and that with rising food costs she needed to find ways to afford the food stamps in addition to paying “for our own laundry [in public housing] and soap to wash our clothes and pay for soap to clean the

<sup>88</sup> Letter from Emma and Edwin Johnson to Sidney Yates, December 5, 1975, Folder LEG – Food Stamps 1975, Box 285, Bib 66991, Sidney R. Yates Papers ca. 1931 – 1998, AM, CHM.

apartment.” She remarked, “we are not getting by free as no one else is,” and urged her congressman to “look at the matter and help us all.”<sup>89</sup>

Many grassroots, anti-hunger, and religious organizations worked hard to help their elderly community members learn about and access federal food aid. In 1971, the USDA mandated that all agencies administering food stamps were “statutorily required to inform the people of the existence and availability,” of the program.<sup>90</sup> But by 1974 studies confirmed that “twenty-eight million Americans (at least 800,000 in Illinois) were eligible for but not receiving food stamps.”<sup>91</sup> Problems with low participation rates included people not knowing that benefits existed or whether they qualified for them.<sup>92</sup> Others hesitated to participate in the program “which they believe bears a ‘welfare’ stigma.”<sup>93</sup>

Three prominent organizations including the Catholic-based 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice, the Gray Panthers, and the Chicago Metropolitan Area Senior Citizens’ Senate (CMASC) worked to help senior citizens learn about the FSP, how to apply and obtain the stamps, and how to overcome other barriers they faced. The coalition noticed that “many senior citizens and

<sup>89</sup> Letter from Annie Mae White to Sidney R. Yates, August 27, 1975, Folder LEG – Food Stamps 1975, Box 285, Bib 66991, Sidney R. Yates Papers ca. 1931 – 1998, AM, CHM.

<sup>90</sup> Letter from Sidney R. Yates to Robert C. Ruck, Folder LEG – Food Stamps 1975, Box 285, Bib 66991, Sidney R. Yates Papers ca. 1931 – 1998, AM, CHM.

<sup>91</sup> Press release, Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition, 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice, Undated, Folder 5-6: Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition, 1972-1982, n.d., Box 5, 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice Records, Women and Leadership Archives, Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter cited as WLA, LU).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

working families here in Chicago are hungry,” and that senior citizens, working people, and newly unemployed are too proud to seek food stamps because of the welfare stigma attached to them.”<sup>94</sup>

The CMASC in 1976 argued that “Illinois has ignored this mandate altogether, has spent no money, and has failed to devise and implement a plan for finding the hungry.”<sup>95</sup> In response, the CMASC formed an “Outreach Campaign.” Characterizing themselves as a “broad based” coalition that included “area agencies, organizations, churches, and individuals,” they made it their mission to “reach hundreds of thousands of Chicago are residents who are eligible but not participating in the Food Stamp Program.”<sup>96</sup> The coalition provided a hotline where people could call in to get more information, provided transportation to local food stamp offices, provided pre-screening for the application process, and assistance for the interview process.<sup>97</sup>

In addition to their own organizing that educated poor Chicagoans of their rights to food, the Gray Panthers and the CMASC filed suit against the state of Illinois pushing them to develop the outreach program mandated in the 1971 federal legislation and were successful a year later in forcing the state-level government to enact the program.<sup>98</sup> For more than a decade, these

<sup>94</sup> Media packet, Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition, Undated, Folder 5-6: Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition, 1972-1982, n.d., Box 5, 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice Records, WLA, LU.

<sup>95</sup> Press release, Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition, 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice, Undated, Folder 5-6: Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition, 1972-1982, n.d., Box 5, 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice Records, WLA, LU.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

grassroots organizations worked together to build a strong coalition of networks that understood the real problems faced by the urban poor. Because anti-hunger activists attempted to alleviate hunger issues every day, they knew the scope and gravity of food insecurity. But, to the public at-large, pervasive doubt about poor people's troubles with food access remained. The invisibleness of hunger in the United States meant that, in times of economic hardship, it became easier for more affluent Americans to stigmatize the poor regardless of the specific challenges those people faced.

Despite the work of sympathetic politicians, anti-hunger activists, and the media to uncover the breadth of the problem, there existed an entrenched public opinion of the impossibility that individuals could not afford food or find work that covered all their expenses. The "American Dream" stipulated that anyone willing to work hard enough secured the privilege of — at a minimum — a basic standard living. When poor people revealed their inability to afford food, the public judged them not on the unique barriers they faced but on their status as workers. One's employment status — and ability to afford food with the paycheck — signaled an individual's freedom from government dependence and full citizenship rights. The ideal "worker" trope carried loaded implications of whiteness, maleness, and a breadwinner head-of-household image that inherently barred most Americans from ever securing that coveted spot on the hierarchy of citizenship. By the late 1960s, the least likely to embody that characterization, poor people, faced the punishment of increasingly popular work-to-eat legislation. In the debate about food as a right or privilege, politicians, the public, and the media gradually shifted toward the latter.

Conservatives and other opponents of the FSP seized the opportunity to shape rhetoric around welfare dependence and the economic downturn more generally by blaming food stamp recipients. The public and the media followed suit. Rather than focusing their arguments on fundamental problems of unemployment or low wages that affected the lives of all Americans to varying degrees, these policymakers and their constituents focused their attention on groups of people who lacked enough resources to provide for themselves and their families. In the early 1970s, tensions persisted among class, gender, and race lines as people on the ground saw it as their right and responsibility to police food stamp users because of “widespread anxiety about the rising cost of living.”<sup>99</sup>

Historian Molly C. Michelmore wrote of the “contradiction of postwar liberalism” when she argued that liberals’ assurances to construct the War on Poverty to “avoid welfare dependency” and simultaneously cut taxes, ultimately privileged “the rights and interest of taxpayers over those of tax eaters dependent on federal assistance.”<sup>100</sup> Housewives continued their surveillance of food stamp users in the grocery store. Union workers endured vilification for “choosing” not to work and receiving federal food aid during strikes. Hippies, college students, and New Left groups who directly challenged the status quo around work and the nuclear family, fell victim to stereotypes of laziness and rebellion. The elderly poor — afraid of the embodying those same stigmas — shied away from food stamps despite their fixed incomes

<sup>99</sup> Michelmore, *Tax and Spend*, 24.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

and limited ability to continue working. These groups identified as workers and citizens in ways that were on the perimeter of traditional American conceptions of work through gendered and class perspectives. By claiming their right to eat through federal food aid and pushing the boundaries of assumptions about what it meant to work, they tested the limits of what it meant to be a citizen. How they lived, provided for themselves and their families, and what they chose to eat became the center of debates around whether food for survival was a right or privilege.

### **Chapter Three: “A Mixture of Compassion and Distaste”: Reimagining Poverty and Attacks on the Food Stamp Program, 1970s –1980s**

“Americans collectively view the poor,” argued a *Washington Post* writer, “with a mixture of compassion and distaste.”<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1970s, the public, media, and politicians associated federal food aid with social welfare rather than a distinct surplus program run by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The public and politicians displayed a growing discontent over the expansion of welfare programs. Many argued that the architects of the Food Stamp Program (FSP) intended it for temporary use and to deal with surplus foods. Conservatives claimed the FSP had morphed into a program that incentivized poor people into a life of government dependence.

Disillusioned constituents, angry about their own economic woes, aligned with conservative politicians who made clear distinctions between hard-working Americans and an overly generalized image of the “poor” who they perceived embodied laziness and an easy-way-out mentality. Conservatives effectively used language that framed the topic of food access as a privilege to those who had earned the right to eat through gainful employment. They did not question the extenuating circumstances of the individual. Constituents receptive to the New Right’s ideologies demanded that politicians re-examine food stamp policy. The mid-1970s was a turning point in the conversation about food rights.

<sup>1</sup> William Chapman, “The Welfare Enigma,” May 8, 1977, *The Washington Post*, digitized. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1977/05/08/the-welfare-enigma/d50ba48a-85f1-43d8-aab1-205f0940db61/>



A central paradox of the FSP was that as it continuously expanded in the decades after implementation, an unprecedented number of people were accessing affordable and healthy food. However, the public – as a collective group – felt more cheated than ever. In terms of food rights, the public homogenized the poor into an overly-generalized stereotype that was antithetical to appropriate American lifestyles and values. Many people perceived “the poor” as refusing to work and reveling in a lavish lifestyle they did not earn. This image of the food stamp recipient did not portray the facts. The *Washington Post* writer pointed to a “fundamental misreading of the kind of people who are poor” arguing that many were “children, disabled, mothers of young children,” or people who were working but did not make enough to make ends meet.<sup>2</sup> He quoted Joe Califano, Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) and former advisor to Lyndon B. Johnson, stating “poor Americans either work full-or part-time or are people no civilized society would compel to work.”<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that the mid-1970s served as a turning point in the way that politicians, the public, and the media understood and talked about the right to food. As the FSP expanded, public anger towards food stamp recipients increased. Opponents of the program helped entrench narratives about the types of people using food stamps, portraying them as deviant to the American way of life.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

I also argue that policymakers were not the sole drivers of perceptions about food stamp recipients that influenced policy changes. Activists and grassroots organizations both for and against food stamps attacked, influenced, and directed the legislation. In addition to the work of liberal anti-hunger activists and grassroots and religious organizations, conservatives who opposed the FSP formed their own coalitions to dismantle the program. While they did not always organize in ways like historian Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors*, housewives responsible for grocery shopping for their families policed food stamp users and exercised their rights as citizens by demanding that their elected officials change food stamp policy.<sup>4</sup> They wrote letters to their local, state, and federal politicians demanding policy changes. These grocery shoppers monitored the contents of the food stamp recipients' basket, observed their checkout total and how they were paying, and took note of the cars in which they drove away. They made quick calculations regarding the costs of the person's material goods in comparison to their own as the crux of their argument that the food stamp system was unfair to hard-working Americans. In the mid-1970s, with the government and economy in flux, disgruntled groups like housewives felt a responsibility to report on the behaviors of the poor when they perceived their own circumstances as blighted. They perceived their own citizenship as a tool to control the behaviors poor and non-white women.

Four events illuminate the 1970s as a period of shifting public opinion and political negotiation in the direction of the FSP framework. First, I present a case study where the

<sup>4</sup> Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

People's Party II in Houston, Texas fought to protect the rights of Third Ward community members at a food stamp distribution office from discriminatory practices by the local government.<sup>5</sup> In some local communities across the country, the county administrators of the FSP suppressed rather than empowered poor people. Neither welfare recipients, bureaucratic workers, nor the public were happy with the nature of the aid. Trapped in a cycle of poverty, food stamp users faced barriers to food access and judgment by the public for their use of federal aid. Low-paid bureaucratic employees worked within a stressful system and the public increasingly saw food stamp recipients as tax-eaters who refused to work. The grievances of each group show a disconnect between the formation of policy and its effectiveness in many poor communities.

I will analyze the 1973 Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act signed by President Richard Nixon. The Act was the first Farm Bill to include policy changes to the FSP since its passage in 1964. In this period, politicians, poor people, and the public agreed that food stamp policies needed revision. Republican and Democratic lawmakers aimed to change the parameters of the FSP and their debates framed the future of food aid in the United States. Its contents were a product of a divided Congress and signaled some of the first instances in Washington where conservatives attempted to alter the FSP. Despite liberal expansion of food stamps in the Farm Bill, Nixon's election represented a moment where newly empowered opponents of the FSP worked to slash appropriations and decrease government regulation. Public rhetoric about food

<sup>5</sup> The People's Party II was the local Houston chapter of the Black Panther Party.

stamp recipients also drove this change as more Americans were reeling from the social movements of the 1960s and the increasingly high unemployment into the 1970s.

To retain loyal constituents and their elected office, lawmakers tuned into Americans' reactions to FSP policy. The mid-to-late 1970s became a moment of transition where the context and goals of the FSP were in flux. The power of public opinion to sway ideas about food rights and federal food assistance made it difficult for politicians to agree on bipartisan legislation to stem what was becoming a highly bureaucratic and chaotic food distribution program. This is evident in the third major event of the period — the 1975 court case *Rodway vs. USDA*. Nine families living in poverty served as plaintiffs. Backed by 22 organizations around the nation including mayors, governors, and non-profits organizations, the plaintiffs demanded that the value of food allotment coupons be reevaluated because they did not match current food expenditures as stated through The Economy Food Plan.<sup>6</sup> As food prices changed with the shifting economy, the value of food stamps fluctuated accordingly. The Economy Food Plan, set by the USDA, periodically evaluated the value of food stamps to ensure that recipients could afford food in the grocery store at a given time.

Finally, I will analyze how public opinion won over conservative ideology by preventing a drastic reduction of the FSP budget that threatened to remove thousands of people from the

<sup>6</sup> Testimony Submitted for the Record to the Senate Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition; In Conjunction with the Hearing held January 30, 1988 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Testimony by: Liz Krueger of the Community Food Resource Center in *Hunger in America: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Nutrition and Investigations of the Committee Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry United States Senate*, 100<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session on Hunger and Related Nutritional Issues (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), 259. Digitized. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED301628.pdf> The program changed slightly when renamed the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) in 1975.

program. But the conservative movement continued to gain traction and Reagan's election to the presidency in 1980 solidified their power. Since his time as governor of California, Reagan was an outspoken opponent of the FSP. His rhetoric about the kinds of people that used food stamps reinforced the negative stigmas that conservatives conjured up since Nixon and Gerald R. Ford held office. Reagan cast the FSP as part of the welfare state – and therefore separate from farmers and other USDA agricultural policies – and as a failed attempt at entitlement programs.

Influenced by public opinion, politicians fought over the new direction of the FSP. Working and middle-class anxieties over the shifting economy and social atmosphere illuminated a changing discourse over which poor people deserved the right to food. Characterizing the FSP in this way strengthened the conservative argument that welfare users were lazy and systemically taking advantage of the government and their fellow citizens. When Reagan introduced the Presidential Task Force on Food Programs in 1983, he aimed to soften his image as a response to the consequences of his budget cuts and to explain the removal of so many poor from federal distribution programs as a result.

### **The People's Party II and the Food Stamp Program**

The early 1970s expansion of the FSP meant that more people were eligible for the stamps and that visibility of the program to the public increased. In 1972, Congress approved four billion dollars for the USDA's Food and Nutrition programs with 1.9 million appropriated

for the FSP.<sup>7</sup> The growing conservative movement forced conversations about food rights, making the FSP an important single-issue campaign topic. Redirecting their focus from Communism to domestic issues, conservative politicians highlighted ideas about moral corruption, family values, and out-of-control social welfare spending.<sup>8</sup> The FSP was a prime target for assault. The public's frustration with their own economic troubles combined with politicians looking to blame social welfare spending and welfare recipients fueled assumptions about flawed eligibility requirements and the degree to which personal choice should be available to food stamp users when they shopped. These ideas fed the public discourse around the deserving and undeserving poor.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, the program's expansion illuminated underserved regions and people, signaling continued failed efforts of the FSP to reach all people suffering from hunger. From the late 1960s through the mid-1970s, public opinion demanded a reimagining of the FSP. Though it became clear to many people that the program needed an overhaul, disagreements on how to

<sup>7</sup> Letter from John C. Whitaker to Andrew J. Curtis, August 18, 1972, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program 1/1/71, Box 60, Welfare (WE) EX WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program to EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans, Subject Files, White House Central Files, Papers of Richard Nixon, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California (hereafter cited as WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL).

<sup>8</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 225-6; Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 439.

<sup>9</sup> Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989). Katz argued that Americans have consistently perceived poor people on the perimeter of society. Seen as the "underclass," by the 1970s, public opinion characterized the poor as victims of entitlement programs that have reinforced a fraudulent and lazy behavior pattern therefore making them undeserving of government programs. Also see: Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 64-5.

adjust the framework and implementation came from all parts of the political spectrum.<sup>10</sup> Shown mostly clearly on the local level, these inconsistencies fostered public disillusionment about the efficacy of the FSP. In Houston, Texas, civil rights activists fought local government and food stamp case workers for better and more equal treatment in receiving FSP benefits. The dispute highlighted problems with state-level autonomy where local officials and case workers reinforced their own discriminations against poor people of color.

In 1970, 2322 Dowling Street opened as a food stamp distribution site that was located in a historically black neighborhood, of Third Ward in Houston, Texas. The Dowling Street building also housed the Harris County Community Action Association (HCCAA). Twice per week, the HCCAA shared the center with federal employees who helped welfare recipients get their food stamps and enroll new applicants. The new location should have been a boon for poor people in Third Ward who did not have the resources to make the three-and-a-half-mile trip to the central food stamp distribution center. People living in these food deserts often did not own cars, were not located near mass transit or held multiple jobs and could not necessarily get to inconveniently located distribution centers.<sup>11</sup> The city's almost complete lack of a

<sup>10</sup> Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 39.

<sup>11</sup> *Food Access Research Atlas*, Documentation, Economic Research Service, USDA, accessed March 2020, digitized. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/documentation/>. The USDA's Economic Research Service defines food deserts as, "neighborhood that lack healthy food sources" where "most measures and definitions take into account" the following: "accessibility to sources of healthy food, as measured by distance to a store or by the number of stores in an area. Individual-level resources that may affect accessibility, such as family income or vehicle availability. Neighborhood-level indicators or resources, such as the average income of the neighborhood and the availability of public transportation."

comprehensive mass transit system in the mid-century affected the ability of many poor citizens living miles away in Third Ward to be able to reach the central food stamp distribution center easily.<sup>12</sup>

Receiving the Dowling Street location from the local government did not necessarily solve the problems of the residents in Third Ward. Community members preferred another, more centrally located food distribution center in the Cuney Homes public housing complex operated by the Houston Housing Authority. Residents petitioned the local Department of Public Welfare and the County Judge. They reached out to their State Representative, Democrat Abbie K. Evans. She begged Harris County Judge Bill Elliot to acknowledge the “699 indigent people that are food stamp recipients” in that area who “have no transportation to get to and from Elder Street.”<sup>13</sup> The local government did not agree that a distribution center should operate in the Cuney Homes area and argued that Harris County already had “far more distribution centers than any other program in the state.”<sup>14</sup> This meager defense deflected responsibility of the Department of Public Welfare and federal workers from having to establish welfare aid to a majority black

<sup>12</sup> Kyle Shelton, “What Old Transit Maps Can Teach Us About a City’s Future: An analysis of once-rejected, later-constructed routes in Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Houston,” *CITYLAB from The Atlantic*, October 10, 2014, [www.citylab.com/commute/2014](http://www.citylab.com/commute/2014). Shelton argues that rejected transit plans in the early 1960s from three major cities, are central plans for modern mass transit development. In analyzing Houston’s history, Shelton recalls a 1973 rejected mass transit proposal whose plans are now mostly in effect today. Additionally, he makes that point that the development of the Houston METRO in 1978 did not release its first major transit plan until 1983.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Abbie K. Evans to Bill Elliot, April 6, 1970, Folder 349-46, Box 0349, Food Stamp Program: Out Lying Areas, 1969-70, Harris County Social Services Cr08 – (1946 – 1978), Harris County Clerk’s Office, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as HCCO).

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Oliver M. Cole to Nonie M. Cooper, January 9, 1970, Folder 349-46, Box 0349, Food Stamp Program: Out Lying Areas, 1969-70, Harris County Social Services Cr08 – (1946 – 1978), HCCO.



community who they saw as underserving of access to food. The example illuminates how people restricted food access for non-white poor people.

Limiting total access to food stamp distribution centers was the most sweeping way for federal bureaucracies to choose which poor people they felt deserved aid. Tactics like refusing to establish a distribution center, like Cuney Homes, or only opening centers that were out of reach of central poverty-stricken populations based on transportation proved effective. But once established, a center deemed not worthy of adequate federal protection, faced other subtler ways of limiting access as well. Racial and gender politics played big roles in the success of a center's food stamp operation.

The center that did open, on Dowling Street, faced controversy from day one. A series of memos and letters revealed a strong rift between state and federal employees and community activists. Sources show both federal employees' and community members' perceptions of how the day unfolded. Not surprisingly, the stories conflicted. Yet all sides reveal central themes to how the FSP operated in poverty-stricken and minority areas of downtown Houston. One federal employee, recalling the events of the day, claimed that HCCAA workers came in through the back door of the building and implied that they had somehow intruded. He made claims about the bad lightening, faulty infrastructure, and rodent infestation. His biggest complaint though was with a local reverend in the community, S.A. Douglass who, a female food stamp employee claimed, "had acted like he'd been drinking." The same memo also recalled Douglass loudly playing a Martin Luther King Jr. speech in the building and other HCCAA "interviewing" food stamp "customers" on their feelings about the welfare program. Finally, the memo recalled

Douglass making veiled threats concerning Ted Britton, assistant director of the Department of Welfare, because he and other top officials were ignoring petitions to open the Cuney Homes food distribution center. The memo ended with a caution about how the center was located just one block away from a “bad hang out for the undesirable people.”<sup>15</sup>

The Dowling Street office where these incidents took place was located very close to the headquarters of the People’s Party II Organization. This was the Houston chapter of the Black Panther Party started by Carl Hampton.<sup>16</sup> Historians have recovered the local history of the Black Panther Party and the ways in which they sought to help their fellow community members in aspects of their everyday life.<sup>17</sup> In this case, it is safe to assume that the activists who were present in the Dowling Street center on opening day and even the “undesirable people” just one block away, associated with the Party. As the historiography of the Black Panther Party has noted, much of tension of that day derived from their longstanding mistrust of the federal government and their motives in black communities.

Other federal employees had their opinions about opening day on Dowling Street and suggestions for a remedy. They made a strong effort to shut down the Dowling Street center.

<sup>15</sup> Notes by Clayton Fey, undated, Folder 349-46, Box 0349, Food Stamp Program: Out Lying Areas 1969-70, Harris County Social Services Cr08 – (1946 – 1978), HCCO.

<sup>16</sup> [www.houstonchronicle.com/local/gray-matters](http://www.houstonchronicle.com/local/gray-matters) A few months later in mid-July 1970, police shot Carl Hampton, 21, in the shoulder on the steps of the local church. A female passerby took him to Ben Taub hospital where he later died. Accounts are ambiguous about Hampton could have died from a shoulder wound.

<sup>17</sup> Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). Nelson examined the Black Panther Party’s connection to the health care initiatives by arguing that health issues became an “indispensable element of the Party’s politics,” and that to intervene in this historiography by showing how the Party helped local communities on the ground by providing them with tangible resources for survival.

Many federal employees did not want to work in centers in that part of Houston and poor black community members and activists like the Black Panthers did not trust the government. Tim Parker, the Harris County food stamp issue supervisor, also complained about the bad infrastructure of the Dowling Street building, the rodent infestation and the recording of the MLK Jr. speech that was a “distraction to our employees who must have correct accounting.”<sup>18</sup> Parker also asserted that a “bawdy house” was located next door simply because the “operator...locks his doors and only opens it for certain people for some strange reason.”<sup>19</sup> Parker concluded his observations to Britton, by recommending that the Dowling Street location be shut down and moved to “some other location.”<sup>20</sup>

The most agitated complaint was a letter sent to Dick Raycraft, administrative assistant to Elliot. Raycraft stated that the welfare aid employees could not work effectively with HCCAA workers in the building during food distribution working hours. From there, Raycraft addressed safety measures and argued that, “our basis for security is prevention rather than actual involvement after the criminal act is started.” The letter went on to state that “it will not be possible to determine security status if HCCAA is carrying out their functions at the same time we issue food stamps.” This complaint directly linked the presence of HCCAA workers with criminal activity. In many ways, this also implicated the residents of the community as criminals

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Tim Parker to Ted Britton, January 15, 1970, Folder 349-46, Food Stamp Program: Out Lying Areas, 1969-70, Box 0349 Harris County Social Services Cr08 – (1946 – 1978), HCCO.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

and immediately stereotyped the types of people that received food stamps. Raycraft ended by stating that after witnessing the events of the opening day first-hand, “that the situation will be intolerable and threatening to a well-disciplined program.”<sup>21</sup>

These reports paint an image of a chaotic, scary, and uncomfortable community juxtaposed to a civilized food distribution center whose federal employees were simply attempting to not only do their job, but as the latter source showed, potentially bring *order* to what federal officials described as an undignified and disorderly community. But the federal employees’ numerous complaints do not tell the whole story. Their image of the Dowling Street food distribution center and the local community members suffered from perceptions of who welfare recipients were, where they lived, and why they needed help from the government. As such, federal employees outwardly displayed signs of contempt for welfare receipts and acted in ways that limited food stamp access to their constituents.

Exhibitions of power by local and state officials embodied the highly charged gendered and racialized pathology of welfare recipients who received government aid. This was most obvious in the refusal of Elliot and Britton to acknowledge that Cuney Homes community members were more than prepared to house another food stamp distribution center that, they knew, would be very convenient for needy, local community members. When pressed, auxiliary federal employees would simply reply that they already had enough distribution centers. The

<sup>21</sup> Letter from unsigned to Ted Britton, January 15, 1970, Folder 349-46, Box 0349, Food Stamp Program: Out Lying Areas, 1969-70, Harris County Social Services Cr08 – (1946 – 1978), HCCO.

indifference to the needs of impoverished, black community members was striking but not surprising.

One month after the Dowling Street opening day incident, the HCCAA headquarters wrote to Sid Hillard and other members of the Area III Board Members that presided over the Food Stamp program in Harris County. The HCCAA mentioned two specific problems including the lack of movement on the Cuney Homes proposal and the treatment of welfare recipients by federal employees. The letter referred specifically to opening day at the Dowling Street location and stated that “community members” witnessed mistreatment of welfare recipients by the federal employees. They lodged three major complaints. First, welfare recipients stated that federal employees “attitudes” when talking with customers was “abusive.” Second, that federal employees refused “service walk-ins” and without looking at their files send them to the Elder Street location, the very place that proved most difficult for these recipients to reach. Finally, the letter stated that caseworkers did not do enough to notify recipients of food stamp price increases and therefore many people left empty-handed because of their inability to afford the stamps. The letter ended by asking that the federal employees respect welfare recipients. The HCCAA invited the Area III Board Members to attend their next meeting for further discussion.<sup>22</sup>

The problems that poor people faced on Dowling Street were not unique to Houston. Throughout the country, there existed a disconnect between the nature of welfare recipients’

<sup>22</sup> Letter from the HCCAA to Sid Hillard and Area Board Members of Area III, February 13, 1970, Folder 349-46, Box 0349, Food Stamp Program: Out Lying Areas, 1969-70, Harris County Social Services Cr08 – (1946 – 1978), HCCO.

participation in food programs and how the very employees assigned to help them stigmatized their need for aid. Problems of program implementation in low-income communities populated by people of color persisted throughout the early 1970s. In January 1972, members of the four-county, grassroots organization Alianza de Pobres, Inc. or the Alliance of Poor, Inc. petitioned President Nixon to institute an emergency FSP in their home counties of Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy located in and around Brownsville, Texas. Citing a state of emergency that left their communities to suffer with “hunger, malnutrition, and starvation,” the grassroots organization argued that other counties around them had access to food stamps but that they did not despite their need. They alleged that their pleas for food access, especially during the winter months, were ignored because their counties were “95% Mexican American.”<sup>23</sup> Despite their work as laborers, people of color were disproportionately affected by policies that hindered their abilities to access healthy food or manage their own food production.<sup>24</sup> Although this was not their first letter to the White House asking for help, they reminded Nixon of their citizenship status and ability to vote in the upcoming election. They begged that Nixon “not give us excuses” and ended their letter by reiterating, “do not expect us to help you if you cannot help us when we go to the polls.”<sup>25</sup> Paralleling ideas behind Fannie Lou Hamer’s Freedom Farm Co-op, or the

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Alberto Milburn to President Nixon, January 31, 1972, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program 1/1/71, Box 60, Welfare (WE) EX WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program to EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans, Subject Files, WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL.

<sup>24</sup> “Introduction: The Food Movement as Polyculture,” in *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, edited by Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 9.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Alberto Milburn to President Nixon, January 31, 1972, Folder WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program 1/1/71, Box 60, Welfare (WE) EX WE 10-4 Food Stamp Program to EX WE 10-5 Family Security Plans, Subject Files, WHCF, RN Papers, RMNL.

Alabama tenant farmers suing for their right to access the FSP, poor people found ways to help themselves and challenge unfair laws that prohibited them from attaining a basic standard of living.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act, 1973**

The vibrancy of grassroots organizing brought more food access to local communities and created space for political advocacy to improve the FSP. But their efforts became more difficult post-1968. As conservatives gained powerful political influence the tenor of public and political rhetoric around food rights and government responsibility gradually shifted. In his 1968 campaign for the presidency, Richard Nixon deployed language of “‘morality,’ ‘law and order,’ ‘welfare chiselers,’ and ‘liberal permissiveness,’” and attacked social welfare programs and the poor people who depended on federal aid for their survival.<sup>27</sup> Accusations that poor people were abusing welfare programs ignited a growing middle-and-lower class conservative base who were all too eager to blame the nations’ economic and political failures on the perceived disinclination of welfare recipients to work.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 12 & 183.

<sup>27</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 210.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

In his first term as president, Richard Nixon balance a Democratic Congress, his own centrist politics, and the pressures of his conservative constituency.<sup>29</sup> Public pressure for government intervention combined with the political pressure of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs (McGovern Committee), forced Nixon to sign off on the liberal changes to the FSP. The Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act in 1973 directly responded to the grassroots activism and public outrage of 1968. The amendments broadened the scope of federal food aid distribution and mandated that “every political subdivision” in the county submit a plan of operation for the Food Stamp Program by June 1, 1974.<sup>30</sup> It also included expanded coverage and higher benefits through June 30, 1977.<sup>31</sup> The Farm Bill laid a path for more federal control – and less state control – over the program. Up to this point, states and counties had the authority to refuse the program in their communities and this often played out to the detriment of people in poverty stricken neighborhoods. The changes to the FSP also made eligible all imported foods and covered the purchase of “seeds and plants used in a home garden.”<sup>32</sup> Finally, it extended eligibility to recovering addicts in accredited rehabilitation centers. The unintended

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>30</sup> “Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973 P.L. 93-86, 87 Stat. 221-250, Aug. 10, 1973,” Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Legislative History – 1973, *United State Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service*, March 12, 2014, digitized. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/legislative-history-1973>

<sup>31</sup> Richard Nixon, Statement on Signing the Agricultural and Consumer Protection Act of 1973, digitized. [www.presidency.uscb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=3932](http://www.presidency.uscb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=3932)

<sup>32</sup> Press release, “USDA Announces Amendments to Food Stamp Regulations,” United States Department of Agriculture, August 17, 1973, Folder IIA5 Food Stamp Program 1972-74, Box 9, Series 1.4, Doc. Files 1957-1977, Manuscript Collection 182, USDA History Collection, Special Collections of the National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, Maryland.



consequence of such legislation eventually aided conservative politicians – like Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan – in making connections between undeserving poor people and federal food access.

Despite these inclusionary measures, Nixon’s statement at the signing indicated a negative conservative sentiment about the nature of federal food aid. He said, “I am willing to accept a temporary return to ‘in-kind’ benefits as provided in this act as a stopgap measure, but I continue to believe that our long-term goal should be to provide income assistance in cash, rather than in food stamps or other forms of in-kind assistance that rob the individual of the chance to make his own spending decisions.”<sup>33</sup> People who perceived the FSP as an entitlement program or handout pushed for cash assistance that lumped all welfare payments together. Recipients had to find ways to budget the money appropriately across all their needs. Opponents of “cashing out” the FSP argued that doing so changed the core intentions of the program to provide poor people with an avenue for affording healthier food and lower costs. Not originally designed as a welfare program or part of Johnson’s 1964 War on Poverty, proponents of the FSP characterized it as a nutrition and surplus program. By talking about the FSP as welfare, conservatives used an opportunity to politicize food and demonize the people who needed it most to survive.

### ***Rodway v. USDA, 1975***

<sup>33</sup> Richard Nixon, Statement on Signing the Agricultural and Consumer Protection Act of 1973, digitized. [www.presidency.uscb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=3932](http://www.presidency.uscb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=3932)

Throughout the mid-1970s, conservatives chipped away at the power of the federal government and used the shifting economy as a consensus that seemed to “confirm the apocalyptic view of systematic corruption” eroding the country.<sup>34</sup> Conservative rhetoric helped move public opinion about food stamps and conversation centered on matters of taxation and public surveillance. Gerald Ford’s post-Watergate ascension to the presidency sparked an onslaught of attacks to the FSP. Ford held many of the same economic and social views of Nixon and other conservatives about food stamps and quickly resolved to dismantle the program.

The USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service cited that by January of 1975, 45 million Americans would be eligible to participate in federal food assistance programs. Of those 45 million people, 18.2 million Americans would use the FSP and other family food assistance programs like the Commodity Surplus Program.<sup>35</sup> Ford and other politicians who opposed expanded FSP spending ramped up their efforts to frame increased participation in federal food aid as part of the *problem* for the failing economy rather than a *symptom* of policymaking that consistently upheld the status quo, which kept many people from reaching equitable standards of living.

Right-wing opponents of the FSP took control of the narrative once held by 1960s liberal protesters and questioned whether all Americans deserved the right to access affordable and

<sup>34</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 49.

<sup>35</sup> USDA – Food and Nutrition Service Charts in memo to Norman Ross, March 17, 1975, Folder Department of Agriculture (5), Box 1, Canning Lid Shortage to Department of Agriculture, Norman E. Ross, Jr. Assistant Director for Natural Resources: Files: 1974-1975, Domestic Council, White House Central Files, Gerald R. Ford Papers, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan (hereafter cited as WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL).

healthy food. They reframed the meanings around food aid by stereotyping FSP recipients as harmful to the economy and the social order. Those people who chose to use government aid for food access threatened the ideas of what it meant to be a citizen and an American because they lived on the outside of accepted norms.<sup>36</sup> Food was not a right of all people but an earned privilege of those who worked and fit within the prescribed gender roles. Where Americans in the late 1960s demanded expanded food access to all poor people as a human right of survival, conservatives in the mid-1970s stereotyped FSP recipients and cast them as “other” based on preconceived ideas about what it meant to be American.

The Ford administration proposed a resolution to increase the purchase requirement of food stamps. Effective March 1, 1975, all low-income individuals and families paid 30 percent of their adjusted net income, instead of the normal 22 percent, for the same amount of food stamps they usually received. The idea was that increasing the purchase requirement of food stamps would decrease the overall federal expenditure. A federal increase in the purchase requirement meant that many poor people currently surviving on food stamps would no longer be able to afford them.<sup>37</sup> Ford was both responding to and generating an increasingly widespread public opinion that food stamps indicated a person’s lack of work ethic and morality.

<sup>36</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Governor Edwin Edwards to President Richard Nixon, February 4, 1975, Folder Food Stamps 2/1/75 – 3/31/75, Box 3, Economic Policy Board (5) to Food Stamps 4/1/75 – 5/12/75, Arthur F. Quern Deputy Assistant for Domestic Affairs, Files 1975-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

The rhetoric used by constituents when writing to their elected officials about food stamp users changed drastically following the 1968 CBS documentary *Hunger in America*. Public outrage shifted from the horrors of starving American babies to disgust that taxpayer money was contributing to feeding people who had, from their perspective, not “earned” the right to eat. One Dallas man writing to his congressman in response to a 1975 newspaper article titled “As Food Stamps Burgeon, Even the Affluent Qualify,” drew the conclusion that the “affluent, union strikers, college students, and the so-called poor who lack ambition to secure work” were merely taking advantage of a system that operated at the expense of “taxpayers.”<sup>38</sup>

But the idea that affluent and lazy citizens were hijacking the food stamp program to reap its benefits by working as little as possible did not hold up. Organizations and constituents committed to helping low income people access federal food aid reacted to Ford’s proposal.<sup>39</sup> One group who stood to suffer from such amendments were the elderly poor, many of whom could no longer work. The rise in food prices combined with stricter food stamp allotments meant these groups of people struggled to afford food. Legislators debated including a standard deduction in talks of Food Stamp Program expansion that would consider the situations of the elderly poor.<sup>40</sup> A Chicago-based physician wrote to his congressman regarding the proposed

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Donald R. Bowen to Alan Steelman, May 9, 1975, Folder 9 Welfare/Food Stamps, 1975, Box 115, Subseries 10, Ways and Means 1973-1976, Alan W. Steelman Papers 1960-2003, Baylor Collections of Political Materials, W. R. Poage Legislative Library, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Martha Hogan to Sidney R. Yates, February 28, 1975, Folder LEG – Food Stamps 1975, Box 285, Bib 66991, Sidney R. Yates Papers ca. 1931 – 1998, Archives and Manuscripts, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter cited as AM, CHM).

<sup>40</sup> Letter from Thomas S. Foley to Sidney R. Yates, November 4, 1975, Folder LEG – Food Stamps 1975, Box 285, Bib 66991, Yates Papers, AM, CHM.

increase in food stamp prices by the Ford administration. He called the proposed legislation “terribly hard-hearted” and declared that it was “poorly conceived since just that group of citizens currently suffering most economically will be forced to bear a further crushing burden.”<sup>41</sup> The physician went on to warn that if that legislation passed, “it would most certainly affect the health of the poor and elderly poor very determinately and to a great extent.”<sup>42</sup>

Between January and March of 1975, local and state officials expressed their strong opposition to the proposed regulation that would increase the purchase requirement by 30 percent. The governor of Louisiana, Edwin Edwards, wrote to Ford urging him to delay instituting the order to increase the food stamp purchase requirement to 30 percent of poor people’s net income. Edwards argued that of the 600,000 persons in Louisiana who received food stamps, “the majority of these low-income people” would no longer be able to afford the program and therefore access food to survive. Edwards urged Ford to stop the implementation of the legislation because it would cause “unbearable hardship on the people we are obligated to help.”<sup>43</sup> Christopher S. Bond, governor of Missouri, reminded Ford that the purpose of the FSP was to “raise the nutritional level of low income families,” and that the new regulation “defeats

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Dr. and Mrs. Harry E. Faivus, December 26, 1974, Folder LEG – Food Stamps 1975, Box 285, Bib 66991, Yates Papers, AM, CHM.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Letter from Governor Edwin Edwards to President Richard Nixon, February 4, 1975, Folder Food Stamps 2/1/75 – 3/31/75, Box 3, Economic Policy Board (5) to Food Stamps 4/1/75 – 5/12/75, Arthur F. Quern Deputy Assistant for Domestic Affairs, Files 1975-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

that primary purpose.”<sup>44</sup> Charles L. Becker, the mayor of San Antonio, whose city was one of four featured on *Hunger in America*, joined in the calls for Ford to stop the regulation before many low-income families would no longer be eligible for the program.<sup>45</sup> Jerry Apodaca, governor of New Mexico, called the proposed resolution “detrimental” to the low-income people of the state and argued that “in this time of economic inflation and recession, our poor and elderly cannot afford a 30 percent increase” in food stamp costs.<sup>46</sup>

In fact, a March 31, 1975 *New York Times* article stated that while incorrect mathematical calculations and some duplicate applications hindered the financial efficiency of the FSP, ultimately, “the abuses and frauds” only made up a “fraction of the errors” despite “the rising criticism that besets the program as its numbers increased.”<sup>47</sup> However, the president’s message echoed that of many other public figures and paralleled the increasingly accepted idea that food stamp users had other choices and means for survival. Instead, they willingly sought the protections of welfare benefits due to a lack of work ethic or moral failing.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Governor Christopher S. Bond to President Richard Nixon, January 31, 1975, Folder Food Stamps 2/1/75 – 3/31/75, Box 3, Economic Policy Board (5) to Food Stamps 4/1/75 – 5/12/75, Arthur F. Quern Deputy Assistant for Domestic Affairs, Files 1975-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Mayor Charles L. Becker to President Richard Nixon, January 30, 1975, Folder Food Stamps 2/1/75 – 3/31/75, Box 3, Economic Policy Board (5) to Food Stamps 4/1/75 – 5/12/75, Arthur F. Quern Deputy Assistant for Domestic Affairs, Files 1975-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from Governor Jerry Apodaca to President Richard Nixon, January 29, 1975, Folder Food Stamps 2/1/75 – 3/31/75, Box 3, Economic Policy Board (5) to Food Stamps 4/1/75 – 5/12/75, Arthur F. Quern Deputy Assistant for Domestic Affairs, Files 1975-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

<sup>47</sup> William Robbins, “740-Million Yearly Loss Reported in Food Stamps,” *The New York Times*, March 31, 1975, Folder Food Stamps (1), Box 4, Drug Abuse and Drug Safety to Food Stamps, Spencer C. Johnson Papers Associate Director for Health, Social Security, and Welfare Files, 1976-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

Grassroots organizations and anti-hunger activists called for leniency on poor people and continued to fight for their right to access healthy food. The Associate Director of the National Conference of Catholic Charities (NCCC), in testimony before the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, reiterated the organization's "moral outrage" over "the fact that income in our society is still so inadequately distributed that people are hungry."<sup>48</sup> Arguing that the Ford administration and the USDA should not raise food stamp prices because it would effectively kick off previous recipients who could no longer afford the stamps, the Associate Director stated that "they simply place the burden of our society's economic problems more heavily on those least able to bear it."<sup>49</sup> He declared that "the Administration is hurting the poor and the needy rather than helping them."<sup>50</sup> Constituents agreed. One man wrote to Representative Sidney R. Yates (D-IL) and argued that "we need food to live by" and that with a potential rise in food stamp prices, "there would be less to live by." The man highlighted his power as a citizen when he wondered, "why cut your voters off just because times are hard?" "We love our government," he declared, "but we need our government's help."<sup>51</sup>

Congress voted to pass H.R. 1589 which prohibited any basic reforms on the FSP for one full year. With a vote of 374 to 38 in the House of Representatives and 76 to 8 in the Senate, the

<sup>48</sup> Mathew H. Ahmann, "Food Policy: The Food Stamp Program," Testimony to Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, United States Senate, February 5, 1975, Folder LEG-Food Stamps-1975, Box 285, Yates Papers, AM, CHM.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Letter William Commins to Sidney R. Yates, n.d., LEG-Food Stamps-1975, Box 285, Yates Papers, AM, CHM.

purchase requirement for low income people on food stamps did not increase. That same day the Senate unanimously passed S. Res. 58, sponsored by McGovern Committee member Robert Dole (R-KS). The resolution required that the USDA submit legislative recommendations by June 30, 1975 suggesting ways to disqualify people in the program with adequate incomes per the poverty income guidelines, increase penalties for those who would abuse the program, improve the administrative relationship of the FSP to other welfare programs, and tighten up the procurement and handling of the food supplies.<sup>52</sup>

The White House Press Secretary released a statement acknowledging the passage of H.R. 1589 without Ford's signature. In his public address, Ford stated that his plan to increase the price of food stamps would have required FSP users to "share" in increased food prices with taxpayers.<sup>53</sup> The implication was that the welfare recipients were causing more harm on a system that some did not pay into especially during a downturned economy. However, Ford did not consider that many people on food stamps and other forms of welfare – who were already poor – suffered just as much if not more from food price increases and therefore would not have been able to spare the fifteen dollars on average price jump in the cost of food stamps.

<sup>52</sup> Senate Resolution 58, February 5, 1975, Folder Food Stamps and Senate Resolution 58 (1), Box 6, Food Stamp Report to Monthly Chartbook, Arthur F. Quern Deputy Assistant for Domestic Affairs, Files 1975-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

<sup>53</sup> Statement by the President, The White House, Office of the White House Press Secretary, February 13, 1975, Folder Food Stamps 2/1/75 – 3/31/75, Box 3, Economic Policy Board (5) to Food Stamps 4/1/75 – 5/12/75, Arthur F. Quern Deputy Assistant for Domestic Affairs, Files 1975-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.



Debates about the functionality of food stamps often centered on two questions. First, whose obligation was it to help poor American citizens gain access to healthy food for their survival? Second, were the concepts of work, worthiness, and the ability to eat mutually exclusive? Or, did an individual's life hardships and moral character signal their worth and right to survive? In fact, many citizens dealing with temporary hardship faced scrutiny. Public perception of poor people's ability to work or their frugality when using the stamps defined their worthiness to receive food aid.<sup>54</sup>

Because the 1973 amendments to the Food Stamp Act mandated that every county in the United States adopt the FSP, more people became eligible for the program making recipients and the program more visible and therefore, politically problematic. This, combined with high economic inflation, informed Ford's aggressive attacks on government spending towards welfare and more specifically, the FSP. To decrease spending, the Ford administration focused on the technical language of the original 1964 legislation that stated the intent of the FSP was to *supplement* the diets of low-income families not *guarantee* their right to a nutritious diet. However, on June 12, 1975 a Federal Court ruled on a lawsuit introduced in 1971 where nine poor families charged that the Secretary of Agriculture had failed in his duties to adjust food stamp prices to meet the inflated economy thereby making them ineligible for the stamps. In *Rodway v. USDA*, the court ruled that the Secretary of Agriculture had to adjust for the changing

<sup>54</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 172. May argues that post-war consumerism came to symbolize Americanism through "cultural values, demonstrated success and social mobility, and defined lifestyles."

economy and food prices and that based off the 1973 legislation, the FSP must *guarantee* a nutritionally adequate diet to all eligible recipients.<sup>55</sup>

As a result, Ford leveraged the public's fears about high taxes and rising food prices to push for massive budget cuts of the FSP. Together, Ford's appointed Domestic Policy Council, the Office of Management and Budget, and the USDA worked towards creating a legislative proposal that would overhaul the FSP. Simultaneously, the June 30, 1975 deadline for Secretary Butz to answer S.R. 58 regarding ways to trim down fraud and abuse in the FSP was fast approaching. Ford's advisors decided to address both issues at once, using S.R. 58 as a "vehicle" to introduce their reform package, they argued for a \$1.2 billion-dollar slash of food stamp appropriations.<sup>56</sup>

A meeting agenda by the Ford administration revealed that their major concerns were streamlining eligibility standards for specific groups, whose participation in the FSP had long been problematic. While the Food Stamp Act of 1973 had, in part, allowed accredited rehabilitation centers for alcoholics to receive food stamps, there was still much discussion on them as well as college students and union workers on strike.<sup>57</sup> Continuing a long history of

<sup>55</sup> Janet Poppendieck, "Hunger in America: Typification and Response," in *Eating Agendas: Food and Nutrition as Social Problems*, edited by Donna Maurer and Jeffrey Sobel (New York: Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 1995).

<sup>56</sup> Memo from Jim Cannon to Philip Buchen, Alan Greenspan, Robert Hartmann, James Lynn, John Marsh, William Seidman, May 13, 1976, Folder Food Stamps (1), Box Drug Abuse and Drug Safety to Food Stamps (5), Spencer Johnson Associate Director for Health, Social Security, and Welfare Files 1976-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

<sup>57</sup> Agenda, Food Stamp Meeting, May 13, 1975, Folder Food Stamps (1), Box 4, Drug Abuse and Drug Safety to Food Stamps (5), Spencer C. Johnson Associate Director for Health, Social Security, and Welfare Files: 1976-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

attacks against union strikers, many constituents understood their choice to strike as identical to the poor people who, they believed, also chose not to work to reap the benefits of welfare. Ford's advisors proposed that all strikers must wait sixty days, while on strike, before becoming eligible for food stamps.<sup>58</sup> That same year, Secretary of Agriculture, Earl L. Butz responded to a Missouri constituent lamenting that strikers living off food stamps was a "gross miscarriage of justice" that conservative policymakers had been trying to "correct" in the legislation for some time. Butz blamed the lack of success in amending the FSP regarding striking union workers to the "dominate hold organized labor has on the Congress."<sup>59</sup>

Then, on November 19, 1975, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, Richard Feltner, addressed the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry to explain Ford's proposed National Food Stamp Reform Act of 1975. The reform package included strict laws that would slash many aspects of the FSP making ineligible an estimated half of the participants, nationwide, that correctly received the stamps. For example, the proposed legislation would institute an income cap for all families applying for food stamps regardless of economic inflation and rising food prices but would provide standard deductions for only the poorest families. Similarly, the Ford administration maintained their stance that a uniform purchase requirement increase to 30 percent of a recipient or family's net income. Arguing that poor families needed to

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Earl L. Butz to Mr. Kelly E. Gibbons, April 15, 1975, Folder Food Stamps (1), Box 4, Drug Abuse and Drug Safety to Food Stamps (5), Spencer C. Johnson Associate Director for Health, Social Security, and Welfare Files: 1976-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

“invest” funds into their food purchases to align with the Rodway ruling and ensure that recipients had nutritional diets. Arguing that the \$1.2 billion-dollar “annual savings” was “not proposed primarily for financial reasons,” Feltner attempted to reassure the committee that it was, in fact, intended to target only the neediest citizens.<sup>60</sup>

While Ford’s program proposed sweeping changes to the FSP, it also bolstered ideas that too many people were on food stamps who were not poor enough to receive aid making budget cuts essential. This logic fed into stigmas that most welfare and food stamp recipients were simply too lazy to work – in the case of union workers – or were devious enough to devise ways to back-door the system and use food stamps simply as income supplement. Leading into 1976, the Ford’s proposed legislation faced much resistance.

In late February of 1976, Herman E. Talmadge (D-GA), then Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee and staunch segregationist, pleaded with Ford to stop pushing for his \$1.2 billion-dollar reform package through regulations imposed by the Secretary of Agriculture while the Senate was still working on passing a reform bill. Ford threatened to implement the regulations despite the hesitation of congress to seriously consider his proposed legislation. Talmadge appealed to Ford’s logic in questioning the long-term success of Ford’s proposal because it would be “severely test in our courts.” Talmadge reminded Ford of Butz’s 1975 testimony before the committee admitting his awareness “that sweeping program changes

<sup>60</sup> Statement by Richard L. Feltner, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture before the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, November 19, 1975, Folder Food Stamps (3), Box 4, Drug Abuse and Drug Safety to Food Stamps (5), Spencer C. Johnson Associate Director for Health, Social Security, and Welfare Files: 1976-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

initiated through regulations do not stand the test of court actions.” In the end, Talmadge argued, Ford’s proposed legislation would mostly act as stalemate that prevented any food stamp reform legislation from passage.<sup>61</sup>

With a vote of 52-22, the Senate passed S. 3136 also known as the Dole-McGovern bill. Far less stringent than Ford’s proposition, the bill proposed to cut food stamp participation by 1.4 million people. Dubbing it the “Mickey Mouse bill,” Ford responded by authorizing Butz to implement regulations based on their proposed National Food Stamp Reform Act.<sup>62</sup> An April 30, 1976 memo from Jim Cannon to Ford confirmed their timeline to publish the regulations in the Federal Register in early May and implement the regulations beginning June 1, 1976. Cannon wrote, “we expect to be sued,” upon hearing that the Food Research Action Committee (FRAC) planned to lead a coalition of states, individuals, and welfare agencies to challenge the regulations in court.<sup>63</sup>

On May 25, 1976, the state of California filed a temporary restraining order against the regulations. The next day, FRAC held a press conference stating their intentions to prevent the June 1 implementation of the food stamp regulations that, they estimated, would cut 5.3 million

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Herman E. Talmadge to Ford, February 23, 1976, Folder Food Stamps (4), Box 4, Drug Abuse and Drug Safety to Food Stamps (5), Spencer C. Johnson Associate Director for Health, Social Security, and Welfare Files: 1976-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

<sup>62</sup> Remarks of the President and Question and Answer Session at the Texas Grain and Feed Association Annual Convention, El Paso, Texas, April 10, 1976, Folder Food Stamps (5), Box 4, Drug Abuse and Drug Safety to Food Stamps (5), Spencer C. Johnson Associate Director for Health, Social Security, and Welfare Files: 1976-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Jim Cannon to Ford, April 30, 1976, Folder Food Stamps (5), Box 4, Drug Abuse and Drug Safety to Food Stamps (5), Spencer C. Johnson Associate Director for Health, Social Security, and Welfare Files: 1976-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

people from the FSP and reduce benefits for an additional 5.5 million needy people. Included in FRAC's coalition to file suit against the regulations were, "26 states, the United States Conference of Mayors, several cities, 53 major labor unions, 20 national religious organizations, numerous civil rights and poverty groups, as well as over 70 impoverished families in 25 states."<sup>64</sup> A day later, four Republican governors, from the states of Alaska, Michigan, Missouri, and South Carolina, also joined the suit.<sup>65</sup>

Meanwhile, Ford's program regulations to cut the FSP by \$1.2 billion-dollars, stalled in court proceedings indefinitely. Since 1968, food stamp legislation overwhelmingly worked to liberalize the FSP by making it available to more people who needed it. The 1973 Farm Bill, the *Rodway v. USDA* decision in 1975, and the inability of Ford's administration to pass their \$1.2 billion-dollar cuts to the FSP altered the program in ways that addressed the accessibility problem on a large scale. The program's legislation was gradually becoming more liberal and poor people continued to organize and fight for their right to food. Since 1964, food stamps were in more counties across the nation, state agencies had less power to interpret the program requirements based on their own preconceived notions about society, and the purchase requirement and eligibility standards had expanded enough over time that most people who needed the program were able to access it. However, as the FSP became available to more people

<sup>64</sup> Press release, Food Research and Action Center, May 26, 1976, Folder Food Stamps (5), Box 4, Drug Abuse and Drug Safety to Food Stamps (5), Spencer C. Johnson Associate Director for Health, Social Security, and Welfare Files: 1976-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

<sup>65</sup> Letter from Jim Cannon to Ford, May 27, 1976, Folder Food Stamps (5), Box 4, Drug Abuse and Drug Safety to Food Stamps (5), Spencer C. Johnson Associate Director for Health, Social Security, and Welfare Files: 1976-77, Domestic Council, WHCF, GRF Papers, GRFL.

it simultaneously became increasingly visible to the mass public. The consistent bureaucratic flaws of the program combined with the fluctuating economy meant that the stigmatizations that food stamp recipients faced continued to increase.

While Ford, Congress, and anti-hunger activist groups sparred over food stamp legislation and potential cutbacks, smaller grassroots organizations continued to find ways to access healthy food for their communities. It was true that the FSP reached more counties than ever before, however, despite the political rhetoric that waste and fraud had infiltrated the program making it a bureaucratic nightmare, the program still did not reach everyone and the purchase requirement continued to exclude many of the neediest individuals and families. Many poor people who resided in counties where the FSP operated did not always understand how to access the program and receive food aid.

### **Hunger Task Force, 1983**

As the United States progressed into a post-industrial economy during the late 1970s, the types of stigmatization morphed. While more affluent people continued to monitor and stalk food stamp users in grocery stores, the focus shifted to demonizing them for their participation in the program. The attacks on striking union workers were no longer the dominant outlet for vitriol against poor people who needed stamps. Spurred on by governor Ronald Reagan's 1976 remarks about the "welfare queen," non-white, single mothers faced overly-generalized characterizations like laziness, uneducated, deviousness, and irresponsible grocery shoppers and mothers. While the attacks on food stamp recipients were still, at their core, about the meaning of work, the

outrage that the public felt focused less on the working-class union men and more on the responsibility and adequacy of the mother.

From his time as governor through the presidency, Ronald Reagan, worked to solidify assumptions and negative characterization of the food stamp and welfare users. However, the election of Reagan was not the beginning of an all-out assault on the FSP, rather, his rise to the presidency symbolized and confirmed the culminating work of Carter, Nixon, and Ford to deregulate government spending and, in the case of Nixon and Ford, incite social animosity to move public opinion about food stamps steadily rightward. Reagan's election cemented an overwhelmingly negative public perception of FSP recipients that had been building since the late-1960s and early-1970s.<sup>66</sup> In many ways, public perception about social welfare programs and the federal food aid programs, more specifically, influenced and reinforced politicians' rhetoric.

Amidst the Reagan budget cuts to many domestic welfare programs, the media, anti-hunger activists, and policy advocacy and lobbying groups illuminated the consequences of poor people's lack of food access. In March of 1982, FRAC reported on studies conducted by Massachusetts pediatricians who were finding increased cases of malnutrition and children reaching what they called "failure to thrive" status.<sup>67</sup> This meant that children suffered

<sup>66</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> Press release, "Massachusetts Doctors Find Evidence of Malnutrition," *Food Research and Action Center*, March 22, 1982, Folder Hunger (4 of 4), Box 13, Carleson, Robert R. Files, White House Staff and Office Files, Ronald Reagan Papers, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Archives, Simi Valley, California (hereafter cited as WHSOF, RR Papers, RRL).



developmental delays as a direct result of lack of food. While the report mostly focused on the impact of budget cuts to the federal school lunch program and the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program, it also cited budget cuts to the FSP as a primary problem of children not receiving enough to eat. Several of the pediatricians reported that the malnutrition and failure to thrive status were a direct result of children dropped from the WIC, school lunch, and food stamps programs.

The Medical Director of the Comprehensive Child Care Program at the Children's Hospital in Boston argued that these children suffered specifically from "inadequate food" and that those foods "should be available through programs like WIC or food stamps."<sup>68</sup> A Boston City Hospital physician and professor at Boston University argued that the "low income children that we see have been helped nutritionally by programs like the Food Stamp Program and the WIC Program, but as soon as their families are dropped by these programs, the children may develop severe nutritional problems." She went on to say that the problems of malnutrition among low income children "will only be made worse by budget cuts in these programs."<sup>69</sup> FRAC Director, Nancy Amidei, compared the report to the one released fifteen years prior by pediatricians reporting on malnutrition in Mississippi. She acknowledged that their reporting resulted in strengthened federal food aid policies that helped deter the degree to which

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

malnutrition and starvation affected Americans in the 1960s and early 1970s and warned “that accomplishment is now in jeopardy.”<sup>70</sup>

In April of 1982, while receiving a humanitarian award in New York, Reagan made a speech to the audience and defended his budget cuts and future budget proposals against consistent media attacks that he was indifferent to the plight of America’s poor. The *Newsweek* article that reported on the event reiterated that Reagan slashed the 1982 budget for food stamps by more than two billion dollars and proposed to cut the 1983 budget by another \$2.3 billion. This meant that, in 1983, two million current recipients would no longer be eligible for food stamps. Many of those two million people were classified as the working poor.<sup>71</sup> Despite the statistics that said otherwise, Samuel Cornelius, USDA Food Nutrition Service Administrator, at a meal provided by the federal school lunch program while visiting a Kansas City grade school declared that “there is nobody around this country going hungry as a result of budget cuts, contrary to the public opinion.”<sup>72</sup>

However, the experiences of religious and civic organizations who were fighting to help food insecure communities told a story that contradicted these statements. In March 1983, the religious organization, Caritas of Waco, Texas, held their fifteenth annual “Poor Man’s Supper.”

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ted Morganthau, Jerry Buckley, and Diane Weathers, “Reagan’s Polarized America,” *Newsweek*, April 5, 1982, Folder 6 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps: Impact Data, 1982, Box 150, Series 6, Robert J. Dole Senate Papers, Dole Institute of Politics, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas (hereafter cited as Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU).

<sup>72</sup> “Food Chief Says ‘Truly Needy’ Care For,” *The Daily Union*, May 19, 1982, Folder Hunger (2 of 4), Box 13, Carleson Files, WHSOF, RR Papers, RRL.

Established in 1967, the Department of Catholic Charities formed the Caritas and eventually ran two thrift stores and a “Feed the People” program. The Feed the People program’s annual fundraising gala, “Poor Man’s Supper,” always consisted of soup and bread. In their invitation letter to the March 1983 gala, Caritas focused on gaining supporters to help the food insecure because of the “extensive cuts in Federal assistance to various welfare programs” and the ongoing high unemployment rate. They estimated that individuals needing emergency assistance in Waco had “more than tripled.” And they calculated that in 1982 – the previous year – they provided \$100,000 in emergency food assistance and \$60,000 in other forms of emergency assistance include rent, utilities, transportation, and medicine.<sup>73</sup> Caritas, like many other private organizations, had worked hard since their conception to help poor communities in times of need, yet, as the federal government worked to pull away from their responsibility to provide basic standards of living – like the right to food – civic and religious groups increasingly felt the burden of feeding the poor as their roles as temporary food aid groups morphed into more permanent food providers.

Despite Reagan’s adamant promises that slashing the FSP funding would curtail unnecessary taxes by removing people who were not poor enough from the program, many Americans already felt the consequences of the budget cuts by the early part of 1983. On May 24, 1983, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities – a non-profit research and analysis organization based in Washington, D.C. – released a report that found “dramatic increases” in

<sup>73</sup> Invitation, Caritas Celebrates The Poor Man’s Supper, February 25, 1983, Folder 17, Box 4, Literary Production 1974-1988, Caritas Records 1965-1988, The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

the number of Americans seeking federal food assistance between February of 1982 and February of 1983. Researchers, in that twelve-month period, examined 181 emergency food programs and cited that persons seeking food aid had increased by more than fifty percent. Eighty-eight percent of the programs reported the increase in people seeking emergency food aid because their food stamp allotment was not covering their food needs for an entire month with an average month's allotment of stamps equally forty-seven cents per person per meal. Three-fourths of the emergency programs reported an increase in serving families with children. The report also found that many emergency food programs, like soup kitchens and food pantries, were unable to deal with the influx of people seeking food assistance and had resorted to turning people away or limiting the number of times an individual could receive food from the same program in a one month period.<sup>74</sup>

While media outlets wondered if the slashes to welfare funding were leaving the poor at an even bigger disadvantage, independent organizations worked hard to increase their capacity to feed their communities. As appropriations for domestic programs decreased and unemployment continued to rise, more people looked to churches and civic organizations for their daily food needs. Policymakers since Carter had advocated for a shift in understanding who was primarily responsible for feeding the poor. Since the 1970s, conservatives had primarily run the FSP and they had increasingly made structural changes to the federal program. They emphasized the need

<sup>74</sup> "National Survey Finds Dramatic Increases in Number of Americans Seeking Emergency Food Aid," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, May 24, 1983, Folder 4 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps Background Information, 1983-1984, Box 148, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

for private foundations and religious groups to take on the responsibility of feeding America's poor.

Politicians since the 1964 implementation of the Food Stamp Act, still debated the scope and definition of terms like hunger, starvation, and malnutrition in the United States. In July of 1983, Reagan's top policy advisors noted that the data on hunger in America kept by the USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services was old and no longer completely accurate.<sup>75</sup> Reagan's advisors understood that the "hunger issue" would continue to be "a major liability for this administration," and scrambled to find ways to show that Reagan was at once concerned for hungry Americans and committed to continuing the fight to alleviating food insecurity. That same month, *The New York Times* published an article detailing the state of affairs concerning the rising amount of people unable to find adequate food access, the overwhelming inability of emergency food centers to provide for the increased number of hungry people, and the policy debates around the issue. In the article, Dr. Jean Mayer, a nutritionist, and then-President of Tufts University worried that "there is a danger that the one social problem that we had eliminated may be coming back."<sup>76</sup> Chairman of the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition, Leon Panetta (D-CA), warned that "this country faces a very serious problem with regard to hunger." He went on to say that "everywhere we went whether it was Cleveland, Ohio, Birmingham, Ala.,

<sup>75</sup> "Hunger in America," White House Memorandum, July 14, 1983, Folder Hunger (3 of 4), Box 13, Carleson Files, WHSOF, RR Papers, RRL.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Pear, "U.S. Hunger on Rise Despite Swelling of Food Surpluses," *New York Times*, July 19, 1983, Folder 4 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps Background Information, 1983-1984, Box 148, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

or Los Angeles, Calif., we heard the same story. The use of soup kitchens, food pantries and hunger centers is up dramatically in the past two years, in some areas by 400 and 500 percent.”<sup>77</sup>

The administration looked for ways to counter the claims that they were turning their backs on the American poor who were starving and malnourished but consistently cutting the budgets of food programs. In a series of presidential appearances where Reagan ate “lunch in a school cafeteria, handing out cheese at a distribution center, etc.,” they argued that federal food programs were available to those who needed it.<sup>78</sup> However, that argument merely homogenized the hardships, hurdles, and experiences that the poor people faced in trying to access food. The Reagan administration was content to use photo-ops and a steadfast argument that food stamps were available those who needed it. These blanket declarations ignored the real-life hardships and inconsistent financial circumstances that may poor people faced. By relying on these arguments, Reagan also solidified his reluctance to take real stock of the effects of his budget cuts on domestic programs since his inauguration. Since the Food Stamp Act of 1964, it had been clear to most people that federal food policies that simply offered a distribution program to the public was not enough to ensure that people could access and effectively use the benefits.

To change public perception around Reagan’s apparent disregard for the poor, his administration proposed a task force aimed at analyzing and gathering quantitative data on the problems of federal food distribution as it was contributing to the ongoing hunger problem in

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> “Hunger in America,” White House Memorandum, July 14, 1983, Folder Hunger (3 of 4), Box 13, Carleson Files, WHSOF, RR Papers, RRL.

America in its current state. In a July 1983 internal White House memo, top advisors suggested Reagan announce the creation of a “Hunger Task Force” by Executive Order to address media accounts that were reporting on the effects of Reagan’s budget cuts to the federal food programs. The result, they hoped, would stop the “continuing play-out of this issue,” because it could “badly damage the President, possibly in a more profound way than the unemployment process has.” On July 30, 1983, in a radio address to the American public, Reagan announced his intentions to create a Hunger Task Force that would conduct a 90-day study analyzing and providing recommendations for changes to the federal food distribution programs. In his address, Reagan told the public that he was responding to press reports “in the past few days of Americans going hungry.” Reagan continued that the reports, “if true,” needed attention but that he was “perplexed” by the various accounts.<sup>79</sup>

Media outlets questioned both the task force and Reagan’s apprehension and disbelief that hunger was still an actual problem across the country. Reagan continued to create doubt in the public consensus that hunger existed. In a White House memo, Reagan reiterated that he was “perplexed” over media accounts in “the past few weeks” of a continuing problem of hunger in America.<sup>80</sup> The media questioned Reagan’s admission that he was “perplexed” by the hunger issue and disregarded his appointment of the task force members as biased opponents of welfare,

<sup>79</sup> Presidential Radio Address, Hunger Task Force, July 30, 1983, Folder Hunger (3 of 4), Box 13, Carleson Files, WHSOF, RR Papers, RRL.

<sup>80</sup> Memo from Reagan to Edwin Meese III, August 2, 1983, Folder Hunger (2 of 4), Box 13, Carleson Files, WHSOF, RR Papers, RRL.

government food distribution, and the poor. A *Baltimore Sun* columnist wrote that “we are perplexed that his is perplexed.” And wondered why, Reagan, “in only recent weeks” realized the problem of hunger that “big-city mayors have deplored and the press has covered heavily.” The column also reiterated that soup kitchens had become a “growth industry.”<sup>81</sup> That same day, the *New York Times* lambasted the proposed Hunger Task Force writing that “it shouldn’t take a 90-day study to resolve the President’s perplexity. The hungry in America have not been hard to find or hear about.”<sup>82</sup> And the *Philadelphia Inquirer* posed the rhetorical question, “Why does the President need a task force to tell him what his own Administration has been doing? Ever since coming to Washington, the Reagan administration has been chopping away at food programs.”<sup>83</sup>

Despite his inner circle of confidants worrying that his public persona indicated his turning his back on the poor and starved, Reagan continued to attack the FSP by creating a perception that it was highly chaotic and no longer serving the people who were truly hungry. The Reagan administration’s pattern of responses to the hunger issues in America relied on the repeated declaration that the food programs worked and that eligible people could use the system as they needed it. However, these responses inadequately addressed the wide range of problems, whether intended or not, that consistently blocked access to food for many people. Relying on

<sup>81</sup> White House News Summary, Editorials/Columnists, August 5, 1983, Folder Hunger (2 of 4), Box 13, Carleson Files, WHSOF, RR Papers, RRL.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.



these pre-scripted answers also ignored the consequences of the administration's consistent and severe budget cuts to the food programs since Reagan's election three years earlier.

Although he made claims of paring down government food programs to highlight the truly needy, Reagan and his administration made only cursory attempts to figure out who those people were. A journalist for the *Wall Street Journal* argued that "the federal government is unable to state with any precision what has happened to low-income families that lost food, welfare, medical and disability benefits as a result of program since 1982."<sup>84</sup> The article went on to say that Reagan had "eliminated or slowed the gathering of many statistics about such programs," during his presidency. In September of 1983, Reagan's task force began their work. They analyzed and made recommendations on food assistance programs and how they might improve.<sup>85</sup> They first set out to define hunger to differentiate between people who were really in need for participation of the program.

The Reagan administration worried about the feasibility of defining of hunger because "nutritionists" disagreed about "whether hunger and malnutrition should be based on caloric intake alone, or protein, or other factors such as recommended daily allowances (RDA's) of certain nutrients."<sup>86</sup> In their final report, the Task Force defined hunger in two ways. The first, as accepted by the medical profession, was "the actual physiological effects of extended nutritional

<sup>84</sup> Burt Schorr, "An Administration Lean on Statistics," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 1983, Folder Hunger (1 of 4), Box 13, Carleson Files, WHSOF, RR Papers, RRL.

<sup>85</sup> Press release, *President's Task Force on Food Assistance*, September 8, 1983, Folder Hunger (1 of 4), Box 13, Carleson Files, WHSOF, RR Papers, RRL.

<sup>86</sup> Untitled, Internal staff notes, Folder Hunger (1 of 4), Box 13, Carleson Files, WHSOF, RR Papers, RRL.

deprivation.” In the second definition, they understood hunger as a “social phenomenon.” The task force claimed that “to many Americans, hunger is also the inability, even occasionally, to obtain adequate food and nourishment.” The difference in the definitions, they reported, was that many Americans felt that the term “hunger” was appropriate even when there were no obvious medical problems.<sup>87</sup> Doubt and denial about the hardships faced by the poor meant that conservative politicians could ignore the implications and real world consequences of their food policies. Differentiating between “scientific” and “social” conceptions of hunger created confusion when attempting to link systemic issues of poverty and lack of adequate food access. In this way, the politics of food remained a conversation about work ethic and morality not about the economy, low wages, or social discriminations.

Researchers associated with the final report claimed that “hunger is distinct from poverty,” and that “not all poor people are hungry.”<sup>88</sup> They categorized the poor into three groups. The “traditional poor” were female-headed households and the elderly. The “new poor” were people who had been unemployed for a period. They referred to the final category of the poor as “homeless or street people.”<sup>89</sup> In the report, researchers made arguments — like that of grassroots organizations — that while the FSP offered an effective way to boost the nutrition of people, many eligible poor were not receiving aid. The report recommended the continued use of

<sup>87</sup> United States, President’s Task Force on Food Assistance, “Report of the President’s Task Force on Food Assistance” (Washington, D.C.: The Task Force, 1984).  
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015007765806&view=1up&seq=2>

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

a joint federal and private distribution of food aid. Whereas private food aid could reach pockets of hunger that federal aid could not. Finally, the report argued that the 1982 budget cuts had “not significantly reduced the availability of major federal food assistant to Americans below the official poverty level.”<sup>90</sup>

Although Reagan had deployed a special task force to investigate the hunger issue in America, grassroots organizations were already well-aware of the problem. Many of these organizations procured quantitative or qualitative data or “poverty knowledge” to better make the case that federal government intervention provided all citizens a better standard of living.<sup>91</sup> In October 1983, a coalition of grassroots and religious anti-hunger organizations released the “Chicago Hunger Watch Report” documenting the growing need of people in their city to access to food. Participating organizations in the Chicago Hunger Watch included 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice, the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, the Illinois Coalition Against Reaganomics (I-CARE), the Church Federation of Greater Chicago, and more. They formed their coalition in 1982 with the goal to obtain accurate quantitative and qualitative data that presented the clearest picture of the “hunger crisis in Chicago.”<sup>92</sup> The coalition hoped that their “original data” would

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>92</sup> “Chicago Hunger Watch Report 1983,” edited by Tom Fox, Kent Peterson, Lauren Hughes, Folder 5-6 Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition, 1972-1983, Box 5, 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice Records, Women and Leadership Archives, Loyola University – Chicago, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter cited as WLA, LU).

influence politicians the local, state, and federal level to reevaluate policies that hindered food access to growing number of people in need.<sup>93</sup>

Their 1983 report surveyed workers within what they called the, “Emergency Food Network,” which was comprised of food pantries operated by the city of Chicago, private foundations and religious groups, soup kitchens, and food drives. The food distribution centers surveyed were representative of both private and public operations on the local, state, and national levels. A culmination of their data showed that 71 percent of Chicago’s poor were either over the age of 65 or under the age of 18 years old.<sup>94</sup> Between the fall of 1981 and winter of 1983, Chicago’s emergency food centers saw a combined nine-fold increase in the demand for food.<sup>95</sup> Emergency food assistance workers cited high unemployment and government cuts “especially in food assistance programs” as major causes for the increase in food needs.<sup>96</sup> Among their list of policy recommendations, the Chicago Hunger Watch coalition called for a public works program that assured adequate incomes and job retraining “equivalent to the GI Bill” after World War II.<sup>97</sup> They also demanded that social program benefits adapt more effectively to changes in costs of living.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

The “Chicago Hunger Watch Report” in many ways conflicted with the report by Reagan’s Hunger Task Force. While the both agreed that the FSP was still not reaching many poor people who were eligible for the program, they differed in their response to the problem. While grassroots organizations and anti-hunger activists – who worked with county food stamp distribution offices and poor people – advocated for strengthened federal policies, Reagan and his counterparts continued the deregulation policies made popular by conservatives and neo-liberals since Carter. Reagan’s task force put the onus of responsibility to feed America’s poor on private foundations and temporary food distribution agencies. These policies harkened back to ideas about welfare capitalism and furthered the ideology of American individualism. If poor people were hungry, in a land of plenty, then they were not working hard enough thereby shunning the privilege to eat and survive. In other words, Reagan and his followers saw the hungry poor as antithetical to what it meant to be American.

The events and changes in FSP legislation influenced opinions about poor people who sought out federal food assistance. A shift in public opinion about food rights worked in tandem with the rise of the New Right and their efforts to dismantle social welfare programs. To many, the FSP was no longer an achievement of LBJ’s Great Society but rather, an uncontrollable government program that depleted taxpayers and helped create dependent poor people.<sup>99</sup> In the debate for food rights, people were increasingly unwilling to focus on food stamps as a right of

<sup>99</sup> Julian E. Zelizer, “The Uneasy Relationship: Democracy, Taxation, and State Building Since the New Deal,” in *The Democratic Experience: New Directions in American Political History*, edited by Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 277.

all people and a responsibility of the government to provide a basic standard of living. Social and political events after 1973 created a tumultuous period where Americans debated food rights. While the direction of food stamp policy was far from decided, the events of the mid-1970s acted as a catalyst in creating and facilitating a shift in public opinion and lawmaking to a more conservative ideology.<sup>100</sup>

Beginning with Nixon's presidency, conservatives fought against expanded food aid programs and successfully introduced work-to-eat legislation that culminated in "the end of welfare as we know it" by the mid-1990s. When Nixon said, in 1973, that the long-term goal was to provide income assistance in cash rather than "in-kind" payments through the FSP, he was articulating a conservative agenda. This idea that government feeding programs were taking freedoms from the poor by blocking their ability to make their own spending decisions resurfaced under President Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s and came to fruition under President Bill Clinton's 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act or welfare reform.

When Ford took over the presidency, he led the charge in characterizing food stamp spending as chaotic and a drain on the national budget. A long-time complaint of constituents was that government spending on the FSP was out of control, especially as many people perceived the recipients as abusing the system, choosing not to work, and gaining entitlement benefits off taxpayer money. In 1975, Ford and the USDA's Secretary of Agriculture Earl L.

<sup>100</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 47.

Butz took a hardline approach to overhaul food stamp program spending. Their efforts faced a coordinated attack by outraged elected officials, grassroots organizations, and individuals. These local organizations and individuals acted as interpreters of the legislation and successfully drove policy change. Although their success meant that more Americans than ever would benefit from federal food aid, conservatives, by the mid-1970s, had entrenched negative stereotypes and assumptions about food stamp recipients in the American psyche.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 illuminated the strong currents of shifting ideas in the conversation about food access as a right or privilege of Americans. While Reagan popularized the negative ideas about food stamp recipients and welfare users more generally, he could so successfully because the public had taken on the role of policing and reporting about individuals who they perceived were using the program incorrectly. Public opinion of an individual's right to food worked in tandem with Reagan's exaggeration of food stamp user stereotypes. Their ideas were not mutually exclusive and one could not have developed without the other.

## **Chapter Four: “Cut, Squeeze, and Trim”: The Fight for Controlling the Food Stamp Program Narrative, 1970s – 1980s**

“You can have faith,” governor Ronald Reagan (R-CA) proclaimed, “in the Republican philosophy of fiscal common sense, limited government and individual freedom.”<sup>1</sup> On August 10, 1974, Reagan spoke to the National Young Republicans in South Lake Tahoe, Nevada. He admonished the Democratic administration that preceded him for “spending a million dollars a day more than it was taking in.”<sup>2</sup> He specifically called the Food Stamp Program (FSP), “the newest nesting place for welfare abuse and fraud.”<sup>3</sup> In California, Reagan declared his economic program of ‘cut, squeeze, trim’ a success.<sup>4</sup>

For welfare and food stamps, slashing spending on domestic programs and continuing a trend of deregulation meant that the responsibility to provide food access and survival to poor Americans fell to private foundations and temporary food agencies. While those agencies served the hungry long before the 1964 Food Stamp Act, the increased demand for food access overwhelmed many of them. In addition to the budget cuts that characterized the problems of the

<sup>1</sup> “Excerpts of Remarks by Governor Ronald Reagan,” August 10, 1974, Folder Research File – Health & Welfare – Food Stamps, Box GO 182, Research Files Health & Welfare-Employment – Manpower Taskforce, Governor’s Office Files, Ronald Reagan Papers, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (hereafter cited as GOF, RR Papers, RRL).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



FSP in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many eligible poor people still faced barriers to access the program in their communities.

This chapter analyzes the how liberal and conservative politicians fought to control the narrative of the FSP. It chronicles the success of conservative politicians in shifting the rhetoric of federal food policy to conversations about welfare and the perceived failings of poor individuals. In the post-Watergate era of economic recession and distrust in the government, poor people fell victim to a stigma of fraudulent welfare users who chose to live outside of acceptable forms of citizenship. Conservative politicians and the public ignored their unique circumstances — like facing discriminations that kept them poverty.

I explore policy changes to the FSP from the 1970s through Reagan's first term in office and offer an analysis of how the rise of the New Right affected federal food distribution programs.<sup>5</sup> Conservative lawmakers gained support from their constituents, in part, by successfully talking about food stamps as welfare although they were separate policies run by separate departments. Reagan, in 1974, recommended to the state and national legislatures that jurisdiction over the FSP move from the USDA to the Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) Department.<sup>6</sup> The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) continued to operate the

<sup>5</sup> Mary Brennan, *Turning Right in the 1960s: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Keven Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and The Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> "Excerpts of Remarks by Governor Ronald Reagan," Sacramento Host Breakfast, September 6, 1974, Folder Research File – Health & Welfare – Food Stamps, Box GO 182, Research Files Health & Welfare-Employment – Manpower Taskforce, GOF, RR Papers, RRL.

FSP but conservatives found ways to shift the narrative about food stamps through the lens of welfare. Those people who believed food access was a privilege of worthy Americans supported increasingly restrictive policies like strict work requirements and benefits term limits. FSP policies remained in flux through the late 1970s and 1980s and the confusion helped to reaffirm negative stereotypes about food stamp users while simultaneously making the program's benefits even more difficult to obtain.

This era challenged longstanding ideas about the function of the FSP and the ways that policymakers fought to claim authority over the future direction of the program. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the elasticity of the FSP allowed conservatives to highlight the chaotic administration of the program. Reagan, in the mid-1970s, called the “out of control” FSP “a national scandal.”<sup>7</sup> Conservatives blamed confusion and flaws of its implementation on liberal expansion. These policy inconsistencies represent two underlying themes. First, in the post-Watergate era, public opinion about government shifted and saw federal programs as untrustworthy and broken. Constituents rallied around lawmakers who propped up the taxpayer as the ideal and hardworking citizens and pitted them against people in poverty by creating a narrative that the poor chose their lifestyle.<sup>8</sup> Second, they were a result of increasing stigmatization of people relegated to “other” status. Republican lawmakers seized the

<sup>7</sup> Press release from the Office of Governor Ronald Reagan, September 6, 1974, Folder Research File – Health & Welfare – Food Stamps, Box GO 182, Research Files Health & Welfare-Employment – Manpower Taskforce, GOF, RR Papers, RRL.

<sup>8</sup> Molly C. Michelmore, *Tax and Spend: The Welfare State, Tax Politics, and the Limits of American Liberalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

opportunity to control the narrative about the types of people who were on food stamps. In California, Reagan argued that an achievement of his administration was “we introduced something that had been missing from public assistance for a long time: the work ethic.”<sup>9</sup> In many cases, they characterized food stamp recipients as living outside the male breadwinner, nuclear family trope.<sup>10</sup>

I argue that the 1970s marked an era in flux for food policies. For the FSP, this meant that politicians fought to control the narrative around the FSP. A bipartisan agreement among lawmakers found that the unintended consequences of expanding food stamp eligibility resulted in a highly bureaucratic and chaotic program at the local and state level. Administrators in distribution offices remained unsure of consistently changing program guidelines and procedures. Many poor people still struggled to access the program. More affluent Americans grew weary of increased taxes and the perceived burden of working to help strangers eat through the federal distribution program. Conservatives succeeded in characterizing food stamps as welfare and recipients as lazy and entitled.

This chapter covers three events that illuminate the frenetic shifts in food policy from the late 1970s through the 1980s. First, I explore the Food Stamp Act of 1977, signed by President

<sup>9</sup> “Excerpts of Remarks by Governor Ronald Reagan,” Sacramento Host Breakfast, September 6, 1974, Folder Research File – Health & Welfare – Food Stamps, Box GO 182, Research Files Health & Welfare-Employment – Manpower Taskforce, GOF, RR Papers, RRL.

<sup>10</sup> Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

Jimmy Carter. It expanded the FSP by nationalizing eligibility standards and eliminating the purchase requirement.<sup>11</sup> As more people gained eligibility for the program under the new policy, the problems of hunger became more visible than ever. Although the 1977 legislation made the most sweeping changes to eligibility that the FSP ever had, the new law also had the unintended consequence of reshaping the defining qualities of the food stamps that differentiated it from welfare. In turn, public opinion about food stamp users turned increasingly negative.

The Carter administration also propelled ideas of deregulation and created a path for President Ronald Reagan, in the 1980s, to slash spending for social welfare programs. When Reagan cut domestic social program spending and promoted a free market approach, he enabled the growing trend of supermarkets shift to suburban and affluent cities.<sup>12</sup> In leaving urban cities, the growth of food deserts among already impoverished people increased.<sup>13</sup> This problem combined with conservative rhetoric that demonized the poor as using the system, characterized hunger as a personal, not a policy, failure. At the same time, Reagan's 1981 and 1982 budget cuts to social welfare programs made him vulnerable to attacks that he had left the poor to fend for themselves and brought a new demographic of people into the cycle of poverty. Despite

<sup>11</sup> Food Stamp Act of 1977, PL 88 – 525a, *United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service*, [https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/PL\\_88-525a.pdf](https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/PL_88-525a.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Alfonso Morales, "Growing Food and Justice: Dismantling Racism through Sustainable Food Systems," in *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, edited by Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 151-2. See also: Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Kruse, *White Flight*; Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Alfonso Morales, "Growing Food and Justice," in *Cultivating Food Justice*, edited by Alkon et al, 151-2.

statistics and media reports that showed how his budget cuts hurt more people than they helped, Reagan and his administration continued to deny any correlation.

Instead of reexamining the policies that kept people in poverty, Reagan created the 1981 Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which provided federal funds and food to emergency centers, and propped up an overreliance on food banks and volunteer organizations originally designed as a last resort.<sup>14</sup> As a result, temporary emergency food aid became the stopgap measure to deal with problems of hunger. Sociologist Janet Poppendieck argued that for policymakers, an overreliance of emergency food aid center, made it “easier for government to shed its responsibility for the poor.”<sup>15</sup> Sporadically volunteering at emergency food centers also helped assuage the fears of more affluent Americans that the government did not do enough fix problems of hunger or poverty. But it ignored the deeper problems of inadequate systems of food access that kept poor people in poverty.

Finally, I will examine the 1982 hearings convened by Senator Jesse Helms’s (R-NC). Helms solicited food stamp administrators and politicians at all levels of government in attempts to quell the chaotic and constantly changing legislation and administration of the FSP. Where Carter’s 1977 legislation expanded the FSP to an unprecedented number of people, Helms sought to restrict the program. The testimonies highlight the consequences of the 1970s frenetic shifts in

<sup>14</sup> Kara Clifford Billings, “The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP): Background and Funding,” Updated January 8, 2020, Version 3, R45408, *Congressional Research Service*, digitized. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R45408.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 6.

food stamp legislation. Administrators questioned rules concerning eligibility, income thresholds, and distribution requirements. A closer look at the hearings shows that regardless of party politics, constant policy changes to the FSP morphed it into something unrecognizable from Johnson and Freeman's conception of the program in 1964. Politicians, the public, media, and poor people expressed confusion and frustration with the ever-changing policies to the FSP. Everyone felt cheated. The increasing problem of inadequate food distribution to the hungry poor and overworked and understaffed food banks and pantries put pressure on politicians to find a better way.

### **The Food Stamp Act, 1977**

The proposed amendments to the FSP in 1977 reveal the partisan battle to reframe federal food distribution and implementation in ways that reflected the values of each party. However, at the crux of the amendment talks were two major issues that centered on continued problems of access. Bipartisan support for eliminating the purchase requirement and nationalizing eligibility standards became the epicenter of the 1977 amendments. Republicans and Democrats submitted proposed policy changes regarding several enduring issues of the FSP. Additionally, constituents supported — and their elected officials reintroduced — the legislation to bar striking union workers from eligibility to receive food stamps. Congress voted against the amendment and upheld the conviction that the purpose of the FSP “was to provide food for those who need it —

not why they need it.”<sup>16</sup> Also included was a workfare amendment that stipulated that food stamp recipients work off their food stamps for no pay. Two main proposals with bipartisan support aimed to lessen the bureaucratic administration of the program and hoped to stamp out fraud and abuse.<sup>17</sup>

Democrats, and some mainstream Republican senators like Jacob Javits (R-NY) and Bob Dole (R-KS), enforced the idea that access to the FSP remained hindered by barriers like the purchase requirement and state control over eligibility standards.<sup>18</sup> In response to a constituent letter, Dole defended his vote to eliminate the purchase requirement stating, “it is unfair to withhold benefits from the deserving, simply because they do not have the cash to buy into the program.”<sup>19</sup> For the destitute poor, the purchase requirement meant that those who needed food access the most were often the very people who could not afford to participate in the program.<sup>20</sup> After much debate among politicians, their constituents, the media, grassroots organizations, and anti-hunger activists, the new amendments to the FSP marked a turning point in the history of

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Sidney R. Yates to Judith M. Johnson, August 9, 1977, Folder Leg-Food Stamps-1977, Box 334, Sidney R. Yates Papers, ca. 1931-1998, Archives and Manuscripts, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter cited as AM, CHM).

<sup>17</sup> “1977 – The Food and Agriculture Act of 1977,” in, *A Short History of SNAP*, September 11, 2018, U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap#1977>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Bob Dole to Mrs. John Peckham, May 31, 1977, Folder 13 Agriculture – Food Stamps – 1977, Box 229, Series 4, Robert J. Dole Senate Papers, Dole Institute of Politics, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas (hereafter Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU).

<sup>20</sup> Judith Bartfeld, Craig Gundersen, Timothy M. Smeeding, and James P. Ziliak, “Introduction,” in *SNAP Matters: How Food Stamps Affect Health and Well-Being*, edited by Judith Bartfeld, Craig Gundersen, Timothy M. Smeeding, and James P. Ziliak (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 4.

food rights. The elimination of the purchase requirement and the nationalizing of eligibility requirements continued the New Deal and Great Society legacy of empowering the federal government to intervene on behalf of all Americans.<sup>21</sup>

In an era marked by the growing popularity of conservative politics which centered on less government intervention and economic stagflation and bipartisan policy moves towards deregulation, the 1977 amendments to the FSP faced unintended consequences.<sup>22</sup> With more people than ever before able to participate in the FSP, poor people receiving federal food aid were no longer perceived as “citizens with responsibilities” and were instead “cast in the role of societal victims” who became symbols of the failures of federal intervention and the social safety net.<sup>23</sup> A long history of public surveillance of food stamp users – especially by female grocery shoppers – continued to influence policymakers and fed popular assumptions about federal food aid recipients. In most cases, this “conservative activism” happened in letters to Congress or to the special committees that wrote legislation for federal food programs.<sup>24</sup> These moderate or conservative shoppers made the act of policing or stalking FSP recipients in grocery stores socially acceptable. In fact, their reports to federal politicians were akin to many historians’

<sup>21</sup> Julian E. Zelizer, “The Uneasy Relationship: Democracy, Taxation, and State Building Since the New Deal,” in *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, edited by Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 277.

<sup>22</sup> Self, *All in the Family*, 310.

<sup>23</sup> Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 242.

<sup>24</sup> Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3.



arguments about conservative women organizing for more exclusionary policies.<sup>25</sup> In a constituent letter to Dole, a Missouri couple argued against eliminating the purchase requirement in the FSP. They alleged that “every time” they made a trip to the grocery store, they witnessed people “taking advantage” of the FSP. They gave examples of grocery carts “loaded until it won’t hold another item,” with “strong, healthy looking” men and women picking up “frozen foods, ready cooked foods, luxury items such as T-bones, sirloin steaks.” The couple, “thoroughly disgusted,” were angry at “paying high taxes to support that kind of extravagance.” They suggested that food stamp recipients visit orchards, pick oranges and squeeze the juice themselves rather than buying ready-made orange juice.<sup>26</sup> Politicians and the public pointed to food stamp recipients as the perpetrators of America’s economic woes instead of the victims of decades of unequal income distribution and social discrimination.

In some cases, administrative power on the local levels to accept or deny food stamps meant that applicants were susceptible to the preconceived ideologies of the caseworkers. For example, an illiterate South Carolina woman, when attempting to apply for food stamps, asked the caseworker for help filling out the form. The caseworker turned her away saying that the

<sup>25</sup> Edward H. Miller, *Nut Country: Right Wing Dallas and the Birth of the Southern Strategy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 46-50. Also see: McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*; Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*; Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage to the New Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Rebecca Klatch, *Women of the New Right* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Ray and Marguerite Jones to Bob Dole, March 21, 1977, Folder 13 Agriculture – Food Stamps – 1977, Box 229, Series 4, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

woman had to fill it out on her own. The woman went without food assistance until she could find help applying.<sup>27</sup>

Problems of access at the local level remained a paramount issue to poor people seeking assistance. Grassroots organizations, in 1977, used the opportunity of impending FSP legislation to reiterate the reality that food stamp recipients' lives to Congress. In February of that year, "anti-hunger advocates" in the southeast region of the United States formed the Southern Coalition to Eliminate Hunger (SCEH). In their report, "Recommendations for Reform," they argued for their expert knowledge on understanding the plight of hungry, poor people because they worked in the communities to increase food access. Their report listed statistics that culminated in evidence that less than 50 percent of people in poverty in the combined states of the southeastern region were receiving food stamps.<sup>28</sup> Beyond statistics, the SCEH accumulated qualitative data from poor people in the region who were having problems accessing the FSP.

One case study was about a North Carolina tenant farmer, who after 45 years of work on one farm, was laid off. The owner allowed the man to continue living in his "shotgun shack" but the man had no income. Caseworkers denied his application for the stamps – despite having no income – because he owned a tractor, which the welfare office deemed "income-producing property." Because the man needed his tractor for work, he could not sell it for food money. The

<sup>27</sup> "Recommendations for Reform of the Food Stamp Program," *Southern Coalition to Eliminate Hunger*, March 8, 1977, Folder 1977 – Welfare – Food Stamps, Box 166, Subseries 1, File Series 3, James O. Eastland Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi (hereafter cited as DASC, UM).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

man went without food assistance until he found a job.<sup>29</sup> Local-level instances of racial discrimination combined with the growing push for workfare legislation as a condition of food aid had consequences of casting out the poor “to fend for themselves in a labor market” where few work opportunities existed and they were subject to “severe economic exploitation.”<sup>30</sup> Many local and state officials were aware of problems like these. They had a different vantage point of the FSP and understood the barriers to access that too many hungry, poor Americans faced.

The president of the United States Conference of Mayors, Lee Alexander (D-NY), wrote to Congress in support of eliminating the purchase requirement for food stamps because it would “allow many of the poorest households – now unable to afford the purchase price – to fully participate in the Food Stamp Program.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the Chicago-based grassroots organization, 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice, reported that “65% of food requests” were served “by private pantries,” not the federal food stamp program. They made the point that private pantries and emergency food aid were “theoretically” supposed to be “complementary food access systems, however by 1977, they were “essential.”<sup>32</sup> The Conference of Mayors also cited their opposition to the

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 347. Also see: Greta De Jong, *You Can't Eat Freedom: Southerners and Social Justice after the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Lee Alexander to “Representative,” July 14, 1977, United States Conference of Mayors, Folder Leg-Food Stamps-1977, Box 334, Yates Papers, AM, CHM.

<sup>32</sup> “Chicago Strives to Meet Hunger Crisis,” 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice, July 27, 1977, Folder 5-6 Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition 1972-1983, Box 5, 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice Records, Women and Leadership Archives, Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter cited as WLA, LU).

proposed workfare requirement which “would create undue hardship in our urban areas.”<sup>33</sup> They opposed making striking union workers ineligible for food stamps because “it is unfair that the lawful and legitimate right to strike should be ‘chilled’ by a threatened deprivation of food stamp benefits.”<sup>34</sup>

Opinions from state and local officials as well as activist organization showed overwhelming support for expanding eligibility to the FSP. Like the Conference of Mayors, the League of Women Voters of the United States reported their support of eliminating the purchase requirement because it would provide more access to the neediest people. They argued that elimination of the purchase requirement held many benefits including, “simplifying the administration of the program,” reducing the amount of food coupons in circulation, and stifling “vendor mismanagement” of the program.<sup>35</sup> The AFL-CIO agreed and, in a letter to Senator James O. Eastland (D-MS), endorsed eliminating the purchase requirement. In addition to helping previously ineligible people to participate in the FSP, the AFL-CIO argued that the new amendments would “simplify the program and eliminate vendor fraud.”<sup>36</sup> As a self-proclaimed “advocate for hungry people,” the Columbus, Ohio Hunger Task Force expressed their support

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Lee Alexander to “Representative,” July 14, 1977, United States Conference of Mayors, Folder Leg-Food Stamps-1977, Box 334, Yates Papers, AM, CHM.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Ruth C. Clusen to “Senator,” May 23, 1977, Folder 1977 Welfare Food Stamps, Box 166, Subseries 1, File Series 3, Eastland Collection, DASC, UM.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Andrew J. Biemiller to James O. Eastland, May 23, 1977, Folder 1977 Welfare Food Stamps, Box 166, Subseries 1, File Series 3, Eastland Collection, DASC, UM.

for the elimination of the purchase requirement because “often, poor people do not have adequate cash resource” to buy food stamps. They reiterated the point that “a person’s certification for food stamps does not ensure one’s participation in regard to poor people.”<sup>37</sup> The Director of the Mississippi Hunger Coalition also reached out to Eastland. Citing that “less than half the eligible families” could receive food stamps during “this cold and costly winter,” the grassroots organization urged Eastland to vote in favor of the new amendments to remove the purchase requirement. They also asked for Eastland to vote for the “critical reform” that would reduce the “red tape through improved standards of program management.”<sup>38</sup> Faculty, staff, and students at Loyola University in Chicago called for the elimination of the purchase requirement for food stamps “a serious consideration for human rights.”<sup>39</sup>

While proponents of a more accessible FSP argued for the survival of poor people, opponents focused on conversations about the reliability and responsibility of food stamp recipients. Many people questioned whether making food stamps free to those who were eligible would lead to further abuse of the system. Eastland and other southern Democrats voted against the measure.<sup>40</sup> The president of the Broadway-Manchester Chamber of Commerce in California

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Marion Wearly to James O. Eastland, April 7, 1977, Folder 1977 Welfare Food Stamps, Box 166, Subseries 1, File Series 3, Eastland Collection, DASC, UM.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Rick Abraham to James O. Eastland, March 10, 1977, Folder 1977 Welfare Food Stamps, Box 166, Subseries 1, File Series 3, Eastland Collection, DASC, UM.

<sup>39</sup> Letter to Sidney R. Yates, March 20, 1977, Folder Leg-Food Stamps-1977, Box 334, Yates Papers, AM, CHM.

<sup>40</sup> Letter from James O. Eastland to John G. Ellison, May 23, 1977, Folder 1977 Welfare Food Stamps, Box 166, Subseries 1, File Series 3, Eastland Collection, DASC, UM.

argued that if the purchase requirement for food stamps was eliminated, it would be the child “who suffers and goes hungry as a result.”<sup>41</sup> He believed that if the family were to receive free food stamps then the money they would have spent on stamps originally would be spent on “a new dress, a pair of shoes or even less important things.”<sup>42</sup> However, poor people and the grassroots organizations that supported them reported that food stamp recipients were unable to afford food stamps because their income was taken up by everyday expenses like “high fuel bills,” “the working poor with ongoing expenses,” and late paychecks that affected their ability to purchase food stamps.<sup>43</sup> The Mississippi Hunger Coalition argued that in at least twelve counties across the state, food stamp offices were only open twenty hours per week. Seven counties closed their office before 1:00pm. No offices in Mississippi were open on Saturdays and in many counties across the state, people lived “more than 20 miles from the nearest Food Stamp office.”<sup>44</sup>

Despite the real-life circumstances of the poor, public surveillance of food stamp users remained a key aspect of political influence on the ground. A Massachusetts woman wrote to Dole and reported on several people she witnessed across several different grocery stores. At the Whole Wheat Trading Company, the woman reported seeing “a healthy-looking young man in

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Press release, Mississippi Hunger Coalition, March 8, 1977, Folder 1977 Welfare Food Stamps, Box 166, Subseries 1, File Series 3, Eastland Collection, DASC, UM.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

his twenties buy some imported Japanese ‘health’ food,” and demanded to know why her “61-year-old husband” was “paying taxes to buy food stamps” for the younger shopper.<sup>45</sup> At the Motts Family Shop-Rite, the same woman reported on a customer who purchased “polish ham,” and “3 large bottles of pepsi-cola, two bags of potato chips, and some Czechoslovakian candy.”<sup>46</sup> Of Dole she demanded to know if soda and candy counted as food.<sup>47</sup> At an A&P store the woman noticed a “girl buy life savers, chewing gum and a box of ice cream bars with stamps,” and declared that “this is not nourishing food for hungry poor people, it is empty calories for a fat girl.”<sup>48</sup> Fat shaming the poor in addition to judging their food choices further entrenched gendered and classist stereotypes that conveyed food stamp users as lacking “of individual character and value.”<sup>49</sup>

### **Conservative Attack on the Food Stamp Program**

While those who opposed the 1977 expansion of the FSP were not successful in overturning the legislation, they were able to reframe the narrative around the program’s operation as an anarchical, highly chaotic picture of fraud, abuse, and waste. They achieved this

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Eleanor B. Silsby to Bob Dole, April 17, 1977, Folder 13 Agriculture – Food Stamps – 1977, Box 229, Series 4, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 7.

in several ways. An Oklahoma-man expressed his frustration to Representative James R. Jones (D-OK), that local coal miners on strike were eligible for food stamps because they were “capable of working.”<sup>50</sup> This stereotype of the lazy tax-eater remained pervasive decades after the initial implementation of the FSP. Even more mainstream Republicans, like Dole, who supported the FSP agreed that striking workers should not receive food stamps.<sup>51</sup> Politicians, constituents, and the media also solidified the negative image of food stamp recipients through a racialized and gendered welfare queen trope.

As a “new kind of Democrat,” Carter’s deregulation tactics paved the way for Ronald Reagan to capitalize on loosening government control over domestic welfare programs.<sup>52</sup> Carter’s efforts to move appropriations away from welfare programs and make them more reliant on a privatized system of charity allowed a bi-partisan rhetoric around narrowing the FSP as one necessary path to alleviating stagflation.<sup>53</sup> The efforts of both Republicans and Democrats to address the economic issues of the mid-to-late 1970s resulted in making welfare programs more vulnerable than ever to attack.<sup>54</sup> An increasingly overwhelming conservative rhetoric implied

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Mike Collier to James R. Jones, January 3, 1978, Folder 13 Jones Legislative, Agriculture, Food Stamps for Strikers, Box LG 25, James R. Jones Collection, Congressional and Political Collections, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

<sup>51</sup> Letter from Bob Dole to M. H. Collinson, May 13, 1977, Folder 13 Agriculture – Food Stamps – 1977, Box 229, Series 4, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>52</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010), 265.

<sup>53</sup> De Jong, *You Can’t Eat Freedom*, 209-11.

<sup>54</sup> Alan Brinkley, “Conservatism as a Growing Field of Scholarship,” *The Journal of American History* 98, No. 3 (December 2011): 748-751.



that only certain people could claim rights to healthy food for survival and therefore full citizenship.<sup>55</sup> The 1964 Food Stamp Program that continued the New Deal and Great Society legacy had lost widespread appeal.<sup>56</sup> From the late 1970s and on, the FSP was no longer an accomplishment of postwar liberalism but rather an embattled, highly bureaucratic program sensitive to conservative assault and characterized as a costly social welfare program.

Although conservatives had certainly not won every fight to alter FSP policy, they continued to dominate the narrative around the structure and implementation of the program. Still reeling from the strikes of the 1970s and the failed efforts of most Republicans to ban union workers' eligibility for food stamps, Reagan's attacks on the "chaos" of welfare programs, by the 1980s, provided a counterargument to the claims just a decade earlier that poor Americans needed help surviving and therefore required an expanded central government. In blaming food stamp recipients, rather than the economic and political inadequacies that put them in poverty, the conservative movement gained traction among disillusioned middle-class voters. By Reagan's election, conservatives were less likely to carry the stigma of, as one constituent phrased it, "a typical Republican" known for "kicking little old ladies out in the snow."<sup>57</sup> If a record number of people were now food stamp recipients, conservatives reasoned, then the logical way to fix pressing economic deficits was to block their claims to federal food aid.

<sup>55</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 4.

<sup>56</sup> Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 262.

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Steve Seay to Bob Dole, April 8, 1977, Folder 13 Agriculture – Food Stamps – 1977, Box 229, Series 4, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

Much of the conservative reasoning about the consequences of FSP expansion depended not so much on their own ideas of food aid and citizenship but rather, as a reaction to the failures of the liberal policy that took root during the 1960s social movements.<sup>58</sup> Grassroots anti-hunger organizations fought back against this idea. A priest representing the Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition argued that “too much of our resources as a nation goes into weapons systems that ultimately are destructive of human life precisely at a moment when too many poor and elderly Americans are ill-fed.”<sup>59</sup> The conservative narrative avoided addressing complicated issues of access, systematic racism, and socio-economic equality that were contributing to the high numbers of welfare recipients. Rather, they approached the problems of food stamp bureaucracy as the fault of poor people who were not doing enough to help themselves regardless of the debilitating social and political hurdles that may have stood in their way.

Reagan embodied this political strategy in his first State of the Union address to Congress. He used much of the speech to defend the budget cuts his administration had already made to domestic welfare programs and outlined his ideas for the future of welfare spending. He recalled the stagflation of the 1970s and situated his speech in the recession that surrounded his present incumbency calling it a time that was “truly ominous.”<sup>60</sup> Boasting that he cut government

<sup>58</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *The Journal of American History* 98 (December 2011): 723-743.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Joyce, Testimony on the Transfer Amendment, April 17, 1977, Folder 5-6 Chicago Metropolitan Food Stamp Coalition 1972-1983, Box 5, 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice Records, WLA, LU.

<sup>60</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union*, January 26, 1982, *The American Presidency Project*, University of California – Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-reporting-the-state-the-union-2>

spending “nearly in half,” Reagan stood by his decisions over the past year to decrease federal spending on most domestic welfare programs. He reiterated his plans to “mobilize the private sector,” making them responsible for doling out the entirety of America’s social safety net and relying on bringing “thousands of Americans in a volunteer effort to help solve many of America’s social problems.” In fact, John R. Block, the Secretary of Agriculture appointed under Reagan, voiced his plan to “turn the Department of Agriculture away from so much emphasis on consumer problems and do more for the producer.”<sup>61</sup> He also denied that the current economic problems were a product of his economic recovery plan but rather, from “decades of tax and tax and spend and spend.”<sup>62</sup>

Differentiating between “social insurance” and “entitlement programs,” Reagan vowed to slash spending for the latter, declaring, “the time has come to control the uncontrollable.” But, Reagan’s more damning indictment of the FSP came when he stated that “virtually every American who shops in a local supermarket is aware of the daily abuses that take place in the food stamp program.”<sup>63</sup> This statement provoked negative stereotypes of food stamp recipients that he had helped to solidify over the course of his political career. Although the FSP was

<sup>61</sup> Lauren Soth, “One of Agriculture’s elite widens his horizons for USDA,” January 15, 1981, *Des Moines Register*, Folder Robert Carr, Box Block, John R., Newspaper Clippings November 6, 1980-January 29, 1981, John R. Block Collection, USDA National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, Maryland.

<sup>62</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union*, January 26, 1982, *The American Presidency Project*, University of California – Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-reporting-the-state-the-union-2>

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

originally constructed to help poor people obtain a more nutritious diet and participate as consumers in the free market, Reagan and conservative allies reduced those recipients to welfare dependents living off charity and other people's taxes.<sup>64</sup> By stating that "virtually every American" had witnessed food stamp fraud, Reagan associated food stamp recipients as "others" who did not fit within the requirements of citizenship and whose flaws and faults centered on their audacity to use government aid to access food for themselves and families.

By talking more generally about food stamp abuse, Reagan reinforced the image of the "other" as defined by the public who inherently associated their preconceived notions of race, gender, and class discriminations onto the persona of the welfare abuser. In addition, by establishing the quintessential local supermarket as the place where the food stamp abuse happened, Reagan inherently assigned fraudulent food stamp behavior to either the welfare recipient or the cashier who might accept the stamps for ineligible, non-food items.

The problem, as Reagan perceived it, was dishonest and lazy poor people, and he worked to pit their struggles against non-food stamp recipients who faced their own economic challenges and were looking for someone to blame. In fact, Reagan had a long history of railing against government aid through food programs. In his "A Time for Choosing" speech, given on October 27, 1964, in support of Barry Goldwater's campaign, Reagan cast doubt on the efficacy of the farm program and the FSP, welfare programs more generally, and the suffering of America's poor. He wondered why the numbers of people using the welfare programs had not declined over

<sup>64</sup> Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity?* 11-2.

the past thirty years of Democratic control and questioned the state of poverty in the United States. Reagan declared that “when the government tells you you’re depressed, lie down and be depressed.” And to defend free market principles and individualism he stated, “we have so many people who can’t see a fat man stand beside a thin one without coming to the conclusion the fat man got that way by taking advantage of the thin one.”<sup>65</sup>

Reagan then referenced Kennedy’s 1960 speech where he proclaimed that 17 million people went to bed hungry each night. Reagan joked “well that was probably true, they were all on a diet.” Motivated by the appreciative applause of the audience, Reagan smirked and attempting “a little arithmetic” found that if the government divided the approximately \$45 billion being spent on welfare with the approximately nine million poor American families “we’d be able to give each family \$4,600 a year. And this added to their present income should eliminate poverty. Direct aid to the poor however is only running about \$600 per family. It would seem that some place there must be some overhead.”<sup>66</sup> Reagan’s simplistic logic on how to reduce or eliminate poverty and hunger in the United States became – throughout his political career – the foundation on which the welfare queen trope thrived. He saw a future where states would take full responsibility of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and food

<sup>65</sup> Ronald Reagan, “A Time for Choosing,” The Speech October 27, 1964, Accessed online at Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, Simi Valley, California, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/timechoosing-1>

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

stamps and ultimately where the private sector – like churches, food pantries, and grassroots organizations – would take on the role of food aid provider for America’s poor citizens.<sup>67</sup>

Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) delivered the Democratic rebuttal to Reagan’s State of the Union address. Reagan proclaimed that “contrary to some of the wild charges you may have heard, this Administration has not and will not turn its back on America’s elderly or America’s poor.”<sup>68</sup> Leahy’s rebuttal focused on this statement and he worked to dismantle the optics of Reagan’s professed concern for the poor and the realistic consequences of Reagan’s policies and budget cuts. Leahy called out Reagan’s proposed budget cuts for the 1983 fiscal year citing that they would affect the 2.2 million households currently on the FSP with elderly or disabled persons in the family. Leahy pointed out that elderly people’s participation in the FSP had always been “historically low” due to the tedious application process and the stigma around accepting food stamps. Leahy clarified that Reagan’s 1983 budget proposal would eliminate 92 percent of households that included elderly or disabled people and said that the suggestion by the Reagan Administration indicated “a frightening lack of awareness as to the reality of the lives of those who will be affected.”<sup>69</sup>

Leahy stressed that elderly and disabled persons faced difficulty in augmenting their incomes with part-time or seasonal employment and that many elderly persons who were

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Floor Statement by Senator Patrick Leahy on Food Stamps, February 11, 1982, Folder 6 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps: Impact Data, 1982, Box 150, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

starving or malnourished were women. He argued that the proposed average \$16 a month-cut in their food stamps would have devastating effects.<sup>70</sup> Finally, Leahy reminded his audience that private charities and local feeding programs had moved well past their capacity and ability to feed all the people that came to them for help.<sup>71</sup> This was a direct result both of Reagan's budget cuts in his first year as President but also his larger worldview and policy prescriptions that domestic welfare issues should not be a burden of the federal government or even at the state level. Rather, Reagan understood welfare as the problem of each individual poor person and civic and religious organizations could help through grassroots organizing, volunteerism, or charity.

The people hurt by the proposed budget cuts to food stamps expanded to the working poor. As the most affected group, a *Washington Post* article stated, the working poor stood to lose an estimated \$684 per year in their benefits.<sup>72</sup> The article highlighted problems of food access especially in the winter months and quoted Leahy in referencing how many poor people in his home state of Vermont had to make the choice of "eat or heat."<sup>73</sup> Many low-income individuals and families, regardless if they worked or not, had to make choices about where they spent their money. When poor people did not make enough money each month to cover their

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Spencer Rich, "Food Stamp Help in Reagan Budget Found Deeply Cut," *Washington Post*, February 12, 1982, Folder Welfare-Bolton-Food Stamps: Impact Data, 1982, Box 150, Folder 6 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps: Impact Data, 1982, Box 150, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

bills, like rent, medical prescriptions, or utilities (such as heat and electricity), they had to make choices about where to spend the money. Often – as in Leahy’s example – many people faced a choice between one survival tactic or another. Faced with impossible decisions, poor people had to choose between surviving Northeastern winters or eating a meal that day.

Contrary to the reality of the increased need for aid to food insecure communities, Reagan continued the food policy rhetoric of conservatives since the mid-1970s that pitted the idea of “truly needy” poor people against a stereotype of people who were poor because they somehow chose such a life. Indeed, conservatives created a narrative in a “socially acceptable form,” that was “free of overt racial references but which nevertheless manipulates racial fears.” Terms like “welfare cheats, welfare queens, and freeloaders,” replaced “the older rhetoric of black laziness and fecklessness.”<sup>74</sup> His characterization of the FSP would hold long-lasting implications for how the program functioned.

Much like the striking union worker who, to some, symbolized an irresponsible able-bodied male, there existed an image of poverty as a choice by people who were perceived as manipulative and lazy. The rhetoric of conservative politicians created ubiquitous images of the corrupt poor and left many Americans – both poor and affluent – feeling that their government was working against their best interests. Those anxieties stemmed from a foundational belief that not all Americans held equal citizenship status and were therefore unworthy of the right to food. Food insecurity increasingly became a marker for irresponsibility and poor choices. Categorizing

<sup>74</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 8-9.



people in terms of their right to eat set a precedent for excluding those people not deemed worthy of full citizenship rights.

At his second State of the Union address to Congress, Reagan called out “farmers, steel and auto workers, lumbermen, black teenagers, working mothers” as suffering the most during the “painful period.”<sup>75</sup> He argued that the economic downturn for most people came not from defense spending or tax cuts but “from the uncontrolled growth of the budget for domestic spending.”<sup>76</sup> He outlined a four-part plan aimed at reducing federal domestic spending including a six-month federal spending freeze, defense savings of \$55 billion, and a three-year standby tax on the gross national product. Reagan’s fourth proposal aimed more specifically at domestic programs where he singled out the Food Stamp Program as one of the “so-called uncontrollable spending programs,” and vowed to reduce spending for the program until it only serviced the “truly needy.”<sup>77</sup> He provoked the public’s growing animosity to food stamps by suggesting that changes to the existing program would ensure that taxpayers money went only to the “truly needy” by getting rid of “fraud and waste.” Naming taxpayers and the truly needy as “victims” of food stamp abuse, negatively homogenized the unique life situations of individual poor

<sup>75</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union Address,” January 25, 1983, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/263103>

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

people. Declaring that the funds for the current program were taken “not by the needy but the greedy,” Reagan vowed to put an end to what he called “corruption and waste.”<sup>78</sup>

Despite vocal and specific concerns by private food distribution charities, Reagan passed the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). The program provided federal assistance to food banks, pantries, and other emergency feeding organizations.<sup>79</sup> This move boosted deregulation tactics and reinforced ideas of privatized food access over government assistance to the poor. However, TEFAP also signaled a larger cultural trend that marked a “reliance on small-scale, local, grassroots, voluntary programs.” Rather than fixing structural and institutional policies failures that kept any Americans in poverty and unable to afford adequate amounts of food, emergency aid allowed more affluent Americans to ignore the hunger problem on a broader scale. For example, volunteering at charitable programs on holidays relieved “the discomfort of the privileged and the pressure for more fundamental action” while also making the act of occasional volunteering “emotionally gratifying.”<sup>80</sup>

### **Senate Testimonies of State and Local Food Stamp Program Administrators**

Reactions to the 1977 expansion of the FSP were broad. Conservative politicians worked to overturn the legislation or implement new policies to narrow eligibility. On January 7, 1982,

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Kara Clifford Billings, The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP): Background and Funding, *Congressional Research Service*, R45408, November 19, 2018, <https://crsreports.congress.gov>, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R45408.pdf>

<sup>80</sup> Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity?* 9.

Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), chair of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, distributed a nationwide letter to county and state officials soliciting their opinions on the FSP. Helms called on the testimonies of local, state, and federal institutions to build a case against bureaucratic issues with FSP administration and implementation.<sup>81</sup> Underlying this assessment of the program was a desire by conservatives to overturn the 1977 legislation that stimulated exponential participation in the program. Congressional budget talks for the 1983 fiscal year considered testimonies from the hearing. The responses to Helms's letter on proposed changes for the FSP were widespread and most of the county and state officials expressed their opinions about how the program should run giving a nuanced perspective of the multi-level bureaucratic operations that dictated food access for most Americans. The 1982 FSP hearings illuminate the ineptitude and chaos of the administrations of the FSP at every level. The hearings also highlight popularized conservative rhetoric demanding to ferret out all fraud and waste in the program at the expenses of the recipients.

A lawyer at the Department of Human Services in Bismarck, North Dakota responded by begging the politicians in Washington to stop making so many changes to the FSP, especially when policy changes from the prior year had not taken effect. The lawyer called for "stability of law and regulation, not constant program changes by both Congress and the Administration." Representatives at the North Dakota Department of Human Services cited an increase in their

<sup>81</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 221.

error rates when confirming eligibility for food stamps due to “the constant program upheaval caused by the seemingly endless string of changes being produced in Washington.”<sup>82</sup>

In addition to the 1981 amendments made to the Food Stamp Act of 1977, county and state officials dealt with the policy changes that reflected the increasingly combative views of liberal and conservative politicians over the appropriate function of federal feeding programs and the rights of poor people to access food regardless of their situation for needing it. With increased calls for defining and prosecuting fraud and abuse within the FSP by conservative lawmakers, local bureaucratic workers, whose job it was to implement the FSP, found their jobs to be increasingly confusing and tedious.

Two Ohio welfare departments – Springfield and Columbus – called for renewed conversations regarding the adoptions of cash out protocols and forgoing food stamps altogether.<sup>83</sup> Although many conservative politicians since the early 1970s had called for cash out programs instead of food stamps, the proposed law never succeeded. Individuals in cash out programs received a lump sum payment each month instead of their allotted coupons. Recipients could use the money for anything they needed, not just food. Many politicians, anti-hunger activists, grassroots organizations, and social workers opposed the cash out program because families had trouble stretching their income across their bills, rent, medicine, and food. If the

<sup>82</sup> Letter from Dale Moug to Jesse Helms, January 13, 1982, Folder 3 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps – State & County Letters, 1981-1982 [1 of 2], Box 153, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Sam Moore to Tom McDowell, February 10, 1982, and Letter from Sheila Harshaw to Tom McDowell, February 5, 1982, Folder 3 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps – State & County Letters, 1981-1982 [1 of 2], Box 153, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

cash out program were to take effect, poor people might continue to decline to eat in favor of paying their bills negating the core purpose of the FSP which was to provide access to more food and better nutrition to low-income people. Others argued that a cash out system deterred from the purpose of the FSP to provide more and healthier food options to low-income people.

Local administrators of the FSP also identified complex issues with eligibility standards in terms of defining the number of people in a household. To determine the recipients' income and therefore number of stamps that the family could receive, the caseworker had to first record the number of people in the household. Reaching a conclusion as to how many people were in the household was difficult because not all families lived the same way. Some households combined generations of their families within the house, either for cultural, financial, or medical reasons. Often, an elderly grandparent might reside in the home or extended family might also live together. Sometimes, two unrelated families might live under the same roof. In the late 1960s through the 1970s, conservative constituents and politicians fought hard to narrowly define what "household" meant, specifically to remove college students, hippies living in communes, and low-income people sharing housing from gaining food stamps benefits. As a result, the "household," by 1982, meant the immediate family living off the same income.

As caseworkers in Manassas Park, Virginia and Painesville, Ohio argued in their letters to Helms, these narrowly defined terms created problems for both the welfare departments and the food stamp recipients. Food stamp caseworkers at the Ohio Department of Welfare recommended that a change in the definition of household to "all who live together regardless of relationship, regardless of age, regardless of purchase and preparation of food." Citing a

continued difficulty in identifying the different groups living in one residence, the caseworkers also pointed out that the current system was easier to abuse because people living under the same roof could claim separate benefits and then combine them.<sup>84</sup> Caseworkers at the Department of Social Services in Manassas Park, Virginia also recommended a change in the definition of household but argued that disabled individuals claim their own benefits separate from the rest of the family. Citing that these people “often have limited income, special diets, and claim independent financial relationships.”<sup>85</sup>

A continuously complex element of the FSP since its 1964 conception was how to implement eligibility laws that were at once fair and flexible so that coverage could be doled out in ways that were adequate to reflect that diverse types of families and poor people throughout the nation. The issues with eligibility standards for food stamps reflect that no one-size fits all scenario would ever provide for all people searching for federal food aid. As lawmakers struggled to adapt food distribution policies to the real lives of the people that lived across the country, local religious and civic groups helped to find ways to supplement the shortcomings of the FSP. While many grassroots organizations and policymakers worked towards striking a balance between federal distribution and local food access, conservatives in and around the Reagan administration continued to push food stamp legislation farther away from the federal

<sup>84</sup> Letter from Lake County Welfare Department, February 5, 1982, Folder 3 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps – State & County Letters, 1981-1982 [1of 2], Box 153, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Veta Jealon O’Connell to Jesse Helms, February 23, 1982, Folder 3 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps – State & County Letters, 1981-1982 [1of 2], Box 153, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

government's responsibility. Ultimately, Reagan aimed to first move food stamp operations solely to the states and eventually out of government purview altogether. Poor people would be made to solely rely on the goodwill of private institutions for their daily food needs.

On March 24, 1982, the House Agriculture Committee and the Subcommittee on Domestic Marketing, Consumer Relations, and Nutrition began hearings to amend the FSP. Representative Fred Richmond (D-NY) delivered the opening remarks for the Democrats and Representative E. Thomas Coleman (R-MO) did the same for the Republicans. Citing the 40 days of hearings and the 93 days of markups to the FSP since 1975, Richmond argued that the FSP faced more "scrutiny than any other social program" in the United States.<sup>86</sup> Richmond also pointed out that so many changes had been made to the FSP since 1975 that "neither recipients nor state and local administrators can remember what the rules of the game are."<sup>87</sup> He railed on the Reagan Administration for using budget cuts and "untrue stories" that spread "malicious falsehoods about the poor people who rely on food stamps to survive or excuses for maladministration."<sup>88</sup>

Richmond cited the Secretary of Treasury, who in 1981, relayed stories about college students using food stamps to buy liquor and made the point that buying such products on food stamps was made illegal in the Food Stamp Act of 1964. His second example recalled Reagan

<sup>86</sup> *Opening Remarks of Congressman Fred Richmond Before Subcommittee on Domestic Marketing, Consumer Relations, and Nutrition, House Agricultural Committee at Food Stamp Hearing, March 24, 1982, Folder 6 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps: Impact Data, 1982, Box 150, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.*

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

telling a story – without substantiating proof – about a man who used food stamps to buy a bag of oranges and then used the change received from the purchase to buy vodka. Richmond again clarified that the 1977 Food Stamp Act made it illegal to give cash change over the amount of one dollar.<sup>89</sup> Richmond cited increased lines at food banks and soup kitchens that faced insurmountable challenges in feeding their local hungry and malnourished poor. Private organizations continued to be overwhelmed by the pressures put on them in the face of billions of dollars-worth of budget cuts to the FSP since Reagan took office just one year before. As the recession deepened and more people experienced financial hardships, “the new poor” joined the lines at food pantries and faced not only economic challenges to food access but the ever-growing negative stigmas around food stamp recipients. Spurred on by the rhetoric of the Reagan Administration that detailed unsubstantiated and detailed stories about people who found endlessly creative ways to abuse the system, more of the public became hostile to those who searched for food access in trying times.

Coleman focused on the amount of fraud and abuse the FSP and the need to make the program run in a more “effective and efficient manner.”<sup>90</sup> While Republicans and Democrats both accepted that the FSP had devolved into bureaucratic chaos, the agreement stopped there. Democrats cited strict changes in eligibility and funding and a shift in control to the states and private organizations that removed many needy individuals from the program and caused

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



confusion at the local, administrative level. Republicans, on the other hand, blamed program deficiencies on the behavior of the poor. If the FSP was ineffective, it was because unethical citizens worked harder on cheating a system propped up by “good” Americans than on working hard for their own American Dream. Coleman argued that one-tenth of the money allocated to the FSP went to ineligible applicants and declared that “we cannot tolerate food stamps being used by hardened criminals.”<sup>91</sup> Likening food stamp recipients to hardened criminals was one of the many ways that conservatives used their rhetoric to strategically position those in need of food as “other” or unworthy of surviving based on the fact they were poor.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, politicians and the public shifted the debate about food rights and the poor. Where in the 1960s, people focused on the contradiction of a wealthy nation and starving people, a concerted political attack on the behaviors, morals, and ethics of those same poor people characterized the 1970s and 1980s. While public surveillance of the poor was not new by the late 1970s, grassroots conservative activists and their political counterparts increased their efforts. The 1977 amendments to the FSP expanded eligibility and removed the biggest barrier to access but it also had the unintended consequence of illuminating the problem of poverty on a much bigger stage. As the Reagan administration defined them, the “traditional poor” combined with the “new poor,” brought the conversation of hunger back into the limelight. Americans had to contend with the fact that the hunger problem had not been “fixed” in the 1960s and that many Americans still faced uncertainty about obtaining their next meal. Fixing

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

the hunger issue in the United States reemerged as an inconvenient social and political problem with no easy answer.

Much of the animosity towards food stamp recipients stemmed from the fact that, over the years, the FSP had morphed into something other than its original intent. The result was a highly bureaucratized and chaotic program that was too difficult to administer on the local levels and to monitor effectively on the federal levels. By the early 1980s, no one liked what the FSP had become. Politicians, local and state food stamp administrators, the public, and the poor were all disillusioned by the inadequacies of the program. The late 1970s and early 1980s showcased a frenetic moment around conversations about what federal food assistance programs would look like in the future. The central debate was whether the right to food, and therefore the right to survival, was a right or privilege of all Americans. These mid-century years were a battleground in the fight to control the narrative about food aid and the deservingness of the poor.

## Chapter Five: “Food Stamps: One American in 10”: Workfare and the Pathologization of the Poor, 1980s – 1990s

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, President Ronald Reagan and conservative lawmakers profiled food stamp recipients as mostly able-bodied, young adults unwilling to work for their livelihood. But Food Stamp Program (FSP) statistics showed otherwise. Families with minor children comprised the bulk of food stamp recipients, receiving 81 percent of all food stamps benefits with an average household size of 3.5 people.<sup>1</sup> Two-thirds of all recipients were either minor children (49 percent), the elderly (8 percent), or disabled (8 percent).<sup>2</sup> Able-bodied adults without dependents, made up just 15 percent of the food stamp population.<sup>3</sup>

Reagan and his allies reinforced negative assumptions about poor people, in part, through rhetoric that misidentified how individuals and families negotiated government resources to survive a life in poverty. Fifty-six percent of all food stamp benefits went to recipients whose monthly gross income fell below half the federal poverty guidelines.<sup>4</sup> The average monthly gross income of food stamp recipients totaled \$443.<sup>5</sup> White people, at 46 percent, made up the largest racial group receiving food stamps. African Americans totaled 37 percent, followed by Hispanics

<sup>1</sup> Joe Richardson, “How the Food Stamp Program Works: 13<sup>th</sup> Edition,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, November 30, 1992, Folder 5 Welfare – Torrey – Food Stamps December 20, 1994 – March 31, 1995, Box 548, Series 6, Robert J. Dole Senate Papers, Dole Institute of Politics, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas (hereafter cited as Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

at 12 percent, Asians at 2 percent, and American Indians received 1 percent of food stamp benefits.<sup>6</sup> One percent of food stamp households included a “legally resident alien.”<sup>7</sup> Food stamp program rules did not allow undocumented immigrants to apply for stamps. College students made up 6 percent of the FSP caseload.<sup>8</sup> Food stamp recipients worked and often moved in and out of employment through low-wage jobs. Eight percent of people identifying as “head of household” worked full-time, 4 percent worked part-time, and 2 percent identified as self-employed or worked seasonally on farms.<sup>9</sup>

Statistics and data collected on food stamp recipients did not match the pervasive negative stereotypes that characterized them. Political economist and Harvard professor David Ellwood noted that “whenever times are bad, welfare comes under attack,” and Americans who linked work to food rights, reacted through “instincts of frustration and anger.”<sup>10</sup> Because the FSP was open to all needy people — as determined by income and household size — politicians regarded it as the “best mirror image of need,” in the country. In other words, tracking the fluctuations of the FSP shed light on the strength of the economy a given time. Because age, race, education level, and other factors used to determine eligibility for other public assistance

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Julie Rovner, “New Cries for Welfare Reform Target Able-Bodied Poor,” *Congressional Quarterly*, March 28, 1992, Folder 10 Welfare – Hoffhaus – Welfare Reform 1990-1993, Box 340, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

programs did not factor into the food stamp application, participation steadily increased through the early 1990s. By August 1991, the USDA reported that “one American in 10” participated in the FSP.<sup>11</sup>

The topic of this chapter is the construction and implementation of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, or welfare reform. I trace the interplay between policymakers and the public from the 1980s to 1996 to explain the overhaul of food stamp policy. Conservatives, since Reagan, successfully altered the rhetoric around food stamps despite data that consistently proved otherwise. Control of the narrative around who used food stamps became the best indicator of how policy changed in the program. While food stamps became part of welfare rhetoric, it ran out of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Conservatives in the late 1970s and 1980s tried to relocate the FSP to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) but never succeeded.

For opponents of the FSP, talking about the program as though it operated like welfare enabled them to stigmatize poor people further by politicizing food. Conservative politicians also criminalized the poor by creating fear in the public psyche that recipients proactively scammed the system at the expense of their fellow tax-paying Americans. Despite statistics that showed the contrary, a bipartisan political base developed around these stereotypes. Democrats, working to gain power back in the White House, aligned their views about government responsibility with

<sup>11</sup> Robin Tallon, “Food Stamps: One American in 10,” November 5, 1991, Folder 10 Welfare – Hoffhaus – Welfare Reform 1990-1993, Box 340, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

that of popular conservative rhetoric. With governor Bill Clinton (D-AR) at the forefront of neoliberal ideology, mainstream Democrats pushed out leftists and gained centrist Republicans.<sup>12</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that conservative lawmakers and the public — whether intended or not — defined some hungry Americans as undeserving of the right to eat for survival and relegated them to second-class citizenship. Public fear that their own hard work paid for such irresponsible behavior allowed conservatives to propose harmful food aid policies that affected the people who needed access to food the most. Republican rhetoric linked hunger and personal behavior through the image of the delinquent food stamp recipient. Democratic policymakers codified that narrative into federal food policy.

In 1996, when Clinton signed the welfare reform package, that ended “welfare as it we know it,” he illustrated the Democratic Party’s neo-liberal turn and the continuation of 1980s conservative policymaking. The neoliberal ideology worked for Clinton in part, because the public increasingly accepted, and even demanded, that poor people should only gain access to food when they had performed their duties as workers in socially acceptable ways. No longer valorized as a responsible social safety net for all Americans, politicians and the public launched an all-out attack on food stamps and the welfare state.<sup>13</sup> Ideas about responsibility to fix problems of pervasive hunger in the United States shifted from federal government programs to

<sup>12</sup> Justin Vaisse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 208-9.

<sup>13</sup> Michael B. Katz, *The Underserving Poor: America’s Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 187-8.

blaming individual behavior. Clinton, as the Democratic presidential nominee, solidified these assumptions on the campaign trail when he declared that, “if people don’t work, if they can work, they shouldn’t eat.”<sup>14</sup>

The chapter is organized around three watershed moments to show both the construction of policy changes to the food stamp program and the activism of grassroots and community organizations who worked to influence the resulting legislation. I will analyze the interplay between congressional negotiations and community-level lobbying that overhauled the framework federal food aid.

First, I will examine the 1985 Food Security Act (Farm Bill). Up for reauthorization in the 1985 Farm Bill were many of the federal food aid programs including the FSP and Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) along with Women, Infant, and Children (WIC), Commodity Supplemental Food Program, Summer Food Service Program, Nutrition Education, and Training.<sup>15</sup> Two main points of contention among policymakers included pushing the block grant system and requiring more stringent work requirements for “able-bodied adults.” Both proposals continued to focus on overturning existing food stamp legislation by restoring more control of the program to states. The proposals also worked to pathologize the poor and blame personal failures for their life poverty. In fact, in 1986, Reagan

<sup>14</sup> “Election Notes,” in *Nutrition Week*, No. 42, Community Nutrition Institute, November 6, 1992, Folder 3 Welfare – Hoffhaus – Clinton Welfare Program October 2, 1992 – March 3, 1993, Box 337, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Bob Dole to Jesse Helms, June 4, 1985, Folder 4 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps/Child Nutrition Hearings 1985, Box 149, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

tapped the director of the Domestic Policy Council, Charles Hobbs, to report on the status of welfare and food stamps. Hobbs's *Up from Dependency*, used "poverty knowledge" to homogenize the experiences of all poor people and blamed the existing welfare structure as incentivizing dependency and laziness.<sup>16</sup>

Despite a bipartisan appeal to the administration that block granting the FSP would cause more harm than good, politicians worked hard to give more power to the states. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that, on a policy level, food stamps have historically been separated from welfare legislation, but that conservatives effectively talked about the FSP as welfare to drive public opinion in their favor. To that end, it is important to understand the arguments behind the block granting system and why politicians achieved the measure for welfare but not food stamps.

Second, I explore the years between the presidencies of Reagan and Clinton by moving from the national policy story to the local. Examining the needs of people on-the-ground during the formative years of welfare reform will show how they influenced policy decisions. From there, I jump to Clinton's 1992 campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it" and how the resulting welfare reform affected the Food Stamp Program. To understand the neoliberal turn of the Democratic Party it is important to draw connections between the policies of Reagan and Clinton. I argue that a Republican majority in Congress and Clinton's desire to overhaul the welfare system that linked work and citizenship rights worked to boost the middle-class' confidence and further pathologized the poor. Frustrated Americans needed someone and

<sup>16</sup> Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).



something to blame. Poor people and the social welfare programs that they depended on to survive became the easy target.

The narrative about poor people that conservatives so successfully spun into the psyche of the American public remained strong despite facts that stated the contrary. As the public and politicians came to agree that poor people were overwhelmingly taking advantage of government help, it became clear that for Democrats to win power back in Washington, their values must align with the new ethos. Clinton's election to the presidency solidified neoliberal policies and ideology. His focus on wage-work and marriage as central parts of welfare reform, combined with the Republican-controlled Congress's desire to exclude more people from federal aid, resulted in food stamp policies that left too many poor people without options for access to food. The decisions made by politicians and the public between 1985 and 1996 altered the way that the right to food defined citizenship.

Finally, I will outline how the 1996 welfare reform package overhauled the FSP. I will chronicle the immediate reactions of politicians and the public to show the effects of the "end of welfare as we know it." Clinton's welfare reform bill institutionalized long-standing efforts of Republicans to devalue the central government's responsibility to provide a safety net for Americans. It also reinforced the idea that wage-work and marriage constituted the only acceptable way out of poverty, regardless of an individuals' circumstances.<sup>17</sup> The legislation — created and passed through the Republican-controlled House and Senate — dismantled Aid to

<sup>17</sup> Gwendolyn Mink, *Welfare's End* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 2.

Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or welfare and replaced it to a block grant called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).<sup>18</sup> Block grants empowered states by giving them sole discretion of social welfare funds and in creating, altering, and implementing welfare programs on the ground. Although Republicans never succeeded in making food stamps a block grant, provisions in TANF laws empowered the newly powerful states to link food stamp eligibility to welfare. This further entrenched the misidentification of food stamps as welfare.

### **1985 Food Security Act and Block Granting Debates**

The Farm Bill of 1985 reauthorized the FSP for five more years and the TEFAP for two more years.<sup>19</sup> Congress also passed work requirements that made states responsible for implementing “employment and training programs” designed to “move jobless stamp recipients onto payrolls.”<sup>20</sup> Similar to FSP legislation in previous Farm Bills, these measures were ultimately non-confrontational and worked to appease a moderate, bipartisan base that understood the efficacy of the FSP but worried about it taking on extreme policies. Ardent conservatives — like Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) and Reagan — remained unsatisfied. Their

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>19</sup> “Conference Committee Passes Farm Bill,” Press Release, United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, December 16, 1985, Folder 4 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps Work Proposals 1985, Box 154, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

efforts to dismantle the FSP remained steadfast. They worked to deregulate the FSP in ways that made it restrictive and exclusionary against those poor people deemed unworthy of survival.<sup>21</sup>

In the Farm Bill politicians debated restructuring the FSP a block grant. The block granting system had long been part of the debate for redefining the welfare system. But the FSP was never part of the original welfare package in the Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 War on Poverty. Designed to respond to the fluctuations of the economy, the framework of the FSP ensured that people in need would always be able to qualify for aid and buy food.<sup>22</sup> If, for example, an income-earning member of a family lost their job or an elderly person applied for stamps and the state ran out of funds from the block grant, these individuals would be denied aid.<sup>23</sup> Times of recession and high-unemployment were not the only potential threats to a food stamp program that operated under a block grant. Families with heads-of-households who worked saw their incomes fall below the poverty line when the income from low-wage jobs did not meet the cost-of-living.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the FSP operated under the Department of Agriculture because it was never officially a welfare program. The original intent of the FSP was to make use of farmer surplus and provide individuals and families with an opportunity to attain a more nutritious diet.

<sup>21</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 221-2.

<sup>22</sup> "Don't Block Food Stamps," July 24, 1985, *The Washington Post*, Folder 6 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps Block Grant 1985, Box 148, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Greenstein, "Should the Food Stamp Program be Block Granted?" June 28, 1995, Domestic Policy Council, Bruce Reed, and Welfare Reform Series, "Food Stamp Block Grants," Clinton Digital Library, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/31724>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Block granting attracted Republicans because it achieved much of their domestic political agenda. First, states gained more control over the program. They could redefine eligibility standards, appropriations, implementation and distribution of the program, and oversight of its functionality. Second, block granting served as an expedient way to balance the federal budget.<sup>25</sup> States received one lump sum, each fiscal year, to use across all programs designated as welfare. It was at the states' discretion as to how the money was appropriated.<sup>26</sup>

Responsible for the reauthorization of the federal food programs, the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, chaired by Helms, heard testimony on these two major points. While Helms and the Reagan administration agreed that block granting and stricter work requirements in the 1985 Farm Bill were paramount to the future of food stamps, much of the committee and local and state officials worried about the viability of the proposals.<sup>27</sup> Stating that "food stamps are for people not states," Dave Durenberger (R-MN), chairman of the Subcommittee of Intergovernmental Relations, argued that "block grants make good intergovernmental sense for many programs. Food stamps is not one of them."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> "Infoletter," National Governors' Association, May 22, 1985, Folder 6 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps Block Grant 1985, Box 148, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>26</sup> "The Block Grant Proposal," 1985, Folder 6 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps Block Grant 1985, Box 148, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>27</sup> "Don't Block Food Stamps," July 24, 1985, *The Washington Post*, Folder 6 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps Block Grant 1985, Box 148, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Dave Durenberger to Bob Dole, July 23, 1985, Folder 6 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps Block Grant 1985, Box 148, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

A long-time advocate for the FSP and member of the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, senator Bob Dole (R-KS) argued for optional state grant blocking. But even this bipartisan appeal did not change the overwhelming stance by many scholars and political thinkers that block granting the FSP served no good purpose. A public policy analyst from the American Enterprise Institute agreed that block granting proposals harmed the intentions of the FSP. He asked Dole's assistant, "Whose idea is it to block grant the Food Stamp Program – that's the worst thing I've ever heard of!" Bolton referred him to Helms's staff for further explanation.<sup>29</sup>

Some conservative politicians knew that block granting the FSP served their political agendas in multiple ways. They recognized that changing the framework of food stamp distribution could "bring an end to the uniformity of the safety net," and allow for more partisan priorities like government spending on hawkish foreign policy measures.<sup>30</sup> Conservatives failed to implement the new structure because officials on the state and local levels voiced their concerns that while the strategy might help balance the federal budget it would be detrimental to Americans who needed access to the FSP to survive. Debates over block granting the FSP highlighted the program's distinctive structure and reinforced its unique purpose as an agricultural program tied directly to the production and distribution of American foodways.

<sup>29</sup> Memorandum from Christina Bolton to Senator Dole, July 27, 1985, Folder 6 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps Block Grant 1985, Box 148, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from John Carlin to Bob Dole, June 5, 1985, Folder 6 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps Block Grant 1985, Box 148, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

Other state level officials agreed that there were “many more negatives than positives” to the block granting the FSP.<sup>31</sup> The governor of Kansas, John Carlin (D-KS), reiterated that the FSP was the “primary safety net” for all low-income people because its eligibility criteria did not work in tandem with welfare programs.<sup>32</sup> In other words, an individual or household denied entry to welfare programs could still be eligible for food stamps. Under a block grant, states had the ability to reallocate the money given by the federal government to other programs and if the state ran out of money, then eligible people would not have the opportunity to participate in the FSP. States had the ability to prioritize certain programs and neglect others.

In the mid-1980s, conservatives pushed more policy changes to further restrict food stamp participation. Reagan continued to problematize the FSP and used “poverty knowledge” to pathologize the poor and blame individual behavior.<sup>33</sup> In early 1986, politicians and the media demanded more stringent workfare requirements for “entitlement programs.” A writer in the *Washington Post* recalled how workfare was once something “decent minded people used to oppose.” However, Reagan and his allies strategically attacked welfare to further their own political agendas.<sup>34</sup> But the public increasingly became enamored with the strategy as conservatives stereotyped poor people as immoral, shunning family values, and deviously

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*.

<sup>34</sup> Jennifer Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare: The Unintended Consequences of Liberal Reform, 1945-1965* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 154.

finding ways to live off the system in lieu of undertaking hard work. The author drew a connection between parents punishing children, insisting “that the regularity of their allowance has some connection to the performance of their household chores,” and the federal government legislating strict workfare requirements of recipients “with no sense of the connection between working and eating.”<sup>35</sup>

Furthering his claim of a corrupt and immoral poor demographic, the author summarized a Bill Moyers special and a *Washington Post* report from that year that stated teen girls “see less reason to practice birth control if they know that their children will be provided for by the state,” and young men “who do not have to consider supporting their ‘families.’”<sup>36</sup> Increasingly, Americans read news reports like these which never told of a specific situation or provided quantitative data. Despite the lack of facts, these reports created the image of communities on the brink of destruction. Conservatives used this rhetoric to cast unwed, poor mothers on the periphery of acceptable society and laid the foundation for future legislation that would punish them under the guise of self-sufficiency through workfare.<sup>37</sup> Americans reaffirmed these stereotypes when they rebuffed calls for systematic changes that would close the inequality gap in favor of punishing poor people.

<sup>35</sup> William Raspberry, “From Welfare to Work,” *The Washington Post*, February 17, 1986, Folder 5 Welfare – Bolton – Food Stamps Work Requirements 1985-1986, Box 154, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Mink, *Welfare's End*, 103. Also see: Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2007), 8.

Reagan's 1986 State of the Union address to Congress railed on low-income people accepting welfare and food stamps and characterized them as the result of a country's wayward drift from "family values." He celebrated a "rising America" that would overcome what he saw as an oppressive federal government.<sup>38</sup> To Reagan, the country was like a prisoner, held captive by a controlling federal government known for "slamming shut the gates of opportunity" and "threatening to crush the very roots of our freedom."<sup>39</sup> Only the people's "courage and common sense" combined with his own policies were enough to revitalize the nation.<sup>40</sup> Reagan characterized a nation fighting against an oppressive "welfare culture" singularly characterized by "the breakdown of the family."<sup>41</sup> He directly linked federally funded social welfare programs, people who lived outside the nuclear family structure, and "female and child poverty, child abandonment, horrible crimes, and deteriorating schools."<sup>42</sup>

In line with Reagan's belief that "private values must be at the heart of public policies, he commended "voluntary giving" as the crux of a successful country."<sup>43</sup> In the mid-1980s, conservative lawmakers capitalized on themes of morality, family values, and a reliance on

<sup>38</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union," February 4, 1986, December 2019, digitized, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-congress-the-state-the-union>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



private charity rather than federal social welfare programs. This rhetoric bolstered the food policy measures instituted during Reagan's first term — like the 1983 TEFAP program — where government funds supported food banks and private charities. These stopgap policies allowed conservatives to continue slashing the FSP's budget and tighten workfare requirements.

Worn-down by Cold War politics, an inconsistent economy, and a re-emergence of domestic hunger problems, the public personally identified when Reagan talked about healing the “land of broken dreams,” where the government was “slamming shut the gates of opportunity,” and “threatening to crush the very roots of our freedom.”<sup>44</sup> Politically savvy lawmakers saw a moment of opportunity to seize the national narrative.<sup>45</sup> The rise of “family values” language helped single out those people who did not participate in the narrow framework for how an American citizen should operate.

In his speech, Reagan promised to not take “from those in need,” but called on Congress to “revise or replace” social welfare programs that “degrade the moral worth of work, encourage family breakups, and drive entire communities into a bleak and heartless dependency.”<sup>46</sup> These promises assured the masses that their hard work and struggles had not gone unrecognized. That individuals and families who did not meet the co-opted terms of Reagan's morality had failed.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 10-11.

<sup>46</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union,” February 4, 1986, December 2019, digitized, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-congress-the-state-the-union>

### **Charles Hobbs, *Up from Dependency***

In the 1980s, social scientists that researched “poverty knowledge” aimed to produce rational and empirical data.<sup>47</sup> The concept of poverty knowledge began in the 1960s when social scientists looked for ways to define, measure, and confront “the poverty problem.”<sup>48</sup> Rooted in the necessity of objective data and empirical methods, the unintended consequences of these methods resulted in studies that lacked a nuanced understanding of the struggles and barriers many poor people faced based on their individual life circumstances.<sup>49</sup> The production of data about poor people’s situations allowed opponents of the FSP to further entrench negative stereotypes about recipients. Their analysis focused more on what they perceived as behavioral flaws on of poor people — characterizing them as dependent and irresponsible — rather than addressing systematic structural inequalities based on race, class, and gender.<sup>50</sup>

Reagan looked to this “poverty knowledge” to focus on the behavior of the poor. In his 1986 State of the Union address, Reagan called for more proposals on ways to overhaul welfare programs and spending. Calling on his Domestic Policy Council (DPC), Reagan tasked them with presenting new ideas. Charles Hobbs, Director of the DPC, completed similar tasks working for Reagan during his tenure as Governor of California. Hobbs advocated for a complete

<sup>47</sup> O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 4.

overhaul of federal welfare programs that would meet “the needs of the poor,” while “reducing dependency on government.”<sup>51</sup> Because many of these research results overlooked the unique set of circumstances that poor people faced, lawmakers and their advisors easily manipulated the findings in ways that best served their own political agendas.

Hobbs’s, *Up from Dependency: A New National Public Assistance Strategy*, exemplified poverty research that homogenized all poor people by creating an easily identifiable and vilified caricature of poor people. The study, conducted by the DPC’s Low Income Opportunity Working Group, recognized all federal food assistance programs run by the USDA as welfare programs.<sup>52</sup> This conflation of welfare programs and the Food Stamp Program distorted the original intentions of the FSP. It served to validate claims by politicians and the public, since the late 1960s, that federal food programs made up a chaotic, highly bureaucratic welfare system.

In a memo to Reagan in which he summarized the six overarching conclusions of the study, Hobbs relied on the most technical aspects of the report and ignored the plight of individuals. Hobbs argued that “welfare is a major deterrent to work and self-support” because the “typical” amount of welfare benefits for a recipient exceeded the net-value of a minimum-wage job.<sup>53</sup> Hobbs implied that rather than proactively finding work, opportunistic poor people

<sup>51</sup> Memo from Charles D. Hobbs to Ronald Reagan, November 6, 1986, Folder WE010 Poverty Programs, Box 028066, Subject File, White House Office of Records Management, Papers of Ronald Reagan, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (hereafter cited as WHORM, RR Papers, RRL).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

realized that they could make more money living off welfare and “adopt the wrong lifestyle.”<sup>54</sup> This argument overlooked the fact that most people on welfare – and more specifically food stamps – already worked but did not make enough to cover all their bills.

Hobbs also reinforced the idea that social welfare aid contributed to the breakup of what most conservatives touted as the epitome of American citizenship — a “traditional” nuclear family. He argued that by “replacing breadwinners with government handouts,” poor people intentionally deviated from “economically viable families” breaking down “the nation’s family structure.”<sup>55</sup> Much of the report worked in tandem with the rhetoric used by Reagan and other opponents of the FSP since its inception in the mid-1960s. Working parallel to Hobbs and Reagan, political scientist Charles Murray reinforced the argument for increased local and state control of welfare programs.<sup>56</sup> They reasoned that previous iterations of welfare legislation failed, in part, because of “top-down” policy creation that misunderstood the actual needs of the poor.<sup>57</sup>

In Murray’s influential book *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980*, he used research from liberal social scientific thinkers to blame the welfare state for causing widespread

<sup>54</sup> Alejandra Marchevsky and Jeanne Theoharis, *Not Working: Latina Immigrants, Low-Wage Jobs, and the Failure of Welfare Reform* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>55</sup> Memo from Charles D. Hobbs to Ronald Reagan, November 6, 1986, Folder WE010 Poverty Programs, Box 028066, Subject File, WHORM, RR Papers, RRL.

<sup>56</sup> Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

<sup>57</sup> Memo from Charles D. Hobbs to Ronald Reagan, November 6, 1986, Folder WE010 Poverty Programs, Box 028066, Subject File, WHORM, RR Papers, RRL.

social disparities in poverty, employment, education, crime, and the nuclear family.<sup>58</sup> Arguments like those of Hobbs and Murray twisted and marred individual and group behavior rather than unpacking structural economic and political deficiencies that reinforced the cycle of poverty.<sup>59</sup>

In line with conservative ideas that states should primarily be responsible for welfare programs, Hobbs insisted they experiment with new ways to distribute program benefits through trial-and-error.<sup>60</sup> As a result, the Reagan administration proposed a program to allow states to fund the experiments using federal money from any of the existing “59” social welfare programs.<sup>61</sup> By insisting that local and state legislators needed more power in distributing welfare in their states, Hobbs ignored a long history of issues that hindered too many people from receiving the help they needed. Problems of localized discrimination and various barriers to access were the main reasons why President Jimmy Carter in 1977 took steps to nationalize the FSP. The Reagan administration’s proposal aimed to overhaul many of the advancements in FSP legislation since the late 1960s. By giving states the power to effectively experiment on the poor at the cost of their own survival, these proposed Republican programs further rendered poor

<sup>58</sup> Murray, *Losing Ground*.

<sup>59</sup> O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 7.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Pear, “Reagan Seeks Change in Welfare System,” December 13, 1986, *The New York Times*, accessed December 2019, digitized. <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/13/us/reagan-seeks-change-in-welfare-system.html>

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

people “isolated, maladjusted, and politically passive,” outcasts that proved unworthy of rights as citizens.<sup>62</sup>

Defining and characterizing dependency — a major theme throughout the report — Hobbs further demonized poor people and federal welfare programs. In Hobbs’s view, an invasive federal government had created dependency in poor people and nurtured that pathology by not pushing those people to “develop into productive workers.”<sup>63</sup> Hobbs called for a “public-private sector commitment” to strengthening “self-reliant families” and “supportive communities.”<sup>64</sup> While on the surface, the report articulated ideas amenable to liberals and conservatives, Hobbs’s argument to give states increased discretion over the creation and implementation of all welfare programs, pathologized poor people and blamed the federal government for inflicting those habits. Indeed, reports like *Up from Dependency* reinforced policies built on rehabilitation of the individual and ignored systematic structural issues that rooted people in poverty.<sup>65</sup> For example, one policy goal recommended that recipients “take greater responsibility for managing their resources.”<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup> O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 123.

<sup>63</sup> Memo from Charles D. Hobbs to Ronald Reagan, November 6, 1986, Folder WE010 Poverty Programs, Box 028066, Subject File, WHORM, RR Papers, RRL.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Molly C. Michelmore, *Tax and Spend: The Welfare State, Tax Politics, and the Limits of American Liberalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 153.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Pear, “Reagan Seeks Change in Welfare System,” December 13, 1986, *The New York Times*, accessed December 2019, digitized. <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/13/us/reagan-seeks-change-in-welfare-system.html>

Reception to the proposal was mixed. According to a *New York Times* article, states expressed “cautious interest” as officials worried about their ability to fully fund new programs.<sup>67</sup> Many politicians recognized the attempts to overturn existing legislation that worked to make welfare programs as equal as possible. The article quoted Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) criticizing the proposed plan stating that it would “no more emancipate the poor than Reaganomics has balanced the budget.”<sup>68</sup>

But Reagan continued his own war on poverty in his 1988 State of the Union address. To the audience he lamented, “my friends, some years ago, the Federal Government declared war on poverty, and poverty won.”<sup>69</sup> Reagan worked to reduce government funding and employ language that solidified negative stereotypes about poor people. He carried over themes from his 1986 State of the Union address that characterized hardworking American citizens at war against vague, immoral forces that threatened the promise of inalienable rights of freedom and prosperity.

Reagan argued that his administration had successfully brought about a “revolution” both social and economic that restored the “American Dream” through “hope based on work, incentives, growth, and opportunity.”<sup>70</sup> For food stamps, a “revolution” signified a change in the

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union,” January 25, 1988, December 2019, digitized, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-congress-the-state-the-union-0>

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

way that Americans viewed the hungry poor and the government's responsibility to help them survive. Where, in the 1960s, Americans demanded that the richest country in the world ensure its own people were living – and eating – at suitable standards, a shift in the public mindset characterized the late 1980s. A bipartisan “persistence of moralism in welfare policy” combined with a growing acceptance that an economic safety net lay outside the boundaries of American's social contract, meant that conservatives effectively overhauled the food stamp program.<sup>71</sup>

To achieve this, in part, Reagan advocated for a food aid system that relied on charities, foundations, and food pantries. As part of this “revolution,” Reagan called attention to the “compassion” of the private-sector and indicated a “77-percent increase in charitable giving.”<sup>72</sup> He argued that private outreach initiatives directly correlated to his so-called social and economic revolution. In relying on an already overwhelmed system of charities and private organizations, conservatives approached the hunger problem through a policy of “damage control” rather than dealing with “the erosion of equality” that kept poor people in a constant search for food security.<sup>73</sup> He claimed that releasing the federal government from responsibility to feed to hungry citizens — and thereby releasing frustrated taxpayers — cleared a path for

<sup>71</sup> Mink, *Welfare's End*, 15&34.

<sup>72</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union,” January 25, 1988, December 2019, digitized, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-congress-the-state-the-union-0>

<sup>73</sup> Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 5.



more people to pursue the American Dream.<sup>74</sup> But in dissolving the obligation of the government to help hungry citizens, Reagan and his allies built a “culture of charity that normalizes destitution and legitimates personal generosity as a response to major social and economic dislocation.”<sup>75</sup> Reagan attempted to validate his stance that the government welfare programs “had created a massive social problem,” where generations of broken families passed on habits of dependency like an “heirloom.”<sup>76</sup>

*Up from Dependency* failed to accurately convey the struggles that poor people faced. On the state and local level, people struggled with unique issues that kept them poverty. While conservatives reinforced an image of degradation, abuse, and laziness around poverty, local organizations working within their immediate communities told a different story. A Dallas woman and chairperson for the ad-hoc committee, *End Hunger*, discussed the barriers that poor people still faced in accessing food stamps. She was “pleased” that Texas state laws had reduced the food stamp application from 10-12 pages to 2 pages and encouraged the pilot program that extended their operating hours to Saturday morning so that clients did not have to take off work.<sup>77</sup> She also cited the Emergency Program on Client Hunger (EPOCH), an “innovative

<sup>74</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 259.

<sup>75</sup> Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity?* 5.

<sup>76</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union,” January 25, 1988, December 2019, digitized, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-congress-the-state-the-union-0>

<sup>77</sup> Letter from Marcie Feinglas to Chet Edwards, April 10, 1990, Folder 22 Food Stamps 1990, Box 176, Subseries 1. Correspondence 1988-1990, Thomas Chester “Chet” Edwards State Legislative Papers, Baylor Collections of Political Materials, W. R. Poage Legislative Library, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

program,” that provided groceries for food stamp recipients to take home from the distribution office while they waited for their stamps to process through the system.<sup>78</sup>

However, she noted that problems still existed. For example, state offices required more federal funding to effectively run their programs and to support the caseworkers that distributed the stamps. The Chairperson claimed that Texas ranked 50<sup>th</sup> with respect to state and local spending on “public welfare.”<sup>79</sup> Between 1987 and 1990, a reported 30-40 percent turnover in food stamp workers illuminated their own struggles and frustrations with the high demand for service and the administratively complex program.<sup>80</sup>

In addition, she noted that in one region of Texas, 70 percent of eligible food stamps recipients did not participate in the program because of the barriers to access and the negative stigma around food aid. She warned that hungry people not on food stamps tended to “become dependent on food pantries” not designed for long-term use but “on an emergency basis only.”<sup>81</sup> In addition, most people on food stamps depleted their benefits before each month ended meaning they also had to rely on food pantries.<sup>82</sup>

The Los Angeles-based Community Food Security Coalition, cited similar findings. Researchers found that emergency food pantries were “overwhelmed” because of cutback on the

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

federal, state, and local levels over the past twelve years.<sup>83</sup> The Coalition reported that food distributed through the emergency food system in their community rose “from 25 million pounds of food in 1979 to over 450 million pounds in 1990.”<sup>84</sup> They also cited a lack of transportation for the needy to access fresh food at supermarkets.<sup>85</sup>

To address these problems on the local level, the Coalition proposed community-based solutions meant to inform larger food access legislation.<sup>86</sup> The report listed projects where community leaders introduced alternative sources for food access in poor communities. These included Church-conducted farmer’s markets, growing herbs and produce in raised beds, urban farming sessions held at senior citizen housing, an independent grocery stores who helped with transportation needs.<sup>87</sup> While these projects helped supplement some of the community’s food needs, these initiatives only worked in warm-weather months and lacked the capacity to address deeper hunger issues on a wide scale.

Despite the problems that local communities faced in accessing and using the full benefits of the FSP, pervasive assumptions about poor people’s work ethic and abuse of the system contributed to growing bipartisan support for adding punitive workfare requirements. A

<sup>83</sup> Linda, Ashman, Jaime de la Vega, Marc Dohan, Andy Fisher, Rosa Hippler, Billi Romain, “Seeds of Change: Strategies for Food Security for the Inner City,” (Master’s thesis, University of California-Los Angeles, 1993). Accessed February 2020. [http://foodsecurity.org/pub/Seeds\\_of\\_Change.pdf](http://foodsecurity.org/pub/Seeds_of_Change.pdf)

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Patricia Allen, “The Disappearance of Hunger in America,” *Gastronomica* 7 (Summer 2007): 19-23.

<sup>87</sup> Ashman et al, “Seeds of Change: 1993.

researcher at the American Enterprise Institute — a Washington, D.C.-based conservative think-tank — cited “a new willingness by both liberals and conservatives to examine the behavior of the poor.”<sup>88</sup> He continued, “This is grass-roots stuff. It’s coming from the people.”<sup>89</sup> As food prices lowered and more middle-class people enjoyed affordable and plentiful foods, inner city poor people found themselves in jeopardy of food insecurity. Grocery stores relocated out of low-income areas into the suburbs. White, middle class people also found ways to “regain control over elements of the food system”.<sup>90</sup> They focused on healthier and more localized food sources like farmer’s markets, community gardens, and community supported agriculture (CSA) programs.<sup>91</sup> This in turn drove up prices of fresh healthy food.<sup>92</sup> Low income Americans found themselves without many options or resources for affordable and healthy food. Conservative discourse aimed at attacking the behavior of poor people and blaming them for their inability to work despite the system that kept them down was part of their “language of the people” that had so successfully brought Republicans into political power.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Julie Rovner, “New Cries for Welfare Reform Target Able-Bodied Poor,” *Congressional Quarterly*, March 28, 1992, Folder 10 Welfare – Hoffhaus – Welfare Reform 1990-1993, Box 340, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, Edited by Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 150.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 261.

The interplay between politicians and the public drove anti-welfare sentiments centered on blaming the behavior of individual poor people.<sup>94</sup> This mutually-reinforced discourse influenced food stamp legislation into the early 1990s despite statistics that proved contrary to the stigmas. In fact, only 15 percent of all FSP recipients were able-bodied adults and half of them worked either part-time, full-time, or seasonal.<sup>95</sup>

By the end of 1991, the total number of food stamp recipients increased to 23.5 million people or one-tenth of the population.<sup>96</sup> Citing “structural inefficiency in the economy,” Representative Robin Tallon (D-SC), argued that “the society is rich enough to meet its obligations,” but the government offices created to uphold welfare programs were not.<sup>97</sup> Congress called on the USDA to investigate the reasons behind the increase in food stamp recipients from 1989-1990. Conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, the report declared two major factors — changes in the economy and Medicaid rules — that contributed to the rise in food stamp participation.<sup>98</sup> Other factors included population growth, immigration reform, and

<sup>94</sup> Julily Kohler-Hausmann, “The Crime of Survival: Fraud Prosecutions, Community Surveillance, and the Original ‘Welfare Queen,’” *Journal of Social History* 41 (Winter 2007): 329-354.

<sup>95</sup> Joe Richardson, “How the Food Stamp Program Works: 13<sup>th</sup> Edition,” *CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress*, November 30, 1992, Folder 5 Welfare – Torrey – Food Stamps December 20, 1994 – March 31, 1995, Box 548, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>96</sup> Robin Tallon, “Food Stamps: One American in 10,” November 5, 1991, Folder 10 Welfare – Hoffhaus – Welfare Reform 1990-1993, Box 340, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Sheena McConnell, “The Increase in Food Stamp Participation Between 1989 and 1990,” *Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. for the Food and Nutrition Service, USDA*, August 1991, Folder 7 Welfare – Hoffhaus – US Department of Agriculture [USDA] Reports on Food Stamps November 1988 – July 31, 1991, Box 340, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

improved access to the FSP especially with the expansion of services for the homeless. The largest states with the biggest populations — Texas, California, New York, and Florida — were responsible for over half of the increase, from 20 million people in March 1990 to 20.5 million one year later.<sup>99</sup> The report argued that the increase in participation was not because of changes associated with welfare programs like AFDC, WIC, or the introduction of the workfare Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (Jobs) workfare program.<sup>100</sup> In fact, less than half of the increase from 1989 to 1990 resulted from unemployment.<sup>101</sup>

The increase in participation combined with escalating negative rhetoric that targeted the behavior of the poor meant that presidential candidates running their campaigns in 1992 would have to make the FSP a top priority. Increasingly lumped together with welfare programs, the FSP became a central part of the conversation on overhauling welfare. Middle-class Americans celebrated president-elect Bill Clinton's promises to make real change in welfare. But his support of "broad-based" programs aimed at alleviating poverty missed the mark with the poorest Americans.<sup>102</sup>

The CRS reported that in 1992, over half or 56 percent of all food stamp benefits went to households with gross incomes less than half of the official poverty line. The elderly and

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Jason Deparle, "The Transition: How to Lift the Poor," *The New York Times*, November 10, 1992, Folder 3 Welfare – Hoffhaus – Clinton Welfare Programs October 2, 1992 to March 3, 1993, Box 337, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

disabled received 12.9 percent of all food stamp benefits. Children comprised more than half (51.4 percent) of all food stamps recipients and households with children received 81.9 percent of all food stamp benefits.<sup>103</sup> Despite the statistics that showed the FSP helped those very people that constituents long-claimed as the “truly needy,” opponents of the program ignored the data and enacted legislation based on assumptions about poor people and their behavior.

By the spring of 1993, *The New York Times* reported a weak economic recovery for “those at the financial bottom,” or the poorest Americans.<sup>104</sup> And by that winter, the *Wall Street Journal* argued that the employment and training requirements that food stamp recipients must meet to stay on the program were not working. Despite the provision in the 1985 Farm Bill that made employment and training programs available to all food stamp recipients, the federal funds appropriated to run the programs at the state and local level only reached a fraction of recipients. Baltimore County reported that “fewer than 1% of 5,000 food stamp recipients” obtained work through the program.<sup>105</sup> That county’s training counselor stated the employment and training workshops were “either an extra burden on people with difficult lives, or irrelevant.”<sup>106</sup>

<sup>103</sup> “The Food Stamp Provisions of the House Welfare Bill,” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, March 31, 1995, Folder 5 Welfare – Torrey – Food Stamps December 20, 1994 – March 31, 1995, Box 548, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>104</sup> Jason Deparle, “Food Stamp Users Up Sharply in Sign of Weak Recovery,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 1993, Folder 3 Welfare – Hoffhaus – Clinton Welfare Programs October 2, 1992 to March 3, 1993, Box 337, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>105</sup> Kevin G. Salwen and Paulette Thomas, “Ticket to Nowhere: Job Programs Flunk at Training but Keep Washington at Work,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 6, 1993, Folder 8 Welfare – Torrey – Food Stamp Education and Training August 15, 1991 – April 14, 1994, Box 548, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

One Baltimore County man supported his wife and two kids by receiving food stamps and unemployment checks. He had a sixth-grade education and was illiterate. Despite attending the mandatory employment and training program and applying for jobs that included car dealerships, grocery stores, and factory work, there were “no bites yet.”<sup>107</sup> To continue receiving food stamps for his family, the man routinely applied for jobs in vain because of his lack of education. Each week he submitted signatures verifying he had applied for jobs which met the requirements of the program. Because he was not on welfare, disabled, or claimed dependents, the man did not qualify for exemption from the workfare requirements.<sup>108</sup> This example highlighted the disconnect between passing legislation based on invalid stereotypes of poor people and the real barriers they faced on their path out of poverty.

Despite years of hardship faced by poor people in gaining access to the right to food, conservative and new neoliberal policies combined to overhaul the FSP and welfare programs in the early 1990s. On March 24, 1995, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed a food stamp provision in the proposed Personal Responsibility Act.<sup>109</sup> The Congressional Research Service argued that the bill was “the most far-reaching food stamp revision since the Food Stamp Act was rewritten in 1977 and surpasses the last large budget cuts in 1981-1982.”<sup>110</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> “The Food Stamp Provisions of the House Welfare Bill,” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, March 31, 1995, Folder 5 Welfare – Torrey – Food Stamps December 20, 1994 – March 31, 1995, Box 548, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.



As the first step to overhauling social welfare programs, the approved House bill initiated watershed changes in how politicians and the public viewed hungry poor people and the government's responsibility to provide them a safety net for survival.

### **The Democrats' Neoliberal Turn and the Election of Bill Clinton**

Quiet on topics like "inner cities, the homeless and the underclass," Clinton approached welfare reform as an additional opportunity at "offering benefits to all Americans."<sup>111</sup> By not directly attacking the systematic inequalities that perpetuated poverty, this watered-down version of trickle-down economics offered no real chance for poor people to change their circumstances. His policies, instead, appealed more to the middle-class and upper-middle-class voters who wanted freedom from the grip of big business.<sup>112</sup> Clinton's welfare proposals spoke more to middle-class voters looking for politicians who cared about their own "quality-of-life issues."<sup>113</sup> To garner support from this powerful electorate, Clinton's promise to "end welfare as we know it" merely "symbolized the success of the new order" that Reagan and fellow conservatives had entrenched into the American political, social, and economic status quo.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Jason Deparle, "The Transition: How to Lift the Poor," *The New York Times*, November 10, 1992, Folder 3 Welfare – Hoffhaus – Clinton Welfare Programs October 2, 1992 to March 3, 1993, Box 337, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>112</sup> Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, 189.

<sup>113</sup> Matthew D. Lassiter, "Suburban Strategies: The Volatile Center in Postwar American Politics," in *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, edited by Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 328.

<sup>114</sup> Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, 264.

Secretary of Agriculture, Dan Glickman, less than three months before the passage of welfare reform, urged the House Committee on Agriculture to rethink the food stamps revisions saying that they went “too far.”<sup>115</sup> Glickman argued that the bill “threatens to undo the national nutrition safety net,” and that 80 percent of the cuts to the food stamp program would directly affect families with children.<sup>116</sup> The Food and Consumer Service branch of the USDA released a report that same month indicating that children would lose \$30 billion worth of food aid benefits over the first seven-years of welfare reform.<sup>117</sup>

### **Welfare Reform and its Effects on the Food Stamp Program**

On August 22, 1996, Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (welfare reform).<sup>118</sup> Along with ending welfare, the final bill upheld the food stamp provision that put many participants at risk of losing their eligibility status including minor children, the disabled, and the elderly. Over a 10-year period, the bill allowed for over \$65 billion dollars in reductions on program spending. Despite overwhelming rhetoric aimed at

<sup>115</sup> Letter from Dan Glickman to Pat Roberts, June 10, 1996, Folder Food Stamps, Box 12, Domestic Policy Council, Bruce Reed, and Welfare Reform Series, “Food Stamps,” Clinton Digital Library, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/31726>

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> “The Effects of Welfare Reform on the National Nutrition Safety Net,” Food and Consumer Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, June 7, 1996, Folder Food Stamps, Box 12, Domestic Policy Council, Bruce Reed, and Welfare Reform Series, “Food Stamps,” Clinton Digital Library, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/31726>

<sup>118</sup> “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act”, Public Law 104-193, 104<sup>th</sup> Congress, August 22, 1996, digitized. <https://www.congress.gov/104/plaws/publ193/PLAW-104publ193.pdf>

rooting out fraud and abuse of the FSP, the program reductions bypassed efforts at “reducing fraud, bureaucracy or other administration costs.”<sup>119</sup> The CRS reported that savings from “anti-fraud measures” totaled 0.1 percent over the first five years.<sup>120</sup> Lawmakers aimed to tighten eligibility standards by making them so strict that many existing recipients would lose their benefits and potential recipients would no longer qualify for the program. Victims of the policy changes were singled-out as second-class citizens who shunned the traditional values celebrated by conservatives. With the repeal of AFDC and the implementation of the TANF block grant, single mothers and their children lost their benefits and remained in poverty. Now firmly institutionalized, the welfare queen trope relegated poor women to shoulder the burden of societal pressures to work low-wage jobs while finding ways to look after their own children.<sup>121</sup>

Clinton’s welfare reform mandated time-limits on food stamps benefits for recipients categorized as able-bodied adults. Unless they worked at least part-time job or enrolled in one of the states’ employment or jobs training programs, these recipients lost their food stamps after 90 days. This provision proved problematic because the bill’s \$75 million allotment to establish workfare programs across the country funded 230,000 individuals. In 1994, 22.5 million people received food stamps. The welfare reform package punished those people who did not work

<sup>119</sup> “The Food Stamp Provisions of the House Welfare Bill,” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, March 31, 1995, Folder 5 Welfare – Torrey – Food Stamps December 20, 1994 – March 31, 1995, Box 548, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1988).

while not providing them with realistic opportunities to find employment.<sup>122</sup> But it also repealed existing workfare employment and job training programs established in 1988 and, as a result, states lost the associated funding.<sup>123</sup>

The bill also made legal immigrants — except for those with refugee status — ineligible for food stamps until after they had resided in the United States for a five-year period.<sup>124</sup> Legal immigrants who lived in the country less than five-years no longer qualified for benefits. The bill gave states one year to enact the provisions and by September 1997, welfare reform removed 935,000 of the 1.4 million legal immigrants living in the United States from the program.<sup>125</sup> One year after welfare reform passed, five advocacy groups held a press conference in Washington to push lawmakers to restore benefits to legal immigrants.<sup>126</sup> Conference organizers called the anniversary of welfare reform “no cause for celebration” and brought together leading groups including the Council de la Raza, the U.S. Catholic Conference, National Asian Pacific

<sup>122</sup> “The Effects of Welfare Reform on the National Nutrition Safety Net,” Food and Consumer Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, June 7, 1996, Folder Food Stamps, Box 12, Domestic Policy Council, Bruce Reed, and Welfare Reform Series, “Food Stamps,” Clinton Digital Library, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/31726>

<sup>123</sup> “The Food Stamp Provisions of the House Welfare Bill,” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, March 31, 1995, Folder 5 Welfare – Torrey – Food Stamps December 20, 1994 – March 31, 1995, Box 548, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid..

<sup>125</sup> Lyna Fujiwara, “Mothers Without Citizenship: Asian Immigrant and Refugees Negotiating Poverty and Hunger in Post-Welfare Reform,” *Race, Gender & Class* 12 (2005): 121-141.

<sup>126</sup> Cynthia Rice and Elena Kagan, “Legal Immigrants and Food Stamps,” Daily Report, August 21, 1997, Box 41, Domestic Policy Council, Cynthia Rice, and Subject Files, “Welfare - Food Stamps - 8/97 Info,” Clinton Digital Library, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/88013>

American Legal Consortium, Farmworkers Justice Fund, and the Food Research and Action Center.<sup>127</sup> The advocacy groups sought to restore food stamps to legal immigrants who “play by the rules, pay taxes and carry the same responsibilities as citizens.”<sup>128</sup>

State officials in Washington, Massachusetts, and New York, reported the immediate strain on their communities and found ways to work around the bill using state money to provide food stamps to legal immigrants.<sup>129</sup> Officials in Colorado, Florida, Maryland, Minnesota, and Rhode Island attempted to use state money to find alternative ways to help legal immigrants gain access to food.<sup>130</sup> Additionally, Congress — at the Clinton administration’s urging — passed legislation that allowed the USDA to sell food stamps directly to states for distribution to those people made ineligible by the 1996 welfare reform law.<sup>131</sup> The Under-Secretary of the Department of Agriculture also noted that the USDA and states worked to publicize the 14 federal food programs that were not contingent on citizenship.<sup>132</sup> Regardless, in December of

<sup>127</sup> Press Release, National Council de la Raza, August 15, 1997, Box 41, Domestic Policy Council, Cynthia Rice, and Subject Files, “Welfare - Food Stamps - 8/97 Info,” Clinton Digital Library, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/88013>

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Cynthia Rice and Elena Kagan, “Legal Immigrants and Food Stamps,” Daily Report, August 21, 1997, Box 41, Domestic Policy Council, Cynthia Rice, and Subject Files, “Welfare - Food Stamps - 8/97 Info,” Clinton Digital Library, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/88013>

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Shirley Watkins, “Food Stamp Deadline,” August 19, 1997, Box 41, Domestic Policy Council, Cynthia Rice, and Subject Files, “Welfare - Food Stamps - 8/97 Info,” Clinton Digital Library, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/88013>

that same year, 73 percent of all legal permanent residents lost their food stamps benefits.<sup>133</sup> The denial of the right to food for legal immigrants reinforced ideas about worthiness, survival, and citizenship (or the path to citizenship). In framing food rights as a privilege for certain groups, welfare reform punished immigrants and condemned them to high levels of food insecurity and starvation.<sup>134</sup>

Because of the dissolution of AFDC in favor of the new block-granted TANF, many families and individuals lost their welfare benefits. Those poor people who relied on welfare checks as their sole income or most of their income, now found it difficult to purchase food for their families. A unique quality of the FSP, in contrast to welfare programs, was that it was based on the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) initiated in 1975. The TFP regulated food stamp allotments in tandem with the inevitable fluctuations of the economy.<sup>135</sup> Clinton's welfare reform proposed that food stamp allotments would no longer react to changing food prices and changes in the economy based on the TFP and instead would move at fixed rate of 2 percent each year.<sup>136</sup> In other words, if food prices increased but food stamp allotments did not change, poor people would continue to have problems affording healthy food.

<sup>133</sup> Fujiwara, "Mothers Without Citizenship," 121-141.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> "The Food Stamp Provisions of the House Welfare Bill," *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, March 31, 1995, Folder 5 Welfare – Torrey – Food Stamps December 20, 1994 – March 31, 1995, Box 548, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

Not only did the existing FSP fluctuate with the economy so that food stamps reflected real food prices at a given time, but the original legislation worked as an “open entitlement” program. This meant that the FSP received government funds based on need. Provisions in the new bill aimed to cap spending limits and permanently end open entitlement.<sup>137</sup> While these measures indeed helped the federal government reach \$65 billion in savings over 10 years, the proposed law punished the poor and operated purely at their expense. The CRS report predicted that the savings from the FSP would cover “large tax cuts” approved by the House Ways and Means Committee earlier that month.<sup>138</sup>

Because the bill gave more power to the states for both the FSP and welfare, it empowered them to recreate eligibility requirements of food stamps and attach them to welfare program obligations.<sup>139</sup> For example, states could sanction FSP recipients who failed to comply with TANF rules.<sup>140</sup> States could also include the cash value of food stamps in income eligibility calculations for TANF.<sup>141</sup> This strategy forced more families to report larger incomes making them ineligible to receive welfare benefits from TANF.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> *SNAP Matters: How Food Stamps Affect Health and Well-Being*, edited by Judith Bartfeld, Craig Gundersen, Timothy M. Smeeding, and James P. Ziliak (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 6.

<sup>140</sup> “The Food Stamp Provisions of the House Welfare Bill,” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, March 31, 1995, Folder 5 Welfare – Torrey – Food Stamps December 20, 1994 – March 31, 1995, Box 548, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the USDA and Congress experimented with new technology to replace physical food stamps. The new Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card resembled debit cards and took the place of food stamps. Proponents of EBT cards hoped to first, detect fraud and abuse in the system more efficiently and accurately while also helping to reduce stigma of food stamp users because it would be harder for nearby customers to discern the payment method of the food stamp recipient. To encourage more states to invest in and experiment with using EBT cards, the bill incentivized state officials by allowing them to block-grant their SNAP program if they started using EBT cards.<sup>142</sup>

The passage of welfare reform in 1996 signified the success of conservative ideology and their efforts to define citizenship based not on inalienable rights but on meanings of work, race, class, and gender. The strict workfare requirements operated under the guise of economic empowerment but it mostly served to exclude poor people from necessities needed for survival.<sup>143</sup> While Clinton touted welfare reform as a catalyst to alleviating poverty, the new programs worked more to enforce a new neoliberal paradigm that served “the interests of global capital” through guaranteed low-wage workers.<sup>144</sup>

<sup>142</sup> “The Food Stamp Provisions of the House Welfare Bill,” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, March 31, 1995, Folder 5 Welfare – Torrey – Food Stamps December 20, 1994 – March 31, 1995, Box 548, Series 6, Dole Senate Papers, DIP, KU.

<sup>143</sup> Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, 187.

<sup>144</sup> Marchevsky and Theoharis, *Not Working*, 33-4.



At its crux, neoliberal policies embodied the rightward shift of American politics and public opinion since the 1980s.<sup>145</sup> This thinking framed welfare recipients and food stamp users as the problem of poverty. Their inability or refusal to live within coded meanings of the nuclear family or to operate in ways deemed respectable by elites came to signify their exclusion from the full rights and privileges of citizenship.<sup>146</sup> Neoliberalism brought full-circle the breadwinner liberalism ideology that diminished reform in the 1930s and 1960s and combined it with an increasingly powerful conservative rhetoric as means to bring the Democrats back to political power.<sup>147</sup> When food stamps became the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Democratic party, through the leadership of Clinton, reinforced popular ideas of poor people as “other.”

The effectiveness of welfare reform rhetoric to resonate with constituents relied less on quantitative data outlining who was hungry and why. Instead, voters reacted to emotionally-charged language that stirred feelings of resentment in FSP recipients and frustration the ever-changing program that seemed to satisfy no one. The rise of conservative ideology that centered on free-market principles and self-help proved so pervasive that Democrats adopted their values under the guise of alleviating poverty. The Democratic Party pledged to fix a broken welfare system but promises of alleviating poverty and creating a better path for poor people to climb out

<sup>145</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017), 306.

<sup>146</sup> Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 399.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

of poverty proved inadequate. Instead, Clinton's neoliberal ideology cemented ideas about the government's relationship to poor people by continuing a bipartisan push — since Carter's presidency in the late 1970s — to privatize social aid and deregulate the federal government.<sup>148</sup>

The passage of welfare reform helped institutionalize poverty in American life.<sup>149</sup> The FSP morphed into a highly bureaucratic and administratively chaotic program. Yet, when the FSP did reach individuals and families in need, it effectively increased the purchasing power of poor people, giving them access to healthier foods. In its core components and goals, the FSP proved successful. But constant legislative battles around the expansion of the program kept lawmakers, the public, food stamp workers and recipients constantly frustrated and confused. Recipients defined the process of accessing food stamps much like that of welfare programs as “a dehumanizing effort to criminalize the poor.”<sup>150</sup> Under the new order, individuals were responsible for the social costs of charity and outreach programs.<sup>151</sup> The completed neoliberal turn in the 1990s reaffirmed the negative stereotypes about them that had come to define poverty legislation despite facts and data that continuously proved those stigmas wrong.

The battle to define the right to food played on the national political stage and through conservative and liberal grassroots organizing. While politicians, the media, and anti-hunger advocates produced research that showed the unique barriers faced by poor people in their ability

<sup>148</sup> Marchevsky and Theoharis, *Not Working*, 14.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>150</sup> Kohler-Hausmann, “The Crime of Survival,” 329-354.

<sup>151</sup> Self, *All in the Family*, 424.

to access healthy food, opponents of food aid successfully created a narrative around poor people that argued for their lack of worth as citizens and humans. Mainstream assumptions about the criminality of the poor overshadowed the realities of the effectiveness of the FSP in providing more people with food purchasing power and access to healthier fare. Food for survival became a tool with which to maintain hierarchical systems of power.<sup>152</sup> The welfare reform bill further limited gender, race, and class equality by deregulating and privatizing institutions responsible for the distribution of food. Those in favor of the FSP, as well as fervent opponents, drove policy changes and political rhetoric around the program since its inception.

The rise of the New Right and the conservative ideology that solidified class, race, and gender hierarchies proved most successful in shoring up centrist ideas about hunger, poor Americans. As standard-bearers of the new order, Reagan and Clinton codified unrealistic meanings of work and welfare into law. Interpretations of the ideologies collided around definitions of individualism, citizenship, and opportunity. They shaped both liberal and conservative conversations about the government and society's obligation to the public. Since the 1970s, the increasingly coherent conservative politics prevailed over the factions and disorganization of liberals and the Democratic Party and resulted in the "end of welfare as we know it."

<sup>152</sup> *Cultivating Food Justice*, edited by Alkon et al, 5.

## Conclusion: Food Stamps: A Right or Privilege?

In 2006, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) removed the word “hunger” from their protocol to identify people in need of food access. They claimed that replacing the term “hunger” with “very low food security” allowed for analytical clarity in assessing real food needs. The Committee on National Statistics of the National Academies reported that the term “hunger” signified an individual person’s physiological symptoms that may or may not be indicative of their actual need for help in accessing food.<sup>1</sup> “Very low food insecurity,” they argued, referred more to the household and the combined need for food access based on income and size of the family rather than individual feelings of need.<sup>2</sup> While innocuous on the surface, this move by the USDA harmed more people than it helped. Sociologist Patricia Allen asked, “if hunger is no longer an analytical category, how does one talk about it or advocate for its elimination?”<sup>3</sup>

When the USDA disregarded hunger as an analytical category used to design federal food aid programs, they homogenized all poor people. The unique circumstances and barriers that kept people in poverty and lacking access to healthy food remained a consistent problem in the growth of the Food Stamp Program (FSP). Instead of finding ways to fix entrenched hierarchical

<sup>1</sup> “Definitions of Food Security,” *Economic Research Service, USDA*, updated September 4, 2019, digitized. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Allen, “The Disappearance of Hunger in America,” *Gastronomica* 7 (Summer 2007): 19-23.

institutions that led to a need for food programs in the first place, the USDA eliminated a word they considered to be difficult to quantify. It also sanitized ideas about poor people facing hunger issues and “very low security” does not portray the same urgent need as terms like starvation, malnutrition, or hunger. The change in terms pushed the problems of food access and poverty out public consciousness. The triumph of conservative neoliberals became more apparent when they succeeded in narrowing the parameters of citizenship based on the right to food access.

Ceasing to talk about hunger did not make the problem go away. In fiscal year 2018, the USDA reported that the average monthly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, per person, totaled \$124.68.<sup>4</sup> Households averaged \$251.27 per month.<sup>5</sup> The amount of SNAP households with an elderly person totaled 26 percent – a 10 percent increase since 1993.<sup>6</sup> Disabled recipients made up 9 percent of the SNAP population.<sup>7</sup> Over 50 percent of households with dependents reported an income.<sup>8</sup> Able-bodied adults without Dependents made up 7 percent of all SNAP recipients.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “National View Summary,” SNAP Data Tables, *Food and Nutrition Service USDA*, updated January 3, 2020, digitized. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/34SNAPmonthly-1.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2018,” *Food and Nutrition Service USDA*, updated November 21, 2019, digitized. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/characteristics-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-households-fiscal-year-2018>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Unlike the Great Depression-era Food Stamp Program, President Lyndon B. Johnson and Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman created the 1960s FSP in a time of economic prosperity for most Americans. The FSP constituted a paradox where it provided more opportunities for low-income people to access healthier food and shop in grocery stores but only if they could afford the program's purchase requirement. Eager to implement the program, local and state officials encountered problems when the poorest people lost access to the overturned Commodity Surplus Program and could not participate in newly implemented FSP because of their inability to pay for the stamps.

In 1967, Senator Robert F. Kennedy's (D-NY), deep interest in the plight of destitute Americans in the Mississippi Delta prompted his fight to expand the FSP. His actions ignited a bevy of protests, Senate hearings, exposés, scientific studies, and constituent demands that no one should go hungry in the richest country in the world. While President Jimmy Carter's 1977 legislation to nationalize eligibility standards and remove the purchase requirement allowed more people than ever to access food stamps, its passage signified the last gasp of bipartisanship. In fact, the bill also added work requirements and stricter eligibility standards that made many poor people ineligible for the stamps. Carter's focus on deregulation and foreign food policy, rather than domestic food policies, helped lay the foundation for "end of welfare as we know it" in the mid-1990s. The triumph of conservatives and neoliberals became most apparent when they succeeded in narrowing the parameters of citizenship based on the right to food access.

The public altered their expectation — since the 1964 implementation of the FSP — from believing that the federal government had a responsibility to help all Americans to demanding

new social policies that excluded the neediest people.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, politicians and the public understood food rights as a privilege bestowed on poor people through charities and private foundations. In the decades since the implementation of the 1996 welfare reform, Americans turned their focus away from the hunger problem and towards issues with the “food system, such as, food safety, nutrition, and environmental degradation.”<sup>11</sup> Sociologist Janet Poppendieck noted that, “The resurgence of charity is at once a symptom and a cause of our society’s failure to face up to and deal with the erosion of equality. It is a symptom in that it stems, in part at least, from an abandonment of our hopes for the elimination of poverty; it signifies a retreat from the goals as well as the means that characterized the Great Society.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite the intentions of SNAP “to alleviate hunger by providing resources to purchase a nutritious diet,” there existed a stark reality that food production, distribution and preparation fundamentally signified an effective economy.<sup>13</sup> Trapped in a cycle of poverty, food stamp users faced barriers to access and judgment by the public for their use of federal aid. Low-paid bureaucratic employees often worked within a stressful system and the public increasingly saw food stamp recipients as tax-eaters who refused to work. The grievances of each group showed

<sup>10</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 527.

<sup>11</sup> Allen, “The Disappearance of Hunger in America,” 19-23.

<sup>12</sup> Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 5.

<sup>13</sup> *SNAP Matters: How Food Stamps Affect Health and Well-Being*, edited by Judith Bartfeld, Craig Gundersen, Timothy M. Smeeding, and James P. Ziliak (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 8.

that food aid programs revealed a disconnect between the formation of policy and its effectiveness in many poor communities. While the 1964 FSP refocused attention on alleviating poverty, it increasingly highlighted tensions surrounding ideas about the government's responsibility to help poor people.

My dissertation offers a launching point from which to study new avenues of the historical consequences of food stamps. Moreover, I suggest new ways of thinking about the formation of citizenship and identity based on which groups of people secured the right to eat for survival. Those poor people excluded from access to federal food aid suffered because they symbolized the fringes of acceptable society. Their "other" status came from their inability to operate within the paradigm of the ideal American worker, mother, or nuclear family.

It is important to understand midcentury liberalism and food stamps as operating within the context of the deserving and undeserving citizen. My sources indicate that many Americans viewed food stamps as a right of citizenship only for those people physically or mentally unable to work. However, public frustration towards the *idea* of who received food stamps often did not match reality. How Americans defined work throughout the twentieth century directly correlated with their views on the government's responsibility to help feed the poor.

More specific studies on the components of food stamp history should continue to illuminate the construction of citizenship through an understanding of politicized food rights. Labor and gender history remained inexorably linked when studying how the right to food for survival hinges on the conception of work. As public and political animosity situated on the welfare queen trope, the question of what counted as work reemerged. Single mothers threatened



the tradition of the nuclear family and worked against ideas of the male breadwinner. Although poor people did not have the resources to embody the affluent lifestyle and had always worked, they remained outcasts in society who were unworthy of aid. Even those people who exercised their rights as citizens and employees through strikes and work stoppages exposed the linkages between private, free market capitalism and the rights and protections of citizens from a democratic central government.

Public opinion of food distribution to individuals seen as not worthy of aid happened as early as 1959 when a state audit of the early Harris County Commodity Welfare Distribution Program revealed that striking union workers applied for the food distribution program. According to the audit, caseworkers completely ignored their applications for food aid. The Assistant Director of the Commodity Distribution Division made it clear that union-men's applications received the same acknowledgement "without regard to the cause of the need."<sup>14</sup> Vilified for striking and not working to obtain their breadwinner status, these men were not seen as worthy of government aid. In fact, union strikers, nationally, faced public outrage at their eligibility status for food stamps well into the 1970s and 1980s.

Poor women remained an essential part of the workforce, yet their status as workers contradicted more affluent people's expectations that mothers stay home to care for their children. This unrealistic assumption acted as a catalyst to demeaning work requirements that defined a women's household duties as second-class citizenship. A rising conservative-leaning political

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Ted Britton from W.E. Moore, November 5, 1959, Folder 29 Surplus Commodities, Box 2121, Harris County Judge CR 31 (1959-1974), Harris County Clerk's Office, Houston, Texas.

agenda rejected welfare programs as entitlements and instead demanded that the receipt of food stamps be contingent on one's attempts to gain employment. This workfare requirement increased the government's ability to surveillance poor citizens' food and life choices.

Predicated on meanings of work, a constant tension manifested not just in Washington politics but through local people and organizations driving food policy changes. As strangers policed poor women in grocery stores and admonished them for their life circumstances and food choices, poor working women — either as stay-at-moms or within the workforce — suffered through an impossible situation. More studies on food stamps, food access, and women-as-workers would illuminate the persistent cycle-of-poverty that perpetuates in these families for generations.

A study is needed on immigration and food rights, demonstrating the formation of citizenship. When the 1996 welfare reform removed most legal immigrants from SNAP, politicians faced severe backlash from the public and state and local officials. Public and political pressure succeeded in overturning the mandate that denied legal immigrants eligibility until they resided in the country for five years. A more in-depth study of this grassroots backlash and the restoration of legal immigrants as worthy of food aid can speak to the social construction of the worthy and unworthy poor.

Studying food stamps through culture and foodways remains an important lens with which to understand the politicization of food access even for those receiving the aid. The FSP

prohibited recipients from purchasing imported food, alcohol, tobacco, and non-food items.<sup>15</sup> These restrictions narrowed the possibility for the purchase of fraudulent or non-food related items. Historian Psyche A. Williams-Forson argued that “Racial ideologies are powerful in shaping one’s worldview.”<sup>16</sup>

A historical exploration into the effectiveness of SNAP in its twenty-four years of operation should analyze the implications of the watershed legislation. Opponents of the FSP altered how Americans thought about federal food aid. Conversations about the right to food now centered on assumptions and stereotypes rather than quantitative and qualitative data and poor people. Since the passage of the 1996 welfare reform, local communities continue to find ways both to increase access to federal food aid to the poor and to provide innovative foodways that reach people who still face barriers in accessing the program.

<sup>15</sup> Food Stamp Flyer, Harris County Judge and Commissioner’s Court, the Texas Department of Welfare and the United States Department of Agriculture, Folder 349-42, Box 0349, Harris County Social Services, Cr008 – (1946-1978), Harris County Clerk’s Office, Houston, Texas.

<sup>16</sup> Psyche A. Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 79.

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