

# American Hunger: Social Ideology and the Fight Against Food Insecurity

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From: flickr.com  
A Great Depression-Era Bread Line

**ABSTRACT** The continued experience of food insecurity among American children and families may, in part, be a consequence of American social ideology. As celebrated and recognizably American ideals like bootstrapping and individualism are, such ideas play a role in perpetuating the social and health challenges of food insecurity. By examining how negative health effects of food insecurity are intertwined with societal ideas of personal responsibility and

individualism, how American social ideology has evolved alongside/shaped food aid policy thus far, and how literature on remedying rates of food insecurity points to policy changes that challenge many main tenets of American ideology, I illustrate how some of our dearest social norms may be indirectly hindering progress on effectively curbing food insecurity in one of the world's wealthiest nations.



From: nytimes.com  
2020 Pandemic Food Bank Line

## FOOD INSECURITY & HEALTH EFFECTS

Health effects of experiencing food insecurity (FI), especially in childhood, are concerning from a public health perspective as it affects both physical and mental health broadly and happens in a social context where norms and expectations of personal responsibility are mediating factors in FI experience.

### Physical Health Effects:

- ❑ Poor physical development
- ❑ Micronutrient deficiencies
- ❑ Increased stress experience
- ❑ Increased odds of ER visits
- ❑ Higher propensity for certain conditions and diseases
- ❑ Ties to obesity with low-quality/cheap foods

Ref: 2, 8, 11, 12

### A Conceptual Framework: Cycle of Food Insecurity & Chronic Disease



Adapted: Seligman HK, Schilling D. N Engl J Med. 2010;363:6-9

### Mental Health Effects:

- ❑ Higher rates of ADHD, impulsivity, poor school performance, behavior & mood regulation issues.
- ❑ Experiencing food itself takes tolls on mental health, especially in family life.
- ❑ Social experience of food insecurity--norms of personal responsibility/individualism work to invalidate the systematic and structural hurdles many facing FI must overcome. Especially for children, who have little control of life circumstances.

Ref: 9, 11, 12

## HISTORY OF FOOD AID POLITICS

U.S. food aid's major milestones track how American social ideology has influenced attempts to address FI.

- ❑ **1930s:** Great Depression forces government action on food aid for millions. Food subsidy program created to buy farm surpluses.
  - From beginning, conceptualized to help ag. industry, unfocused on right-to-food.
- ❑ **1943:** Great Depression-era program ends as both unemployment and food surplus very low.
- ❑ **1960s:** Food Stamps return in pilot program in 1961, signed in federally in 1964 Food Stamp Act. Program continues to expand for following decades with fluctuating benefits and restrictions.
  - Critics push "inducing dependency" rhetoric, support personal responsibility and work as preferred solution avenue.
- ❑ **1990s:** Contested 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act passes, reflecting rise of neoliberalism, harshly restricts benefits, aiming to encourage workforce participation.
- ❑ **2008:** Program renamed Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to fight stigma of welfare label and currently remains the nation's largest anti-hunger initiative.

### Concept Origins

1600's English Poor Laws set precedent for codifying social ideology of "undeserving poor" and require strict work requirements and very limited benefits to address growing number of poor in cities, framing poverty as moral failing.



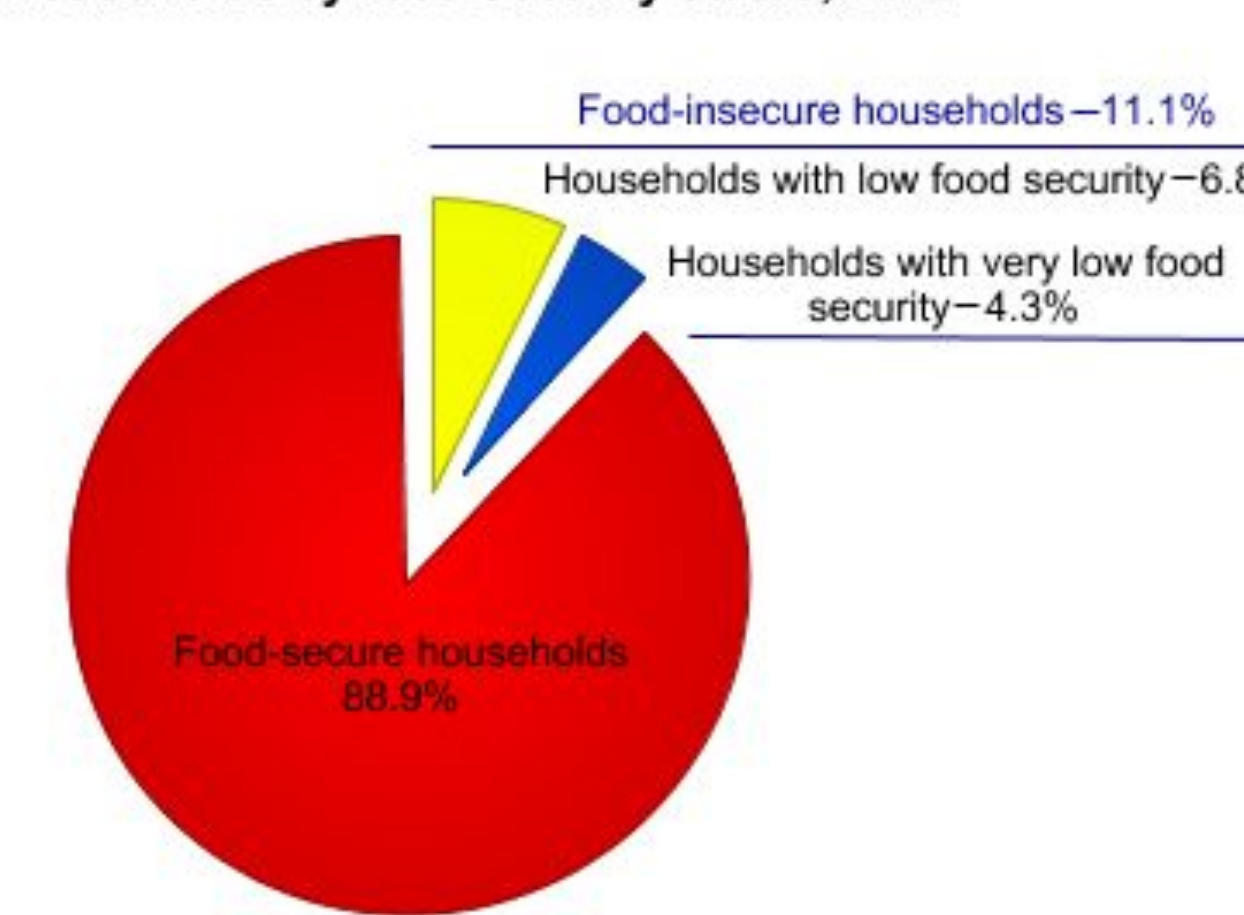
From: usda.gov

President Johnson signs the Food Stamp Act, 1964

*"Instead of instilling personal responsibility, it encourages dependence on the Government"*

1995 Testimony before Congress by Mr. Payne in support of welfare reform's benefit reduction.

### U.S. households by food security status, 2018



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from the December 2018 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

Ref: 1, 4, 6, 10

## POLICY COMPARISON/RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature on addressing food insecurity draws on policies of other developed nations with lower rates of FI among low-SES citizens, and suggests variations on our existing aid programs. Many use a right-to-food view of the role of social welfare in a way that challenges aspects of the current social sentiment on the role of aid programs.

### Rights-based Framework

Right-to-food based approaches based off the perspective of the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights look to treat food aid as meeting basic human needs and create an enabling environment

- ❑ Conditional Cash Transfer Expansion: benefits are more fluid/not earmarked for certain expenses
- ❑ Expanded SNAP/existing program benefits: i.e. including more participants. Easiest place to start changes.
- ❑ Universal Basic Income

Lasting solutions to FI likely require piecemeal steps and a combination of tactics that work to address many complex aspects of poverty. Nonetheless, pursuing real change points to a paradigm shift to support a right-to-food approach, and away from individualism/"bootstrapping" as the only palatable way to address FI.

### WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

The coronavirus pandemic and ensuing economic downturn has made food aid politics as salient as during the Great Depression and may serve as a similar catalyst for expansive policy intervention/change in public sentiment around food aid.

**Unemployment rate soars to 14.7 percent, highest level since the Great Depression**

From: nbnews.com May 8, 2020

**As Hunger Swells, Food Stamps Become a Partisan Flash Point**

Democrats are seeking to raise benefits as research shows a rise in food insecurity without modern precedent amid the pandemic. But Republicans have balked at a long-term expansion of the program.

From: nytimes.com May 6, 2020

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