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# REDUCTIONS IN SNAP INCREASE HEALTH RISKS FOR FOOD INSECURE WOMEN

BY LUIS QUINTANILLA

*RETHINKING POLICY ON GENDER,  
SEXUALITY, AND WOMEN'S ISSUES*



BY LUIS QUINTANILLA

# REDUCTIONS IN THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM INCREASE HEALTH RISKS FOR FOOD INSECURE WOMEN

*Passage of the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage Bill on August 10, 2010, allowed for an \$11.9 billion reduction in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits. Though this reduction will provide states for funds for teacher's salaries and for Medicaid, it will reduce monthly allowances by \$59 starting in November 2013. The re-allocation of safety-net funds will place food insecure women in health deficits. Cuts must be stopped.*



RENAMED SNAP in 2008 to reduce the stigma and to thereby increase participation, the Federal Food Stamps Program has the same goal: alleviating hunger and

malnutrition by increasing a family's food purchasing power.<sup>1</sup> However, recent legislation has threatened the programs ability to meet this goal. In August 10, 2010, cuts in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) were made to prevent the furlough of nearly 140,000 teachers and to add funding to Medicaid.<sup>2</sup> Though the cuts generated funds for other valued sectors, they impact low-income households by decreasing needed monthly allotments, further pinning vulnerable populations into impoverished conditions that lead to food insecurity and hunger. Of the affected participants, women living alone and women with children will be the most impacted. Increases in food insecurity will directly translate into increases in health impairments.

## WHO IS FOOD INSECURE?

In 2008, 14.6 percent (17.1 million) of U.S. households were food insecure sometime during the year.<sup>3</sup> Food insecurity is

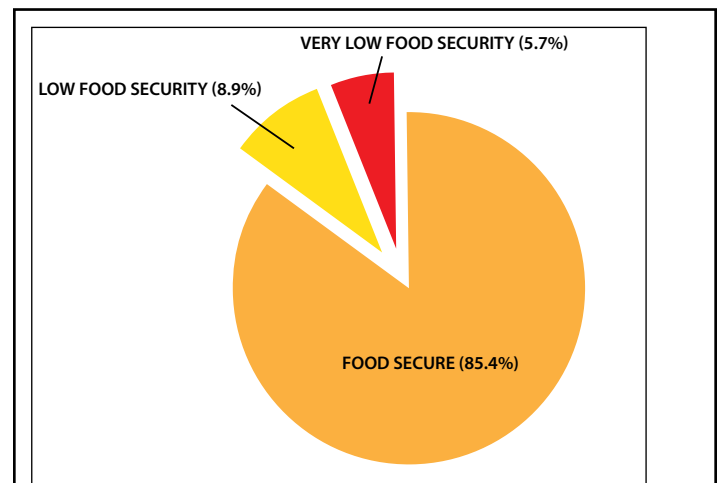


EXHIBIT 1: FOOD SECURITY STATUS OF U.S. HOUSEHOLDS, 2008.<sup>3</sup>

defined as the lack of available nutritionally adequate and safe foods by which socially acceptable ways to acquire these foods is limited or uncertain.<sup>4</sup> The levels of food insecurity are low and very low (see Exhibit 1). The most food insecure population in the U.S.—aside from households with incomes below the official poverty line—are households with children that are headed by single women (37.2 percent).<sup>3</sup> Cuts in SNAP will further place these women at a disadvantage.

## MENTAL HEALTH RISK FACTORS AND FOOD INSECURITY

Though the relationship between food insecurity and mental health status can be bi-directional, food insecurity can lead to mental health deficits. A food insecure mother trying to find work may feel a sense of guilt and blame, which elicits a stress response. According to Heflin, Siefert, and Williams, one's sense of mastery, or the ability to solve one's own problems, can be eroded by one's perception of stress in their environment and one's sense of personal efficacy.<sup>5</sup> Heflin, Siefert, and Williams also point to mental health impairments as a result of nutritional loss from food insecurity. Lack of sufficient vitamin intake has been associated with symptoms like irritability, nervousness, depressed mood, feelings of fear, and reduced cognitive and motor functioning. In this study, food insecurity was determined to be a causal or contributing factor in depression. Meeting criteria for major depression was highly significant in their findings. Again, the authors point to the limitations of a causal relationship, where depression causes food insecurity or both occurring simultaneously.<sup>6</sup>

Levels of depression and anxiety have also been found to be higher in food insecure women. In a cross-sectional survey conducted from 2001 to 2003 on 2870 mothers of 3-year-old children, food insecure women demonstrated higher levels of major depressive episodes and generalized anxiety disorder.<sup>5</sup> One study examined the effects of the loss food stamp benefits on mothers. A maternal depression screen was provided to a sample of 5306 mothers. The study found women who had seen a reduction in food stamps scored positively on the maternal depression screen.<sup>7</sup>

Food insecurity can impact the mental health status of women. The lack of basic sustenance can lead to serious effects in psychological functioning. Food insecurity has been linked to an increase in depressive and anxiety disorders. Thus, the re-allocating and reduction of SNAP funds will only worsen the ability of SNAP women to maintain their mental health.

## HOW TO HELP

Reductions in SNAP benefits will lead to increased numbers of households experiencing food insecurity and increased numbers of food insecure women experiencing physical and mental health deficits. There are, however, several actions individuals can take to protest the siphoning of SNAP benefits:

- Visit the Food Research and Action Center website (<http://www.frac.org>) to obtain additional information.
- Contact the White House (202-456-1414) to voice concern about cuts in SNAP benefits.
- Urge your congressional representatives to support a bill that does not raid SNAP benefits.
- To understand the burden of being food insecure, take the Food Stamps Challenge and attempt to live off \$3 per day worth of food and urge your congressional representatives to also take the challenge.

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*Photo Credit: istockphoto.com*

## NOTES

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