

**Testimony of
Dr. Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach
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on the subject of “Ending Hunger in America: Challenges, Opportunities, and Building the
Political Will to Succeed”
before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Rules
April 28, 2021**

Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today at this hearing on ending hunger in America.

My name is Diane Schanzenbach, and I am the Director of the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University, where I am also the Margaret Walker Alexander Professor of Social Policy and Economics. For the past two decades, I have conducted and published numerous reports, peer-reviewed research studies and book chapters on food hardship, hunger, and federal nutrition assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). I also serve on the boards of the Greater Chicago Food Depository and the Food Research and Action Center and am an elected member of the National Academy of Social Insurance as well as the National Academy of Education. I have served as a member of the National Academies of Science Engineering and Medicine’s Committee on Examination of the Adequacy of Food Resources and SNAP Allotments, and the National Academies panel on Improving Consumer Data for Food and Nutrition Policy.

My testimony today draws primarily from research that I have conducted or reviewed that considers the role of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) and other influences on hunger, food insecurity, health, and economic security.

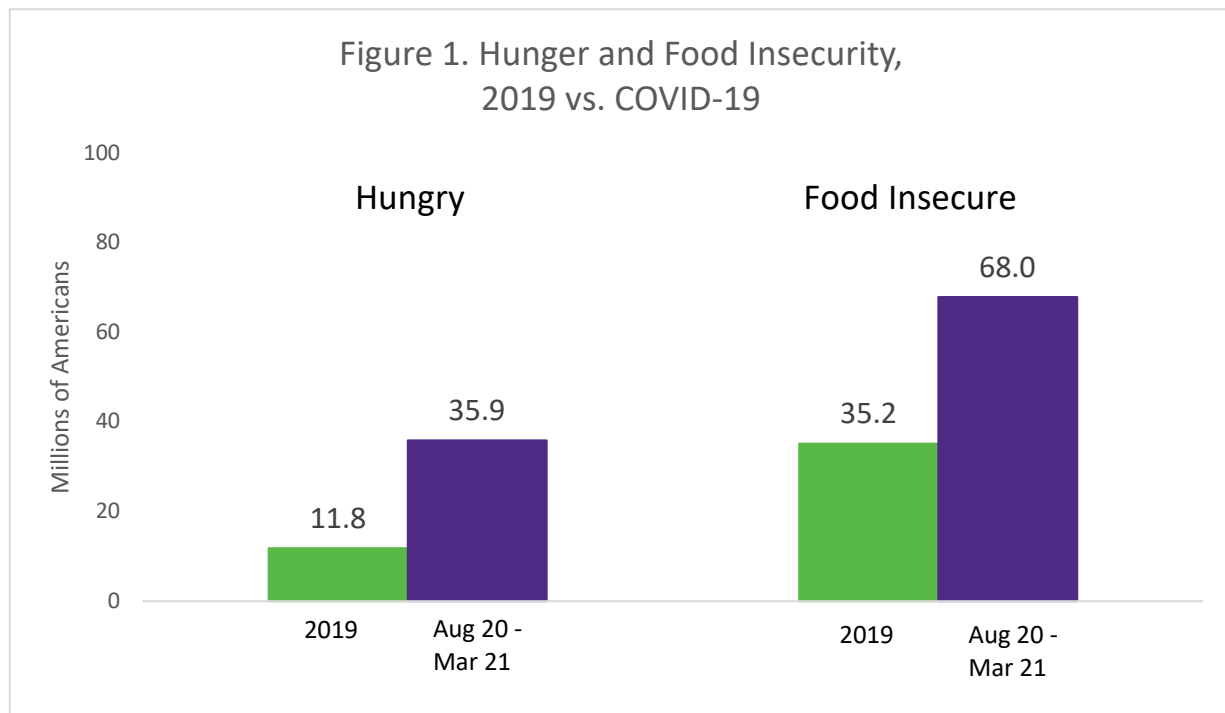
The Current State of Hunger in the United States

Even during a strong economy, there are several million Americans who experience hunger.

In 2019, 35.2 million people (11 percent of the population) were food insecure, meaning they did not have consistent, dependable access to enough food to live an active, healthy lifestyle. In 2019, 11.8 million of these food insecure individuals (4 percent of the population) were also categorized as hungry. Hunger—not having enough to eat, or in USDA’s parlance experiencing “very low food security” (VLFS)—is a more severe measure than food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2020).

During COVID-19, between August 2020 and March 2021, Census Bureau surveys indicate that 35.9 million Americans (11 percent of the population) lived in households in which they

sometimes or often did not have enough to eat in the past week—in other words, they were hungry. While the food security statistics collected on a regular basis during COVID-19 are not strictly comparable to those collected on an annual basis, it is clear that rates of hunger are elevated in comparison to their pre-pandemic levels. Rates of hunger have been especially high among households with children and among children themselves. I estimate that 68.0 million Americans (20 percent of the population) were food insecure during COVID-19 (Schanzenbach and Pitts, 2020).



Typically, measures of food hardship increase when the unemployment rate increases, so high rates are not surprising given the state of the economy. The coronavirus pandemic and the measures to address the public health emergency led to a rapid and an unprecedented spike in unemployment, as well as hour reductions for many workers. School and childcare closures, where many children typically receive free or subsidized meals, further added to the pressure on families' food budgets. In addition, food prices increased sharply at the start of the pandemic leading to a reduction in the purchasing power of families' limited income.

We have seen strong progress against hunger in the last three months. Rates of hunger peaked in December with 46 million reporting they sometimes or often didn't have enough to eat in the prior week. By the end of March, the numbers fell to 30 million—the lowest since the pandemic began. This progress reflects a range of factors, including the Economic Impact Payments, increases in SNAP benefit levels, a new round of Pandemic EBT payments paid to families who lost access to free or reduced-price school meals, and a strengthening job market.

I emphasize that rates of hunger would have been even worse this past year were it not for government programs already in place, extraordinary emergency measures passed by Congress

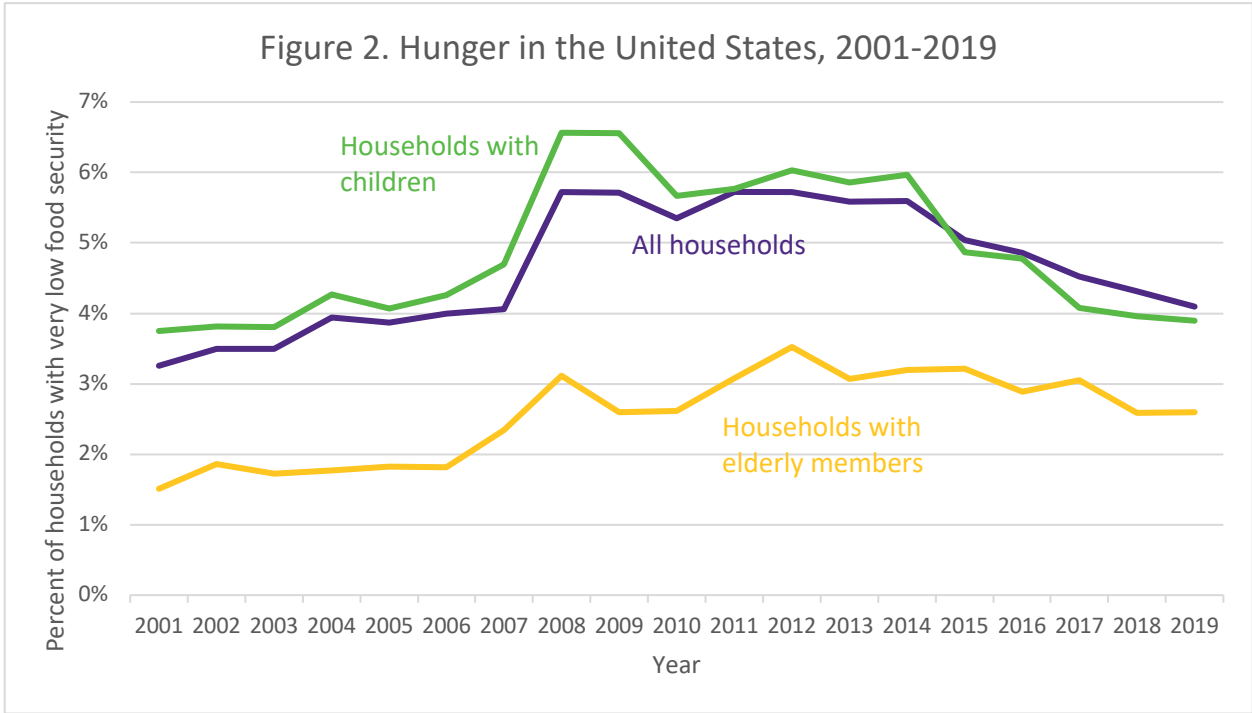
both at the beginning of the pandemic and throughout the past 12 months, and a surge in aid from food banks and other organizations.

Trends in Hunger in the United States

Households with children tend to experience higher rates of hunger than households overall. Households with elderly members tend to experience somewhat lower rates of hunger than households overall, and changes in hunger among the elderly are less tied to the economy. These rates are still unconscionably high, though. Over the last decade, 3 percent of elderly households reported experiencing hunger.

As shown in Figure 2, below, annual rates of hunger overall and among households with children increased by 40 percent at the onset of the Great Recession and remained elevated for at least seven years. During COVID-19, children have been much worse off, with hunger rates in households with children averaging 3.5 percentage points higher than overall households.

The extended elevation of food insecurity for years following an economic downturn in part reflects the fact that an economic recovery takes longer to reach more disadvantaged households. Unemployment rates for groups that tend to have higher rates of hunger (e.g. those with low levels of education) generally increase more during recessions and take longer to come back down. Because of this tendency, I have advised my colleagues who run food banks to expect need to be elevated for months and even years to come.



The experience of lack of adequate food is widespread across the United States. The most recent USDA numbers prior to the pandemic show hunger rates ranging from a low of 2.6

percent in New Hampshire to a high of 7.0 percent in Louisiana (see Figure 3, Panel A). During COVID-19, in every state, at least 1 in 15 adults say they don't have enough to eat and in 27 states more than 1 in 10 adults report not having enough to eat (see Figure 3, Panel B).

Figure 3A: Hunger by State, 2017–19
Very Low Food Security during the Year
All Households

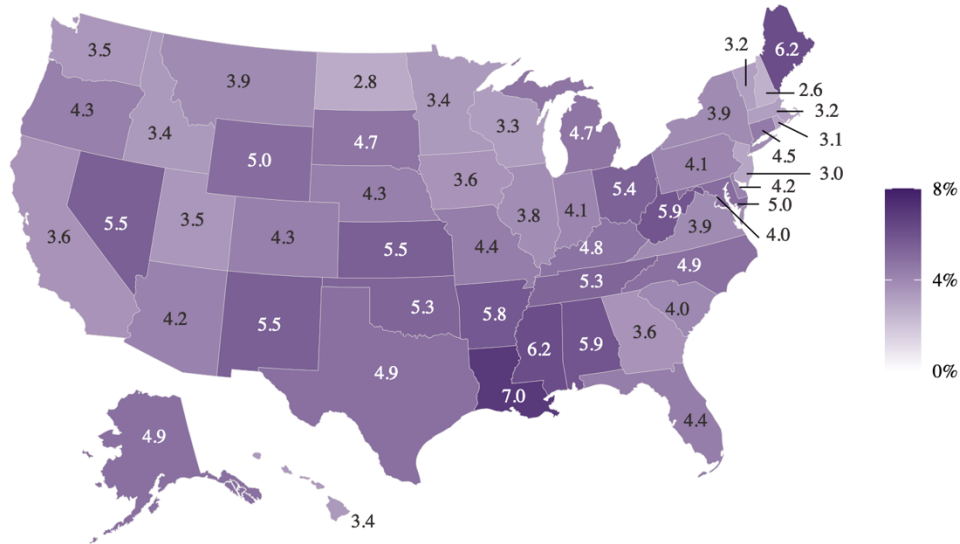
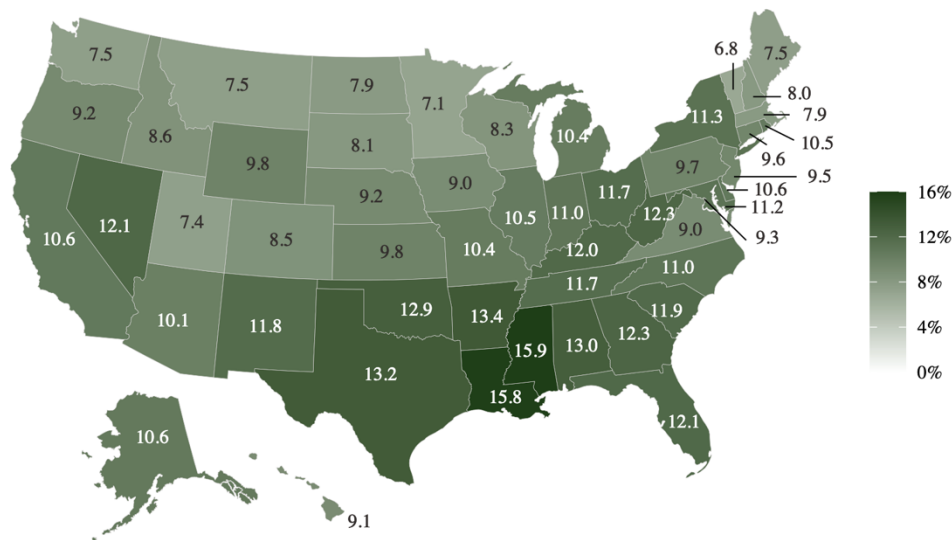
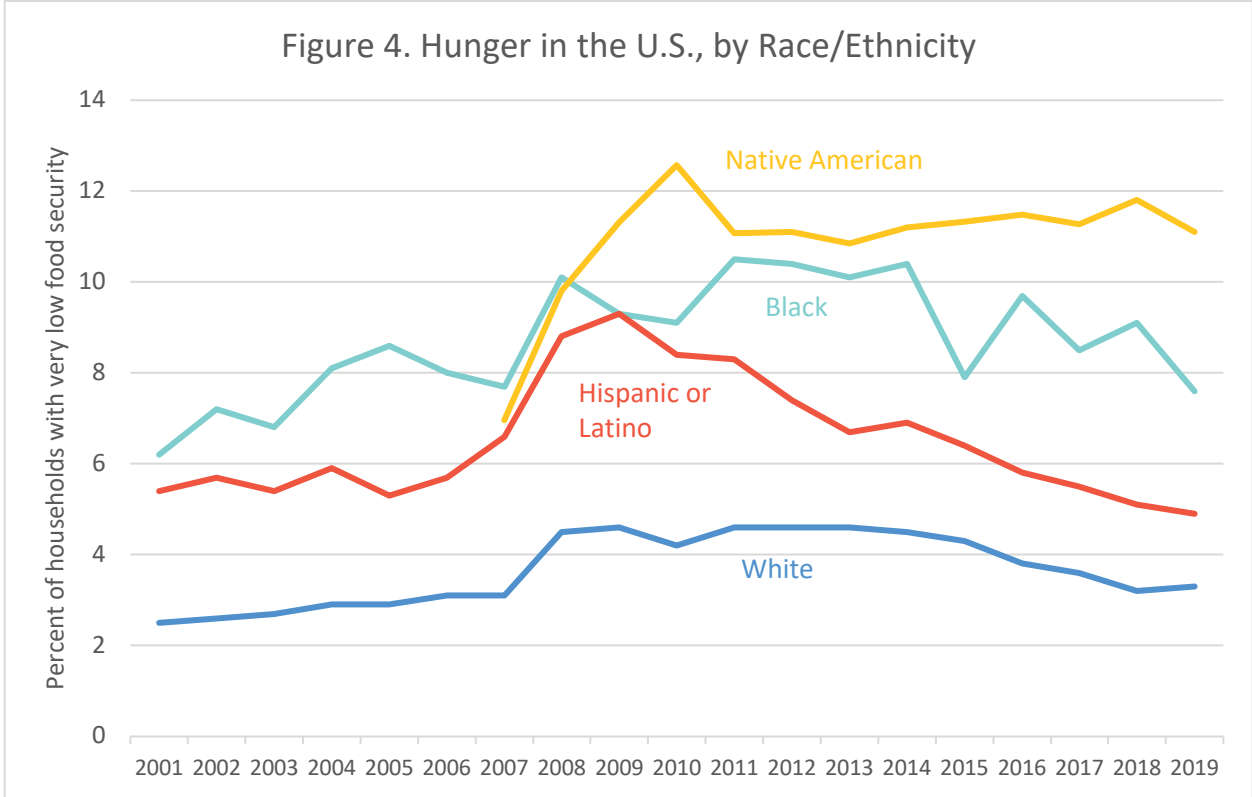


Figure 3B: Hunger During COVID-19
Sometimes or Often Not Enough to Eat in the Past 7 Days
All Households – August 19, 2020 – March 29, 2021



Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American families are more likely to experience hunger compared to White families (see Figure 4). Typically, in the annual data, Blacks are a little more

than twice as likely as Whites to experience hunger. Rates among Hispanic/Latinos fall between those of Blacks and Whites. These same relative patterns have held during COVID-19. By my calculations, more than 1 in 10 Native Americans experienced hunger over the last decade. (Data on Native Americans are not yet available during COVID-19).



Of course, the share experiencing hunger declines as incomes increase. About half of households experiencing hunger have incomes lower than the poverty threshold, and three-quarters have incomes below twice the poverty threshold. This means that many people who are eligible for or are participating in SNAP and other programs still suffer from hunger, suggesting that the programs as they are currently structured are insufficient to eliminate hunger. Another one-quarter have higher incomes than twice the poverty threshold and generally are not eligible for government food support programs like SNAP and free school meals. During COVID-19, about 4 percent of adults report that they have received food from a food pantry in the last week.

Paths to Eliminating Hunger

There is a host of evidence that we can move the needle on hunger, and indeed I believe that together we could eliminate it entirely.

The centerpiece for federal efforts to address hunger and food security in the U.S. is SNAP, which provides resources to eligible families to purchase food to be prepared and consumed at

home. SNAP already does much to reduce hunger but could be even more effective with some modest policy changes. Other policies that play crucial supporting roles are school meals, the Pandemic and Summer EBT programs, and summer feeding programs, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), Unemployment Insurance, Social Security, the Economic Impact Payments, and the newly expanded Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit.

To be sure, there is an important role for food banks and other charities. They help meet emergency needs, and for some people facing hunger—such as those with incomes that place them out of the range of most food support programs but have fallen on hard times—are the only source of help. I regularly hear from leaders in this sector that their work is more effective when it is supported by a strong SNAP program.

SNAP

SNAP is a highly efficient and effective program, designed to work through the normal channels of trade like grocery stores and supermarkets. SNAP supplements the cash resources that a family has to purchase food, so that between SNAP and their other income, a family should be able to afford to buy a sufficient, healthy diet. Average monthly benefits for a family of 3 in 2019 (before the pandemic) amounted to \$365 per household—which is about \$4 per person per day. SNAP kept 2.5 million people out of poverty in 2019, including 1 million children and a quarter of a million elderly (Fox, 2020).

SNAP is efficiently targeted to families who need benefits the most, reduces the likelihood that families have trouble affording food, and serves as an automatic fiscal stabilizer in times of economic downturns. SNAP also offers vital long-term benefits to children. Research has shown that SNAP provides key benefits across people's lives, boosting health and economic outcomes. Recent research that I conducted found that those who had access to SNAP benefits as children were more likely to graduate from high school and grew up to be healthier; women in particular were more likely to become economically successful due to childhood access to SNAP benefits (Hoynes et al., 2016).

SNAP serves a diverse caseload. About 2 in 5 households on SNAP have children at home. The majority of these families are employed, but do not make enough to afford the food they need on their own. For them, SNAP helps stretch their grocery budget and reduces the likelihood they suffer hunger or food insecurity. A lot of these families cycle on and off of SNAP, using it temporarily when their jobs or hours are unstable. Another 2 in 5 have elderly or disabled members. They generally will be eligible for SNAP and participate for longer periods of time, because their incomes tend to be stable but too low to afford the food they need without additional help. The remaining 1 in 5 households tends to be very poor, many with incomes below half the poverty threshold or even no cash income at all. Many of these have just a single adult in the household and face many challenges and barriers that make finding stable employment difficult. In many of these cases, SNAP is the only program available to them.

SNAP can serve such a diverse caseload because it is well designed. The benefit levels are flexible, topping up purchasing power for those who lack enough money to buy the food they need, and providing a floor for food consumption for our nation's most vulnerable families. A key reason for SNAP's success is that it relies on the private sector to provide efficient access to food through grocery stores and other retail outlets. The program's reliance on the free market system has been a critical feature of SNAP from the beginning.

SNAP provides many benefits to both individuals and society. It benefits the wider economy by providing an effective economic stimulus in difficult economic times, and by also ensuring that recipients preserve their ability to buy food. By design, SNAP can very quickly adapt to economic downturns. As more households become eligible for the program—for example, due to job loss—they can be quickly enrolled, with total program outlays automatically increasing along with need, and then reducing again as the economy recovers.

SNAP stimulates the economy and helped turn the tide from contraction to expansion. Its recipients quickly spend their benefits, providing a relatively rapid fiscal stimulus to the local economy including the retail, wholesale, and transportation systems that deliver the food purchased. The USDA estimates that every \$5 in new SNAP benefits generates as much as \$9 of economic activity. This translates into almost 10,000 jobs from \$1 billion dollars in total SNAP spending (Hanson, 2010). Alan Blinder and Mark Zandi (2015) have found that Congress' authorization of a temporary SNAP increase during the Great Recession had a larger fiscal stimulus impact than any other potential spending increase or tax-cut policy.

By increasing resources available to purchase food, SNAP increases food spending, lifts millions of people out of poverty, reduces hunger and food insecurity, and improves both the quantity and the quality of foods purchased. When families receive SNAP, they are able to buy more nutritious foods they otherwise could not afford. A recent study found that a monthly \$30 increase in SNAP benefits would increase participants' consumption of nutritious foods such as vegetables and healthy proteins, while reducing food insecurity and fast-food consumption (Anderson & Butcher, 2016).

Reforming SNAP

SNAP is effective, and it would be even more effective if the benefit were better aligned with families' needs. Even before COVID-19, there was wide recognition that SNAP benefits were inadequate to buy and prepare healthy food with a benefit amount based on an out-of-date foundation called the Thrifty Food Plan.

For example, today food preparation is dramatically different from when SNAP was introduced. High-quality prepared and convenience foods—pre-washed bagged salads, cleaned baby carrots, rotisserie chickens, etc.—have helped reduce the time it takes to prepare meals, and has helped drive a shift in time use (especially among women) away from food preparation and towards other productive activities, such as nurturing children and paid employment. SNAP benefits, however, are based on an increasingly outdated formula that assumes that household

recipients can allocate an unlimited amount of time to prepare meals from scratch (Ziliak, 2016). Currently USDA is updating the Thrifty Food Plan to better reflect an accurate cost of a healthy basic diet today. Evidence suggests that even a modest, \$30-per-month increase in SNAP benefits would improve dietary quality and reduce hunger and food insecurity.

We also need to make sure that those in need can access SNAP benefits. Participation rates are especially low among the elderly. The Elderly Simplified Assistance Demonstration Project streamlines the application and certification process for some households with elderly and disabled members and should be expanded nationwide to address senior hunger.

Currently, SNAP benefits for the group known as ABAWDs (Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents, who are not elderly or disabled and are not living with children) are time-limited in normal economic times to only 3 months in a 36-month period, unless they are employed at least 20 hours per week or are engaged in a workfare or training activity. States are not required to offer a job or training program to individuals subject to the SNAP time limit, and the law limits the characteristics of training programs that a state can provide. As a result, the requirements are mismatched, not adequately meeting needs of the population to be served. The rule is also administratively complex, and one of SNAP's most error-prone aspects (Bolen & Dean, 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic, work requirements have been suspended nationwide. This population is among the most vulnerable and often faces substantial barriers to employment, in good economic times as well as poor. I believe it is a mistake to tie basic food aid to employment.

Other Approaches to Eliminating Hunger

To eliminate hunger requires a multi-dimensional approach, built on SNAP as a cornerstone but including a range of additional tools.

School lunches and breakfasts play an important role in providing healthy meals to children—their importance was underscored during COVID-19 when kids lost access to these meals. Congress enacted the Pandemic-EBT program, which provides food benefits similar to SNAP to students who lost access to school meals due to school closures. My research found that these payments reduced child hunger in the weeks after they were received by 30 percent (Bauer et al., 2020). This program was modeled after a pilot program conducted several years ago by USDA. The Summer EBT program gave families \$60 per month in benefits per eligible child during the summer months to offset the loss of school meals. The evaluation of this pilot program found that those children awarded additional benefits experienced less hunger and food insecurity, and improved their diets, consuming more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and dairy products, and fewer sugar-sweetened beverages (Gordon et al., 2016). The Biden Administration recently announced that these payments will continue through this summer. Making this program permanent will help eliminate hunger.

Research has documented the importance of adequate nutrition in early life on later-life health and economic outcomes, so it is particularly important to ensure that pregnant women and

young children are protected from hunger. While WIC does an exemplary job ensuring that infants have adequate access to the foods and breastmilk or infant formula they require, it falls short along other dimensions. Participation rates drop substantially as children age; while 84 percent of eligible infants participate in WIC, the share drops to 33 percent by age 4. To protect children from hunger, we need to increase participation rates in WIC. Since all pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and toddlers on SNAP are automatically eligible for WIC, it would be straightforward to measure and establish performance metrics for cross-enrollment of eligible SNAP participants into WIC, similar to the performance metrics for the National School Lunch Program.

Our refundable tax credits play an important role as well. Together the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit (CTC) lifted 7.5 million out of poverty in 2019. Both have been expanded in smart ways as part of COVID-19 relief packages. The EITC increases employment and incomes, especially among families with children. The recent changes will also make it a more effective program for childless individuals. While the EITC plays a vital role, it has some limitations. Since it is only paid out once per year, it generally does not help with month-to-month expenses. Further, because it is conditional on employment, it provides little insurance during job loss or economic downturns. The new, fully refundable CTC will be paid out monthly, providing a needed boost in resources to children even when their parents cannot find work. These reforms to the CTC are expected to cut child poverty nearly in half next year, and will surely help reduce hunger. This will also spur better outcomes for these children in the long run.

Social Security deserves a special mention, as it lifts 26.5 million people (including 17.5 million seniors) out of poverty. Without question, the rate of hunger among the elderly is much lower because of this program. So, too, does Unemployment Insurance, which helped millions of Americans weather the spike in COVID-19 job losses.

Of course, eliminating hunger and enhancing economic security is greatly assisted by sustained, broad-based economic growth. When people have the education and training they need, more are employed and wages are growing, the need for government assistance declines.

Conclusions

Over the last year, we have seen the highest rates of hunger in the United States since we began systematically measuring it. As we continue to emerge from the national crisis caused by COVID-19, we should not be satisfied with merely reducing hunger in the U.S. back to its previous level. We can eliminate hunger entirely.

We can dramatically reduce, and I believe even eliminate, hunger by better using the tools we have already developed. We can enhance SNAP by aligning its benefits with what it realistically takes to purchase and eat a healthy, basic diet, and by increasing participation. Further, we can improve participation in other nutrition programs like school meals and WIC. The recent expansions to the EITC, Child Tax Credit, and Summer EBT will also reduce hunger; making these expansions permanent will make great strides. Bolstered by stronger income and nutrition support programs, the nonprofit sector will be made even more effective in filling remaining gaps and addressing some of the root causes of hunger.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions you might have.

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