  
Promoting smart, fair food policy for New York

**Fall 2013 Food Policy for Breakfast Seminar Series**

**The History and Politics of the SNAP Program: What Can We Learn in 2013?**

**November 19, 2013**

**Panelist Discussions:**

**Triada Stampas, Senior Director of Government Relations, Food Bank for New York City**

* What is a “meal gap”? The translation of the financial resources needed for families to have a nutritionally sound diet into number of meals.
  + This metric is utilized by Feeding America and can be more meaningful that other metrics, like pounds of food.
* In New York City, there is a meal gap of 235 million – i.e. NYC families have fallen short this many meals in a year).
  + Food banks help to address this gap but generally fall about 100 million meals short per year.
* 40% of SNAP population utilized also emergency food and 75% of SNAP recipients report funds are gone by end of month. But emergency food efforts are not able to fully fulfill the need.
* Among low income households with children, 70% of reported difficulties affording food.
  + Many of these families used a similar coping mechanism: they purchased less protein and also more foods that are not nutritionally sound, but are filling.
* SNAP was cut was about 5% across the board which translates into a loss of about 76 million meals over the next 12 months.
* The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009 provided Americans with an upfront increase in food stamp benefits - i.e. it frontloaded increases ahead of inflation.
  + - The plan was to let inflation “catch up,” then the benefits increase incrementally from there as usual.
    - November 2013: this deadline was NOT indicated as the expiration for increase provided by the 2009 legislation - this was an accelerated deadline.
* The current Farm Bill includes two leading proposals related to SNAP:
  + A $4 billion cut or $40 billion cut
    - The smaller cut is targeted at states that link their SNAP program with a low income home energy assistance program. Of these states, NY will bear the brunt because it has the largest number SNAP enrollees.
  + Between $30 and $90 a month for food will be cut each month for families.
  + Kirsten Gillibrand was quoted, saying, “Never before has cutting SNAP benefits been a safe position for Democrats to take.”
  + Congressional members are currently floating $10 million as an acceptable cut number.

**Maggie Dickinson, PhD Candidate, CUNY Graduate Center, Department of Anthropology**

* We have lessons to learn from what happened during the historical welfare reform of 1996.
* There is currently not enough political clout behind the issues of food stamps to make Democrats feel like they can and should act on the issue.
* Politicians are transforming a robust program that began as something to protect right to food into something that is a work support (i.e. subsidy to low-wage labor).
  + For example, Bloomberg raised food stamp rules by 120% during his time as mayor.
* There must be an improved policy in regards to unemployed people seeking SNAP benefits.
  + People who are working have an easier time applying for food stamps; much more difficult a person is unemployed or if that person is also applying for cash assistance, as s/he lack many of the documents, like pay stubs or proof of address, that are required for the application.
    - Bloomberg made it easier for employed individuals.
    - Cash assistance program is still punitive and difficult to apply for (this is left over from the Giuliani administration).
* Overall welfare spending has actually increased since 1996, but there has been a shift in welfare state, and because of this, the extra spending is not necessarily benefitting the very poor and the unemployed.
* We are moving towards defining a “deserving” poor – those who are earning minimum wage (which may be below subsistence level), but who are employed.
  + Work requirements for benefits demonstrate this notion.
* The welfare reform bill included a waiver for able-bodied adults without dependents, which was meant to protect citizens during economic crisis. NYC never accepted these waivers for food stamps, though NYS did.
* Earned-income tax credit: If the food stamp program is based on this, a 2-tiered system is created and we risk having a welfare-ization of the food stamp program.

**Janet Poppendieck, PhD, Co-Director, NYC Food Policy Center**

* In the mid-70’s, an energy crisis caused spike in food prices which lead to an increase in food stamp benefits and increase in enrollees.
  + Gerald Ford called the food stamps program “out of control,” and this is how the surge in participation was viewed by the conservative party and many media outlets.
* The Reagan administration cut food stamps by $7 million, and enrollment declined by 1 million.
* It was the expertise of advocates that the fueled changes that restored SNAP during mid-90s welfare reform.
  + There was a change in way the program was administered that allowed for the surge of enrollment in 2003 and 2009 recessions, respectively.
* Reframing SNAP as a work assistance program assistance is not the best strategy because this is used to further depress benefits to the poorest and those most in need.
* Food assistance has been resilient in the long run in the US but people do not eat in the long run – they eat every day.

**Questions from the Audience**:

* What is a good way for “normal people” to get information about SNAP and food policy? Should we consider the new administration an opportunity to call for a food policy center?
  + Triada Stampas: The average NYC resident knows very little about SNAP cuts. Food Bank for NYC has previously tabled at GrowNYC markets and has offered information about how the Farm Bill affects NYC, and the table would be “mobbed” with questions. A brief side note – the City council’s annual hearing about hunger happening at 1pm on Monday, November 25th and will be an opportunity to find out more information on emergency food and SNAP. Both formal and informal information resources on the topic exist.
  + Jan Poppendieck: There is a great potential for enlisting faith-based organizations in education efforts.
  + Maggie Dickens: It is important to consider how to organize around these efforts and do it smartly. There are opportunities for more organizing of those who come to food banks to eat – these people certainly have direct stake in this issue.
* How can we help those on food stamps obtain more nutritious food?
  + Maggie Dickens: Conversations about nutrition often happen without consideration for the actual benefit amounts afforded to people and families enrolled in SNAP.
    - We need the help of public and private funders to improve quality of food at food banks. SNAP enrollees are strategic - they will address their remaining monthly food needs with what is offered at food banks, after they maximize SNAP purchases. For this reason, food banks need to offer nutritious food.
  + Jan Poppendieck: Though it is a complex task, we must restructure food subsidies so that produce is comparatively inexpensive in relation to grain and soy.
  + Triada Stampas: A recalculation of the poverty level and a recalculation of the SNAP benefits offered could mean more appropriate SNAP qualification criteria and more appropriate benefits.
* How do we reframe and broaden the food stamps discussion?
  + Jan Poppendieck: We will not solve poverty with food stamps, but talking about food stamps is also an opportunity to address issues and causes of poverty.
  + Triada Stampas: We must build momentum locally – we should use “states as the laboratories of democracy” to find ways to improve the food stamps program and better address issues of hunger and food insecurity.
  + Maggie Dickens: We must take a critical look at what foods we subsidizing and for what purpose. How do we shift these subsidies? And how do we restructure our food system to benefit more regional foodsheds?