Othering & Belonging Institute

RESEARCH REPORT

Fighting Poverty with SNAP

Reassessing the Tool Kit for a Unified Movement for Economic Justice

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The Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, formerly the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, is a vibrant hub of researchers, community leaders, policy-makers, artists, and communicators that advances research, policy, and work related to marginalized communities. It engages in innovative narrative, communications, and cultural strategies that attempt to reframe the public discourse around marginality and inclusion and respond to issues that require immediate and long-term action.

This report was developed by Global Justice Program researchers at the Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, as part of its larger project of analyzing food and agricultural policy.

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Cover: Members of the National Welfare Rights Organization march to end hunger, in Washington, DC, 1968. Credit: Jack Rottier/ National Parks Service. Accessed from the Jack Rottier Collection at George Mason University Libraries.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Antipoverty and the Food System

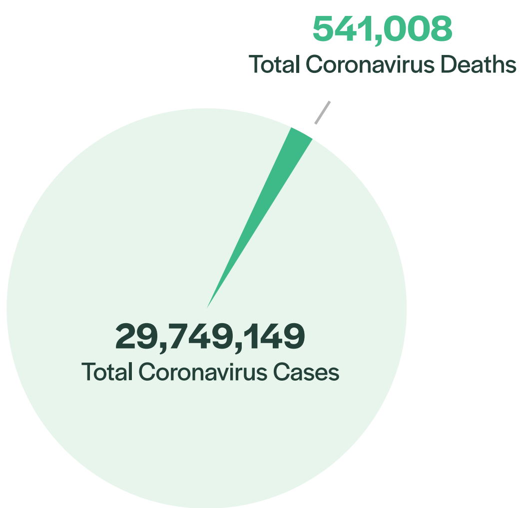
COUNTLESS ORGANIZATIONS, communities, and social movements across the United States are fighting for a more just and equitable future. Alongside their work, this report envisions a future where hunger is recognized as an issue of poverty and not simply a lack of food and thus where poverty itself is curbed and wealth more equitably distributed. We envision a future where we can all share the prosperity of the nation, where the nation acts responsibly toward its people and toward the people of other nations, and where all peoples have dignity (in wages, in workplace protections, and in workplace organizing) regardless of the work they do.

Considering the uneven impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of this vision and of efforts to realize it cannot be understated. As of April 22, 2021, more than 31 million cases of the virus and more than 569,000 deaths associated with it have been confirmed in the United States, and the large-scale lock-downs and other measures that have been implemented to curb the progression of the virus have led to mass unemployment and historic drops in economic activity.[1] Across the United States, businesses have prioritized profitability over workers' lives and livelihoods, with communities of color bearing the brunt of the pandemic's health and economic impacts. Nationally, Black and Latinx people are contracting the virus at rates three times higher than white people; and Black and Native people are dying at a rate 1.4 times, and Latinx people 1.2 times, higher than white people.[2] According to a Pew Research Center survey, 53 percent of Latinx respondents said they or someone else in their household have either been laid off or taken a pay cut because of the pandemic, which is larger than the shares of white (38 percent) and Black (43 percent) respondents who said the same.[3] Additionally, the recovery of jobs since the outset of the pandemic has been uneven. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for Black workers has declined only 7.6 percentage points since peaking in May 2020, compared to a decline of 9.4 percentage points for Asian workers and 9 percentage points for white workers across the same period.[4]

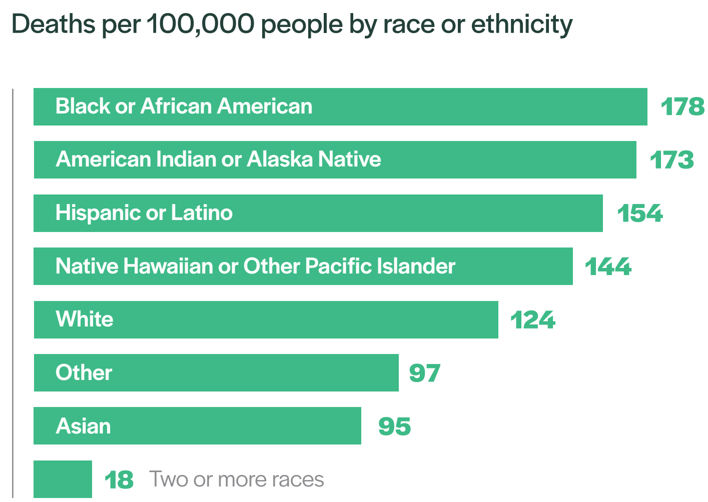
Such labor market disparities have translated into disparities in food sufficiency and housing security. According to the Census Pulse Survey, Black and Latinx adults were more than twice as likely as white adults to report that their household did not get enough to eat: 17 percent for Black adults and 16 percent for Latinx adults, compared to 7 percent of white adults. Adults who identify as American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, or as multiracial, taken together were more than twice as likely as white adults to report that their household did not get enough to eat, at 19 percent. These effects were pronounced for families living with children. Adults in households with children were more likely to report that the household did not get enough to eat: 14 percent, compared to 7 percent for households without children, well above the prepandemic figure.[5] Finally, according to a Brookings Institution survey, between the start of the pandemic and December 2020, the eviction and foreclosure rate of Black and Latinx respondents increased by 7 percent as compared to only 2 percent among white respondents.[6] Living in such economic precarity, there is no shortage of hardship.

FIGURE 1

The Impact of COVID-19 through March 7, 2021



Source: Worldometer: https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/us/



Source: The COVID Racial Data Tracker: https://covidtracking.com/race

Within our vision of a more just and equitable future, the obligation of the nation to ensure the well-being of its people is no longer stigmatized or diminished, and policy-makers themselves take seriously this obligation even beyond moments of crisis. This more equitable future thus demands, at the very least, a safety net for all people living within the country, bridging racial and economic divides alike. This report contends that developing a comprehensive national safety net involves reassessing and strengthening existing social support programs not limited to those that explicitly aim to tackle poverty. Given the relationship between economic hardship and putting food on the table, programs that target food insecurity offer an important opportunity to develop such a safety net. Toward this end, this report looks to a centerpiece of US food and agriculture policy: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

This report accounts for the value of SNAP in helping low-income individuals and families acquire food, particularly during times of economic hardship.[7] Yet it also recognizes that SNAP's potential has never been limited to food assistance. Rather, SNAP's potential lay in the program's ability to operate as a full-fledged *anti-poverty* program and thus a program that would strike at the root of hunger itself. Therefore, moving the program toward such ends would not only drastically change the landscape of hunger in the United States but would enlist in the fight against poverty the work of policy-makers, organizations, communities, and social movements that work with food and agriculture.

This report is organized into four parts. **Part 1** accounts for how SNAP functions as an antipoverty program in the United States and how its effectiveness in curbing poverty evidences the origins and evolution of the program. SNAP originated as part of the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act—the first Farm Bill—where the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation facilitated the distribution of farm commodities, purchased at reduced prices, to state and local hunger relief agencies. It was not until President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty and the Food Stamp Act of 1964 that the precursor to the program would be regarded as a full-fledged antipoverty program.[8]

Part 2 of this report maps the landscape upon which struggles over SNAP take place. As part of the Farm Bill, SNAP has been acutely vulnerable to the whims of government austerity efforts and corporate control that have remade the entire US food system in the past several decades. The struggle over SNAP in the 2018 Farm Bill highlights the challenges and opportunities ahead of us. We are reminded of the premier nutrition assistance program's ability to stand on its own for years and its capacity to operate as an antipoverty program.

Part 3 of this report offers three policy recommendations to help realize the program's full potential: removing work requirements and other discriminatory restrictions from SNAP, removing SNAP from the US Farm Bill while anticipating the new challenges this may pose, and federalizing the administration of the program and distribution of its benefits.

Part 4 of this report interrogates how the strategies and lessons of these efforts to strengthen SNAP can inform the development of an even more effective social safety net: universal basic income (UBI). Ultimately, UBI would provide an unconditional and guaranteed income that would meet basic human needs while providing a floor of economic security.[9] Not only would such a program effectively eliminate absolute poverty, but it would also ameliorate the historic effects of structural racism, including decades of restrictive immigration laws and housing policies, discriminatory hiring and employment practices, segregation, and other circumstances that have left countless communities unable to secure living wages, home and car ownership, and other assets.

PART 1

Reframing the Value of SNAP

DESPITE ITS NAME, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has done far more than offer nutrition assistance for those experiencing economic hardship within the United States. It has also proven itself to be an effective antipoverty tool. SNAP benefits are an entitlement, which means that anyone who qualifies under the program rules can receive benefits. Families with the greatest need receive the largest benefits, and households in the lowest income bracket use twice the proportion of their total expenditures on food than do those households in the highest income bracket.[10]

An Antipoverty Program

Because it is an entitlement program that follows income, SNAP operates as a powerful antipoverty tool. SNAP benefits by and large go to the poor. For example, according to a 2017 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report, about 92 percent of SNAP benefits went to households with incomes below the poverty line, and 55 percent went to households below half of the poverty line (about $10,668 for a family of three in fiscal year 2020). Further, when measured as income and when correcting for households' underreporting of benefits, SNAP has been shown to keep many people out of poverty. For example, in 2016 (the most recent year such data are available), SNAP kept about 7.3 million people out of poverty, including 3.3 million children.[11] According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report, *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*, SNAP is the second-largest antipoverty program for children in the United States.[12]

FIGURE 2

SNAP Reduces Poverty

Source: Chart Book: SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table (2019).

Applicants for food stamps line up before a window in the Food Stamp Division Office in Rochester, New York, the first city to offer the Federal Food Stamp Plan in 1939. Photo courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.

Because SNAP benefits are an entitlement, the program also responds quickly and effectively to support low-income families during times of increased need. This is especially true when SNAP benefits can be acquired alongside the benefits of other such entitlement programs. For example, a 2010 US Department of Agriculture (USDA) study found that the recession beginning in 2007–2008 not only increased the number of SNAP households, but it also increased the extent of joint SNAP and unemployment insurance (UI) households. An estimated 14.4 percent of SNAP households also received UI at some point in 2009—nearly double that of 7.8 percent in 2005.[13] Moreover, an estimated 13.4 percent of UI households also received SNAP at some point in 2009, an increase of about one-fifth over the estimate of 11.1 percent from 2005.[14] A 2016 study of the safety net and poverty in the Great Recession found that SNAP responds more to economic downturns than any program except UI.[15] As the effects of the economic recovery have been felt more broadly, SNAP caseloads have declined, falling about 2 percent annually (1 million people) in 2014 and 2015, 3 percent (1.5 million people) in 2016, and 5 percent (2 million people) in 2017. Nationally, SNAP caseloads have been falling for five years; between 2013 and 2018, SNAP caseloads fell by 7 million people.[16]

SNAP's ability to operate as a powerful antipoverty tool is pronounced for low-income communities of color, who bear the brunt of poverty in the United States. According to the US poverty statistics released by the US Census Bureau in September 2019, the poverty rate for (non-Hispanic) white Americans is 7.3 percent, while for Black and Latinx Americans it is 18.8 percent and 15.7 percent, respectively. Thus, although Black Americans made up 13.4 percent of the population, they accounted for 25.1 percent of all SNAP recipients, while Latinx people accounted for 18.5 percent of the US population and a roughly proportionate 16.7 percent of all SNAP recipients.[17] Similarly, SNAP's ability to operate to be responsive to times of increased need is pronounced for low-income communities of color.

Together, trends in the use of SNAP benefits and UI highlight this relationship between economic hardship, racial inequity, and the effectiveness of antipoverty programs in addressing both. According to a 2010 USDA study, the number of SNAP, and joint SNAP and UI, households increased in the wake of the 2007–2008 financial crisis. Yet, joint SNAP and UI use for Black and Latinx peoples in 2009 exceeded joint use by white people by about 16.6 and 9.8 percent, respectively.[18]

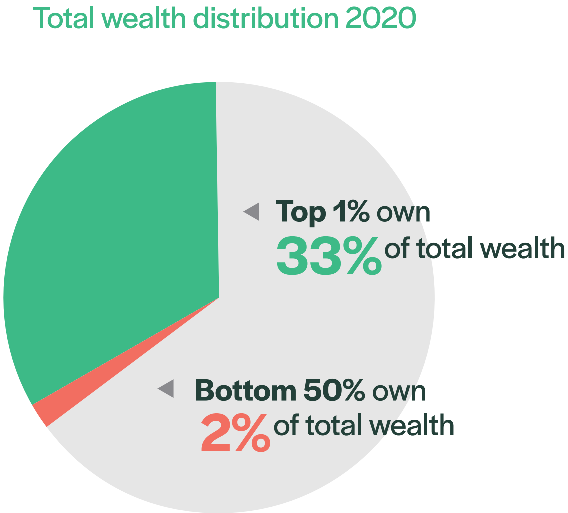
The Evolution and Erosion of SNAP

SNAP's antipoverty benefits are not incidental. Historically, these benefits have been constitutive features of the program since its inception and throughout the life of the program. The Food Stamp Program, which later became SNAP, originated in the rural relief and commodity support policies of the New Deal era. In the wake of the Great Depression, the program was just as much a farm price support program as it was a program intended to alleviate hunger and poverty. As part of the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act, the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation facilitated farmer and consumer support by allowing the federal government to distribute farm commodities, purchased at reduced prices, to state and local hunger relief agencies. However, just as the rural relief and commodity support programs benefited white farm owners (primarily at the expense of Black tenants and sharecroppers), so too were the support programs for consumers reserved for white Americans.[19]

By the 1960s, the program's antipoverty and racial justice potential was more fully realized. Spearheading President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty was the 1964 Food Stamp Act, which gained notoriety as a national antipoverty program. Under the act, food stamp benefits were financed by the government, and administrative costs were shared with states. Only with the 1977 Food and Agriculture Act, enacted under President Jimmy Carter, was the program directly incorporated as part of Farm Bill legislation.[20] Before then, despite the work of the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation, the Farm Bill

FIGURE 3

The Wealth Gap (2020)



Source: "Distributional Financial Accounts Overview," The Federal Reserve, December 18, 2020.

had long been geared primarily toward commodity support programs. In the context of the 1970s recession, this move was generally hailed as the Carter administration's principal antipoverty achievement.[21] Ameliorating the impact of such economic hardship, federal expenditure on food support grew by about 500 percent in that decade alone.[22]

Against this history and the program's originally intended purpose, and against the program's clear successes, for decades there have been efforts to reduce the size of SNAP and attach troubling work restrictions to benefits. These attacks coincided with the deep recession of the early 1980s, when President Ronald Reagan—who ushered in the era of neoliberalism, made "welfare queens" an epithet, and turned SNAP into a symbol of the ills of big government—made severe cuts to SNAP and other domestic spending.[23] Such efforts to undermine the effectiveness of SNAP have been carried out while the number of key groups in need has grown. For example, among female-headed families with children, the "deep poverty" rate more than doubled from 2.9 percent, or about 800,000 people, in 1995 to 6 percent, or roughly 1.7 million people, in 2005.[24] Although deep poverty among children was lower in 2016 (2.7 percent) than in 2005 (3.5 percent), government assistance programs were even less effective than they were in 1995—twenty years prior. Among children whose families were below half the poverty line, those benefits lifted 79 percent of them above half the poverty line in 2016, as opposed to 82 percent of such children in 1995.[25]

Alongside the enactment of work restrictions, inaction around the outdated Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) has also hindered the success of SNAP as a key part of the safety net in the United States. Maximum SNAP benefits vary by family size and are calculated by the USDA, using the cost of the TFP—specifically, the estimated cost of feeding a family of four, with a man and woman aged 20–50, one child aged 6–8, and one child aged 9–11, and adjusted for other unit sizes.[26] The USDA defines the TFP as the "national standard for a nutritious diet at a minimal cost." In other words, it is an outline for the cheapest nutritious diet possible for a family to live on. Yet the TFP was first introduced in 1975 and its value was only recently updated for 2021 to adjust for inflation, cost of food, and changes in diet. Since SNAP benefits are calculated based on the TFP, they had long fallen short of what many families need to buy and prepare healthy meals.

Such willful neglect and concerted efforts to undermine the program from the Reagan era onward have worked more broadly in conjunction with the increase in wealth disparities. The share of wealth held by the top 1 percent rose from just under 30 percent in 1989 to nearly 39 percent in 2016, while the share held by the bottom 90 percent fell from just over 33 percent to less than 23 percent over the same period.[27] Critically, this trend has been hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic and its disparate impacts on people of color and working poor communities alike.[28] According to the Federal Reserve, as of 2020 (Q3) the top 1 percent of Americans have a combined net worth of $36.2 trillion (or 31 percent of all household wealth in the United States), while the bottom 50 percent of the population holds just $2.36 trillion combined (or 2 percent of all wealth).[29] This trend is a reversal of what happened in the United States during the Great Depression and in the wake of the economic crisis. Between 1928 and 1973, the share of income held by the top 1 percent declined in almost every state.[30]

Further, such efforts to erode SNAP have taken place while the intergenerational dynamics of racialized poverty persist and worsen. Of principal concern here is the racial wealth gap. A study on assets and social policy, which followed the same sets of families for 25 years, found that the wealth gap between white and Black families nearly tripled—from $85,000 in 1984 to $236,500 in 2009.[31] Similarly, a 2019 report found that between 1983 and 2016, the median Black family saw their wealth more than halved after adjusting for inflation, compared to a 33 percent increase for the median white household.[32] Despite the relatively faster growth in wealth for Black and Latinx families between 2016 and 2019, the white-Black gap in median wealth barely changed, from $163,700 in 2016 to $164,100 in 2019, and the white-Latinx gap fell only modestly from $160,000 in 2016 to $152,100 in 2019.[33]

In the context of these decades-long trends, and in the context of the disparities that the COVID-19 pandemic has been exacerbating, there is great need to not only assess the barriers to an even stronger SNAP and safety net in general, but also identify and build upon recent successes.

PART 2

The Political Landscape of SNAP

CORPORATE CONTROL refers to control of political and economic systems by corporations to influence trade regulations, tax rates, and wealth distribution, among other measures, and to produce favorable environments for further corporate growth. As part of the Farm Bill, SNAP has been acutely vulnerable to the whims of government austerity efforts and corporate control that have remade the entire US food system in the past several decades. In this light, the struggle over SNAP in the 2018 Farm Bill, in particular, highlights the challenges and opportunities ahead for the program and its potential as a full-fledged antipoverty program.

Corporate Control and the US Food System

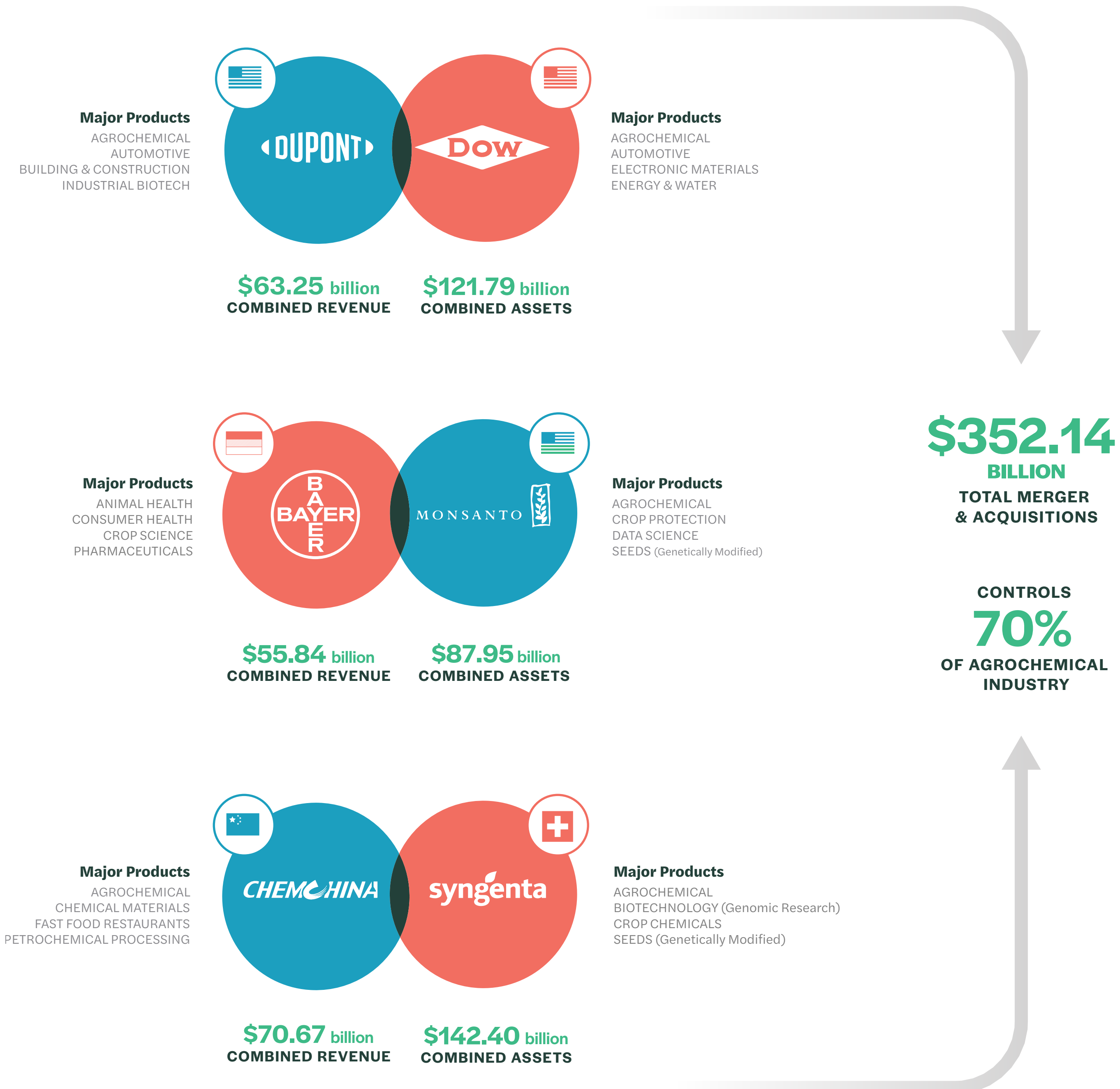
Within the past two decades, there has been rampant market concentration across a number of global agricultural input industries: between 1994 and 2013, the four-firm concentration ratio jumped from 21.1 percent to 44 percent in crop seed and biotechnology; from 28.5 percent to 62 percent in agrochemicals; from 28.1 percent to 56 percent in farm machinery; and from 32.4 percent to 55 percent in animal health.[34] Within the past two years, three massive mergers between six multinational life sciences, pharmaceutical, chemical, seed, and fertilizer companies have begun to remake these already-concentrated and fraught international markets: Bayer has bought out Monsanto, ChemChina has bought out Syngenta, and Dow and DuPont have joined forces. By 2018, just four firms—Dow, DuPont, ChemChina, Bayer and BASF—controlled over 60 percent of global proprietary seed sales.[35]

These three multibillion-dollar mergers would have a profoundly negative impact on the future of global agriculture: They would further reduce competition in such areas as crop protection, seeds, and petrochemicals. They would inhibit procompetitive research and development collaborations and would further consolidate an already-concentrated agrochemical arena. Additionally, they would pose an unparalleled danger to ecosystem sustainability and exacerbate the global climate crisis.[36] Despite the well-documented impacts of consolidation more broadly, and the anticipated impact of these mergers in particular, the joining of these companies has been receiving ongoing regulatory approval.

These mergers follow from decades of increasing corporate control of the *global* food system, particularly in the wake of the global economic shocks of the 1970s and 1980s. During the 1980s, structural adjustment programs by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank—characteristic of this early period of neoliberalization—facilitated the breaking down of foreign tariffs, the dismantling of national marketing boards, and the elimination of price guarantees in the Global South. Such programs served the interests of multinational corporations by helping them secure markets abroad for agricultural commodities produced domestically. Yet the trend of dismantling domestic safety-net programs for farmers, guaranteeing low prices for commodity purchasers (i.e., corporate buyers), and making up the potential loss for farmers with government direct payments has continued through crop insurance and other such supposed support programs.

FIGURE 4

The Era of Corporate Consolidation and End of Competition



Source: Elsheikh & Ayazi (2018), "The era of corporate consolidation and the end of competition: Bayer-Monsanto, Dow-DuPont, and Chem-China-Syngenta."

These mergers also follow from a decades-long transformation in the *domestic* food system, including US food and agriculture policy, broadly. Since its New Deal-era inception, the US Farm Bill in particular has shifted from subsidizing production and consumption to now subsidizing agribusiness. In doing so, the Farm Bill has transformed potential prosperity and security for all parts of US civil society—farmers and consumers alike—into greater corporate control and power of the US and global food system. In its current form, SNAP aids big banks, it is liable to cuts by conservative lawmakers every four years when the Farm Bill is revisited, and it is rife with biased and ineffective restrictions that ultimately undermine the program's true potential.

The 2018 Farm Bill and Beyond: Recent Successes and Lessons

Many policy-makers, organizations, community organizers, community members, and researchers have been committed to slowing and reversing the trend of corporate consolidation and control of the global food system. These groups have advocated for rejecting key procorporate provisions of the Farm Bill that constitute clear assaults on key parts of the social safety net. For example, in May 2018, following concerted efforts by policy-makers and advocacy groups alike to halt the disastrous provisions of the omnibus bill from becoming law, the House failed to secure enough votes to pass its version of the 2018 US Farm Bill—the Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018 (H.R. 2).[37] On December 12, 2018, in a 386–47 vote, Congress passed a revised version of the Farm Bill that held strong bipartisan support.

Concerted efforts to reject key procorporate provisions of the Farm Bill and clear assaults on key parts of the social safety net found their footing with SNAP. The $867 billion bill ultimately rejected a dramatic expansion of SNAP's mandatory state workfare programs, which require adults between 18 and 59 years old who are without kids and not disabled to enroll or work at least part time to receive benefits. Long pushed by House Republicans, the expansion would have mandated 20 hours a week of training or work, and stricter eligibility guidelines for low-income families who qualify for SNAP through other welfare programs—a practice known as broad-based categorical eligibility.[38] According to the Congressional Budget Office, more than 1 million people would have left the SNAP rolls over the next 10 years if the new work requirements had not been fended off.[39]

Further, nutrition title funding remained level, while certain decreases in SNAP funding will be used to foster increased permanent funding for the new Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Program. Additionally, the version of the Farm Bill passed by Congress instructs the USDA to allow farmers markets to operate an individual Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) device for accepting SNAP benefits at more than one location.[40] This change resolves a long-standing barrier to operating efficient and cost-effective SNAP EBT systems at markets, a problem farmers and food advocates have been trying to address for years.

Such success in halting key changes within what would have been an otherwise devastating Farm Bill has reminded policy-makers, organizations, community organizers, community members, and researchers of the viability of the US Farm Bill as a touchstone for struggles against corporate power and corporate control of the global food system, as well as struggles against extreme poverty and inequity. It has also reminded these groups that the most effective time of intervention is *prior to* and during the reauthorization process of the Farm Bill. It was during this process that the concerted efforts to halt what the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition referred to as "the most anti-family farm and anti-environment Farm Bill of all time" had found relative success.[41]

Even after the passage of the 2018 Farm Bill, attacks on key policy areas have been successfully fended off, including attacks on "broad-based categorical eligibility" (BBCE) itself. Under this policy, applicants can be found eligible for SNAP if they received benefits from other specified means-tested programs, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance, Supplemental Security Income, or state-funded general assistance cash benefits.[42] Although SNAP generally operates under a consistent set of federal eligibility rules, BBCE allows for differences in income and eligibility rules across states. In this way, the policy affords states the ability to raise SNAP income eligibility limits so additional families in need can receive adequate support. The policy also lets states adopt less restrictive asset tests so that families, seniors, and people with disabilities can have modest savings without losing the SNAP benefits. Given the positive impacts of the policy, the Trump administration's attacks on BBCE were met with fierce pushback. In April 2020, New York Attorney General Letitia James led a coalition of 22 attorneys general and the City of New York, that, in a letter to the USDA, demanded the agency not finalize a proposed rule that would dismantle the policy and disqualify millions of low-income Americans from SNAP benefits.[43]

While efforts to fend off major assaults on SNAP—assaults that would have only rendered the social safety net even more tenuous and exacerbated extreme poverty and inequity—have found some success with the 2018 Farm Bill and beyond, efforts to improve SNAP and secure its future success will have little traction if they simply are in response to such attacks.[44] Thus, it is necessary to celebrate and build upon proactive campaigns to improve, expand, and transform SNAP. For example, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of March 2020 gave the USDA authority to let states temporarily modify procedures to make it easier for families to continue participating in or apply for SNAP.[45] Since then, states have been using temporary SNAP flexibility to provide emergency benefit supplements, maintain benefits to households with children missing school meals, and ease program administration during the pandemic. In addition to these allotments, the COVID-19 relief package enacted in December 2020 included a 15 percent increase in SNAP's maximum benefit for January through June 2021; and the American Rescue Plan Act, enacted in March 2021, extended that increase through September.[46] This increase—which applies in all states and territories participating in SNAP—amounts to about $28 more in SNAP benefits per person per month, or just over $100 per month in food assistance for a family of four.

Additionally, in the 2018 bipartisan Farm Bill and after much public pressure, Congress mandated the USDA to reevaluate and reform the TFP. On August 16, 2021, the USDA fulfilled that directive and released a reevaluation of the TFP.[47] For the first time in more than 45 years, the USDA assessed the foods and beverages that make up a healthy, practical diet first, then determined a reasonable cost at which they could be purchased by resource-constrained households.[48] As a result, come October 2021, the maximum benefit levels in SNAP will be based on the market basket costs of the 2021 TFP.[49] The result will be an increase of 21 percent—about 40 cents per person per meal—in the maximum SNAP benefit over the prepandemic amount. Because the 21 percent increase will go into effect at the same time that a temporary 15 percent boost in benefits provided under the American Rescue Plan Act expires at the end of September 2021, the actual increase that program participants will see will be smaller.[50]

Ultimately, such efforts to expand SNAP and transform it beyond the status quo will have little traction unless they come from a strong and united movement. People working toward antiausterity, economic justice, feminist justice, environmental justice, climate justice, food justice, and just labor and immigration futures all have a stake in helping realize SNAP's full potential as an antipoverty program and thus a program that would strike at the root of hunger itself.

PART 3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Road to a Better SNAP

CONSIDERING THE PROGRAM'S increasingly counterproductive restrictions and the widening wealth gap in the United States, the need to realize the full potential of SNAP is greater than ever. This report recommends three major changes to SNAP. First, we recommend guaranteeing that SNAP benefits are no longer tied to work requirements. Second, we recommend federalizing the administration of the program and distribution of benefits. Third, we recommend removing SNAP from the Farm Bill yet doing so in an informed way that protects the future of the program and opens it up to such transformation.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Remove Work Restrictions

Principal among the roadblocks to a better SNAP are the program's work restrictions. According to the Congressional Research Service, the purpose of work restrictions or requirements for such programs is "to offset work disincentives in social assistance programs, promote a culture of work over dependency, and prioritize governmental resources."[51] Yet the evidence supporting such conclusions and the assumptions behind them are faulty, and the work restrictions themselves inhibit SNAP's antipoverty potential. Thus, this report's first recommendation is to remove work restrictions from the program.

CASE A: Work restrictions undermine SNAP's effectiveness as an antipoverty tool

Since the concerted efforts to dismantle social welfare programs (under the name of "reform") from the 1980s onward—for example, giving states wide latitude to create work requirements for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash-assistance program—there have been countless efforts to extend those work requirements to other safety-net programs.

SNAP is replete with such paternalistic restrictions, requiring adult recipients to meet work requirements unless they are exempt because of age, disability, or children. Able-bodied adults without dependents can only get SNAP for three months in three years if they do not meet certain special work requirements—a time limit that has been part of the law since the 1996 "Freedom to Farm Bill." Otherwise, such individuals must work at least eighty hours per month, participate in qualifying education and training activities at least eighty hours per month, or comply with a workfare program.

Such work restrictions and the beliefs behind them ignore the realities of poverty and unemployment. For example, research has shown that the belief that social assistance programs disincentivize work and promote a culture of dependency is outright false. Following the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, a major welfare-reform bill, the number of people receiving TANF plummeted, employment among recipients increased, and poverty rates did not change.[52] The work requirements seemingly served their function: aided by state-sponsored training and placement programs, people sought jobs in the face of economic pressure and hunger. However, the employment gains were ephemeral, inconsistent, and have often been questionably attributed to "welfare reform." Further, research has shown that employment gains during this time were largely attributed to Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) increases, not work requirements.[53] Critically, research has also shown that people who were on TANF and not subject to work requirements saw their employment rates rise in the long term, even as the people with work requirements lost jobs.[54] The reason that the initial trends did not hold is simple: while recipients did seek and attain jobs, the jobs they sought were often low paying and unstable. This means that such jobs could not lift people from poverty as anticipated.

Finally, the premise of such work restrictions is the assumption that people on SNAP are "not in a hurry to get off," primarily because of the supposed lack of incentive to work and the ease of profiting off federal support. In other words, it is the belief that such programs create dependency and disincentivize work itself. On the contrary, most SNAP recipients remain in the program for a short period of time until they become financially stable and can transition to self-sufficiency, with half of all new participants leaving SNAP within one year and two-thirds leaving within two years.[55] Additionally, most SNAP recipients who can work do so. Over half of individuals who were participating in SNAP in a typical month in mid-2012 were working in that month. Furthermore, 74 percent worked in the year before or after that month (in the twenty-five-month period). Rates were even higher when work among other household members is counted: 87 percent of households with children and a nondisabled adult included at least one member who worked in this twenty-five-month period.[56]

In short, the problem with work requirements is that a stable, living wage is difficult to attain and that the low-paying and part-time jobs that such work requirements force people into are usually unstable to begin with. Such issues are obfuscated by the erroneous concern that a "culture of dependency" is the source of poverty rather than structural barriers to economic stability and mobility.

CASE B: Work restrictions also exacerbate the racialized nature of poverty

Besides being based on assumptions, work restrictions also disproportionately affect communities of color by ignoring how poverty, unemployment, and

access to stable employment are themselves racialized. That is, work restrictions ignore how structural racism has created barriers to steady employment and a living wage for Black, Latinx, and Native communities, as well as for members of farmworker, immigrant, LGBTQ, and other marginalized communities. Thus, work restrictions that supposedly encourage recipients to find employment by eventually limiting benefits ultimately serve to withhold resources from those who need it the most.

Historical and contemporary discriminatory housing, zoning, lending, employment, criminal justice, and other policy, legal, and business practices—and the legacies of slavery and colonialism that underpin them—have created and maintained such barriers to gainful employment. For Black people, the combination of slavery; segregation; and discriminatory institutions, policies, and practices have for centuries denied them equal access to the wealth created through their labor. For other people of color, including Latinx and Asian people, historical and contemporary dynamics of displacement, labor, trade, and foreign intervention have similarly denied them equal access to the wealth created through their labor. At the same time, for peoples who are indigenous to what is now the United States (i.e., Native peoples), the combination of theft of land, genocide, criminalization of their communities and cultural practices, unremunerated labor, and other such dimensions of US settler colonialism have rendered their dispossession a condition of possibility of US wealth. Finally, historical and contemporary dynamics of foreign military intervention, resource scarcity, austerity measures, migration, and domestic dynamics of labor control, along with Islamophobia, among other dynamics, have drastically affected the livelihoods and well-being of Asian communities and other communities of color—a reality that the "model minority" myth hides.

There are several problems with work requirements, and when they are applied to SNAP, the program's potential is drastically undermined. As such, low-paying and part-time jobs are usually unstable to begin with, and most low-income people who can secure steady employment already do work. Further, access to gainful employment is not afforded to everyone evenly. In fact, SNAP work restrictions and other programs with work restrictions thus maintain unequal economic outcomes and opportunities that are passed on intergenerationally. The removal of work restrictions from SNAP would help realize the program's full potential as an antipoverty program while accounting for the many ways in which poverty itself is racialized.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Move the Administration of SNAP Back to the Federal Government

The second roadblock to a better SNAP is the ongoing devolution of program administration and benefits distribution toward states and counties, and away from the federal government. Thus, this report's second recommendation is to move the administration of SNAP back to the federal government.

CASE A: The devolution of SNAP to counties has increased administrative costs

Along with other means-tested benefit programs, there is a detailed framework of federal law and regulation governing SNAP. Specifically, SNAP is administered by the Food and Nutrition Service's (FNS's) national office and seven regional offices, along with state agencies. In addition, some states administer SNAP at the county level. These states pass federal SNAP administrative funds through to the counties for program functions performed by county agencies. The FNS oversees the states' implementation of SNAP to ensure they carry out the program in accordance with federal laws and regulations. States are then responsible for determining whether the recipient's household meets the program's eligibility requirements, calculating monthly benefits for qualified households, and issuing benefits to those households. FNS funds the full cost of SNAP benefits and generally reimburses the states for 50 percent of their administrative costs.

With about 92.3 percent of the $68 billion in federal spending on SNAP reaching the program's beneficiaries, and with 7.7 percent covering administrative costs as of 2018, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has praised SNAP as a model of government efficiency.[57] Yet the administration of the program at the county level has made the program costlier. According to the USDA, in 2016, the federal share of SNAP administrative costs nationwide totaled over $3.7 billion. Half of these costs (roughly $1.8 billion) were incurred by states that are administered at the county level.[58] Although out of the fifty-three states and territories that participate in SNAP, only ten are administered at the county level, and county-administered states spent 24 percent more on state administrative expenses per case than other states (after controlling for differences between states).[59] Such disparities in administrative costs are apparent even at the household level. In 2014, the average administrative cost per SNAP case (i.e., per household) per month for these ten *county-administered* states was over $21, as opposed to under $10 per case for the *state-administered* states. The cost-per-case varied significantly among the ten county-administered states in 2014, with costs ranging as high as $34 (California) and as low as $10 (Ohio) per case.[60] Finally, weaknesses in state and county financial management controls—and a lack of effective FNS oversight—have led to inaccurate financial reporting when it comes to SNAP benefits administered at the county level.[61]

The devolution of SNAP to the county level has led to costlier administration and less accurate financial reporting. Therefore, bringing the administration of the program away from the county level and back to the state level would ameliorate the administrative costs of the program. Yet undoing the devolution of social welfare programs demands considering the efficiencies and effectiveness of administering SNAP not at the state level but at the federal level. Budget data for the major low-income assistance programs—Medicaid, SNAP, Supplemental Security Income, housing vouchers, the school lunch and breakfast programs, and the Earned Income Tax Credit—show that, in every case, federal administrative costs range from less than 1 percent to 8 percent of total federal program spending. In other words, 91 to 99 percent of total federal spending on these programs reaches beneficiaries in the form of benefits or services, the same or slightly better than the 90 to 99 percent of combined federal and state spending for these programs.[62] Equating federal administration of social welfare programs with bureaucratic bloat and unwieldy overhead thus masks the administrative costs of devolution itself, especially once program administration reaches the county level. Furthermore, if SNAP were to be administered at the federal level, existing issues with FNS oversight would also be ameliorated. Thus, should the political will exist, eventually federalizing SNAP would leave more to be offered in terms of benefits and would undermine opponents' concerns about accurate financial reporting.

Finally, tasking the federal government with administering SNAP begs another question: how might federal administration of the program manage the uneven experience of poverty and hunger across racial, class, and state lines? The demographics and needs of state populations are not equal. With the 1996 welfare-reform laws (principally, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) that propelled the move toward state administration of such programs, the fear was that there would be a "race to the bottom," wherein states will reduce benefits out of fear of becoming "welfare magnets" that attract recipients from other states. The good news has been that state and local governments are enacting diverse programs and have not appeared to be limiting welfare provision in new ways to avoid becoming "welfare magnets." However, the type of program they adopt is systematically related to the racial and ethnic composition of the caseloads and the local political climate, leading to a fragmentary system in which some states and localities are more responsive than others.[63]

CASE B: The federal government has shown it can reduce fraud

Despite sustained claims of fraud that accompany efforts to cut SNAP benefits, SNAP continues to have one of the lowest fraud rates among federal programs. Where fraud does exist, it is largely a matter of trafficking—the illegal sale of SNAP benefits for cash or other ineligible items. Such fraud occurs not only in larger retailers but also in smaller-sized retailers that typically stock fewer healthy foods.

From 2007 to 2013, the number of SNAP-authorized stores grew by 53 percent—a recession-era increase that coincided with a sharp rise in the number of SNAP participants—with small and medium-sized retailers (including convenience stores) accounting for most of that growth.[64] With this growth has come the risk of the increased occurrence of fraud, especially at these small and medium-sized retailers. Yet in the past decade, the USDA has seen declines in the rate of trafficking from 4 percent to 1 percent of benefits. The rate of trafficking in larger grocery stores and supermarkets in particular—where 82 percent of all benefits were redeemed—have remained less than 0.5 percent. Ultimately, SNAP has achieved a record-high payment accuracy rate of more than 96 percent.[65]

The decrease in fraud rates have largely been achieved through steps the USDA has taken to improve SNAP oversight—namely, the SNAP Stewardship Solutions Project. In 2017, the program led to the sanctioning of 549 stores and permanent disqualification of 826 stores for trafficking in SNAP benefits or falsifying an application, cracking down on new forms of fraud by requiring more frequent reviews of higher risk retailers, establishing stiffer penalties, and strengthening state partnerships. Since then, such work has been carried out by the USDA's FNS.[66]

Despite the success of the SNAP Stewardship Solutions Project and other such efforts, false claims of high rates of fraud—paired with tropes about recipients and their consumption habits—strengthen efforts to cut SNAP benefits.

CASE C: Greater federal and state administration of SNAP would undermine bank and corporate control

The need to transform the administration of SNAP also emerges because banks and corporations reap major profits from the operation of nutrition assistance programs through outsourcing government services to third parties. Beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as part of the larger shift toward privatizing public assistance systems and putting SNAP benefits on ATM-style EBT cards, large banks and corporate actors have benefited from SNAP and other safety-net programs through the contracts they hold with states to help administer benefits.[67]

Regardless of the actual effectiveness of EBT-based benefits, JP Morgan Chase and other banks cover none of the operating and equipment costs. Instead, they are covered by (and split evenly between) states and the federal government. Further, banks collect interest on Federal Reserve money held for government programs and collect user penalties, including EBT card loss, out-of-network use, and balance inquiries.[68] The impact is significant; for example, according to the Government Accountability Institute, JP Morgan Chase made more than $500 million between 2004 and 2012 from the transaction fees of government benefits to US citizens. In New York alone, JP Morgan Electronic Financial Services has a nine-year EBT services contract with the state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance worth $177 million.[69]

Relative to SNAP, other large entitlement programs such as Medicare and Medicaid have long been known to have high fraud rates. In 2019, agencies across the government made an estimated $175 billion in improper payments—up from about $151 billion for 2018. Medicare and Medicaid accounted for about 59 percent of these payments, or $104 billion total. There are fears that removing SNAP from the Farm Bill and further federalizing the program—mirroring a program like Medicare in particular—would cause fraud rates to balloon. Yet this concern elides the source of the high costs of such massive entitlement programs. Specifically, the issue is one of outsourcing government services to profit-driven third parties. In many cases, complex business models are built on extracting as much funding from federal and state governments as possible—a fate that has befallen Medicare and Medicaid.[70]

Thus, moving the administration of SNAP away from corporations and into the hands of states and the federal government—particularly in ways that avoid the issues faced by other large entitlement programs—would preserve such programs and lessen the power of corporations. At the same time, maintaining or expanding corporate power—by maintaining or expanding SNAP without addressing the program's relationship to the federal government as well as US banks and corporations—would fundamentally undermine the program's antipoverty potential.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Keep SNAP but Remove It from the US Farm Bill

The third barrier to an antipoverty SNAP is the US Farm Bill itself. The Farm Bill leaves the program subject to partisan conflict and divergent urban-rural interests. Thus, the third and final recommendation of this report is to continue improving SNAP but remove it from the US Farm Bill.

CASE A: Removing SNAP from the Farm Bill would open new opportunities

The idea to remove SNAP from the Farm Bill is a familiar one. It was sparked in 1981, again in 1995–1996, and most recently in the lead-up to the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill. In the 113th Congress, the House passed two separate bills: an agriculture-only farm bill and another bill for nutrition assistance. The former bill authorized farm programs for five years, while the latter bill authorized nutrition assistance programs for only three years. This would have put these programs on different timelines to ensure that their reauthorizations would be considered separately.[71] The two were eventually recombined before

The Threat of Block-granting

Block-granting has long been proposed as a way to more efficiently and cost-effectively administer assistance programs. Proponents generally assert that shifting from federal management to block grants administered at the state or local level reduces federal responsibility for priority setting and oversight. It gives states or localities more flexibility in the use of the funds while reducing reporting and administrative requirements. Many officials argue that local decision-making about priorities and resource allocation is more responsive to local needs and makes services simpler for consumers to access.

Shifting from the guarantee of benefits based on eligibility to fixed funding ultimately ends the individual entitlement and risks the erosion of program funding. Thus, against such narratives of cost-effectiveness and efficiency, block-granting has operated as a discreet strategy for cutting funding for such programs. For example, while some block-grant proposals include an initial increase in funding, which can allay the fears of current recipients, proponents have generally hoped for program savings (i.e., cuts) in the future. Further, although block-granting is sold as a "flexibility" measure, it tends to restrict the degree to which states can respond to economic downturns—precisely the moments when antipoverty programs are needed most.[77] In the past, block-granting poverty programs has also given states the flexibility to change eligibility requirements, kick needy people off programs, and divert the money toward other priorities.[78]

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the effects of block-granting on program funding and effectiveness are clear: since 2000, overall funding for the thirteen major housing, health, and social services block-grant programs in the federal budget has fallen by 27 percent after adjusting for inflation, and by 37 percent after adjusting for inflation and population growth.[79]

Emblematic of such outcomes, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is a block-granted antipoverty measure that arose out of the 1996 "welfare reform" push and has become effectively useless in states like Arizona. In July 2015, Arizona became the first state to cut poor families' access to welfare assistance to a lifetime maximum of 12 months—a fifth of the time allowed under federal law. Such restrictions have been devastating. In 2014, about 29,000 poor families received benefits under TANF in Arizona, 16,000 fewer than in 2005; and in 2009, in the middle of the worst economic downturn since the Depression of the 1930s, benefits were cut by 20 percent.[80] In 2019, two bills designed to restore such benefits—House Bill 2607 and Senate Bill 1501—died despite the state achieving a $1 billion surplus that year.[81]

SNAP has also been targeted by such block-granting efforts under a different name. For example, the House GOP's 2015 budget proposal sought to transform federal funding for SNAP (and Medicaid) into a "State Flexibility Fund" (i.e., block grant). The House's poverty task force declared in their mission statement that such changes were designed to "increase flexibility to state and local governments to promote new ways to help those in need and foster seamless cooperation across assistance programs." Yet, the House's 2014 budget proposal set out to cut those programs by nearly $1 trillion combined over 10 years. Again in 2016, the House Budget Committee approved a budget plan that set out to achieve such cuts by converting SNAP into a block grant beginning in 2021, cutting funding by $125 billion (nearly 30 percent) between 2021 and 2026. By then, the committee had proposed similarly deep cuts to SNAP in each of its five previous budgets.[82]

Although block-granting SNAP is a tempting answer to the call for greater program efficiency and cost-effectiveness, there is no reason why the federal government cannot administer the program in that way. Such a program administered at the federal level would leave little to no need for priorities and resource allocation, thus nullifying the supposed need for states and localities to adjust the program to be more responsive to local needs and make services simpler for consumers to access.

the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, yet the experience offers a reminder that removing SNAP from the Farm Bill does not require too great an imaginative leap.

Removing SNAP from the Farm Bill would not come without certain risks for both the "farm part" and the "food part" of the Farm Bill. For example, absent liberal and moderate urban and suburban votes to protect SNAP by also voting for commodity and crop insurance subsidies would make it difficult if not impossible to continue political support for the farm subsidies.[72] This is well known to congress members. In 2013, Senator Thad Cochran (R-MS), then ranking member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, told the North American Agricultural Journalists group that food stamps should continue to be included in the Farm Bill "purely from a political perspective. It helps get the Farm Bill passed."[73] Conversely, support for improving SNAP benefits would also be more difficult to achieve politically were SNAP divorced from farm programs—a challenge that the lead-up to both the 2002 and 2008 Farm Bills made clear, and a topic that has come up during each reauthorization period since then.[74]

These challenges thus highlight how logrolling is a constitutive feature of the Farm Bill reauthorization process, as legislators may support faulty programs to secure support for programs that might otherwise fail or take a drastic hit. Such fears drive a certain conservativism by legislators and stakeholders who work to keep both "halves" of the Farm Bill together. However, the very admission that these programs need to be combined to pass them makes a strong case for legislators to reevaluate the stand-alone merits of each program.[75]

Absent of a long-term vision and strategy, each half of the Farm Bill might succumb to their worst fates: a SNAP program removed from the Farm Bill, placed under Health and Human Services, yet ultimately block-granted; and farm policies that erode the safety net for producers while bolstering the profits of agribusinesses, banks, and other industries. Conversely, splitting the Farm Bill while maintaining a long-term vision and strategy for each half of the bill that is grounded in a sustainable and racially and economically just framework for transformative change could free each half from its status quo and allow both farm programs and nutrition programs like SNAP to reach their fullest potential.

CASE B: A stand-alone SNAP could follow the recent successes of other antipoverty programs (e.g., Child Tax Credit)

Child poverty has been a locus of antipoverty organizing and legislating within the United States, and the strength of the Child Tax Credit (CTC)—and recent updates to the program—lies within its relatively stand-alone nature, which lends itself to effective program revisions and expansions. As part of the $1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, president Joe Biden increased the size of the tax credit. The benefit is set to expire after a year, but organizers and legislators are pushing for it to be extended through 2025 and ultimately made permanent.

The credit, which is effectively a family allowance that is run through the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), provides $3,000 a year for each child under 18 years old, topped up to $3,600 for kids under six years old. Thus, a family with three children receives almost $10,000. As a point of reference, the average income of the bottom 20 percent of households in the United States is about $14,000. As a result, the new CTC will cut the rate of child poverty in half, and will raise the total incomes of the bottom fifth of American families by 33 percent.[76]

In addition to the increased dollar amount, the program is expected to be especially effective because of how it will be administered: families will not be required to have taxable incomes in order to receive such payments; it will be fully available to families without any tax obligations; eligibility will be automatic; and there will be no audits like those that the IRS has long imposed on EITC recipients for technical mistakes. Among its other strengths, structuring a universal child allowance as a "refundable" tax credit means that it does not reduce other benefits.

Finally, the legislation authorizes the Treasury to send checks monthly—that is, direct distribution. Under the current system, EITC and CTC recipients get their refunds at tax time. This new policy eliminates the need for tax preparers and other potential barriers. The recipient gets either a check, a direct deposit, or a debit card from the Treasury, and gets 100 cents on the dollar with no rake-off by the tax preparer. Collectively, a stand-alone SNAP could better model such effective antipoverty programs, and the revisions and expansions that make them what they are.

From SNAP to Universal Basic Income

WE RECOMMEND THREE MAJOR CHANGES to SNAP: First, the benefits should no longer be tied to work requirements. Second, the administration of the program and distribution of benefits should be federalized. Third, the program should be removed from the Farm Bill in an informed way that protects the future of the program and opens it up to such transformations. Finally, we recommend implementing these strategies and lessons in the push for a larger guaranteed income program and legislation to provide federal governmental guarantees to employment.[83]

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have pushed governments to take seriously the importance of large economic relief programs. In March 2020, the United States approved a means-tested, one-time cash payment to eligible taxpayers. However, these funds did not provide a lasting benefit—nor did the cash payments distributed to eligible taxpayers in December 2020 and March 2021—as several million people in the United States still must draw unemployment benefits to meet basic needs.[84] Put simply, such payments were necessary and helpful, but ultimately insufficient.

The infrequency and uncertainty of cash payments, along with the uncertainty of employment itself—particularly for people of color—have led to increasing demands for regular cash payments to individuals and families, without means testing or other action on the part of recipients. In short, they want a guaranteed income.[85] Yet these demands are not new. Martin Luther King Jr. himself wrote in 1967—the year before he was assassinated and anticipating the Poor People's March—that "the solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a now widely discussed measure: the guaranteed income." Even today, the Movement for Black Lives, a collective of over 50 groups affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement, included universal basic income (UBI) as part of their official policy platform in 2016.[86]

How can the lessons from SNAP be used to bolster the case for UBI? What policy strategy can get us from a stronger SNAP to a comprehensive national safety net? We propose the following:

Create a Supplemental Poverty Assistance Act

Create a Supplemental Poverty Assistance Act

(a) This new act would remove SNAP from the US Farm Bill, federalize the administration of the program, and strip it of work requirements. Congress and the president would need to sign the revised legislation.

(b) The process would push through such changes within the Farm Bill process itself. In recent years, it has become increasingly common for Congress to use appropriations bills as an unorthodox way to raid mandatory funding from Farm Bill programs to fill discretionary spending gaps. These backdoor cuts are known as Changes in Mandatory Programs (CHIMPs). In addition to cuts through the annual appropriations process, Farm Bill mandatory spending has been targeted through a process known as budget reconciliation, which begins with the budget committees instructing the agriculture committees to cut spending. Unlike CHIMPs' ability to conserve programs through appropriations bills, cuts proposed in recent years via reconciliation have not become law. It is imperative that Congress refrain from reopening the Farm Bill outside of the normal Farm Bill reauthorization process. Enacting such changes through the budget or appropriations process instead of the 2022 Farm Bill reauthorization process would undermine negotiations before they could even begin.

Retain Key Subprograms of SNAP and Other Non-SNAP Programs Under the Nutrition Title

Retain and bolster key subprograms of SNAP under the same name

(a) SNAP funds several subprograms that provide significant benefits to farmers, ranchers, and rural communities while at the same time improving access to fresh, healthy food for low-income consumers and communities. These programs include the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Program, which helps SNAP users purchase more fresh fruits and vegetables at locations like farmers markets, and the Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program, which awards grants to eligible nonprofits, tribal organizations, and food program service providers to promote self-sufficiency and food security in low-income communities. A **Supplemental Poverty Assistance Act** should ensure these programs remain within the Farm Bill under SNAP.

Retain key non-SNAP programs under the nutrition title

(a) The nutrition title funds several subprograms that provide significant benefits to farmers, ranchers, and rural communities while at the same time improving access to fresh, healthy food for low-income consumers. These programs include the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, which provides USDA foods to low-income households, including the elderly living on Indian reservations and to federally recognized Native peoples residing in designated areas near reservations and in the state of Oklahoma (this program works in lieu of SNAP); the Emergency Food Assistance Program, which helps supplement the diets of low-income Americans, including elderly people, by providing them with emergency food and nutrition assistance at no cost; the Nutrition Programs Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which supplements the diets of low-income elderly persons at least 60 years of age with nutritious USDA foods; the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, which provides low-income seniors with coupons that can be exchanged for eligible foods at farmers markets, roadside stands, and community-supported agriculture programs via a grant program; the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, which provides fresh fruits and vegetables to school children throughout the day; the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which supports projects, grants, and tax credits that increase access to healthy, affordable food in underserved communities; and the Food and Agriculture Service Learning Program, which increases the capacity for food, garden, and nutrition education and complements the work of the federal farm-to-school grants. A **Supplemental Poverty Assistance Act** should ensure these programs stay and come to constitute the rest of the nutrition title.

Use the Above Strategies and Lessons to Take Steps Toward UBI

Establish a broad framework for action based upon three key pillars

(a) This vision of a future devoid of extreme and long-standing inequality along lines of race, gender, and class, and with UBI at its center, must be built on three pillars: first, a decent stable income afforded to all, such as that which would be guaranteed by a UBI program; second, a sturdy foundation of assets afforded to all; and third, a societal share in our economy's prosperity. Together, these would offer a path toward enduring progress.

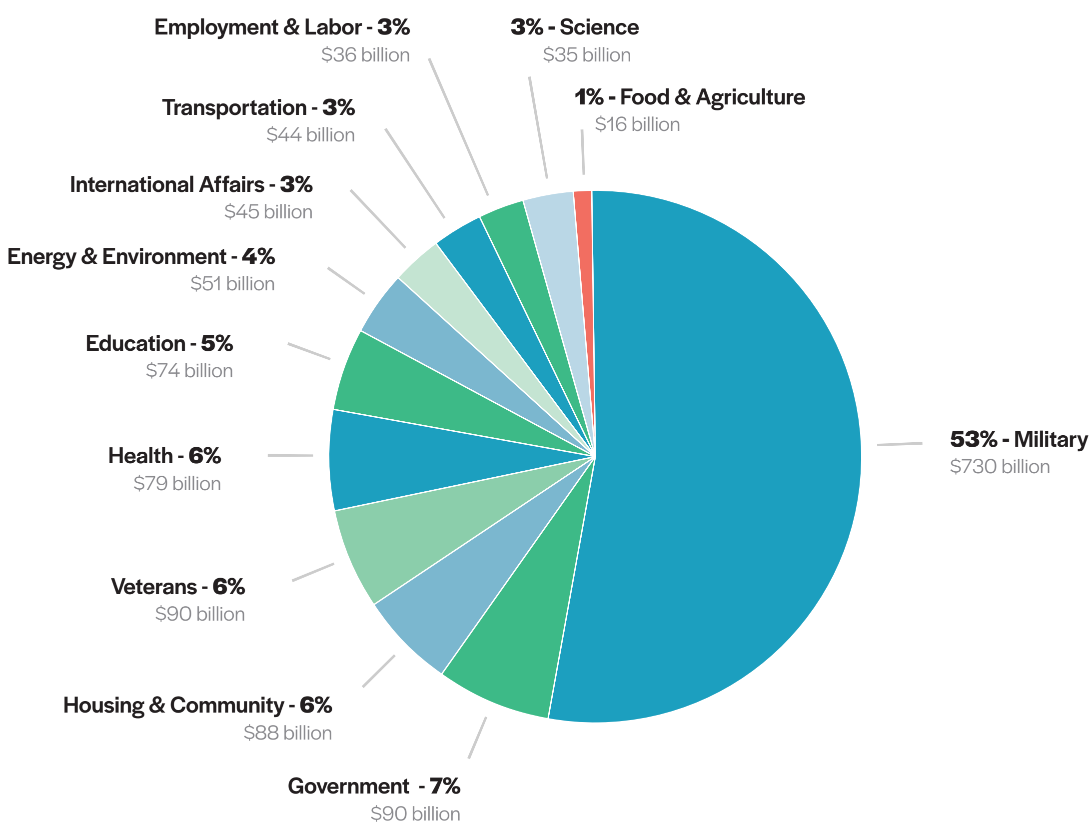
Consider diverse funding strategies while avoiding pitfalls

(a) A major roadblock toward UBI is funding for the program. Pulling funds for UBI from existing programs—such as the $70 billion SNAP—would be unfavorable for many reasons. First, it would require at least 50 SNAPs to cover the cost of a modest UBI program. Second, pulling money from other social safety-net programs and distributing them more broadly would undermine the targeted support such programs have offered to certain marginalized communities.[87] Avoiding these pitfalls is crucial.

(b) The case for UBI in particular has been made for decades from across the political spectrum, with creative solutions to the challenge of funding. As early as the 1940s, economists and lawmakers had advocated for a negative income tax, which shares the same outcome as UBI—wealth redistribution—yet offers a different way there. More recently, attorney, entrepreneur, and 2020 presidential candidate Andrew Yang advocated for UBI and proposed a 0.1 percent

FIGURE 5

Federal Discretionary Spending, Fiscal Year 2019



Source: National Priorities Project: https://www.nationalpriorities.org/analysis/2020/militarized-budget-2020/

financial transaction tax that would raise as much as $50 billion per year to help fund the program.[88]

Mobilize diverse contingents and support the most transformative efforts

(a) Ultimately, transforming corporate control and power of the US and global food system into prosperity and security for all parts of US civil society—farmers and consumers alike—through UBI requires creative solutions to the structure and funding challenges the programs present. Yet these are ultimately matters of political will, pointing to the need for a concerted effort by US policy-makers, organizations, communities, and social movements to shift the conversation toward a vision of a future without poverty.

(b) Efforts to transform our economy are already taking shape. In January 2019, a letter demanding to take swift action to address the threat of the climate crisis, with over 600 signatories, was proposed to Congress.[89] Afterwards, a resolution was proposed on February 7 by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY-14), outlining the ambitious **Green New Deal**, which calls for the federal government to have a pivotal role in the green transition.[90] The Green New Deal would establish the **Commission for Economic Democracy (CED)**, which would create a participatory economic environment for the public. In addition to holding government agencies, private entities, and nonprofits accountable and making them accessible and transparent through CED oversight, the CED would disperse monthly UBI—payments of $3,000 for individuals and $1,500 for dependents. Despite its contentiousness and uncertainties, the broad framework for action continues to gain momentum.

CONCLUSION

Economic Justice and the Food System

TAKING THESE LESSONS AND STRATEGIES from the struggle over SNAP, we must continue the push for an even more effective and expansive social safety net—UBI and legislation to provide federal governmental guarantees to employment. By providing an unconditional and guaranteed income that would meet basic human needs while providing a floor of economic security, the benefits of UBI and guaranteed employment would be experienced by vast swaths of US society. Not only would such a program effectively eliminate absolute poverty, but it would ameliorate the historic effects of structural racism, including decades of restrictive immigration laws and housing policies, discriminatory hiring and employment practices, segregation, and other circumstances that have left countless communities unable to secure living wages, home and car ownership, and other assets.

Although this report has made the case for UBI by way of a key Farm Bill program, SNAP, the broader societal objectives and strategies of UBI would shape the US food system itself in positive ways. In other words, UBI would address many of the challenges that federal policies governing food and agriculture programs have struggled to address, including those concerning farm subsidies and insurance, racial and economic disparities, labor and migration exploitation, and barriers for beginning farmers. For example, UBI would function as a safety net and alleviate the precariousness growers face regarding corporate contracts. It would alleviate the need for off-farm income, thus protecting farmers from the vagaries of employment in local communities. By not being means tested, UBI would also ameliorate racial disparities in agricultural commodity payments and land ownership.[91]

UBI would also help assuage the effects of mass automation and technological change, which have already begun reshaping the landscape of the US food system. On the production side alone, traditional agriculture companies are increasingly adopting farm automation into their processes, including drones, autonomous tractors, robotic harvesters, automatic watering, and seeding robots. Their rationale and the rationale of companies on the processing and distribution side: it achieves fresher products, greater "labor efficiency," and a reduced environmental footprint.[92] Yet in practice, this profound transformation of the food system would displace countless food system laborers and diminish what little workplace leverage they have, ultimately exacerbating existing inequities. Besides UBI, no other social or economic policy solution today would be of sufficient scale to effectively address such inequities, within and beyond the US food system that will be exacerbated by job market disruptions associated with technological progress.

Endnotes

1 Within the United States, the economic crisis has been unlike that of past recessions: First, the need to shutter many businesses led to millions of jobless workers in a matter of days and weeks. Second, unlike the 2007–2009 recession, these impacts were experienced across multiple industries almost immediately. Third, virtually all businesses have needed to take steps to increase safety by reducing physical contact, while many have refused to do so. Andrew F. Johnson and Katherine J. Roberto, "The COVID-19 Pandemic: Time for a Universal Basic Income?" *Public Administration and Development* 40, no. 4 (2020): 232–35, https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.1891; "COVID-19 Dashboard," Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, accessed April 22, 2021, https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html.

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The Othering & Belonging Institute brings together researchers, community stakeholders, and policy-makers to identify and challenge the barriers to an inclusive, just, and sustainable society in order to create transformative change.