

THE FOOD POLICE: FOOD STAMPS, SURVEILLANCE, AND THE
CONSTRUCTION OF THE UNDESERVING HUNGRY

by

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ABSTRACT

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Hunger in America is produced through broader social and economic inequality and patterns of hunger are unevenly distributed across places and social groups. While 10.5% of all U.S. households experienced hunger, Black households, Latino households, households with children headed by either a single woman or a single man, and households in poverty faced substantially higher rates of hunger in 2019 (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2020). The Food Stamp Program (FSP), now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), is the largest hunger relief program in the U.S. Acknowledging the racialized and gendered patterns of hunger in the U.S. is central to my research, yet federal policy and hunger debates rarely directly address the inequitable distribution of hunger.

Drawing from more than 100 congressional hearings between 2000 and 2018 that were related to the reauthorization of FSP and SNAP, I examined the rhetoric and dominant ways of understanding hunger that informed the production of federal hunger relief policy in this period. I ground my examination of legislative discourses about hunger within shifting dynamics of race, class, and gender in the United States, and my discourse analysis interrogates the logics and rhetoric shaping post-welfare reform shifts in debate on FSP and SNAP policy. This

dissertation documents an erosion of the federal commitment to hunger relief in the United States during this timeframe.

My analysis demonstrates how after welfare reform, legislative debates on federal hunger relief became increasingly focused on disciplining what I term, drawing from Katz's (1989) critical work on poverty, the "undeserving hungry." Examining legislative debates about hunger is critically important as widely circulated understandings of hunger shape federal anti-hunger policies in ways that determine access to the life sustaining resource of food for some of the country's most vulnerable populations. In this way, discourses about hunger directly connect to questions of well-being and life and death. I examine the eroding commitment to hunger relief within neoliberal discourses about austerity and personal responsibility and in legislative discourses that construct SNAP recipients as dependent, obese, or criminal. Instead of focusing on hunger itself, much of the legislative debate scrutinizes the everyday lives of the poor and hungry: examining their purchases, where they shopped, and whether they made "good" choices. At the same time, my analysis of legislative debates reveals that there was never an assessment as to whether the implementation of new disciplinary measures actually reduced hunger or created cost-savings. Rather, legislators questioned whether we *really* need SNAP, citing unsubstantiated high rates of waste, fraud, and abuse (Chapters 3 & 5) and uncritical and paternalistic analyses of obesity (Chapter 4). Discourses contrasting the (non-white) 'undeserving hungry' against the hardworking (white) taxpayer supported the creation of new exclusionary boundaries around SNAP and (re)produced racialized and gendered assumptions about the poor, deemed dependent, obese, criminal, or incapable of making healthy food choices.

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Dedicated to all the humans who bring food to our tables,
many of whom are deemed the undeserving hungry.

I see you, and I thank you every day.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ABAWD: Able Bodied Adult Without Dependents
- AFDC: Aid to Families with Dependent Children
- BBCE: Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility
- ERS: Economic Research Service (of the USDA)
- FNS: Food and Nutrition Service (of the USDA)
- FSP: Food Stamp Program
- PRWORA: Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act
- SNAP: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
- SNAP E&T: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training Program
- USDA: United States Department of Agriculture
- USDA OIG: United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General
- USDA IG: United States Department of Agriculture Inspector General
- TANF: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

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I come from a long line of nurturers – cousins and grandparents, moms and dads, aunts and uncles – who all showed me that feeding people is to offer them grace, respect, hospitality, comfort, love, and joy. From this I understand that protecting everyone's right to food is sacred, and I am forever grateful for that way of knowing and being.

CHAPTER 1: THE FOOD POLICE: FOOD STAMPS, SURVEILLANCE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE UNDESERVING HUNGRY

Introduction

We can all agree that no one ought to go hungry in America, and SNAP is essential in protecting the most vulnerable citizens during tough times. For many it is a vital lifeline to keeping food on the table. What we don't want is for this program to hold people back from achieving their potential. I believe there is a role for SNAP, but we need to have a complete, clear understanding of its mission and purpose. – Rep. Conaway (R-TX), Chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture Opening a 2015 16-session legislative review on the Past, Present, and Future of SNAP

Hunger¹ is an intractable problem in America connected to broader social and economic inequity. The enumeration of U.S. household hunger reveals critically important broad scale patterns in hunger dynamics. In 2019, 10.5% of all U.S. households experienced hunger (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). Hunger is highly racialized and gendered, and unevenly distributed across marginalized social groups in the U.S. Compared to the 2019 average, these U.S. households experienced increased hunger at the following percentages: 19.1% of Black households; 15.6% of Latino households; 14.5% of households with children under 6; 28.7% of households with children headed by a single woman; 15.4% of households with children headed by a single man, and 27.6% of households with incomes below 185% of the federal poverty threshold (ibid., 2020).² Despite these clear patterns, federal policy and hunger debates rarely directly address the racial and gender dimensions of hunger. Noting a similar dynamic in federal poverty policy, Schram (2006) documents how “welfare reform reflects an ostensibly

¹ In this dissertation, I primarily use the term hunger to capture the broad state of precarity related to not always knowing where the next meal is coming from. I will use term food insecurity as measurement of hunger, as that is commonly how quantitative studies provided measurements of hunger. See the section below: Situating Hunger (p. 15-19) for detailed explanations of terminology.

² See Figures 1.1 and 1.2 for more details on trends of food insecurity.

race-neutral discourse that nonetheless operates to actively reproduce racial disadvantage” (74). Acknowledging the racialized and gendered patterns of hunger in the U.S. is central to this research. Moreover, as Schram's point underscores, examining discourses in anti-hunger policy is significant for analyzing how federal policy draws from and has the potential to reinforce social hierarchies.

The federal Food Stamp Program (FSP), now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),³ is the largest anti-hunger program in the U.S. with a 2019 budget of \$60.4 billion (Cronquist 2021). With few exceptions, SNAP trends in participation typically mirror rates of poverty in the U.S.⁴ In 2018, the racial composition of SNAP participation was as follows: 45.0% white, 22.3% Latino, 26.6% Black, 1.5% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 2.9% Asian, 0.2% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 6.4% “some other race,” and 3.2% “two or more races” (Loveless 2020).⁵ Support for federal hunger relief has historically had widespread bipartisan and public support (Poppendieck 1998). This sentiment shielded SNAP from earlier rounds of neoliberal austerity, even as it is increasingly situated within politicized discourses of social welfare (ibid). As such, debates surrounding food stamp policy have been importantly connected to those about ‘welfare reform’⁶ (King 1999). While several changes

³ For clarity, I primarily use SNAP, but will use Food Stamp Program (FSP) depending on the timeframe of the discourse being analyzed. The current iteration of the program, SNAP, is a reauthorization of the 1973 Food Stamp Program, with a name change from FSP to SNAP in 2008.

⁴ See Figure 1.4 that shows economic and SNAP trends.

⁵ Percentages have some overlap because Census data reports Latino ethnicity, and individuals can also “select one or more race categories” – for example, 59.3% of households are described as “Race, White Alone,” but 45.0% are described as “White alone, not Hispanic or Latino” (Loveless 2020, 3).

⁶ Broadly referred to as “welfare reform” the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), an entitlement program that provided cash payments to families, with the block grant program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF “help(s) families recover from temporary difficulties and move forward” through assistance with “food, housing, home energy, child care, job training, and more” as determined by the state TANF office (U.S.

were made to food stamp policy during the period associated with welfare reform,⁷ legislators rejected efforts to devolve the Food Stamp Program to a block grant and maintained its entitlement status because, as one senator noted, "there must be a safety net ... against starvation in this country" (Senator Lugar (R-IN), quoted in King 1999, 370). However, as captured in Rep. Conaway's comment at the opening of this introduction, and as evidenced in this dissertation, SNAP is under growing scrutiny and the certainty of a "safety net" against hunger is no longer guaranteed.

In order to better understand U.S. hunger policy making and the debates and discourses surrounding SNAP policy after welfare reform, I analyzed transcripts of 138 congressional hearings broadly related to federal legislative deliberation of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the Food Stamp Program, to elucidate the shifting discursive constructions of hunger within legislative discourses. In this examination, my research takes up the following questions:

1. What are the prevailing discourses of hunger in federal legislative deliberations surrounding SNAP between 2000-2018? Have the dominant discourses changed, and if so, in what ways?
2. How did the discourses and reforms associated with the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act impact SNAP policymaking and debates in the post-welfare reform era?
3. How do constructions of race, gender, and class appear in anti-hunger discourse? Do these discourses change over time and in what ways?

General Services Administration's Technology Transformation Service, USAGov, 2019). See also: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (n.d.)

⁷ See Appendix A: SNAP Policy Fact Sheet for the rules initiated with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). In my analysis, Ch 3 addresses PRWORA rules on employment quotas and time limits, and Ch 5 addresses PRWORA rules on criminality.

My goal in conducting this analysis was to examine the rhetoric and dominant ways of understanding hunger as they relate to the production of federal anti-hunger policy. I analyze the racialized and gendered dimensions of federal anti-hunger policy and embed my examination of legislative discourses about hunger within the shifting dynamics of race, class, and gender in the United States. This critical discourse analysis interrogates the logics and discourses shaping post-welfare reform shifts in the SNAP policy. My research reveals that during this timeframe there was an erosion of the federal commitment to government hunger relief. My analysis demonstrates that during this period, legislative debates surrounding SNAP reauthorization became increasingly focused on disciplining the “undeserving hungry,” a term I draw from Katz’s (1989) critical work on poverty. I trace this shift through legislative discourses that have constructed SNAP recipients as dependent, obese,⁸ or criminal.

As an urban studies scholar with a background in nutritional science, I am uniquely positioned to analyze the interwoven discourses of food, health, and politics. I examine legislative discourses in debates about anti-hunger policy with the understanding, as Waitt (2005) has noted, that discourse is not simply “passages of connected writing or speech” (281). Rather, discourse “cohere[s] around the production and circulation of knowledge ... how particular knowledge systems convince people about what exists in the world (*meanings*) and determine what they say (*attitudes*) and do (*practices*)” (ibid, 218, emphasis added). My theoretical framework is grounded in feminist critiques and critical poverty and race studies. I

⁸ Obesity is contested, as a term, in its measurement, and as way of knowing and too often visually assigning poor health status. Fat justice activists consider the term obesity a slur (Gordon, 2020). My use of it here, much like the criminality and dependency discourses, explicitly considers legislative discourses – not to reinforce the concept, but to acknowledge the dominant social construction of the so-called obesity epidemic. See Ch 4 for discourses that challenge dominant ways of knowing obesity.

situate my analysis within both interactive discourses about hunger and political economic shifts, including the neoliberal reworking of state and federal poverty policy (Goldberg 2009; Melamed 2006; S. Schram 2006; Peck 2001) and the color-blind racial frameworks that dominate the neoliberal era (Bonilla-Silva 2010; M. K. Brown et al. 2005; Ernst 2010; Quadagno 1994). I develop an intersectional analysis (K. Crenshaw 1989) of the racialized and gendered *meanings* surrounding hunger, and how that may inform the political *attitudes* and *practices* underlying anti-hunger policy. Most recently, dominant understandings of poverty have also been highly informed by discourses of workfare, dependency, and personal responsibility (Bonds 2015; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Lawson and Elwood 2014; Peck 2001; S. Schram 2006). Building from critical poverty studies (Bonds 2015; Goode and Maskovsky 2001; Katz 2015; Lawson and Elwood 2014) and critical race theory (K. Crenshaw 1995b; K. Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Ford and Airhihenbuwa 2010; Gotanda 1995; C. Harris 1995; 2002), this project contributes to scholarship analyzing racialized and gendered constructions of poverty through a specific focus on legislative discourses about hunger.

The timeframe of my research overlaps with the growing moral panic over the U.S. ‘obesity epidemic,’⁹ which frames poor health and nutrition as individual and moral failings (Campos 2004; Gard and Wright 2005). This is also a period of intense neoliberal state restructuring premised on austerity logics that at once prioritize the reduction of social spending while at the same expanding funding and state capacities towards discipline,

⁹ See note 8.

militarization, and carcerality (Loyd and Bonds 2018; Gilmore 2007; Peck 2003).¹⁰ The years 2000-2018 saw sharpening inequality, and given SNAP's entitlement status, the counter cyclical program worked as designed in response to the Great Recession, which occurred December 2007 through June 2009 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2019a). Meaning, that during the recession, SNAP participation increased as it should to account for the economic downturn. In 2000, there were 32.5 million individuals in poverty and 17.1 million individuals in SNAP. Participation of eligible individuals spiked during the Great Recession and by 2012, there were 47.1 million individuals in poverty and 46.9 million individuals in SNAP (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service 2019). SNAP participation and spending rose because of the Great Recession, reached a historic peak in 2013, and has declined yearly between 2014 and 2019 (Aussenberg and Falk 2019).¹¹

The timeframe of my analysis also saw the enduring significance of disciplinary welfare discourses (Roberts 2014; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). These well-established discourses combined with the Tea Party movement that had gained momentum in response to Obama's presidency and his re-election for a second term (Haltinner 2016). This movement fused neoliberal rhetoric about government inefficiencies to more explicit language of racism and racial resentment (Melamed 2011; Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011) in ways that turned SNAP into a "popular punching bag, especially ... closer to Election Day" (Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA), 2014). My project illustrates how this once broadly supported program became

¹⁰ Harvey (2007) defines neoliberalism as a "theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can be best advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade" (22) arguing that the purpose of neoliberalism is to restore "class dominance ... threatened by the ascent of social democratic endeavors" (22).

¹¹ Figure 1.4 for more details on SNAP, employment, and poverty trends.

increasingly subject to bipartisan scrutiny. My analysis of nearly two decades of legislative debates about SNAP reauthorization identifies increasing focus on implementing more disciplinary approaches to anti-hunger policy. I find that these discourses took shape across several key themes, including work, health, and criminality.

Theorizing Race, Class, Gender, And Place In Discourses Of Hunger

I first draw from critical race theory (CRT) (K. Crenshaw 1995b; K. Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Ford and Airhihenbuwa 2010; Gotanda 1995; C. Harris 1995; 2002), and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) to analyze the material and discursive connections between race, class, gender, and hunger. In brief, I hold the following CRT principles at the forefront of my research: race is socially constructed; racism is covert and commonplace; racism benefits the dominant group; race must be viewed intersectionality across multiple forms of oppression; and CRT-grounded research is justice based and anti-essentialist (Delgado and Stefancic 2012, 275 - 303). Racial categories are fluid, contested, and socially constructed, based on current political or economic needs (Bonilla-Silva 1997; K. Crenshaw 1995b; Omi and Winant 1994). James (2008) describes race as simultaneously a “biological fiction” and a “social fact” (32) to highlight both the shifting social meanings and material effects of race. Through colonization, racial group categorization was ascribed, primarily using phenotypic appearances (Omi and Winant 1994).

My analysis builds from Gilmore’s (2002b) definition of racism as “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies” (261). This definition underscores how racisms create an array of “death-dealing displacements” (Gilmore

2002a, 16) that lead to premature death for racialized populations. Drawing from Gilmore's notion that premature death is often state sanctioned, it is critically important to examine state policymaking and its role in the creation and reproduction of social difference. In my research I found that widely circulated understandings of hunger inform federal anti-hunger debates that shape access to the life sustaining resource of food in ways that directly contour questions of well-being and life and death. My findings reveal that both policy and health discourses about the un/deserving hungry reinforce and entrench discourses of personal responsibility, eliding the role that structural dynamics – from racism, stagnating wages, uneven urban economic development and access to resources – play in shaping the dynamics of hunger (Reese 2018; Alkon and Norgaard 2009; Cadieux and Slocum 2015; Carney 2015; Shannon 2014).

I recognize that the conquest and formation of the United States was thoroughly racially exploitive, starting with the genocide of Indigenous peoples for white land ownership and the enslavement of humans classified as property (Bonds and Inwood 2016). White supremacy has been legally and socially maintained through a number of American institutions, policies, and practices over the course of history, a select few of these include sharecropping and vagrancy laws (Lipsitz 2011), segregation (Massey 1994), limited school integration (Orfield 2013), wage and labor law protections (Glenn 2002), criminalization (McKittrick 2011), and disinvestment of Black communities (Wilson 2002). White supremacy has been structurally maintained throughout US history, and at present is heavily reinforced through the “the criminalization of non-white bodies, and the legal codification of servitude can be found across the differential space-times of plantations and prisons” (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 955).

Two dominant understandings of race in the U.S. are fundamental to this study's period of 2000-2018: color-blind racism and racialized and gendered tropes of urban poverty. Color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010) – ostensibly not seeing race – is best understood as a way of framing racial inequalities as emerging from “natural” or “cultural” phenomena while minimizing the role of racism or structural relations in shaping and giving rise to racialized social, political, or economic differences (Bonds, Kenny, and Wolfe 2015). This post-Civil Rights Era “laissez-faire racism” (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1996) blames racial inequalities on the individual and the culture that they come from, because inequalities can no longer be caused by illegal and overtly racist acts. Gotanda (1995) traced the legal patterns of the Supreme Court to show a color-blind interpretation of law in which “racism is thought of only as an individual prejudice” (p. 265). Brewer and Heitzeg (2008) emphasized this point in their analysis of color-blind legal interpretations, which rely on the understanding that “discrimination must be intentional and similarly individual” (635) and thus prevent any structural interpretation of racial inequity. In this context, the key is that racism is understood only through the narrow lens of individual hostility and antagonism rather than a structurally produced and historically entrenched phenomenon embedded in institutions and everyday life (Melamed 2006; Goldberg 2009; Bonds, Kenny, and Wolfe 2015; Flagg 1993).

I draw from critical studies of poverty and welfare reform to understand the discursive production of hunger. While discourses of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor are centuries old (Katz 2015), the gendered and racial construction of contemporary discourses of poverty can be traced to the powerful anti-Black sentiments foundationally rooted in slavery, which shape-shifted into vagrancy laws during Reconstruction, and continued to crystalize into

the racist trope of Black Americans as lazy and criminal that persists today (Brewer and Heitzeg 2008; Katz 2015; Muhammad 2010).

I engage with critiques of the racialized and gendered construction of urban poverty (Roberts 1991; Crenshaw 1995a; Andersen and Collins 2013), which emphasize not only how poverty is mapped on to specifically racialized and gendered bodies, but also onto specific spaces (i.e. the urban “ghetto”) (Williams 2004). This produces a widespread rhetoric of failing people and places in urban spaces, obscuring the ongoing roles of segregationist policies, surveillance, and disinvestment in the relational production of non-white urban spaces and predominantly white suburban spaces (Loyd and Bonds 2018; McKittrick 2011). When anti-hunger solutions are provided without the historical context of racial and class segregation in housing (Massey 1994) and retail (Kwate et al. 2013), they elide the structural racism at the root of hunger in the United States. For example, racial disparities in grocery store access are often provided as a reason for racial disparities in food insecurity. As Shannon (2014) argues, these discourses operate as a way to uncritically place racialized health problems in low-income communities.

Critical studies of poverty and welfare reform help contextualize the history that has constructed current narratives of urban poverty. Critical poverty studies situates poverty as “...a direct outgrowth of uneven capitalist development,” understanding “that the meanings, practices, and identities of those who are impoverished vary across geography, history, and multiple axes of difference” (Goode and Maskovsky 2001, 17). Contemporary U.S. narratives on urban poverty can be traced to the deeply rooted anti-Black racism and violence of the post-Civil War era, including the implementation of vagrancy laws during reconstruction and, later,

through the implementation of Jim Crow laws that segregated urban space by race and class (Muhammad 2010; Katz 2015). Muhammad (2010) details what he calls “the condemnation of Blackness” within social science research and politics from the Progressive Era through the middle of the 20th century. He argues that scholarly and popular understandings placed an “emphasis on culture defined as pathology” (ibid., 277), attaching poverty and criminality to Blackness in a way that ignored racism and discriminatory practices in hiring and policing in the urban North.

I draw from Muhammad’s insights, particularly as they relate to Katz’s (1989) tracing of the production of political, public, and social science understandings of the so-called ‘culture of poverty,’ and the ‘underclass’ that define and categorize the ‘undeserving poor.’ These constructions have worked to deny access to federal programs and forms of support. As Katz argues:

[P]olicy has collapsed into artificial categories the continuum on which poor people have been arrayed ... moral assessments have nearly always overlain pragmatic distinctions. The issue becomes not only who can fend for themselves without aid, but more important, whose behavior and character entitle them to the resources of others. ... The undeserving poor, the culture of poverty, and the underclass are moral statuses identified by a source of dependence, the behavior with which it is associated, its transmission to children, and its crystallization into cultural patterns. (ibid, 9-10)

Here Katz sharply critiques ‘poverty knowledge,’ such as that in the infamous “Moynihan Report (1965),”¹² an analysis of the “Negro Family,” which blamed Black matriarchal family structures, Black male underemployment and unemployment, and Black youth “delinquency

¹² The Moynihan Report was called “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (Katz 1989, 24) authored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan of the federal Office of Policy Planning and Research of the Department of Labor, purported to understand what might undermine “Blacks’ legitimate aspirations for equal results” (ibid., 25) after the 1964 passage of the Civil Rights Act.

and crime; alienation [and] ‘narcotic addiction’” for the “tangle of pathology” in urban Black families (cited in Katz, 26-27). This report informed policy and decades of thinking that pathologized the supposed culture of individual behaviors (e.g., single motherhood, criminality, and welfare dependency) within urban Black families (Rainwater and Yancey 1967). Katz (1989) critiques the construction of the “underclass”¹³ – a term that still widely circulates within urban scholarship – for the moral judgement embedded in the term and its emphasis on individual behaviors rather than structural change. An extensive body of literature documents the enduring influence of the Moynihan Report in the construction of race, gender, and class (Greenbaum 2015; Loyd and Bonds 2018; Hinton 2016; Taylor 2016).

Scholarship in the social sciences, then, plays a central role in producing ‘poverty knowledge’ that blames and stigmatizes poor people of color. This is apparent even within critical urban scholarship meant to document and challenge the persistence of racial and class segregation in cities (McKittrick 2011; Loyd and Bonds 2018). For example, Massey’s (1994) groundbreaking work detailing the structural dynamics of urban segregation analyzed concentrated poverty in terms of “anything that is correlated with poverty: crime, drug abuse, welfare dependency, single parenthood, and educational difficulties” (480). His analysis, though engaged with critical analysis of racism and racial segregation, still defined poverty as “linked to individual behaviors associated with the underclass” (ibid., 481). Herbert Gans (2010) has also critiqued such understandings, arguing that urban scholarship on “neighborhood effects” often emphasizes individual “trouble-making, and antisocial” behaviors, calling “attention to

¹³ Wilson (2002 [1987]) popularized the term ‘underclass’ to describe predominantly Black, urban, socially isolated individuals who had disordered characteristics including “inner-city joblessness, teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, welfare dependency, and serious crime” (ibid., 261).

[poverty] concentration,” yet “divert[ing] attention from policies that would reduce or end poverty” (82).

I draw from Katz’s (1989) influential analysis of the ‘undeserving poor,’ paying particular attention to “whose behavior and character entitle them to the resources of others” (9) in my analysis of legislative discourses of federal hunger relief. My dissertation emphasizes the discursive and material production of poverty, race, and crime, rejecting understandings that situate these dynamics within culture, dependency, or personal choices. Rather, I understand poverty, especially Black poverty, as produced through capitalist relations and racist policies and practices across scales, including extractive practices that cemented intergenerational wealth accumulation among whites (Reeves 2017) and that devalued Black property and neighborhoods (Perry 2020).

This project draws from scholarship in the area of critical food studies, which involves critical analysis of the food system, often through similar feminist, critical race and/or critical poverty studies approaches highlighted above. The scholarship problematizing race and the U.S. food system has grown substantially over the past decades (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Slocum and Saldanha 2013). Critical food studies span an array of topics, including analysis of the Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast for Children Program (Heynen 2009; Potorti 2017); studies of color-blindness in farmers markets (Guthman 2008); investigation of institutional racism within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) (Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin. 2002; Jones 1994); and examination of the prohibition of Indigenous foodways (Norgaard, Reed, and Horn 2011). Many have critiqued research of and solutions to U.S. food system problems because they focus on white upper middle-class priorities (such as farmers markets, cooking classes,

urban gardens, and land trusts) (Guthman 2008; Holt-Giménez 2017; Newtown Florist Club Writing Collective 2013; Tompkins 2012).

I draw from critical food studies to contextualize hunger through a food justice lens. Food justice “places access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food in the contexts of institutional racism, racial formation, and racialized geographies” (Alkon and Norgaard 2009). This project adds to a line of critical anti-hunger research. Drawing from qualitative interviews with Black female caregivers, Jarrett, Bahar, and Odoms-Young (2014) identified several strategies – such as social network support and community resources - that caregivers used to either make food last in the house or to improve food access. Block et al. (2012) pinpointed structural barriers and situated issues of power and respect as foundational to limited food access in low-income and predominantly Black Chicago neighborhoods. Carney’s (2015) intersectional analysis found that hunger prevails on both sides of the U.S. border for women who have immigrated to the U.S. from Central America and Mexico. Many of the women had come to the U.S. in the hopes of reduced hunger and poverty through employment opportunities, but Carney (2015) documented immigration exacerbated hunger in the U.S. given barriers to both employment and food access, compounded by loss of family support or other foodways from home (e.g. gardens). Chilton and Rose (2009) argue that healthy and culturally affirming food is a basic human right. Interrogating racism has been present in some of the US anti-hunger conversation, for example, explicitly discussed as the impetus for the Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast for Children Program (Heynen 2009; Potorti 2017). And, the Tufts-Delta Health Center in rural Mississippi created one of the U.S.’s first vegetable prescription programs given the abject poverty produced from Jim Crow and sharecropping

(Ward 2017). Combined, these literatures inform that theoretical framework that I draw from to contextualize the project's discourses analysis.

Finally, I use Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality to understand intersecting systems of oppression and how that may impact anti-hunger policy. Intersectionality recognizes that the racism experienced by women of color can only be understood when considered in the context of gender, rather than assuming separate experiences of race and gender. Analyzing anti-hunger discourse requires the complication and analysis of oppression based on several socially ascribed identities – including race, class, and gender – and the intersectional examination of how the ascription into any marginalized identity exponentially reinforces marginalization in another.¹⁴ Importantly, intersectionality allows for the analysis of qualitative differences caused by oppression, vulnerability, or marginalization based on intersecting identities. For example, mothers have long been expected to provide the unpaid labor of feeding their families (DeVault, 1991), and Black feminists detail the punishment of poor Black women in state-sanctioned programs (Roberts 1991; Crenshaw 1995a). As noted above and detailed further below, hunger is racialized and gendered. Black households and households headed by a single woman persistently hover near a 30% hunger rate (see Figures 1.2 and 1.3). And, SNAP is a state-sanctioned program that provides food funding for households in poverty and experiencing hunger. In this dissertation, I used an intersectional lens to analyze if there are

¹⁴ Additional systems of marginalization, such as ableism, could also increase risk of hunger. I will foreground the intersection of racism, classism, and sexism producing hunger utilizing “dynamic centering” of those identities. This is theoretically justified as the dominant urban poverty discourse punishes impoverished mothers of color (Brito 1999; Mink 1994; Monnat 2010; Roberts 2012).

compounding discourses on race and gender that have a differential impact rather than looking at discourses of race and gender alone.

In the next section, I establish program context and situate the issues at stake during legislative debate about the reauthorization of SNAP between 2000-2018. SNAP is an increasingly complex program with multiple initiatives and policies under its scope. As such, I provide an overview of SNAP administration and funding and definitions of hunger and food security. I focus on how they relate to anti-hunger policy making in order to ground my analysis in the following chapters.

Situating Hunger: The Problem of Hunger And U.S. Anti-Hunger Policy

“Poverty can produce a most deadly kind of violence. In this society violence against poor people and minority groups is routine. I remind you that starving a child is violence” - Coretta Scott King 1968 (as quoted in: Jackson 2009)

“Food security’ “the availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices.” (United Nations 1975, In: Lawrence and McMichael 2012)

“[S]ilent undernutrition.” (Brown and Allen 1988, 508)

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.” -Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 25 (United Nations 2015)

“Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. (adopted at the 1996 World Food Summit, In: FAO 2003)

“A hunger-free community is a place where there is no discrimination – where people are connected, even interconnected, across the usual social boundaries of race and ethnicity, class, social status, disability, age, block or neighborhood. It’s a place where no one, no matter what their age or social standing, is worried or anxious about having enough money for healthy food.” (Center for Hunger-Free Communities, 2018)

“Nutritious food is a human right.” (Why Hunger n.d.)

Both the term *hunger* and the related, but distinct concept, *food security*, attempt to describe the seemingly simple notion of whether a person has enough food. The above quotes elucidate the contradictions and complexity of trying to distil what it means to have ample access to food. The quotes also reveal the range in understandings of hunger, from the notion that food is a human right to those emphasizing market-based food production. In this dissertation, I use the term *hunger* to capture the broad state of precarity related to not knowing where one’s next meal is coming from. I employ a food justice-centered conceptualization of hunger (Alkon and Norgaard 2009) that views hunger not as an outcome of scarcity, but rather as the result of the “inequitable distribution of resources and uneven relations of power,” including “persistent race, gender, and class inequalities” (Cadieux and Slocum 2015, 13; see also Bradley and Herrera 2016; Carney 2015; Holt-Giménez 2017; Patel 2009). I use the term *food insecurity* as measurement of hunger, as that is commonly how quantitative studies provide measurements of hunger.

So, what kind of a problem is hunger in the American context, and how do we know? Janet Poppendieck (1995) outlines how concerns for hunger in America appeared in the popular narrative during three distinct periods in the 20th Century: during the Great Depression, in the 1960s when Civil Rights activists brought Senator Robert Kennedy to the Mississippi Delta in order to document poverty, and then again in the 1980s during an economic downturn

amidst President Reagan’s social spending cuts. Poppendieck (1998) further details that anti-hunger advocates in the 1980s pointed to the swelling use of emergency food relief in the U.S. as evidence of increased hunger. Ronald Reagan created a President’s Task Force on Food Assistance that dismissed the concern for increased hunger because it lacked scientifically substantiated “hard” proof (ibid., 102-105).¹⁵

At the same time, the Physician Task Force on Hunger in America (1985) set out to “document,” “analyze,” “assess,” and eventually “determine why hunger is a problem, and make recommendations to remedy the problem and, if possible, prevent it from recurring” (6). A review of the report noted that given the lack of a “single universally agreed upon definition of hunger” (Brown and Allen 1988, 508) or measurement, the Physician Task Force derived an estimate of hunger based on the number of Americans living in poverty (ibid, p. 509). Because there was no way to measure hunger, it was difficult to ascertain the extent of the problem, let alone provide solutions. The drive to quantify hunger eventually resulted in the 1995 national measure through the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS). The ERS uses the term *food security*, defining it as: “Food security means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life”¹⁶ (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2020, 2). However, the USDA ERS considers *hunger* to only be a physiological “uneasy or painful sensation caused by lack of food” (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service 2020b).

¹⁵ Pear (1984) also reported on Reagan’s Task Force, noting the commission has concluded that “hunger does persist” in America but that “allegations of rampant hunger simply cannot be documented.”

¹⁶ However, the Hunger & Food Security Programs branch of the USDA adds two key elements to that definition: “At a minimum, this includes: 1) readily available, nutritionally adequate, and safe foods and 2) assured ability to acquire personally acceptable foods in a socially acceptable way” (USDA, HFSP, 2018). This distinction is critical and can frame anti-hunger solutions in very different ways, yet the dominant USDA frame shortens the definition to the one provided by USDA ERS.

The concept *food security*¹⁷ gained national traction during the 1980s economic downturn and expanded with the Community Food Security Coalition's influence on policy in the 1990s, enough to garner support for a national measure of hunger in 1995 (Allen 2007). The 1995 Community Food Security Empowerment Act¹⁸ attempted to encompass social and community barriers to food access that had been "emphasized by public health, social medicine, and early public sector planning efforts"(Morales 2011, 153) in previous framings of anti-hunger efforts. In the conclusion of her historical tracing of U.S. hunger and food relief, Poppendieck (1998) noted that while the community driven food security projects showed great promise, they had become "overshadowed by a shift in policy which has placed the protection of federal nutrition programs on center stage" (279-280). I start my discourse analysis in 2000 while the dominant legislative discourses were still emphasizing a protection of the federal food stamp program.

As concepts, depending on the complexity and context of the definition used, both food security and hunger do little to critique or question the control over one's place in the food system.¹⁹ I primarily use hunger throughout this dissertation, following food activist scholars, such as Allen (2007), who in critiquing the current USDA ERS definition, noted that only using the term food security "takes away the sharp edge of the word hunger" (22). Hunger is still

¹⁷ Definitions vary slightly, but this definition was adopted at the 1996 World Food Summit (In: FAO, 2003): "Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."

¹⁸ Morales (2014) notes the wide-spread favorability in that the Act was "Endorsed by more than 125 organizations" (ibid, 152), many were part of the Community Food Security Coalition.

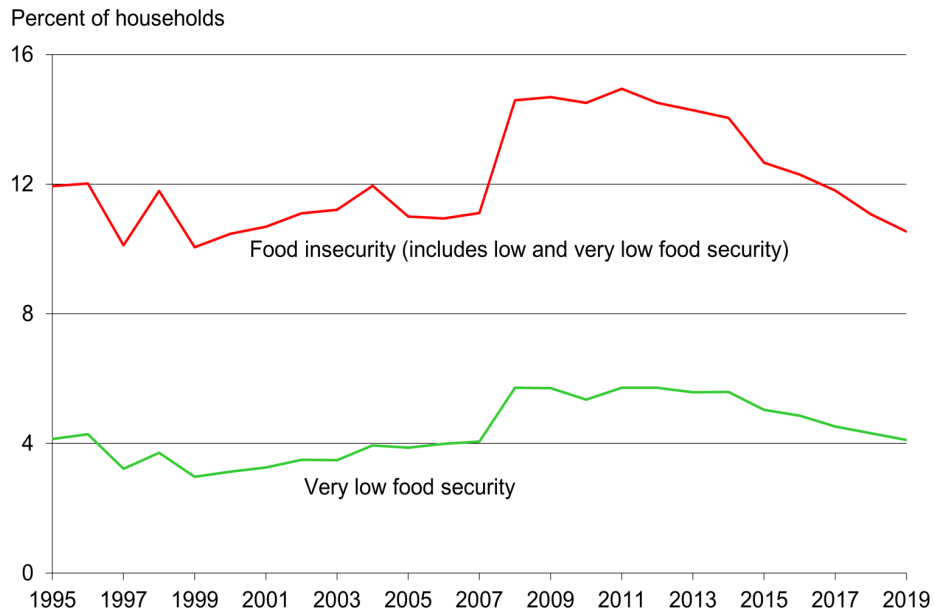
¹⁹ Alternates have emerged to challenge the concepts of food security and hunger, notably food sovereignty. See: Patel's (2009) argument "'food sovereignty', a term that was very specifically intended as a foil to the prevailing notions of food security" (p. 665); yet Edelman (2014) reviews the food sovereignty "origin story" (960) and questions whether it has always been "diametrically opposed" (965) to food security.

used by advocates and academics, yet it is important to acknowledge it can be emotionally exploitative (Fisher 2017). This term could appear in exploitative imagery or language to solicit emotion or donations for hunger relief but can happen in a way to further marginalize and disempower individuals experiencing hunger.

Patterns Of Hunger in The U.S. By Race, Class, Or Gender

The USDA ERS categorizes the number of U.S. households experiencing hunger with *food insecurity* – the absence of food security, or with *very low food security* which is an even more severe form of hunger. The enumeration of U.S. household hunger reveals critically important broad scale patterns in hunger dynamics. The USDA calculates select long-term trends in rates of household hunger that captured shifts in hunger during my study period. Figure 1.1 (below) shows overall trends in food insecurity, and very low food security, starting in 1995. As would be expected, the percentage of households experiencing hunger in America worsened corresponding to the economic downturn, with the steep increase in hunger measured in 2008 during the Great Recession.

Figure 1.1: Trends in prevalence rates of food insecurity and very low food security in the US between 1995-2019.



Note: Prevalence rates for 1996 and 1997 were adjusted for the estimated effects of differences in data collection screening protocols used in those years.

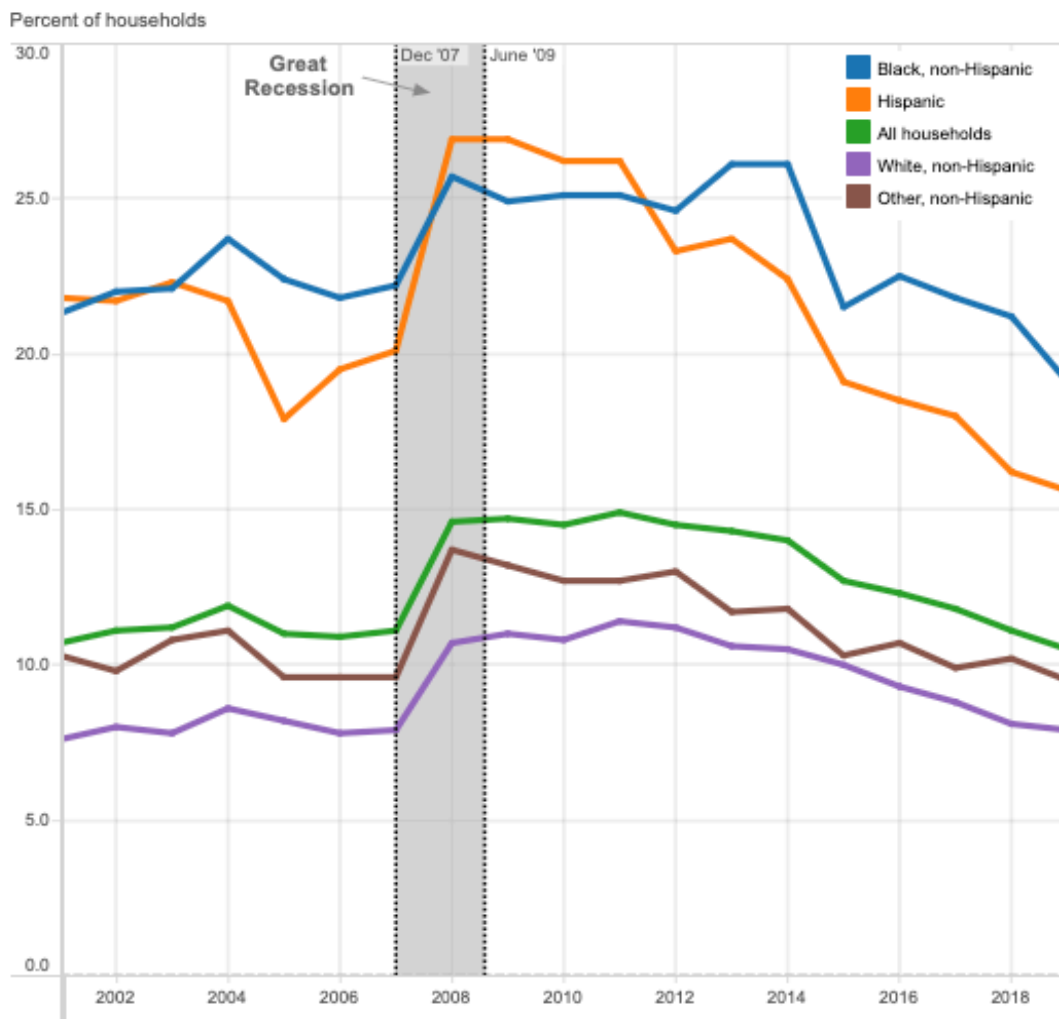
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

Source: (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service 2020a)

Figures 1.2 and 1.3 (pictured below) vividly display how patterns of hunger varied by race and ethnicity, or for households with children between 2001 and 2019. In 2006, prior to the Great Recession, Figure 1.2 shows more than double the percentage of households experiencing hunger for both Black (21.8%) and Latino (19.5%) households, compared to the lowest percentage in white (7.8%) households (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service 2020a). In 2006 for households with children experiencing hunger, Figure 1.3 shows triple the percentage in households with children headed by a single woman (30.4%) and almost double if headed by a single man (17.1%), compared to the lowest percentage in married households with children (10.1%) (ibid.). Hunger increased across all

households during the recession, with the percentage of Latino households experiencing hunger surpassing Black households between 2008-2011. As the U.S. economy improved, hunger decreased through 2019. However, even with the general economic improvement, the historic lows for this time period showed more than one quarter of all households with children headed by a single woman (28.7% in 2018), and nearly one fifth of all Black households (19.1% in 2019) experienced hunger (ibid.).

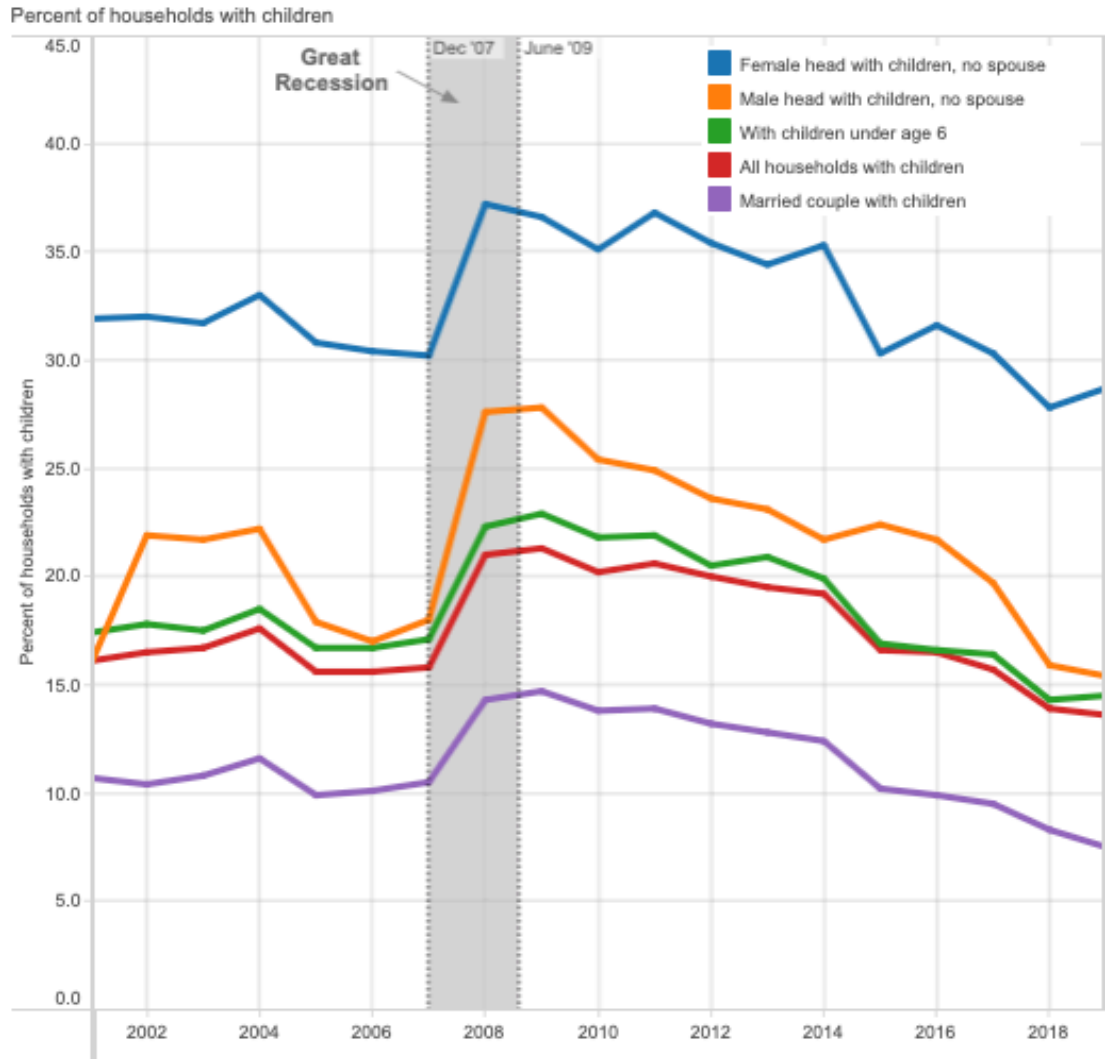
Figure 1.2: Trends in food insecurity by race and ethnicity, 2001-2019



Source: Calculated by USDA, Economic Research Service, using Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/>

Source: (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service 2020a)

Figure 1.3: Trends in food insecurity among households with children, 2001-2019



Source: Calculated by USDA, Economic Research Service, using Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/>

Source: (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service 2020a)

There are limitations to the USDA measurement of hunger, including that it samples approximately 50,000 U.S. households. Because of this, many racially marginalized populations not captured sufficiently in national data have still higher rates of hunger, including Native Americans(Feeding America 2020), immigrant families (Sano et al. 2011), and the rapidly growing number of “Mexican-origin families ... along the Texas border with Mexico” (Sharkey,

Dean, and Johnson 2011). Additionally, the USDA only reports hunger by one household demographic category at a time, so it does not provide statistics across multiple positions of marginalization that individually, have been shown to have higher rates of hunger. For example, it does not report food insecurity by household for women living alone who also have incomes below 185% of the federal poverty threshold.

Federal Hunger Relief

In the United States, hunger relief was historically relegated to charities until both agricultural surplus and extreme poverty reached the federal political agenda with the 1933 Agriculture Adjustment Act. That Act, in part, authorized distribution of food surplus to those in need (DeVault and Pitts 1984; MacDonald 1977; Brown and Allen 1988; Poppendieck 2014). Current federal food assistance programs are designed to alleviate hunger, and most studies suggest modest success (Gundersen, Kreider, and Pepper 2011; Gundersen and Ziliak 2014). My research analyzes the largest anti-hunger program in the U.S. – the Food Stamp Program (FSP), now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).²⁰

SNAP legislation at both the federal and state level is increasingly complex. For example, in the 2018 Farm Bill, there were 34 proposed bills or policies specifically related to the implementation of SNAP. SNAP funding is *mandatory spending*, meaning there must be federal funds available to pay the SNAP benefits for all households who qualify for the program. There are federal rules regarding SNAP benefits, eligibility, and work requirements, but states²¹

²⁰ See Note 3.

²¹ This includes all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, and Guam. Since 1982, Puerto Rico has a separate block grant called the Nutrition Assistance Program for Puerto Rico.

dispense SNAP and have options in how they apply these rules (Congressional Research Service 2018; United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service 2018b). Here I provide a brief overview of SNAP, and its rules, limiting my discussion to policies important to the discourse analysis of legislative hearings. I also provide the SNAP Fact Sheet (Appendix A) for a quick reference guide to SNAP policies detailed below and used in the hearings.

Households with equal to or less than a net income of 100% of the federal poverty level (FPL) and liquid assets below \$2250 qualify for SNAP, with higher limits for households that include any elderly individual (over 60) or an individual with a disability. States can also utilize what is termed *categorical eligibility* to determine SNAP access, which means that the household is automatically eligible because they receive other federal or state needs-tested support. Once eligibility is determined, benefits are calculated based on household size, the maximum benefit, and net household income.

SNAP has been authorized through the Farm Bill since 1973²² (Congressional Research Service 2018). The Farm Bill is a generic, but commonly referenced, name for the omnibus²³ federal bill reauthorized every 5 years and includes provisions for SNAP under the bill's Nutrition Title.²⁴ The 2018 Farm Bill is the basis for any SNAP spending estimates provided.²⁵ The Congressional Budget Office estimated the Nutrition Title accounted for three fourths of

²² SNAP is authorized under the Nutrition Title of the Farm Bill. Since 1933, Farm Bill legislation reauthorizes the previous Act, and adds or adjusts programs in a current bill. Farm Bill programs are authorized and funded for the 5-year duration until the next Farm Bill debate, but can be amended in the interim or extended if needed.

²³ As omnibus legislation, the Farm Bill funds several USDA programs related to conservation, trade, commodities, and farm subsidies. The 2014 Farm Bill allocated almost 80% of funding to SNAP (Imhoff, 2019).

²⁴ The policies and provisions in the Nutrition Title that legislate SNAP are sometimes referred to as the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, which was formerly the Food Stamp Act of 1977.

²⁵ The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) included temporary increased monthly SNAP benefits and suspended some eligibility requirements (CBPP, 2021). All FSP policy discussed in dissertation prior to the conclusion do not include the temporary changes due to FFCRA, nor the related increase in SNAP funding.

projected 2018 Farm Bill spending,²⁶ with SNAP estimated to receive almost \$65 billion (98%) of the Nutrition Title (Aussenberg and Billings 2019). In 2018, the average monthly SNAP allotment was \$131 for a single person and \$239 for a household of 2 people and averaged \$1.40 per meal per person (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2019b). SNAP funds are distributed to an individual through an electronic bank transfer (EBT) card and can only be used to purchase food (Cronquist 2021).

Food Stamp Program Participation

As Farm Bill funding authorizes mandatory spending for all food stamp eligible households, the number of SNAP participants increases and decreases concurrent with economic changes. With few exceptions, SNAP participation trends mirror rates of hunger and poverty in the U.S. For example, participation dropped with economic improvement after the Great Recession: on average, monthly SNAP participation was 47.6 million in 2013 compared to 35.7 million in 2019 (~15% vs ~11% of the U.S. population, respectively) (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service 2021).

Importantly for my research, there were food stamp policy implications and subsequent participation changes after ‘welfare reform’²⁷ as well as before and after the Great Recession. The decreased participation of eligible families after welfare reform will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Figure 1.4 (below) shows the changes between 1985 to 2018 in the number of individuals participating in the food stamp program, the number of individuals who were unemployed, and the number of individuals who were at or below poverty thresholds, including

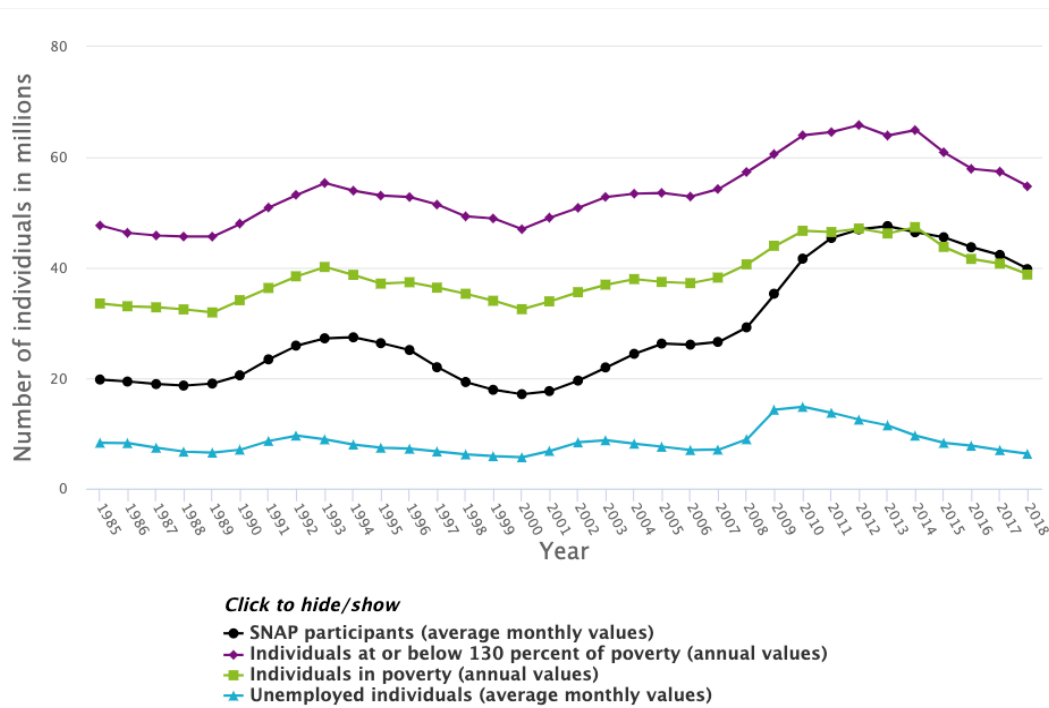
²⁶ For reference, the 2014 Farm Bill allocated almost 80% of funding to SNAP (Imhoff, 2019).

²⁷ See Note 6. The SNAP ‘welfare reform’ changes are discussed below.

those 130% at or below the poverty guidelines.²⁸ Figure 1.4 shows how SNAP participation of eligible households decreased after welfare reform – the gap between households in poverty and SNAP participating households increased between 1995 and 2000 – then narrowed slightly in response to policy changes between 2000-2007. Then with increasing SNAP participation rates during the Great Recession, the number of households in poverty and SNAP participating households reached near parity in 2012. As shown in Figure 1.4, in 1995, there were 37.1 million individuals in poverty and 26.3 million individuals in the Food Stamp Program (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service 2019). By 2000, there were 32.5 million individuals in poverty and 17.1 million individuals in the Food Stamp Program (ibid.). Participation of eligible individuals spiked during the Great Recession and by 2012, there were 47.1 million individuals in poverty and 46.9 million individuals in the Food Stamp Program (ibid.). The percentage of participation for eligible individuals has remained high, with 38.8 million individuals in poverty and 39.8 million individuals in the Food Stamp Program (ibid.).

²⁸ This data uses the Department of Health and Human Services definition of the federal poverty level.

Figure 1.4: Yearly trends in SNAP participants, unemployment, and poverty, 1985-2018



Source: (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service 2019).

Welfare Reform And The Food Stamp Program

Debates on welfare reform shaped the Food Stamp Program (FSP), now SNAP, in ways that continue to have relevance today, including added provisions to the PRWORA of 1996²⁹ on FSP/SNAP work requirements and punitive measures. In brief, PRWORA instituted the Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents (ABAWD) work requirement and time limit. This ABAWD time limit tightened the enforcement of long-standing food stamp work requirements³⁰ by limiting benefits to three months out of three years for anyone aged 18 – 49 who is able to work and does not have dependents (defined as children under the age of 18) unless they

²⁹ See note 6.

³⁰ See Appendix A: SNAP Fact Sheet for other SNAP work requirements.

volunteer, work, or participate in an employment and training program for 80 hours per month. This requirement was not vastly different from typical work requirements, but states now kept track of the total months that participants categorized as ABAWD used benefits, as well as focused specific attention on employment and training of participants categorized as ABAWD. These individuals lose their SNAP/FSP benefits even when job searching (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service 2018a). This rule became a major focus of legislative debate that will be discussed in Chapter 3.

PRWORA also instituted several punitive measures related to SNAP/FSP: 1) a permanent ban for anyone convicted of a drug felony, 2) a temporary ban for anyone who is incarcerated, 3) and a ban for so-called “fugitive felons” – individuals who have a warrant out for their arrest in connection with a felony or for violating terms of their parole or probation. PRWORA also allowed for law enforcement to request personal information about any individual in SNAP/FSP without a warrant if the person was considered a “fugitive felon” (Government Accountability Office 2002). As described in Chapter 5, the USDA Office of Inspector General combined the provisions of “fugitive felon” and law enforcement warrantless requests for personal participant information to create Operation Talon and ensnare food stamp recipients.

Finally, PRWORA made significant restrictions³¹ to federal benefit eligibility for non-citizen immigrants. Gleason et al. (2001) estimated significant decline in food stamp participation by non-citizen immigrants that could be explained by PRWORA-enacted rules, and the 2002 Farm Bill restored some food stamp benefits. A comprehensive assessment that

³¹ “Title IV of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) restricts the eligibility of non-U.S. nationals (aliens) for many federal benefit programs.” (Congressional Research Service 2020)

would appropriately contextualize the scale of immigration policy and rhetoric on SNAP is beyond the scope of this dissertation. See Potochnick (2016), Van Hook and Balistreri (2006), Henderson, Capps, and Finegold (2008), Kilty and de Haymes (2012), Bollinger and Hagstrom (2008), and Agrawal (2008) for assessments of the impact of PRWORA on non-citizen immigrants and their children. Notably, this is a giant caveat to the notion of protecting the “safety net ... against starvation in this country” (Senator Lugar (R-IN), quoted in King, 1999, p. 370), as non-citizens were disqualified from all federal benefits through PRWORA.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I demonstrate how the discourses surrounding SNAP extended from the logics and discourses of welfare reform, connecting efforts to extend discipline and control through overlapping discourses about dependency, obesity, and criminality undermining an ostensible commitment to the “safety net ... against starvation in this country” (Senator Lugar (R-IN), quoted in King, 1999, p. 370). The 1996 passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) gave rise to several changes to SNAP, including the imposition of work quotas and time limits and new “tough on crime”- informed policies, both of which I discuss in Chapters 3 and 5. These shifts were underpinned by well-worn racist and gendered tropes about ‘fraud’, ‘criminality,’ ‘dependency’, and ‘entitlement’ (Muhammad 2010; Roberts 2014; Fording, Soss, and Schram 2011; Mink 1994). Additionally, such tropes merged seamlessly with solutions to the growing moral panic on the obesity epidemic (Campos 2004) as I show in Chapter 4. While the discourses of the undeserving poor (Katz 1989) are well-documented, the policy production of the undeserving hungry is less well-examined. This dissertation attempts to fill this gap by attending to the language and rhetoric surrounding

SNAP reauthorization. Examining the discourses surrounding hunger is critically important because it shows how these ideas are communicated and circulate more broadly, shaping policy debates and collective and individual understandings of hunger. In the next chapter, following feminist practice, I start the qualitative research discussion by grounding myself in the research process. Following this discussion, I detail my research design, methodology, and overview the analysis chapters.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY: QUALITATIVE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Reflexivity: Notes from a white Dietitian Studying Hunger And Obesity

Feminist scholars have long noted the need to ground oneself within the research (Rose 1997) a practice that is not modeled, often ignored, or outright derided in search of objective truths within the health sciences. Recognizing the importance of locating myself within in this research, I turn here to my positionality, academic background, and training and what brought me to this research. First, I am a white, cis-gender woman who grew up in an affluent suburban neighborhood and have never had to worry about where my next meal was coming from. As such, at best, I can underscore and critique institutional structures that maintain dominant discourses on health and hunger. In fact, in Chapter 4, I highlight the rhetoric that I myself amplified or corroborated, unintentional or not, that worked to systematically create the undeserving hungry through dominant nutrition discourses.

I am trained as a registered dietitian, with undergraduate and graduate degrees in nutritional science. Twenty years ago, I became interested in the field of nutrition because I felt and still feel that people should have dignified access to life-affirming foods that align with their health needs. Long ago I stopped sharing that I was a dietitian as I would often hear confessions related to the “bad” food choices they made or questions on the best new diet for weight loss.

Like many other dietitians that I know, I consistently pushed back against the shame and blame surrounding food and grounded myself in the understanding that there are no “good” or “bad” foods, but rather “sometimes” foods. I bemoaned cozy connections between large food and soda conglomerates and the accrediting body for dietetics practitioners, comparing it to the ties between medicine and tobacco companies from previous decades. I challenged the

dominance of “Big Agriculture” and lobbyists pushing through corn and wheat subsidies. I looked for solutions in healthy neighborhoods so people could get outside and move more.

I began my career during the crystallization of the “obesity epidemic,” a paradigm in which we still live. We learned that U.S. children may have shorter lifespans than their parents, (Belluck 2005) which was blamed on obesity. My undergraduate capstone project was about the increasingly concerning prevalence of pediatric obesity and my first post-graduate job was with health researchers for teens and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. For one of those projects, I helped create a healthy food plan that, in retrospect, was essentially a modified version of weight watchers for teens with Down Syndrome. I co-edited a chapter on overnutrition (i.e., how excess food consumption leads to weight gain) for a textbook on nutrition, and taught dietetics to aspiring dietitians.

I thought I was HELPING. But in fact, I was not.

I championed the Health at Every Size (Bacon 2008) movement, but rarely noted how much of the dominant health discourses did little to incorporate, or ignored, the notion that you could be both healthy and have a high body weight. I rarely questioned the discourse that obesity is categorically unhealthy and that thinness, except in extremes, is always a marker of good health. I hardly questioned the simplified connection between individualized calorie consumption and weight gain. I remember learning that 95% of diets for weight loss fail, and that most people gain back more weight than they lost. But I did not reflect on how the dominant discourse of calories in/calories out for weight loss might actually be fueling weight gain and the “obesity epidemic.”

I also learned that poverty and economic insecurity are the primary drivers of poor health in the U.S. In nutrition, this discussion gets reduced to simplistic understandings that people who are poor are stuck with cheap, unhealthy food. It does not ask *why* people are poor in the first place. And, because of the focus on cheap diets and farmer subsidies, the discourse erases the exploitative nature of the food system labor from farm laborers, to line cooks, to meat packers, to dishwashers enabling the production of cheap, unhealthy food. I was stuck in the medicalized nutrition paradigm (and I likely remain obtuse to ways I am still stuck). Even if my concerns emphasized the role industrial agriculture or limited outdoor access, I almost always understood obesity to be bad, and excess calories were the cause.

I share this background because I truly understand how the arguments about poor health, nutrition, and fatness are accepted as truth and how they are promoted by well-intentioned practitioners. I have made many of the arguments myself. I am not rejecting the concern for population health and how it might be related to weight. What I am arguing is that we need much more complex analyses of the dynamics shaping hunger and obesity that take seriously the ways in which these dynamics are embedded within structural and social relations in complicated and shifting ways.

I also argue, from the position of a white dietitian trained in the predominantly white discipline of nutritional science, that this field is woefully ill-equipped to engage with questions of race and this overwhelming whiteness works to further marginalize Black and Brown and low-income individuals – typically women and mothers – within dominant nutrition discourses. As a white scholar, I know I still have much to learn and that this will be an ongoing process. My

analysis emerges from this social location and my critical examination of legislative discourses is thus necessarily partial.

The rhetoric and policy initiatives I examine in this dissertation are produced within the dominant nutritional thinking about the “obesity epidemic,” notably that obesity is driven by poor food habits. What could be described as performative concern regarding health, hunger, and obesity on the part of legislators, advocates, and witnesses is very likely driven by perceived concern for health and the right way to address it. Many dietitians and health practitioners continue to ascribe to the health discourses that identify obesity as a disease in a way that distills obesity prevention and treatment to individual behavior change. Such understandings obscure critical dynamics in the ongoing production of premature death for the racialized and gendered poor. That is, the “obesity epidemic” is an all-encompassing, commonsense discourse that is thoroughly grounded in racist, classist, and gendered ideology. In Chapter 4, I synthesize a small part of the vast body of work chipping away at commonsense diet/weight understandings, but it remains a dominant discourse. I now shift to a discussion about my research design and the method of critical discourse analysis.

Research Design: Legislative Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis has long been a tool to dissect the power/knowledge of political discursive practices (Foucault 1980). According to Schram (2006), discourse analysis as a methodology examines:

... the power of discourse to invoke contexts that make some actions seem appropriate and others not. ... Discourse invokes context in the way it frames, narrates, and positions policy makers, their policies, and the effects those policies have on people. ... While discourse is open to multiple readings, some resonate more than others to invoke more widely shared, established contexts. The power of discourse is represented in

iterated discursive practices that reinforce themselves to the point that we can say they 'make themselves real,' privileging their way of saying and doing things, while marginalizing others. (xi)

Through analysis that includes historical, social, economic, and cultural dynamics, Schram (2006) traced how legislators used terms such as *welfare dependency* and *personal responsibility* in the welfare reform debate in ways that made them firmly established "truths." For example, he documents how legislators deployed euphemistically neutral, color-blind terms that "implicitly suggest the undeservingness of welfare mothers who just happen to be disproportionately black and are often mistakenly assumed to be overwhelmingly black" (Schram 2006, 100). This discourse is built on social differentiation and continues to construct racialized, gendered, and classed subject positions in tandem with policy, media, and public discourses. Schram's (2006) analysis is one example³² on which I base this project.

Hunger relief solutions are complex and highly politicized. I analyzed legislative discourses surrounding SNAP to analyze connections between the discursive structures of poverty, attached to long-standing racialized and gendered established truths (e.g. dependency or personal responsibility) (Schram 2006), and current meanings and attitudes surrounding hunger and anti-hunger solutions in the U.S. While sometimes discourses are explicitly racism and gendered, other times these dimensions are more difficult to ascertain, given the centrality of color-blindness as a contemporary racial frame (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Brown et al. 2005; Melamed 2006). In these instances, marginalization may be more covert, implicit, and coded. As a consequence, it is necessary to draw upon established truths (Schram 2006) and the social,

³² For complementary discourse analyses see Peck's (2001) review of workfare, and Sparks' (2003) review of legislative deliberation during welfare reform.

historical, economic, and cultural context in which these concepts emerge in order to analyze discourses about hunger and anti-hunger policy making. For these reasons, discourse analysis is well suited to synthesize the complexity of the many interactive discourses at work in shaping dominant understandings of hunger.

Discourse Analysis as a Method

In describing discourse analysis as a method, many authors agree on a few key points: it is complicated as there are no set procedures; it is highly iterative and fluid; language has material effects; and the analysis must consider the social, historical, economic, geographic, and physical contexts in which discourse is produced (Dittmer 2010; Holstein and Gubrium 2005; Waitt 2005; Fairclough 1992). While Fairclough (1992) takes a slightly narrower definition of discourse compared to other social scientists, he offers a straightforward framework for the process of discourse analysis itself. He suggests that those using this approach should 1) use a wide lens to view how discursive practices interact; 2) give the text itself a close read; and 3) keep in mind the social practices and context in which the discourse is happening. Each of these processes of review overlap and progress in an iterative fashion, underscoring the fact that discourse analysis does not proceed linearly (Fairclough 1992, 231).

Given the complexity of conducting discourse analysis, I drew from specific strategies as offered by Waitt (2005) to guide my project. Waitt outlines the strategies as such: "1) Choice Of Source Materials; 2) Suspend Pre-Existing Categories: Become Reflexive; 3) Familiarization: Absorbing Yourself in and Thinking Critically about the Social Context of Your Texts; 4) Coding: Once for Organization and Again for Interpretation; 5) Power, Knowledge, and Persuasion: Investigate Your Texts for 'Effects of Truth'; 6) Rupture and Resilience: Take Note of

Inconsistencies Within Sources; and 7) Silences: Silence as Discourse and Discourses That Silence.” (220). Waitt (2005) also stresses these strategies are a mere “starting point” (219) and that the analysis should remain fluid and adaptable based on emerging findings. With these insights about the iterative and nonlinear process of discourse analysis, I outline how the steps of my analysis built from Waitt’s seven strategies. While conducting the research, I managed three interrelated and parallel documents: source material, daily reflexive memos, and the codebook as I discuss in more detail below.

Step 1: Obtain Source Materials & Initiate Reflexive Memos

Waitt’s (2005) first strategy of including a comprehensive *Choice Of Source Materials* is key to “establishing rigour” (223). The objectives of congressional hearings are “to obtain information and opinions on proposed legislation, conduct an investigation, or evaluate/oversee the activities of a government department or the implementation of a Federal law” (U.S. Government Publishing Office 2021). The primary source material for this dissertation was publicly available testimonies from Congressional hearings related to SNAP. The Farm Bill³³ is a generic, but commonly referenced, name for the omnibus federal bill that reauthorizes SNAP as one of a multitude of programs under its legislation approximately every 5 years. The House and Senate agricultural committees propose Farm Bill legislation and oversee authorization of SNAP (Imhoff 2019). As such, they conduct a majority of SNAP policy hearings, including on proposed legislation, commissions, and reviews of SNAP program effectiveness and investigations. The timespan of the chosen source material was additionally

³³ See Appendix A: SNAP Fact Sheet for more information on the “The Farm Bill.”

important as this project aims to theorize post-welfare reform era discourses about SNAP during a period that spans significant political economic changes including three very different administrations (Bush, Obama, and Trump), a historically significant recession that significantly impacted the dynamics of hunger and poverty, and a sharpening of racial inequality.

The Congressional Record³⁴ holds transcripts of all public legislative proceedings, including all deliberation, debate, hearings, and votes since 1873 (Library of Congress 2013). Committee hearings include opening statements by members of congress, in order of member ranking, followed by testimonies from congressionally selected expert witnesses on the hearing topic. Witnesses include the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), leaders of the USDA departments that oversee and manage SNAP, state and regional SNAP administrators, economists, doctors, academics in political science, nutrition, and public health, executives from charitable anti-hunger organizations, and on rare occasion, SNAP participants. In my source material, witnesses were typically given five minutes for an opening statement when all witnesses on a select panel would briefly speak. Following this, congress would proceed with a question-and-answer portion of the hearing for the panel. Occasionally, multiple panels were held on the same day and are grouped under the same congressional record. Congressional records in my source material included up to 10 witnesses over the course of several hours in one hearing. All oral and written testimonies, and additional written supporting evidence are part of the congressional record. These legislative texts are immense, descriptively rich, reflect a wide range of voices, perspectives, and various amounts of political

³⁴ The Congressional Record is public data. The project involves publicly available data and does not involve research with human subjects. As such, UWM IRB review and approval was not required.

power, and allowed me to interpret “how” people have understood the largest anti-hunger program in the US as well as the “why” behind these perceptions.

I started my search with ProQuest® Congressional and Hein Online® databases for a systematic search of hearings associated with SNAP Policy and the four Farm Bills between 2000-2018. These Farm Bills, listed by their official titles, are as follows: the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002; Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008; Agricultural Act of 2014; and The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018. The Government Printing Office website organizes a browse function for all Congressional Committees, searchable by year. This included many of the hearings by both the House Committee on Agriculture and Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry hearings (Government Printing Office, 2020). I hand-searched the hearings provided under both Agricultural committees between 2000-2018 for additional SNAP-related hearings.

The ProQuest® Congressional database includes an index of a bill’s legislative history, which I used to find additional hearings. The legislative history includes items associated with a bill, including reviews and investigations not specifically associated with creation or authorization of legislation. For example, the House Committee on Agriculture 2010 hearing to review USDA's information technology systems was initiated as an overview of technology used in all USDA programs, including SNAP, and was not specific to creating new Farm Bill legislation. The ProQuest® indexed legislative history also included additional Senate or House committees that held hearings important to the Farm Bill. For example, the 2012 House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform hearing Food Stamp Fraud as a Business Model: USDA’s Struggle to Police Store Owners was included in the index. The final source material included

full text transcripts of 138 congressional hearings.³⁵ I uploaded all source material to Atlas.ti (ATLAS.ti 8, Scientific Software Development GmbH) in order to code as described below.

As suggested by Creswell (2013) and Birks, Chapman, and Francis (2008), I kept a running document of daily reflexive memos on process, observations, and emerging information when reviewing source materials and supporting research. The memos served several critical functions. Most importantly, they provided means to incorporate Waitt's second strategy: to *Become Reflexive*. During Step 1, I used memos to document process, note when transcripts were uploaded into Atlas.ti and thus ready to be analyzed, as well as any notes, errors, complications, related to incomplete data and when I needed to search for additional supporting and secondary material to contextualize the legislative discourse. I describe additional use of the daily reflexive memos in subsequent steps below.

Select Review of Secondary Source Material

Given the iterative nature of discourse analysis "other, unexpected texts may become relevant and important to its success" (Waitt 2005, 223) as identified through "ongoing secondary research" (223). Legislative discourse interacts with and draws from cyclically reinforcing public, media, social science, and institutional discourses, embedded in social, cultural, and historical contexts (Schram 2006). I utilized historical, cultural, and social context as secondary resources to the legislative discourse for a better understanding of the various discourses embedded into understandings of hunger in America. I now describe these secondary sources.

³⁵ See Appendix B for a list of all hearings.

The witnesses' written evidence provided deep secondary context of witness testimonies. This included reports by organizations, academic papers, copies of institutional and government memos and reports, and letters of support by coalitions. Testimonies often referenced or described other programs, reports, or government bodies important to SNAP policy. This secondary material was critically important for the little-examined program called Operation Talon,³⁶ which I detail in Chapter 5.

A select overview of key secondary sources follows. The USDA website provides detailed overviews of the USDA programs and agencies related to SNAP, including the Food and Nutrition Service, the Economic Research Service, the Office of Inspector General, and the Office of Civil Rights. The Congressional Budget Office and Government Accounting Office produce non-partisan reports on federal programs, including cost and legislation analysis. Finally, the four Farm Bills included legislation on hundreds of programs, and SNAP is a complex program with different policy provisions in each Farm Bill. I used the Congressional Research Service (CRS) for the Farm Bill and SNAP overviews between 2000-2018. According to the Library of Congress (Congressional Research Service n.d.) "CRS works exclusively for Congress, providing timely, objective, and authoritative research and analysis to committees and Members of both the House and Senate, regardless of political party affiliation." For clarity, I created a succinct review of the SNAP policies that are referenced in the legislative hearings, See Appendix A: SNAP Fact Sheet.

³⁶ In brief, Operation Talon is an initiative by the investigative arm of the USDA. I provide additional search methods for Operation Talon in Chapter 5.

Step 2: Familiarization

While working through Waitt's third strategy, *Familiarization*, I read the entirety of source material and took note of the social context of the author, audience, and text itself. During this process, I did not read the source materials in depth, but used my reflexive memos to note if authors seemed to have power, inherent authority, and were considered a source of "truthful" or "factual" knowledge" (Waitt 2005, 225), and what impact this may have had on the audience and text produced. I engaged with Waitt's fifth strategy, *Power, Knowledge, and Persuasion: Investigate Your Texts for 'Effects of Truth,'* during this and future steps because "the mutual relationship between power and knowledge is underpinned by discursive structures" (Waitt 2005, 233).

My project also builds from frameworks developed through closely related discourse analyses of welfare reform (Sparks 2003; Mink 1994; Peck 2001; Albelda, Folbre, and The Center for Popular Economics 1996) that examine the gendered and racialized discursive structures attached to commonsense understandings that pathologize poverty, such as the discourses about "welfare dependency" and "welfare queens." As noted above and explored more in Chapter 3, the circulation of these discourses powerfully informed legislative policy mandating sanctions, workfare, and an era of personal responsibility (Melamed 2006; Roberts and Mahtani 2010; Peck 2001). Drawing from these insights, I analyzed witnesses and legislators' discursive structures that produced their ways of knowing hunger and federal hunger relief solutions. I maintained notes in the daily reflexive memos on speakers and witnesses, the text and hearing's construction, and paid attention to note broad conversations about historical, cultural, economic, and social contexts.

Again, Waitt's second strategy of *Suspend pre-existing categories: become reflexive* was critical during each step in the analysis. This required explicit subject positioning to inform the project and my discourse analysis reflects the speaker's underlying attitude and meaning of hunger in the U.S., rather than my personal understanding. Waitt (2005) stresses that it is critical to "keep careful and transparent documentation of the interpretation process" (225) in order to explicitly trace any attribution of that interpretation. While I will did not interpret and synthesize results until much later, I did note general overviews about the hearing and topics engaged so I could return to the reflexive memos throughout the process in order to trace patterns that emerged over time.

Step 3: Descriptive Coding

For coding, I used constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2008) to reflect on the complex divergent and convergent "empirical realities" (p. 206) of hunger as they appeared in the legislative discourse. This approach requires multiple passes and reviews of the data initially using broad, general "open" coding that in subsequent passes narrows to themes and eventually allows for patterns to emerge (Charmaz 2008; Creswell 2013). Given the iterative nature of constructivist grounded theory, codes for the project's discourse analysis are inductive. I divided Waitt's fourth strategy *Coding: Once for Organization and Again for Interpretation* into my steps 3 and 4. During the first pass of coding, I created a broad list of codes to note sections of source material to which I returned for descriptive coding.

During descriptive coding, I additionally used the reflexive memos on the source material noting author, audience, text, power/knowledge, personal reflection, and social

context. While I coded, I added to that memo anything pertinent to the source material. These additions included: my conflicts, concerns, issues in creation and categorization of descriptive codes; additional notes of author power/knowledge and authority; any conflicting or contesting “truths” or “facts;” and my own personal reflection on the process. The analysis required research into additional source material or supporting material, and I noted those potential additional sources in the daily memos for later search and review during analysis.

Step 4: Analytic Coding and Synthesis

Analytic coding and synthesis informed each other in an iterative process, and thus I describe them as one step. I started with analytic coding to initiate synthesis, then I returned to analytic coding to dive deeper into the discourses supported by secondary material to further synthesize the analysis. I started by reviewing the descriptive codes, source material, and reflexive memos for emergent patterns (Charmaz 2008; Creswell 2013), combing lists of codes organized by thematic topics to “provide insights into why an individual or collective holds particular sets of ideas by which they make sense” of the world (Waitt 2005, 232).

Through familiarization, I focused on untangling notions of poverty, race, class, gender, and place in order to examine how the source material speakers understood persistent hunger disparities in the U.S. I paid particular attention to the scholarly works detailed above regarding color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010) and included an intersectional (Crenshaw 1989) examination of constructions of urban poverty (Roberts 1991; Crenshaw 1995a; Andersen and Collins 2013; Williams 2004). I foregrounded “the contexts of institutional racism, racial formation, and racialized geographies” (Alkon and Norgaard 2009) when considering how

legislators and witnesses understood food access. I returned to the previous discourse analyses on welfare reform (e.g. the established discursive structures on welfare dependency and welfare queen) that drew from long-standing pathologies of poverty in America reform (Sparks 2003; Mink 1994; Peck 2001; Albelda, Folbre, and The Center for Popular Economics 1996).

During analytic coding, I noted similar comments in the reflexive memos as described above. When I finished the first pass of analytic coding of all source material, I returned to codes, source material, and reflexive memos, which included my initial perspectives on emergent patterns to synthesize and outline the broad themes for my dissertation. I returned to my initial questions on dominant discourse, race/class/gender in that discourse, and shifting discourses over time. I noted a general pattern that emerged from reviewing the entire body of source material: over almost two decades, from 2000 to 2018, there was an erosion to the federal commitment that no one should go hungry in America.

Step 5: Emerging Patterns and Organizing Themes

The organization of this dissertation reflects the key themes that emerged from my discourse analysis: In Chapter 3 I document the expansion of discourses about SNAP dependency, in Chapter 4: I examine how discourses about obesity inform understandings of hunger and anti-hunger policy making, and in Chapter 5: I document the criminalization of the undeserving hungry. I developed each of these chapters through an analysis that charts discursive shifts and the increased deployment and circulation of hunger discourses related to obesity, crime, austerity, and workfare. While the analysis presented in Chapter 3 strongly resonates with other examinations of the logics and commonsense understandings that

supported welfare reform, the discourses of obesity and criminality that emerged in my analysis were so prominent that I centered them in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively.

From these three broad categories, I returned to analytic coding for a deeper review of how the discourses related to the contemporary historical, social, cultural, and economic contexts, and the other source material hearings over the 2000-2018 timeframe to further group patterns. Additionally, I reviewed discourses used in hearings in order to include specific quotes that captured the dominant discourses related general themes, noting how the discourses were received within the hearing and contextualizing with secondary material.

Throughout the process, I utilized Waitt's strategies six and seven: *Rupture and Resilience: Take Note of Inconsistencies Within Sources*, and *Silences: Silence as Discourse and Discourses That Silence*. However, both were challenging and only emerged in comparing overall patterns based on reflexivity, coding, historical, social, cultural, and economic contexts, additional secondary research, as well as comparison of legislative discourse to secondary material. An excellent example on which I based ruptures and silences is Holloway Sparks' (2003) analysis that detected counter-discourses to welfare dependency that were both erased and ignored. Of the approximately 600 legislators, witnesses, experts, and advocates that Sparks analyzed regarding legislative debate on welfare reform, only 17 were individuals who at one point in their life utilized welfare benefits. These individuals gave powerful testimony, notably the following: welfare allowed them to leave abusive or undesirable partner relationships; and low wage work without childcare, healthcare benefits, and transportation would end up damaging family relationships and increasing need for long-term support (Sparks

2003, 215-217). Not only was this directly counter to the dominant workfare discourse (Peck 2001), it was also ignored by legislators (Sparks 2003, 196).

The logics of race, class, gender, as well as rhetoric about “failing” urban spaces were deeply embedded in ways of knowing and understanding hunger and disciplinarity within SNAP legislative discourses. These discourses emphasized the need to limit funding for a “ballooning” program, except when federal funding supported new techniques for sanctioning and surveilling SNAP recipients. The neoliberal logics of austerity, discipline, and responsibility (Fording, Soss, and Schram 2011; Roberts 2014; Loyd and Bonds, 2018; Peck, 2003) appeared across the themes of dependency, obesity, and criminality in ways that supported expanding SNAP exclusions and ongoing efforts to devolve the program. I trace how legislators across parties reiterated the need to root out SNAP waste, fraud, and abuse in ways that extended the surveillance and policing of SNAP recipients.

Dominant Discourses in SNAP Legislative Hearings from 2000-2018

In my analysis chapters, I will use exemplary quotes from the legislative hearings as those quotes best represented dominant discourses. In what follows, I describe how I determined which discourses were dominant to provide context for the more detailed analysis chapters. Following the steps one through five above, I determined dominant discourses in the legislative hearings based on several factors regarding how concepts appeared in the hearings. I noted how frequently a concept was debated both across the number of hearings in which it appeared, and approximately how much time within a hearing was dedicated to the concept. I noted who was speaking, the legislative party (Democrat or Republican for representatives) or the institutional affiliation (for expert witnesses). Through this, I was able to establish if one

person was hyper focused on a singular concept, or if multiple legislators and witnesses were debating a concept. Additionally, I watched for patterns of consensus or contention between legislators and witnesses, taking note of whether there was a specific party or institution attached to a concept. As described in more detail above, I held these patterns in historical, economic, and political context to note if there was something important related to SNAP or other federal legislation. As such, I determined a discourse was dominant based on more than just how often a concept appeared, but also who said it, who agreed with them, who disagreed with them, and how the debate continued within a legislative hearing. I then noted if/how the debate changed over the years, again both regarding frequency, speaker, institution, and/or party affiliation. Finally, I also considered a discourse dominant if it impacted proposed or enacted Farm Bill policy as this is what legislates programmatic changes to SNAP.

It was only after I took a wider view across all of my reflexive memos organized in sequential order (based on hearing date) that I noticed a significant uptick in discourse related to program cost in 2010.³⁷ I returned to the hearings to record patterns, and in nearly every SNAP deliberation beginning July 2010, at least one legislator, but often several, would mention the high cost of SNAP, the large increase in participants and subsequent increased total federal cost, and/or the fact that SNAP takes up a majority of funding relative to the cost of all other Farm Bill programming. This shift was incredibly distinct, so I returned to look for other patterns of in frequency, speaker, institution, and/or party affiliation tied to a specific concept to see if the dominant discourses of SNAP emerged or changed. In the end, I separated my analysis into the early years (2000-2010), and the later years (2010–2018) because the dominant discourses

³⁷ I discuss the historical context of this time frame in my Chapter 3 analysis.

that circulated in SNAP hearings in these time frames were distinct. I returned to the analysis and pulled out several key themes during the time frames as shown in Tables 2.1 and 2.2 to compare the changes dominant discourses.

Table 2.1: SNAP Legislative Hearings and Dominant Discourses, The Early Years (2000 – 2010)	
<u>63 Legislative Hearings (>130 Hours)</u>	<u>Most Common Dominant Discourses</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 48 Hearings were General Farm Bill or USDA Programming Hearings • 15 Hearings were Dedicated to a Specific Topic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food Stamp Fraud: Why Trafficking Persists and What Can Be Done About It • Review of the Operations of the Food Stamp Program • Review the Federal Food Stamp Program and Its Impact on Children's Health • Hearing to Review Short and Long Term Costs of Hunger in America • Hearing to Review the State of Obesity in the United States • Waste, Fraud, And Abuse in programs under the Committee's jurisdiction • Hearing to Examine New and Innovative Ways to Improve Nutrition and Wellness Programs • Hearing to Review Federal Nutrition Programs • Hearing To Review Access To Healthy Foods For Beneficiaries Of Federal Nutrition Programs And To Explore Innovative Methods To Improve Availability • To Review the Federal Government's Initiatives Regarding Child Nutrition Programs • The Role of Federal Food Assistance Programs in Family Economic Security and Nutrition • Child Nutrition and the School Setting • Promoting Health, Preventing Chronic Disease, and Fighting Hunger: Assessment of USDA Food Assistance and Child Nutrition Programs in the Economic Downturn • Improving Nutrition for America's Children in Difficult Economic Times • Reauthorization of U.S. Child Nutrition Programs: Opportunities to Fight Hunger and Improve Child Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low Participation in SNAP for Eligible Individuals and Households • Increase Access to SNAP through Simplifying Sign-up • Low Benefits/Erosion of Benefits Compared to Inflation • Obesity Epidemic • Nutrition Education <p><u>Moderately Common Dominant Discourses</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant Outreach to Address Stigma, Confusion, Immigration • Expand Eligibility -- Increased Asset Allowance, Adjustment for Utilities/Bills • SNAP Supports the Economy • Most SNAP Participants Work in Low/Stagnant Wage Jobs • Incentivize Healthy Food • SNAP Improves Health • High Rates of Hunger in the US

I divided Table 2.1 into most common discourses and moderately common discourses. In the early years (2000-2010), nearly all hearings showed bipartisan legislative and witness concern for the low participation of eligible SNAP recipients. Across the hearings and over the years, many witnesses and legislators indicated that the SNAP error and fraud were at an all-time low; that most participants who can work, do work but wages were stagnant and too low; and that SNAP is a boon to local economy because it increases a household's purchasing power. Many witnesses and legislators also reiterated the high rates of hunger among U.S. households, citing particular concern for households with children. When describing how to improve SNAP, most witnesses, but few legislators, noted that SNAP benefits were too low, with some witnesses describing an erosion of benefits that no longer kept up with inflation.

When debating reasons for and solutions to low participation, several concepts appeared – none of which were considered at every hearing but did appear consistently and impacted Farm Bill policy. As such, I considered these dominant discourses. USDA administrators, state administrators, and participant advocates noted increased stigma and confusion regarding eligibility after welfare reform; long, complicated sign-up processes; and eligibility that didn't allow for enough savings in case of emergency. Welfare reform also limited access for "legal" immigrants, which also impacted participation by children who were citizens but their parents were not. The 2002 Farm Bill policy simplified sign up by including standard deductions for items such as utilities and housing, expanded eligibility rules to include Broad

Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE)³⁸ for SNAP, and reinstated access to SNAP benefits to “legal” immigrants. Both the 2002 and 2008 included funding for increased outreach at the state level.

A subset of hearings did discuss health-related concepts. Almost all hearings that described both health and SNAP, at least one, but often many, witnesses and/or legislators voiced significant concern for the ‘obesity epidemic.’ In these discourses, there was bipartisan concern for obesity as well as legislators, administrators, and advocates alike suggesting diet education as a solution. The 2008 Farm Bill expanded nutrition education funding focused specifically on childhood obesity. Several hearings did describe the health and wellness benefits of SNAP, particularly for reducing childhood illness. Notably fewer hearings described health benefits of SNAP compared to the majority that voiced concern for obesity. Finally, there was increased interest in providing incentives for purchasing fruits and vegetables with mentions of small state-based grants testing incentives programs.

There were less common, underlying discourses that were minimally debated between 2000-2010, but are important to note given patterns that emerged in the later years of analysis. A few republican legislators describe concern for SNAP fraud during in this time frame, but it was primarily related to historical high rates of fraud, how updating to electronic benefits (instead of paper stamps) reduced the illegal sale of food stamps (known as trafficking), and needing to remain vigilant against fraud in the program. Some advocates noted that Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents (ABAWD)³⁹ work quota and time limit rules were too strict,

³⁸ See Appendix A: SNAP Fact Sheet for more information on categorical eligibility. BBCE will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

³⁹ See Appendix A: SNAP Fact Sheet for more details on ABAWD and other work requirements. ABAWD will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

especially in cases and places where it is difficult to find employment. The USDA administration under President Bush wanted to review BBCE⁴⁰ given concerns it expanded eligibility and potential for fraud, but this was met with legislative pushback and was not part of proposed policy change. A select few witnesses and some legislators voiced concern for SNAP dependency or lack of self-sufficiency among participants. While it didn't rise to the level of dominant discourse, several legislators and witnesses over the years noted their appreciation for the cooperative bipartisanship in the congressional Farm Bill hearings and subsequent policy formation. My review of dominant hearing discourses in the early years (2000 - mid 2010) corroborates that there was mutual bipartisan protection and expand of SNAP. However, there was a dramatic and notable shift in partisan discourses related to SNAP starting in mid-2010. As such, for some discourses, I divided Table 2.2 by party affiliation for clarity.

⁴⁰ See note 38.

Table 2.2: SNAP Legislative Hearings and Dominant Discourses, The Later Years (2010 – 2018)

<p><u>67 Legislative Hearings (>140 Hours)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 41 Hearings were General Farm Bill or USDA Programming Hearings • 26 Hearings were Dedicated to a Specific Topic, Including 16-Hearing Review of SNAP: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hearing to Review Quality Control Systems in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program • Hearing to Review Recent Investigations and Audits Conducted by the Usda Inspector General • Hearing to Review Updates on USDA Inspector General Audits, Including Snap Fraud Detection Efforts and IT Compliance • Hearing to Examine the Role of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Relation to Other Federal Assistance Programs • Food Stamp Fraud As A Business Model: USDA's Struggle To Police Store Owners, Committee On Oversight And Government Reform House Of Representatives • Hearing To Review The Implementation Of Section 4022 Of The Agricultural Act Of 2014: Pilot Projects To Reduce Dependency And Increase Work Requirements And Work Efforts Under The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program • Farm Bill Accountability: The Importance of Measuring Performance, While Eliminating Duplication and Waste • Healthy Food Initiatives, Local Production and Nutrition • A National Priority: The Importance Of Child Nutrition Programs To Our Nation's Health, Economy and National Security • A Review of Child Nutrition Programs <p>16-Hearing Review of SNAP (2015 – 2015)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past, Present, and Future of SNAP • SNAP Recipient Characteristics and Dynamics • The World of Nutrition and the Role of the Charitable Sector • The World of Nutrition, Government Duplication and Unmet Needs • The Means to Climbing the Economic Ladder • How Our Welfare System Can Discourage Work • Developing and Using Evidence-Based Solutions • Breaking the Cycle • The National Commission on Hunger 	<p><u>Bipartisan⁴¹ Dominant Discourses</u></p> <p><u>Program Cost</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (R) High Cost of SNAP • (D) SNAP Cost Will Drop when Economy Improves <p><u>Waste and Fraud</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (D) SNAP Payment Error and Fraud at an All-Time Low • (R) Any Error or Fraud Cost is High because SNAP is a Large Program, some (R) Allege Wide-spread Fraud <p><u>Broad Based Categorical Eligibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (R) Systematic Fraud and Abuse with Increased SNAP Eligibility • (D) Reduces Error and Total Cost, No Proof of Systematic Fraud or Abuse <p><u>Work/Dependency</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (D) Most SNAP Participants Work, Concern for Unemployment and Low Wage Work • (R) SNAP Results in Dependency, Low Self-Sufficiency <p><u>Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (R) No Waivers to Rule • (D) Waivers to Rule to Account for Areas of High Unemployment, but Can Enforce Work Requirement <p><u>Partisan Dominant Discourses</u></p> <p><u>Fiscal Responsibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect Tax-Payer, Concern for Deficit and Tight Budget <p><u>Program Integrity</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tough on Individual Fraud (e.g. Trafficking) <p><u>Obesity</u></p>
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⁴¹For the bipartisan discourses, (R) = Republican and (D) = Democrat.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing Special Populations • Examining State Options • The Retailer Perspective • Evaluating the Effectiveness and Outcomes in Nutrition Education • Evaluating Error Rates and Anti-Fraud Measures to Enhance Program Integrity • Improving Innovation and Success in Employment and Training Programs • Opportunities for Improving Access to Food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern for Diet Related Diseases • Common Solutions Include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diet Education • Incentivizing Healthy Choices <p><u>Healthy Food Access</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low Quality Food Options, Urban Spaces
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The later years (mid 2010 – 2018) were notably different. In nearly every SNAP hearing beginning July 2010, at least one legislator reported on the high cost of SNAP. I noted another pattern as related to a shift in the type of hearings. I reviewed 130⁴² hearings between 2000-2018, which I ended up dividing into 63 hearings in the early years and 67 in the later years. As shown in Tables 2.1 and 2.2, a vast majority of all hearings reviewed in both time periods were broadly related to Farm Bill topics. These included field hearings where farmers and advocates would attend an open forum to discuss proposed policy and their needs, or Congressional hearings with state and federal administrators, advocates, and other expert witnesses discuss a wide range of USDA programs under the Farm Bill. These would deliberate several aspects of

⁴² See Appendix B for the full list of hearings by date and committee. These 130 hearings do not include the 8 hearings that were specific to Operation Talon and my expanded search as those were looking for specific programmatic details of Operation Talon.

Farm Bill programing within the same hearing, including the multiple initiatives, concerns, and policies of SNAP.

However, there were other types of hearings that a Congressional committee held to discuss a specific topic or concern. I compared the hearing topic columns in Tables 2.1 and 2.2 and show a noticeable difference in the focus of these topically driven hearings. From 2000-mid 2010, there were no hearings specifically dedicated to SNAP employment or training programs. The later years had 5 hearings specifically dedicated to work, dependency, or self-sufficiency (1. *Hearing To Review the Implementation of Section 4022 Of The Agricultural Act Of 2014: Pilot Projects To Reduce Dependency And Increase Work Requirements And Work Efforts Under The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*; 2. *The Means to Climbing the Economic Ladder*; 3. *How Our Welfare System Can Discourage Work*; 4. *Breaking the Cycle*; 5. *Improving Innovation and Success in Employment and Training Programs*) with 3 additional hearings (1. *Past, Present, and Future of SNAP*; 2. *Developing and Using Evidence-Based Solutions*; 3. *Examining State Options*) in which most of the hearing focused on if SNAP should be used to enforce work.

In the early years, there was one hearing specific to the operations of the Food Stamp program, two on waste or fraud, but the rest (12 of 15) related to health, wellness, and/or economic well-being. In the later years, there is a thorough 16-hearing review of SNAP (held between 2015-2016 and separated in Table 2.2 for clarity), an overall increase in hearings specifically on fraud, oversight, integrity, and waste, and comparably fewer on health and well-being. Republicans held control of the House Committee on Agriculture during the 16-hearing review of SNAP. Meaning, the chair of the full committee, Rep Conaway (R-TX), and the chair of the Subcommittee on Nutrition, Rep Walorski (R-IN), called the hearings, oversaw the agenda,

witnesses, and ran the meetings. Thus, the topic of these specific hearings had a neoliberal slant (e.g. *How Our Welfare System Can Discourage Work*). However, there was equal representation at the 16 hearings between Democrats and Republicans and a wide range of witnesses from various institutional perspectives for all other hearings in the later years. Additionally, the patterns of discourse were similar and apparent in both the general Farm Bill hearings and the full Congressional review. Thus, I was still able to trace whether there was consensus or contention related to a specific topic even as frequency of hearings related to a specific topic (e.g. work, program cost), and the subsequent discourse about a topic, increased. The dominant discourses from the later years are listed in Table 2.2. I determined there was a shift in debate, combined with partisan contention over proposed and enacted policy, which I considered an indication of increased SNAP scrutiny and erosion to the federal commitment to the SNAP safety net.

Regarding fiscal responsibility, most Republicans and many Democrats voiced concern for budget and spending. Democrats noted that SNAP is working as expected by responding to an economic downturn and slow recovery. However, there was bipartisan concern to protect the hard-working taxpayer as well as maintain program efficiency and integrity. Democrats reiterated that error and fraud in SNAP was at an all-time low, with Republicans noting that even if rates are low, it still resulted in huge costs given the overall ballooning size and cost of SNAP. This resulted in bipartisan discourse on reducing individual fraud (e.g. trafficking) and keeping errors low to reduce overall program costs. There were a few Republicans citing widespread individual fraud and abuse, with Democrats countering that this was anecdotal and unfounded. In addition to generic allegations of individual fraud and program abuse, there was

an increased focus by many Republicans on specific policy details that expanded eligibility and potential systematic fraud. One such policy was broad based categorical eligibility (BBCE).⁴³ I describe and analyze this policy in detail in Chapter 3 because the discourse was emblematic of the Republican narrative of systematic fraud and abuse.

Regarding employment, Republicans across the board indicated that SNAP participation should be contingent upon work status with increased discourses on self-sufficiency and dependency. A single Democrat, McGovern (D-MA), continued to highlight that SNAP is a hunger relief policy, not a jobs policy. Most Democrats were not opposed to enforcing work, but noted that most who can work, do work, and that there are already strict policies in place to enforce work. One such policy discussed in detail was ABAWD,⁴⁴ with Democrats voicing concern that there should be waivers to the rule in places and cases of high unemployment. In general, Republicans rejected waivers to the ABAWD rules.

In terms of health discourses, there remained bipartisan discourses on the obesity epidemic, nutrition education, and incentivizing healthy food choices. There was a growing discourse regarding limited access to healthy food and bipartisan blame on small liquor and convenience stores in urban areas. An emerging discourse was the interest in food purchase restrictions (e.g. limiting purchasing of soda), with an entire hearing dedicated to this topic in 2017. There were comparably fewer discourses on the protective nature of SNAP for health and well-being than obesity and related diseases, despite several expert witnesses noting studies on the health benefits of SNAP. On occasion, witnesses and legislators did discuss topics such as

⁴³ See Note 38.

⁴⁴ See Note 39.

perpetually high rates of hunger in the U.S., high costs of other necessities (childcare, housing, medicine, transportation), the economic benefits of SNAP, inadequacy of benefits to last through the month (particularly related to health). These debates were overshadowed by the focus on work, fraud, integrity and so I did not consider those to be dominant discourses. Meaning, a vast majority of SNAP debate after July 2010 was not about hunger.

Chapter Overview

In Chapter 3, I show the intensification of discourses of SNAP “dependency” after the 2008 Farm Bill hearings and connect the increasing deployment of discourses of dependency to the racial politics of the Tea Party movement and the sharpening of inequalities during and after the Great Recession. My analysis reveals that debates about dependency informed the creation of new policies requiring the exchange of work or training for SNAP benefits (also called workfare), targeted particular groups, amplified rhetoric about the need for austerity measures, and supported the devolution of support to charitable anti-hunger organizations.

In Chapter 4, I show how legislators attached the growing moral panic over the obesity epidemic to SNAP policies through an emerging health science discourse and the emerging hunger obesity paradox (Scheier, 2005). There was bipartisan support for SNAP dietary reform and I illustrate how those reforms were grounded in racialized assumptions about health and well-being and the neoliberal rhetoric of personal responsibility that situates poverty and hunger as outcomes of individual choice and moral failings. This focus on obesity led to the creation of SNAP policies on diet education, incentives for healthy food, and discourses of food restrictions.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I consider how the mobilization of the USDA’s disciplinary arm – the Office of Inspector General (USDA OIG) – illustrates the entanglement of the welfare and carceral states. I document the little examined program called Operation Talon and consistent discourses that criminalize hunger. Operation Talon was enabled by welfare reform policies that allowed for the linked personal data on federal food benefits to police “fugitive felon” lists to apprehend individuals. Since 1997, Operation Talon has led to the arrest of over 18,000 individuals for alleged crimes, but not crimes related to SNAP fraud, per se.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See Note 113 in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 3: “NO ONE SHOULD GO HUNGRY IN AMERICA,” BUT ...: HUNGER, “DEPENDENCY”, AND THE NEOLIBERALIZATION OF ANTI-HUNGER POLICY

Introduction

There is definitely a lot of good the program does, but there is stigma about those who depend on SNAP benefits. There seems to be a pervasive stereotype about what kind of person uses SNAP: they are lazy, they do not care, they do not work. But that is just not me, and it is not the people I know who have needed Government assistance. We are hard workers who want a different future. - Faith Watson, Greenville, Michigan, 2017

At a 2017 Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry hearing titled, *Growing Jobs and Economic Opportunity: Perspectives on the 2018 Farm Bill from Michigan*, Faith Watson’s comments capture key discourses about federal nutrition assistance and government dependency. First, she reiterates a dominant narrative that only people who work are deserving of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).⁴⁶ Second, she directly calls attention to the prevailing stereotype that those utilizing government assistance are “lazy.” Ms. Watson’s comments set the tone for my analysis of hunger relief policy discourses between 2000-2018 and the ways in which they both reflect and diverge from the previous decade’s anti-poverty logics and policymaking. Gendered and racialized stereotypes associated with “dependency” are well-documented; they have a long history in arguments for welfare reform and significantly informed the passage of the 1996 PRWORA⁴⁷ (Quadagno 1994; Monnat 2010; Sparks 2003; Soss et al. 2003). However, as I discuss in this chapter, the use and salience of these stereotypes as related to hunger relief policy shifts over time. Unlike what is commonly referred to as welfare, the Food Stamp Program was sheltered from being devolved to a block grant program through PRWORA because of the belief that “no one should go hungry in

⁴⁶ See Note 3.

⁴⁷ See Note 6.

America” (King 1999). However, PRWORA did give rise to several changes in SNAP policy, including the implementation of stricter work quotas and time limits.

In the years directly after welfare reform (e.g., after 1996), the dominant legislative discourse surrounding SNAP can be captured with a statement made by Rep. Gutknecht (R-MN) in 2001, when attending a Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry hearing titled *The New Federal Farm Bill*, who stated: “I speak for just about everybody in this room. In this country especially, no one should go hungry.” However, as reviewed in Chapter 2 and revealed in this chapter’s analysis of quotes, over a period of nearly two decades (2000–2018), the discourse shifted to erode the federal commitment to hunger relief.

In this chapter, I use exemplary quotes from the legislative hearings to analyze two categories of dominant discourse surrounding the formation of federal hunger relief policy: (1) SNAP participant dependency in the context of work requirements and (2) austerity in relation to taxpayers, program integrity, efficiency, quality control, and government waste. I review the literature that extensively documented these dynamics for welfare reform to situate the less well-known impact of neoliberal rhetoric about dependency and austerity on SNAP policies.

The discourse surrounding anti-hunger policy follows a very similar trajectory to that surrounding welfare reform, albeit with a different timeline. As with narratives around welfare, policymakers and other participants in SNAP hearings drew on and reinforced entrenched tropes about racialized and gendered “dependency” to characterize recipients as unworthy and criminal to justify austerity approaches to anti-hunger policy. I contextualize these shifts by situating them within the environment of neoliberal political economic restructuring that is premised on reductions in social welfare (Melamed 2006; Roberts and Mahtani 2010).

Furthermore, the timeframe of my analysis (2000–2018) encompasses the Great Recession, December 2007 through June 2009, and the sharpening of inequality in the United States (Kornbluh and Mink 2019).

I begin with an examination of exemplary quotes from early SNAP policy discourses (2000–2010), which were primarily concerned with low participation in the program. Even though legislative debate was focused on boosting SNAP participation, discourses of dependency were still prevalent in this period. The resulting SNAP policy implications, as codified in the 2002 and 2008 Farm Bills, maintained support through program expansion. Next, I turn to more recent anti-hunger discourses (2010–2018) that increasingly focused on dependency and austerity, resulting in contentious policy implications for the 2014 and 2018 Farm Bills (Congressional Research Service 2014; Monke 2018). I contextualize the more recent discourses with the rise of the Tea Party and the racialized politics of resentment (Melamed 2011). I argue that discourses of dependency and austerity worked in tandem to both define and exclude the ‘undeserving hungry’ (Katz 1989). My analysis contributes to a robust body of literature by illustrating how long-established discourses about the deserving and undeserving poor eroded the (already questionable) federal commitment that no one should go hungry in America.

Theorizing The Undeserving Hungry

As discussed in Chapter 1, this dissertation is positioned at the juncture of the literature on critical race theory and critical poverty and food studies. In particular, I draw from theories of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010) and Black feminist critiques of poverty policy and discourses to understand hunger policy as both produced through and productive of racialized,

classed, and gendered differences. Legislative rhetoric during welfare reform drew from critiqued notions of individual and cultural failings (Katz 1989).⁴⁸ As well, color-blind policy making – though ostensibly race neutral – relied on racist and sexist stereotypes of Black women. Welfare rhetoric crystalized in representations of the “welfare queen,” which became code for an undeserving Black, single, unemployed mother who depended on welfare, often without mentioning race (Brito 1999; Mink 1995; Monnat 2010; S. Schram 2000). Through the depiction of Black mothers’ individual failings, legislators blamed ‘welfare queens’ for their own poverty.

Feminists of color have long argued that dominant narratives about urban poverty are not just racialized, but also gendered, often focused particularly on punishing mothers of color (Roberts 1991; Crenshaw 1995a). For example, Roberts (1991) documented the systematic targeting of pregnant poor women of color as substance abusers within public assistance programs, which resulted in the loss of parental rights. More recently, she traced how the prison and foster care systems have been inextricably linked in ways that “blame mothers for the cause of startling rates of child poverty rather than to tackle poverty’s societal roots” (Roberts 2012, 1484). Her findings demonstrated that as public assistance began to support more families of color, the rhetoric surrounding it changed from “protecting children not from social disadvantages stemming from poverty and racial discrimination but from maltreatment inflicted by their mothers” (Roberts 2012, 1485). Roberts (2012) stressed such discourses

⁴⁸ See the Chapter 1, section “Theorizing Race Class, Gender, and Place, in Discourses of Hunger” for more on color-blind racism and individual/cultural failings prominent in current theories of urban poverty.

advanced a neoliberal ideology of personal responsibility and private interest over public support, as now there were individuals to blame rather than society as a whole.

Neoliberalism assumes that all racial barriers were lifted in the post-Civil Rights era, situates individuals in the purportedly color-blind free market (Melamed 2006; Roberts and Mahtani 2010), and heavily relies on narratives of personal responsibility and work ethic (Melamed 2006; Roberts 2012; Davis 2007). Racial inequality persisted “under the auspices of meritocracy” (Davis 2007, 350) through the guise of the American Dream; as a result, poverty was pathologized and victims were blamed for the self-perpetuating cycle of poverty. The color-blind welfare dependency discourse suggested that intergenerational poverty was a problem because welfare dependency was itself a pathology “concentrated in a black underclass” (Schram 2006, 146) and required individual solutions (Katz, 2015). At the same time, Republicans and some Democrats finalized a decades-long discursive shift to workfare, an approach to poverty governance that “[emphasizes] work, family, and individual responsibility, along with localized and market-based solutions” in ways that reframed welfare as “disempowering” and part of an anti-work ethic (Peck 2001, 108). Like dependency, workfare also pathologized poor work ethic by identifying it as a problem of missing cultural values (Peck, 2001). Legislators used repetitive and reinforcing color-blind rhetoric of individual failings, cultural pathologies, and welfare dependency that were frequently discussed alongside “drug use, violence, crime, teen pregnancy, [and] single motherhood” (Schram, 2006, p. 146). The bipartisan passage of welfare reform solidified the use of sanctions-enforced workfare to discipline the poor, particularly welfare queens, and eliminate “dependency” on federal programs.

More insidiously, this meant that instead of welfare serving as a social support to help lift individuals out of poverty, welfare dependency and subsequent moral corruption have been cited as root causes of urban plight (Adeola 2005; Woods 2007). The cloaked, “race-neutral” understanding that welfare dependency causes urban plight required drawing on color-blind images to increase sanctions and dismantle welfare. However, the American psyche embraced welfare iconography in a way that was not race-neutral. Gilens (1996) suggested that the embedded race-coding of welfare evoked negative portrayals and understandings of welfare. Analysis of welfare media portrayals has confirmed the negative racist stereotyping of mothers on public assistance (Kelly, 2010; Luther, Kennedy, and Combs-Orme, 2005). Moreover, this iconography affected the distribution of welfare sanctions, which subsequently increased their criminalization and disproportionately impacted Black and Latino households (Fording, Soss, and Schram 2011; Monnat 2010; Roberts 2012).

Stark racial inequality characterizes poverty and urban economic geographies (Crump 2002; Bonds 2013). While there are still staggeringly disproportionate rates of poverty and racialized wage inequity (Bonds 2013), anti-Black racism conflates Blackness with poverty (Brahinsky 2011). The American public has long operated under the perception that Black individuals comprise a larger portion of the American poor (Gilens 1996), and also a larger portion of the welfare population (Schram 2006) than in reality. Gilens (2003) shows that, starting from around 1965, media portrayals of poverty crystallized around representations of Blackness associated with welfare waste and abuse, except during economic downturns, when there was a “dramatic ‘whitening’ of poverty images” (117) and more neutral language around

welfare. This media both mirrored and reinforced enduring racist stereotypes (e.g., welfare queen) of Black Americans as being dependent, and further attached poverty to Blackness.

Race is structurally embedded in the workings of capitalism, and the racially uneven cycle of poverty is an outcome of its operations (Bonds 2013). Welfare reform had the dramatic effect of fixing “dependency” by defining success as a reduction in caseload rather than an actual reduction in poverty (Schram and Soss 2001; Lindhorst and Mancoske 2003).

Additionally, neoliberal policies obscured and maintained structural racism, perpetuating gendered and racialized patterns of job allocation and wage inequity (Chamberlain 1997; Glenn 2002).

The Eroding Commitment to Federal Anti-Hunger Support

My analysis of the legislative discourses circulating in Food Stamp Program/SNAP⁴⁹ hearings documented shifts in federal hunger relief policy after welfare reform to its current formulation. To conduct my examination, I returned to the segments of source material associated with the following codes: taxpayer funds, dependency, efficiency, quality control, error, mission, waste, abuse, employment, training, wages, block grant, mandatory funding, entitlement, stigma, eligibility, ABAWD, work requirements, low participation, outreach, non-profits, benefits sign up, case workers, SNAP office.

I begin this discussion with a quote from Senator Harkin (D-IA) opening the 2001 Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry on the *Nutrition Title of the New Federal Farm Bill*, which represents a dominant concern in the early (2000-2010) years of my analysis.

⁴⁹ See note 3.

It is unacceptable that in the last six years, the percent of eligible people who participated in the food stamp program dropped from 71 percent to 59 percent ... At the same time, use of food pantries and soup kitchens is on the rise. I would like to know why that is happening. Contrary to some of the stereotypes about food stamp recipients, over half of them are children, nine percent are elderly, and nine percent are persons with disabilities. Most of the rest are adults who work for a living. We need to make sure that our nation's food pantries and soup kitchens are able to help people in need, but not as a substitute for the food stamp program.

Here Senator Harkin (D-IA) reported that participation in food benefits significantly dropped among eligible families at the same time that the need for anti-hunger organizations increased, indicating not that hunger had diminished, but rather that food stamp use had. Through early 2010, my analysis showed descriptions of “unacceptable” declines in food stamp participation⁵⁰ that echoed throughout Farm Bill hearings. In a report contracted by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA),⁵¹ Gleason et al. (2001) noted a 31 percent drop in the monthly food stamp caseload between 1994 and 1999 that could not be fully explained by the economy. Factors explaining the decline included: 47% related to the improved economy, 3% due to work requirements,⁵² 26% due to PRWORA (including as related to immigration),⁵³ and 24% was related to “other” factors (ibid, xv). Many of the debates in my source documents attempted to assess the reason for low participation of eligible families and focused on outreach and the simplification of sign up to encourage participation.

⁵⁰ See Figure 1.4 for trends in individual SNAP participation charted with trends in U.S. employment and poverty levels from 1985 – 2018.

⁵¹ USDA is the federal administrative body of SNAP.

⁵² This was categorized through state’s implementation of SNAP work requirements, time limits, and work encouragement policies between 1994-1999.

⁵³ Gleason et al. (2001) estimated 42% of the decline explained by PRWORA related to reduced eligibility of non-citizen immigrants. The 2002 Farm Bill restored some SNAP benefits for non-citizen immigrants. As noted in Chapter 1: regarding the impact of PRWORA and food stamps a comprehensive assessment that would appropriately contextualize the scale of immigration rhetoric and policy on SNAP participation is beyond the scope of this dissertation. See Potochnick (2016) for an assessment of the 2002 Farm Bill restoration efforts that partially increased SNAP participation among immigrants.

A household is automatically eligible for SNAP with the receipt of other state or federal support, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).⁵⁴ As such, these households would not need to prove income or complete an asset test if they had already been approved for TANF. Welfare reform resulted in the intended decreased participation in TANF compared to its predecessor (Schram and Soss 2001; Lindhorst and Mancoske 2003). In my findings, one theory for the decline in SNAP argued that lower TANF participation meant signing up for SNAP was more complicated because fewer households were automatically eligible. At a 2001 House Committee on Agriculture hearing on the *Formulation of the 2002 Farm Bill*, Eric Bost, the USDA Food and Nutrition Services Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services offered this explanation for declining participation:

There is growing recognition that the complexity of program requirements, often the result of the desire to target benefits more precisely, may cause errors and deter participation among people eligible for benefits. For example, households are required to provide detailed documentation of expenses for shelter, dependent care, medical expenses and child support.

In this quote, USDA Under Secretary Bost argues that the documentation required at SNAP sign up might be a deterrence causing the participation drop.

Several hearings detailed lengthy certification visits for those signing up for SNAP and also documented that participants often had to travel and take time off work for certification at the SNAP office. These points led to debates emphasizing ways to simplify SNAP sign-up, with some voicing concern for “program integrity.” When Bost discussed “the desire to target benefits more precisely,” he was emphasizing efforts to minimize incorrect benefit allotment. The concern was that simplifying SNAP sign up would make it more likely that someone could

⁵⁴ See Appendix A: SNAP Fact Sheet.

qualify for SNAP when they were not actually eligible for SNAP. For example, rather than requiring “detailed documentation ... for shelter” expenses, a standard deduction for shelter for all families might result in some families having a net income low enough to qualify for SNAP when they would not have if they had used their actual cost of shelter.

Some legislators suggested that removing “detailed documentation” would also make it easier for participants to commit fraud. For example, at the same House Agriculture hearing on the *Formulation of the 2002 Farm Bill*, Rep. Clayton (D-NC) sought clarification about the testimony from a General Accounting Office (GAO) administrator⁵⁵ about the GAO’s assessment of SNAP simplification, stating “I understood you to say that you didn't necessarily have to sacrifice the integrity of the program ... in simplification, your approach would be that it could indeed be for the beneficiaries, as well as for the people, how far [sic] to administer it.” The GAO administrator confirmed that the USDA FNS could simplify SNAP sign-up in a way that helps both administrators and participants without “sacrific[ing] the integrity of the program.” The ideas captured in these debates about boosting participation in SNAP while retaining its “integrity” shaped changes in SNAP policy. In fact, the 2002 Farm Bill expanded SNAP funding for outreach and increased state options for eligibility and ease of sign up (Congressional Research Service 2006).

That said, legislators and witnesses still drew from and mobilized well-established discourses of dependency that had gained so much traction in debates about welfare reform.

⁵⁵ Mr. Robertson, Director, Education, Workforce and Income Security Issues of the GAO.

For example, this 2001 exchange⁵⁶ between Mr. Ohls, of Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., Mr. Rector Senior Research Fellow, Heritage Foundation, and Representative Goodlatte (R-VA), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry reflects the discourses about employment and the connection between SNAP and TANF:

Mr. OHLS. ... food stamps, unlike the former AFDC, the majority of households are not—work isn't relevant. They are elderly ... Many of them are children. I mean, there are relatively few people left to talk about. I mean, one could easily discuss whether or not the work requirements in the A-1 provisions are being applied appropriately.

Mr. RECTOR. If I could, that is simply incorrect. It is absolutely incorrect. Eighty percent of food stamp benefits in a given year go to families with children and 85 percent of that group, the families with children are single mothers and/or children with no parents at all. That is the classic AFDC system. It is almost a mirror population and we have heard a whole lot about—

Mr. GOODLATTE. Is there a pool of people that are in the Food Stamp Program that are not in the TANF program?

Mr. RECTOR. Yes. And one part of that pool are individuals who were in TANF, who were required to do some job search, some work, some training, and they didn't do it and they got a sanction off or part sanction off of TANF, or a full sanction off of TANF, but they are continuing to get food stamps. Now I would ask you to ask some of the State experts up here whether or not it is plausible to really argue that that individual's continued receipt of food stamps when they are refused TANF is not a factor in encouraging their idleness and in encouraging them to evade the TANF work obligation. It is a serious problem, and it is obviously occurring. But even if they are not on TANF, programs that reward idleness, that give something for nothing, that give a handout to those that are not working, we know from welfare reform that is exactly what we don't want to do, and that is what food stamps is doing now. We need to bring it in line with the welfare reform of 1996. It embodies all the old errors of the war on poverty. We need to do something different.

Mr. GOODLATTE. I am big fan of work requirements, and I would welcome evidence from either of you in support of or recitation of that position, because if indeed we have a situation where people are using the Food Stamp Program to not participate in the TANF program, we need to know that. That is not in the interest of their children if they are taking that position. They either ought to be qualified for both or they ought to be working.

⁵⁶ This is from a different panel within the same 2001 House Committee of Agriculture *Formulation of the 2002 Farm Bill* as cited above. Farm Bill hearings detailing SNAP priorities were often limited to a single day in the early years of my analysis.

Here the conversation positions “single mothers” as dependent and taking advantage of the system and frames SNAP as supporting “idleness” and a poor work ethic. Please note that at the time of this 2001 hearing, SNAP benefits averaged \$0.81 per meal and \$75 per person/month (equivalent to the 2021 purchasing power of \$2.33 and \$216, respectively), a sum of money that no individual could support themselves with.

In its emphasis on stronger work requirements in exchange for SNAP access, this exchange does several things. While Rep. Goodlatte opened this hearing by stating that “we should not have hunger in the world's richest country that has the world's safest, most wholesome, economical, and abundant food supply,” his comment that “they ought to be working” indicates an interest in drawing exclusionary limits for SNAP in relation to employment. Moreover, with the implementation of PROWRA, there was a decline in families that “neither work nor receive welfare benefits” (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2001, 5). This fact refutes Mr. Rector’s inference and Rep. Goodlatte’s suggestion that SNAP recipients were “using the Food Stamp Program to not participate in the TANF program.” If this were the case, then there would have been an *increase* in the number of families participating in SNAP that were neither working nor receiving TANF.

In the exchange, Mr. Ohls attempts to clarify that most participants who are required to work, do work, while Mr. Rector intervened with a response laden with discourses the blame the poor and mark them as dependent and abusing the system, echoing the logics of welfare reform. By stating that “*It is almost a mirror population and we have heard a whole lot about,*” Mr. Rector invokes racialized, gendered, and classed characterizations of welfare recipients – pathologizing them as “single mothers,” “welfare queens,” “dependent,” “idle,” and “lazy”

persons – without explicitly referencing the identities of the “population” he is referring to (Mink 1994; Quadagno 1996). As my discussion about legislative debate in later years (2010-2018) reveals, discourses of dependency become more nuanced, coded, and less explicit, relying more on the ostensibly race-neutral language of color-blindness.

Another theme emerging in the legislative discourse related to decreased SNAP participation was that participants were affected by the public and political attitudes emphasized during welfare reform – expressed clearly by Mr. Rector above – and that beneficiaries of public assistance should work and not utilize government benefits. Gleason et al. (2001) theorized⁵⁷ that one of the effects of the “great deal of publicity and rhetoric” (xiv) associated with PRWORA was that SNAP participants received the negative messages about government benefits and stopped participating in SNAP because of that rhetoric. Some legislative and USDA discourses about perceived stigma associated with the program specifically highlighted the name ‘food stamps.’ In the House Committee on Agriculture *Hearing to Review the 2007 Farm Bill Proposals of the US Department of Agriculture* - including a USDA proposal to rename the program “the Food and Nutrition program” - Rep. Baca (D-CA), applauded the suggested change:

I want to thank you for suggesting that we change the name at this point to food and nutritional program. It seems like a minor change, but a very important proposal, especially as we look at 36 million people, 11 percent of our population now, that fall under the category of poverty or in the need for food stamps. “Food stamps” is a term that carries a huge stigma, and that is an important change even though it is minor. In my district in the Latino community, have had a hard time accepting food stamps because the term “food stamp” suggests that people don't work. And that applies to a variety of different people, and so just changing the name itself will help get people to apply for the food and nutritional program versus the food stamp negative connotation.

⁵⁷ See note 53 for more on the USDA-contracted report by Gleason et al. (2001).

With his statement noting the name “carries a huge stigma [and]... suggests that people don't work,” Rep. Baca’s observations attach negative connotations to hunger relief, similar to the documented stigmas associated with other government programs, such as welfare (Mink 1998). Following these debates, the food stamp program eventually was renamed as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)⁵⁸ in the 2008 Farm Bill. According to legislative debate, the logics surrounding this rebranding were meant to address multiple issues: to destigmatize food benefits, to recognize the elimination paper “stamps” in exchange for food, and – perhaps most importantly – to emphasize the program as a *supplemental support* to what households must spend on their own in order improve their nutrition,⁵⁹ beyond the provision of food. I highlight the word *supplemental* as SNAP households are expected to spend 30% of their income on food, and SNAP benefit allotments are calculated accordingly.⁶⁰

Yet, the rebranding of “food stamps” to SNAP was not enough to protect the program from the onslaught of stigmatizing rhetoric that emerged in more recent years (2010-2018) of legislative debate, which worked to delegitimize the program and reduce its funding. As Faith Watson’s 2017 testimony at the opening of this chapter makes clear, a name change has done nothing to reduce the stigma deeply felt by SNAP recipients: “There is definitely a lot of good the program does, but there is stigma about those who depend on SNAP benefits.”

Overall SNAP participation grew slowly between 2002-2007, and by 2007 66% of all eligible households participated (Leftin and Wolkwitz 2009). The extended exchange between

⁵⁸ Despite the name change, many references to the program still use food stamps, with common rhetoric like “food stamps, now called Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).”

⁵⁹ As will be detailed in Chapter 4, the name change occurred during growing concern for the ‘obesity epidemic’ and SNAP policy increasingly prioritized obesity prevention.

⁶⁰ See Appendix A: SNAP Policy Fact Sheet.

Rep. Goodlatte and Mr. Rector captured the underlying yet enduring discourses of dependency even in a period when legislatures were primarily concerned about low levels in SNAP participation. The impact of language about the poor’s ostensible “dependency” on SNAP was tempered in the 2002 and 2008 Farm Bills, which increased funding to expand enrollment with continued outreach and simplification of SNAP sign up.

Regulating the Hungry

In these later years (2010-2019), I find that the undeserving SNAP recipient comes more sharply into focus within debates about SNAP work requirements. Even as the country endured an historically significant recession starting in December 2007, beginning in mid 2010, legislators increasingly emphasized concerns about the size of SNAP, SNAP “dependency,” and the previous decade’s expansion of eligibility options in ways that ignored expanding levels of poverty, unemployment, and hunger.⁶¹ In fact, it was in early 2009 that the so-called Tea Party emerged, mobilizing racial resentment after the 2008 presidential election and reinvigorating a push to reduce government spending on entitlements premised on idea that “that government ha[d] become an instrument for serving racial minorities” (Melamed 2011, 220). Tea Party rhetoric on shrinking social welfare programs relied heavily on explicitly racialized, classed, and gendered tropes about who was getting “handouts” compared to those “working for a living” (Haltinner 2016; Williamson, Skocpol and Coggins 2011). These merged easily with well-

⁶¹ See Figures 1.2, 1.3, to show the stark increase in hunger, and Figure 1.4 to show trends in SNAP and poverty during this time period. Participation of eligible individuals spiked during the Great Recession and by 2012, there were 47.1 million individuals in poverty and 46.9 million individuals in SNAP. See Tables 2.1 and 2.2 documenting shifts in dominant discourses.

established bipartisan neoliberal consensus in legislative debates and found that in the legislative discourse hunger was increasingly framed as a problem of dependency.

Critical to understanding SNAP debates is the fact that the Farm Bill legislates regulations associated with SNAP implementation. However, SNAP policy allows for states to request flexibility in rules related to eligibility, sanctions, and work requirements, which the USDA broadly defines as “state options.”⁶² As a consequence, these dynamics vary by state, shift over time, and can either expand or restrict SNAP eligibility. In these later years of debate (2010-2018), legislators increasingly discussed two specific SNAP work policies: the SNAP Employment and Training program (SNAP E&T) and the Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents (ABAWD) rule. The ABAWD rule limits SNAP benefits to three months for unemployed adults who *can* work and are not raising a child under the age of 18.⁶³ The time limit applies even if the person is looking for a job. I document how legislators attempted Farm Bill policy changes that would enforce “self-sufficiency” through SNAP E&T or limit states’ ability to waive the ABAWD rule because that waiver expanded SNAP eligibility. These Farm Bill work policies made it more difficult to qualify for SNAP without working, similar to the workfare policies Peck (2001) analyzed during welfare reform debates. These arguments for work policies never discussed whether the increased SNAP E&T or work requirements actually reduced hunger.

The ABAWD rule grew to be a major focus of debate, with tightening of restrictions proposed in the 2014 and 2018 Farm Bills as well as by the Trump administration. As such, I

⁶² See Appendix A: SNAP Policy Fact Sheet.

⁶³ ABAWD rule is applied to unemployed 18 to 49 year-old SNAP recipients who *can* work and do not have any dependents under age 18 in their care. These individuals are required to work 80 hours a month and they are allotted a maximum 3 months of SNAP in 3 years for the months they do not prove employment. See SNAP Fact Sheet, appendix A for more information on how the waiver is implemented, and other state options regarding the ABAWD rule.

detail ABAWD changes since 2009. In 1996, welfare reform enacted the SNAP ABAWD rule. It came to the forefront because the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act suspended it based on elevated unemployment during the recession. The ABAWD rule was reinstated in 2013, but if a state had high unemployment rates, they could apply for a waiver to the ABAWD rule for the entire state or a specific region or county. Whether states chose to waive the ABAWD rule varied and changed over time. Even in states where the unemployment rate qualified them for an ABAWD waiver, some decided not to waive the rule, or did not apply it in all regions that qualified.⁶⁴ Bolen et al. (2016) noted that in 2015, the ABAWD rule only applied to 30% of the U.S. SNAP population, while by 2016, it applied to 65%. From 2015 to 2018, statewide waivers dropped from 31 to 8, partial state waivers increased from 13 to 28, and states without any ABAWD waiver increased from 9 states to 17 (Congressional Research Service 2018). Harris (2018) examined the impact of SNAP work requirements on a national scale from 2010–2016 to capture the suspension and reinstatement of the ABAWD rule; he documented a sharp decline in SNAP participation due to work requirements with minimal increases in employment among those impacted by the ABAWD rule.

To better understand these shifts, Ku, Brantley, and Pillai (2019) reviewed county-level SNAP data for a vast majority of participants between 2013 and 2017.⁶⁵ Their analysis illustrates how a purportedly race-neutral policy, such as the ABAWD time limit, produces racially unequal

⁶⁴ 2014, Ohio poverty rights advocates filed a civil rights complaint to the USDA because Ohio's partial state ABAWD waiver excluded Ohio's larger urban counties such as Cuyahoga County that have a higher proportion of Black and Brown Ohioans. At the time, Cuyahoga County had a higher unemployment rate than 11 of the 16 counties that had been granted a waiver (Borchardt, 2014).

⁶⁵ This included USDA administrative data on SNAP participation available at the county level, "About seven eighths of total SNAP participants in the United States live in the 2410 counties represented," as well as USDA reported state approved ABAWD waivers, "county or even municipality specific" reported by USDA each quarter between 2012 – 2017 (Ku, Brantley, and Pillai (2019), p. 1447).

impacts. The researchers analyzed differences in SNAP participation based on whether a county applied the ABAWD rule; they found a rapid loss of SNAP benefits for counties in which the ABAWD rule was in place (ibid). In a second analysis of the data, these researchers documented the uneven impact of the ABAWD rule on loss of SNAP benefits by race, ethnicity, or disability. They identified a 7.2% reduction in SNAP for Black adults, 5.5% reduction for Latino adults, and 2.6% decline for white adults, as well as a 4.0% reduction in SNAP for adults with disabilities⁶⁶ (Brantley, Pillai, and Ku 2020). The ABAWD time limit was instituted with welfare reform and many scholars – including Roberts (2012), Fording, Soss, and Schram (2011), and Monnat (2010) – have documented the disproportionate impact of welfare sanctions and subsequent criminalization of Black and Latino households. Remarkably, the USDA does not study the impact of the SNAP work policies on rates of hunger, including for the SNAP funded E&T programs.⁶⁷

Constructing the Problem of SNAP “Dependency”

Throughout the testimony between the years of 2000-2018, SNAP supporters consistently reiterated that SNAP recipients are employed, as illustrated in the quotes below spanning a 13-year period.

Sen. Stabenow (D-MI) in 2001:⁶⁸ I would like to note that the average demographics of a person today on food stamps is very different from what one might typically think of in the past. We are talking about people who are working.

⁶⁶ The intersection of race, ethnicity, or disability were not reported. The model controlled for gender but did not report the rates of SNAP loss at the intersection of gender with any other variable.

⁶⁷ The assessment of whether the SNAP Pilot E&T work requirements or training impact hunger is part of the 2014 Farm Bill programs assessment. The preliminary pilot reports were expected in 2019 and are still forthcoming.

⁶⁸ Stabenow – 2001 Senate, hearing title: *The Nutrition Title of the New Federal Farm Bill*

Rep. McGovern (D-MA) in 2014:⁶⁹ [T]he overwhelming majority of SNAP recipients who can work do. Let's keep in mind that nearly 70 percent of SNAP recipients are not expected to work because they are either elderly, disabled or children.

Even so, the later period of analysis (mid 2010-2018) saw a significant uptick in the use of legislative discourses about the need to enforce work as a condition of receipt of benefits (see Peck, 2001, for a discursive analysis of workfare that traces a similar transformation around welfare). These discourses positioned SNAP recipients as requiring policies to enforce work, despite the fact that “the overwhelming majority” who could work already did. In 2011, the Under Secretary for the USDA Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services highlighted the importance of the USDA funding SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) work programs in a statement to the Senate Committee on Agriculture,⁷⁰ noting they are “part of the effort of the program [SNAP] to make people more self-sufficient.” Both the 2014 and 2018 Farm Bills increased support for work requirements, including the extension of funding for pilot programs in different states to test out various SNAP E&T pilot programs. The SNAP discourses of “self-sufficiency” were coded extensions of the racialized, classed, and gendered tropes of *welfare dependency* and *welfare queen* (Quadagno 1994; Mink 1995) embedded within USDA work requirement programs.

In 2014, the House Committee on Agriculture initiated a hearing⁷¹ on recently funded SNAP E&T pilot programs before any applications were received. The discussion within the hearing questioned the types of state options the USDA was planning to allow for assessment in

⁶⁹ McGovern – 2014 House, hearing title: *The Hearing on implementation of Section 4022 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 Pilot Projects to Reduce Dependency and Increase Work Requirements and Work efforts under SNAP*

⁷⁰ The hearing title was: *Farm Bill Accountability: The Importance of Measuring Performance, While Eliminating Duplication and Waste*

⁷¹ Same hearing as Note 69.

the pilot process. In one of those exchanges, Rep. Austin⁷² Scott (R-GA) asked USDA Secretary Vilsack if SNAP E&T could include drug testing or exclude people who have been fired from a job for failing a drug test. The Secretary questioned why states would focus on drug testing when the purpose of the pilots was ostensibly to increase employment, noting that drug testing would work as an unnecessary barrier that would prevent recipients from second chances in the event that they had a relapse in their recovery. What follows is Rep. Scott's (R-GA) response:

Mr. Secretary, with due respect, we are not talking about second chance here. We are talking about people who are making a choice in many cases to buy drugs instead of food. And it is one of the reasons that many American citizens have lost faith in this system. And so again, I mean, I am talking about protecting the integrity of the system, and quite honestly, I don't think that working people's tax dollars and their wages should be going to pay for SNAP benefits for people who are failing drug tests. I just hope that if a state says that somebody who loses their job because they failed a drug test should not be eligible for food stamps, that the agency would respect that decision by the leadership of the states.

In this quote, Rep. Scott (R-GA) insists that SNAP recipients who use any illegal drugs are inherently criminal, reiterating his support of denying access to the program for a failed drug test. The combination of drug use to signify criminality and denial of benefits is deeply embedded into the dependency and individual moral failings arguments from welfare reform (Roberts 1991; Mink 1995; Schram 2006; Peck 2001), which I consider in more detail in Chapter 5. This quote also signaled a progressively common legislative interest: giving more state options to exclude SNAP participants, in this case, drug testing. Currently, per USDA guidelines

⁷² There are two GA Congressmen with the same last name, this is Austin Scott (R-GA), and the other is David Scott (D-GA), who also is the current Chair of the House Committee on Ag).

drug testing can be selectively applied, but cannot be broadly used in SNAP.⁷³ Rep. Scott's (R-GA) request of the USDA to respect a "decision by the leadership of the states" was also a reminder the USDA approves or denies a restrictive option like this because it is not currently part of SNAP policy. Additionally, the USDA could sanction states for implementing unapproved options. However, legislators attempted to change USDA oversight of some state options through the Farm Bill with SNAP policy changes. For example, in initial 2014 Farm Bill legislation, the House proposed that states could administer drug testing as part of their eligibility determination, which did not become part of the 2014 Farm Bill. Drug testing was not the only congressional legislation attempting to control states' ability to carve out (in)eligibility. And, in 2014 the House also attempted to repeal the ABAWD rule waiver discussed above and "broad based categorical eligibility" another policy discussed below (CRS, 2014). The common thread between these three policies is that they all would have led to increased exclusions from SNAP.

Similar to what scholars of welfare reform have documented (e.g., Fording, Soss, and Schram 2011), discourses regarding SNAP work requirements often simply reiterated who "deserved" SNAP. In a 2015 House Agriculture review of SNAP,⁷⁴ Rep. Rouzer (R-NC) encapsulates his constituents' concerns:

... we all want to take care of those who need the help, but when I have folks back home who are telling me they are in dire straits, they paid their taxes, done everything right all these years, and they are not eligible for anything, and then they contrast that with those who have not contributed quite as much to society, let us say, and they are getting everything, that is a real problem. That issue surfaces all the time, particularly in

⁷³ Requiring drug testing has only been an USDA-approved state option regarding SNAP benefits for people who have been convicted of a drug felony but cannot be broadly applied or required. However, several states have attempted legislation requiring drug testing for means-tested programs (CRS, drug testing).

⁷⁴ The House Committee on Agriculture conducted a full legislative review of SNAP in 2015 - 2016, see Table 2.2.

the past, 4 to 5 years in particular. So how do we get our incentives right? ...Do we need to have a program, in essence, where we come in and say, all right, if you have a job, here is a payment because you are doing the right thing?

This is a classic exemplary quote contrasting racialized notions of the “working taxpayer” to a “government dependent” in order to make distinctions between those who are deserving of benefits and those who are not. For example, Rep. Rouzer (R-NC) signaled support for SNAP, but only for “folks back home ...[who have] done everything right all these years.” He did not utilize explicitly racial language, however his references to those who have “not contributed quite as much to society, let us say, and they are getting everything,” is a discursive nod to the highly racialized “established concept” (Schram 2006) of the non-white, undeserving dependent. His use of “let us say” suggests that we all know who he is talking about without him needing use racially explicit language in his construction of the hardworking taxpayer and the government dependent. Finally, his reference to the idea that “we all want to take care of those who need the help” is an example of commonly deployed legislative preface to comments that would then turn to demarking those who truly deserve “help” and those deemed unworthy of assistance. The growing circulation of discourses about the need to enforce work as a condition of SNAP strikingly resonates with the discourses that Peck (2001) delineates in *Workfare States*.

Discourses about the need to implement SNAP work requirements served the purpose of distinguishing the ‘undeserving hungry’ through construction of SNAP dependency. Critically, these debates never included discussion about whether work requirements reduced hunger. As has been established by critical poverty scholars, constructions of the undeserving ‘dependent’ works to legitimate social welfare cuts (Katz 1989; Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Lawson and

Elwood 2014; Schram 2006). I now turn to another common narrative: the need to protect ‘taxpayers’ from SNAP fraud. These debates obscured the crucial point that most SNAP participants do, in fact, work. Despite this fact, those who were “working hard two, three jobs, and still living in poverty,” as Rep. McGovern (D-MA) argued, were not protected from accusations of fraud, abuse, and idleness.

Waste, Fraud, And Abuse and the Integrity Of SNAP

A key theme that emerged in tandem with SNAP discourses about work between 2010-2018 was the relentless focus on the cost of SNAP. Again, debates about the cost of SNAP were twinned with the dichotomous construction of the hard-working taxpayer and the SNAP participant. However, given the economic recession, slow recovery, and sharpening economic inequity, the distinction between the “taxpayer” and “participant” was not always clear. This blurring of distinctions is captured in a statement from Senator Stabenow (D-MI), in the 2012 Senate Committee on Agriculture Hearing on *Farm Bill Accountability: The Importance of Measuring Performance, While Eliminating Duplication and Waste*:

Taxpayers have every right to expect that their money is being used wisely and effectively. We know, because of the recession, there are families who have paid taxes all of their lives, who never thought in their wildest dreams they would need help putting food on the table, who now need food assistance. And that is even more of a reason to make sure that we are stopping fraud and abuse and managing every dollar as responsibly as possible. So as we look at the Farm Bill, I believe we need to ask questions like, Are we getting the right results? Are we being cost-effective? Are we eliminating waste, fraud, and abuse?

This quote represents a common reiteration that SNAP worked as designed during the Great Recession, in that it funded benefits to qualifying households and responded quickly in the economic downturn. Yet Sen. Stabenow still pulls in the common bipartisan discourse of

insisting upon rooting out “waste, fraud, and abuse.” Once again, this comment misses the key point that most SNAP participants who can work, do work – which she herself pointed out as noted in her 2001 quote above. Instead, her observation separates SNAP use for the life-long taxpayers “who now need food assistance” in the wake of crisis from other SNAP beneficiaries. Additionally, Stabenow’s focus on cost-effectiveness is an example of the huge uptick in legislative discourses around SNAP costs and “program integrity.” These debates tended to relate to notions of “quality control,” “accountability,” “integrity,” and “efficiency” to protect the American tax dollar from waste. Predictably, concerns about the so-called integrity of SNAP were woven through constructions of the ‘undeserving’ hungry.

Narratives about waste and abuse often drew on the language of integrity to mobilize outsized reactions to problems in SNAP. Despite these growing concerns, in the 2014 House Agriculture on the upcoming SNAP E&T pilots,⁷⁵ USDA Secretary Vilsack maintained that SNAP was then at “the lowest fraud and error rate in the history of the program.” Nonetheless, at that same hearing Rep. Yoho (R-FL) made the following comment:

One of the things that has come up several times is the integrity of the program for the SNAP program. Mr. Conaway brought it up, Mr. Scott, Ms. Lujan Grisham, and myself have personally seen people abusing the system or making poor choices. I was back in the district right before we came back, and this young fellow came in to a Jiffy Store. He was buying gas, a six-pack of beer, cigarettes, and he bought a sandwich with his food stamps, and then he pulls out cash to pay for the other things and lottery tickets. And that is the kind of thing that ruins the integrity of the program because the working person out there, as Mr. Scott says, we see hard-working people paying their taxes and those things going on. And it just kind of erodes the faith of the American people. And I know we are working on it. We can't stop all that. But I felt like I should bring that up because I see that often.

⁷⁵ See note 69.

This quote illustrates the reiteration of similar discourses from “Mr. Conaway ... Mr. Scott, Ms. Lujan Grisham, ...” around questions of “integrity.” Additionally, the definition of integrity is conflated with many different points on “abusing the system” and “poor choices.” Often these “integrity” discourses did not clearly distinguish between government *waste* compared to *fraud* or *abuse*. It is helpful to identify if the legislator or witness was discussing *unintentional* errors that would be inherent in any program this size versus *intentional* abuse of a system. In this case, Rep. Yoho indicated that the SNAP participant in this story was abusing the system to buy gas, a six-pack of beer, cigarettes, or lottery tickets, which is patently false, as those sorts of items are excluded from SNAP purchases. It also implies that the SNAP recipient must not really need SNAP since they can afford to buy these non-essential items. Despite the legality of all of these items, all purchased with cash, Rep. Yoho paints a picture of abuse about “those things going on” that “erode the faith.” The implication is that this particular SNAP recipient *did* abuse the system, and that *implication* was enough for Rep. Yoho to claim fraud. With the note of concern for those “paying their taxes,” Yoho’s comments make a clear distinction between those hard-working taxpayers and the “young fellow” featured in his story. Fraud and abuse tended to imply criminal behavior, or at least behaviors that deserve sanctioning, and those discourses will be more specifically analyzed in Chapter 5. Rep Yoho’s comments reflect a common logic in discursive constructions of the poor: that they are abusing the system and are unworthy of federal support.

A similar, but distinct discourse on waste has to do with how states are vulnerable to abuse or are themselves “gaming the system” with the widened state options for determining

eligibility. In the 2011 House Committee on Agriculture series of hearings on the *Agricultural Program Audit*, Rep. Lucas (R-OK) opens with this statement as related to SNAP audits:

We all need to eat, and when families fall on hard times, SNAP is a valuable resource that helps ensure that no one goes hungry. In the current economic environment, we need to ensure that SNAP benefits are going to those families that truly need support. I am concerned that the broad-based categorical eligibility increases opportunities for waste, fraud, and abuse. We are spending more than twice the amount of SNAP now than we were in 2007. Program participation has nearly doubled in that time. We have a responsibility to ensure that the \$69 billion we are spending on nutrition assistance is being properly used and is helping the people it is meant to help. That is exactly the type of information we need to gather in these audits. Are the Title IV programs [SNAP] being targeted effectively? Are the taxpayer's dollars being spent properly? Are there areas that we can streamline or eliminate? It won't be easy, but we need to find savings throughout all the farm bill programs.

In prefacing the statement with “We all need to eat ... SNAP is a valuable resource” Rep. Lucas (R-OK) crystalized the many discourses used to draw exclusionary boundaries around SNAP and captured the eroding commitment to federal hunger relief. Because of SNAP's high cost, Rep. Lucas' emphasized the need to exclude certain individuals from SNAP using discourses on audits for quality control, deservedness, and taxpayer savings. Drawing from discourses about dependency, his use of “helping the people it is meant to help” and “targeted effectively” signals the need to exclude the undeserving hungry, framed as dependent or fraudulent. His comments ignore the Great Recession and its ongoing implications in 2011. These discursive tactics are powerful. Rhetoric informs policy changes across scales. In the end, Rep. Lucas' focus on audits and discourses circulating around “broad-based categorical eligibility” (BBCE) and “opportunities for waste, fraud, and abuse” showcase a concern less about alleviating hunger and more about making SNAP more difficult to access.

BBCE was one of the SNAP strategies discussed in my findings from the 2000-2008 hearings to help simplify SNAP sign up. Under BBCE, any household is automatically eligible if

they receive noncash aid in any needs-tested program that has an income limit of 200% such as childcare benefits provided by TANF through a voucher, not cash. In this example, since the household had already qualified for TANF childcare, they were automatically eligible for SNAP and would not need to complete the SNAP income or asset test during the application process.

The focus on BBCE is also reflected in this House Agriculture 2011 *Hearing to Review Updates on USDA Inspector General Audits, Including SNAP Fraud Detection Efforts and IT Compliance*. This hearing was created because, in the hearing quoted directly above, the USDA Inspector General indicated the USDA Food and Nutrition Services⁷⁶ could do a better job of detecting state fraud. In what follows, Rep. McGovern (D-MA), Rep. Fortenberry (R-NC, Chairman of the Committee), and two top level USDA employees, Mr. Harden the Assistant Inspector General for Audit, and Inspector General Fong, discuss fraud in SNAP during the question-and-answer portion of the hearing.

Mr. McGovern. ... Senator Kyl announced that he was looking at SNAP as a potential offset to pay for the extension of a payroll tax cut, but he says that there are some people who earn more than \$1 million in income who are eligible for food stamps. Based on your understanding of the program, if you make a million dollars a year, are you eligible for food stamps?

Mr. Harden. That is not my understanding.

Ms. Fong. I think under the SNAP regulations that a person with an income of a million dollars would not normally qualify, but there are, as you know, other provisions in terms of categorical eligibility where that may come into play or there may be asset tests--if it is an asset as opposed to income, that may be another factor.

Mr. McGovern. Right, and there are income eligibility tests and asset tests, but I think it would be helpful if you could give us some clarity on whether or not millionaires are getting SNAP benefits or not. You know, it is hard for me to imagine that somebody who has assets of over a million dollars is eligible for SNAP, but I mean if you find that I would like to know about it. If you don't, I would like to know about that, too, because again it leaves the impression that somehow there is massive abuse of this program. And based

⁷⁶ Two USDA offices: the Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS, which also administers SNAP) and the Office of Inspector General (USDA OIG) study complementary and different measures of SNAP fraud and quality control.

on what you have told us so far, that is not the case. There is some abuse but it is not at a level comparable to some of the defense contracting practices that we have in this country. So in any event, any information on that would be very helpful to have. Thank you.

The Chairman. Thank you, Mr. McGovern. I think it is important to point out the SNAP program has doubled in expenditures in the last 4 years. But to the gentleman's point that it might be helpful if we did have a type of spreadsheet that showed all those states' qualification requirements based upon the criteria that you just said. There is a general requirement by Federal statute, the general parameter or the general eligibility standard and then the variation by states. That might get to this point as to whether asset considerations are a part of certain states' requirements or not and that might be helpful information.

Ms. Fong. We would be happy to talk with our colleagues at FNS. They may very well have that information and we will see what we can do to work with you on that.

This exchange elucidates many details. First and foremost, Rep. McGovern (D-MA) reiterates that SNAP abuse is incredibly low. While Mr. Harden confirms that millionaires are not eligible for SNAP, USDA Inspector General (USDA IG) Fong interjects with “but there are, as you know, other provisions in terms of categorical eligibility ... if it is an asset as opposed to income, that may be another factor.” Assessing the impact of categorical eligibility or asset tests on fraud is not under the purview of the USDA IG. Fong herself noted that she will discuss it with the USDA Food and Nutrition Services because this is not something her office investigates or audits in relation to SNAP fraud. Nonetheless, USDA IG Fong circulates a common talking point about assets and BBCE without any proof that eliminating the asset test through BBCE increases fraud. Rep. McGovern questioned her response with “it is hard for me to imagine ...” and asks for clarification and evidence of SNAP eligibility in “somebody who has assets of over a million dollars.” Rep. Fortenberry (R-NC, Chairman of the Committee) closed the conversation by reiterating current SNAP cost, and like Rep. Lucas (R-OK) above, omitted any discussion about the Great Recession and its impacts on poverty and hunger.

Within these inquiries into BBCE, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) (2012) concluded the following: “Eliminating broad-based categorical eligibility would save an average of about \$1.2 billion per year, which is less than 2 percent of projected spending for the program between 2013 and 2022. In addition, restricting eligibility for SNAP in that way would increase the time required to verify information on SNAP applications, which would probably result in more errors and greater administrative costs (ibid, 4). The CBO additionally explained that 65% of the increase in spending on SNAP between 2007 – 2011 “has been driven primarily by the weak economy ... [and that] ... 20 percent of the growth in spending can be attributed to temporarily higher benefit amounts enacted in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009” (1). Finally, this 2012 CBO report predicted SNAP participation would decrease as the economy strengthened (ibid.). This CBO report was widely used by BBCE supporters in legislative hearings, but the outsized focus on BBCE as a potential source of fraud grew.

What follows is the 2014 opening comments from Sidonie Squier, the Secretary of Human Services Department in New Mexico, in her testimony on behalf of Secretary's Innovation Group in the Hearing to Examine the Role of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Relation to other Federal Assistance Programs:

Ms. Squier. ... My Department administers food stamps, TANF, Medicaid, LIHEAP and many other human service programs. In addition, I am a member of the Secretary's Innovation Group ... a network of 17 human service secretaries reporting to their governors from states that represent 34 percent of the U.S that ... favor policies that promote work, self-sufficiency, and healthy families. ... SNAP is a food supplement program whose intended purpose is to assure individuals with the very lowest incomes have enough to eat. But, regrettably, this program has strayed from its earlier worthwhile purpose. ... during the period of strong economic growth between 2001 and 2007, food stamp caseloads increased by more than 50 percent ... significant factors include Federal policy changes, in particular the aggressive Federal pressure on states to recruit additional beneficiaries, combined with the loosening of eligibility rules through a provision of law called categorical eligibility. Categorical eligibility permits households

to bypass the normal income limit of 130 percent of the poverty level and the resource limit also of \$2,000 to \$3,250 imposed by SNAP if these households are eligible for TANF or SSI or the State General Assistance Program. ... So the thing that I want to bring home the most today... is that because of this provision called categorical eligibility, in New Mexico, for instance, anybody who touches the TANF program--which can be anybody in the state, because the TANF program touches things like marriage or counseling or fatherhood that don't have anything to do with assets at all. So you could have millions of dollars in the bank and still be eligible for food stamps just because you are touched by a TANF program, even something as simple as a brochure.

Secretary Squier's testimony, representing Secretaries overseeing 34 percent of the U.S. population, overstates how BBCE drove increased participation rates from 2001-2007 as well as how BBCE *can* be used commit SNAP fraud. Her comments regarding "aggressive Federal pressure on states to recruit additional beneficiaries, combined with the loosening of eligibility rules through a provision of law called categorical eligibility" ignores and obscures the low SNAP participation rate – which in some states dipped to 50% after welfare reform – of those who were eligible for SNAP, as I documented within discourses in the earlier years of study (2000-2008). Secretary Squier's assertion that these TANF programs covered "anybody in the state" ignores the USDA-required income limit⁷⁷ for any BBCE-granting TANF programs. She correctly states that TANF funds can cover programs about "marriage or counseling or fatherhood that don't have anything to do with assets at all."⁷⁸ However, *in order to count toward BBCE eligibility*, the targeted mailing of the brochure she's talking about could only go to households with an income below 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL) per USDA guidelines.⁷⁹ In other

⁷⁷ See Appendix A: SNAP Fact Sheet. In brief USDA BBCE guidelines have a federal income limit of 200%. In 2018, New Mexico had a lower income limit than allowed through at 165% FPL. Even with widespread use of BBCE, only 4.2% of households without and 7.7% of households with an elderly or disabled member had a gross income between 131% - 200% of the FPL in 2016.

⁷⁸ For an excellent overview of how TANF funds are currently spent, see the investigative journalist podcast from NPR's Marketplace 'The Uncertain Hour,' Season 1, for the 20th Anniversary of welfare reform.

⁷⁹ Many states have lower guidelines, in 2016, NM did use the "brochure" mailing, but had a 165% FPL upper limit.

words, her argument that “you could have millions of dollars in the bank and still be eligible for food stamps just because you are touched by a TANF program,” is only true for a person with \$1M in assets and an income below the state and federal BBCE limit.

When considering Secretary Squier’s assertions, it is important to highlight that in 2014, *monthly* benefits averaged \$125 per person or \$257 per household, a paltry sum that does not stretch to meet the needs of most recipients. Additionally, eligibility does not automatically mean the person will receive SNAP benefits if their income is too high when benefits are calculated.⁸⁰ Secretary Squier wielded information on BBCE in ways that distort the ways that SNAP eligibility is determined, combining discourses about government waste and the “ballooning” size and scope of SNAP with narratives about the potential for fraud and abuse by “anyone” who received “something as simple as a brochure.” Despite Rep. McGovern’s request for clarification on SNAP for millionaires three years prior, and in the absence of any evidence or proof of SNAP use by millionaires, this rhetoric had become a dominant talking point with respect to BBCE. These discourses about abuse and waste worked to delegitimize BBCE and sow doubt related to the integrity of SNAP.

Later, in the question-and-answer portion of the hearing, Rep. Fudge (D-OH) asked Stacy Dean, Vice President for Food Assistance Policy, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, and Secretary Squier to clarify more about BBCE:

Ms. Fudge. Ms. Squier, you indicated that if someone just gets a brochure that they are eligible for TANF. Ms. Dean, is that accurate?

Ms. Squier. Not TANF.

⁸⁰ See Appendix A: SNAP Fact Sheet

Ms. Dean. Under the TANF block grant, states can spend TANF funds on a wide variety of needs. TANF, bottom line, is a funding stream, not a program. So, yes, states can spend TANF funds----

Ms. Fudge. How the state chooses, correct?

Ms. Dean. Yes.

Ms. Squier. But that would be food stamps that I was indicating.

Ms. Fudge. Go right ahead.

Ms. Squier. If someone receives a brochure about TANF, that can in New Mexico make them eligible.

Ms. Fudge. It can. It can. But you indicated that every single person that gets it is eligible. That is what you said. I just want to be clear.

Ms. Squier. And I believe in New Mexico that is true.

Ms. Fudge. Okay. So that is New Mexico. I can't argue that because I don't know New Mexico law.

This exchange illustrates the complicated task of untangling the impact of state options regarding BBCE. In the hearing format, Rep. Fudge (D-OH) must take Ms. Squier's expert word as the Secretary of Human Services Department for the state of New Mexico for a valid and accurate representation of the issues pertaining to BBCE and abuse. Rep. Fudge did not explicitly ask about the income characteristics of households who *can* receive the brochure, and Secretary Squier omitted that information. Later during the same period of question-and-answer, Ms. Dean attempted to clarify BBCE, drawing from the 2012 CBO estimates that eliminating BBCE would reduce SNAP participation and result in a subsequent 2% decline in the SNAP budget for SNAP. She indicated that "there is no way that categorical eligibility is the cause or the fuel for caseload growth." Even so, when it was his turn for questioning the panel, Rep Austin Scott (R-GA) opened his comments with the following:

...whether it is two percent or five percent, the challenge we have right now to me is the integrity of the system. And when you allow the integrity to start to slide through, whether it is categorical eligibility or whether it is turning your head and looking the

other way, and I would suggest that ... the states ... are ... essentially state-sanctioned gaming of the system, then any of the programs lose support of the American citizen, and that is where we have the problem. And whether it is one percent fraud or two percent fraud or ten percent fraud, we have a responsibility to address that fraud, because if we don't, then in the end we will be able to serve fewer people and the money doesn't go to the people who actually need it the most.

Here Rep Scott (R-GA), like many of the legislators, cut off discussion about complexity or lack of fraud with a discursive shift emphasizing that *any* fraud is too much fraud, for the sake of “the people who actually need it the most.” The result of this, he argues, is that SNAP “lose[s] support of the American citizen.” Again, this rhetorical posturing about fraud constructs an outsized problem for an issue that barely exists. In pointing to “integrity ... whether it is categorical eligibility or whether it is turning your head and looking the other way,” Scott deployed notions of *waste, fraud, and abuse* to demonize a program ostensibly rife with abuse. The idea that this abuse occurs while administrators and officials are “looking the other way” feeds into neoliberal rhetoric about the inefficiencies of the state and the burden of social programs on the American taxpayer.

Again, the distinction between *waste, fraud, and abuse* was intentionally opaque here. Government *waste* is best understood as *unintentional* residual errors of a large program and overspending taxpayer money. BBCE simplifies the process of signing up for SNAP and the projected residual effects were a 2% increase in SNAP funding that would go to participants who would not have qualified for SNAP under traditional eligibility (Congressional Budget Office 2012). This 2% is an example of the government *wasting* taxpayer money. The Congressional Budget Office (2012) also indicated the 2% increase in cost did not account for potential cost savings from reducing caseworker time and error that occurs when calculating SNAP eligibility traditional methods. This caseworker inefficiency and error could also be seen as government

waste and was saved through BBCE. However, Rep Scott (R-GA) argued that BBCE is intentional *state fraud* in their “gaming of the system” to allow more SNAP sign-ups, increasing wasteful government spending. This enabled Rep Scott (R-GA) and like-minded legislators who demand states’ rights for drug testing and work requirements to deny a states’ rights argument for BBCE because the states themselves are committing fraud. I more deeply consider discourses of criminality and discipline in the next chapter, but these framings echo the rationale used to expand welfare disciplinarity and surveillance and to build support for the defunding and devolution of welfare reform (Crenshaw 2012; Bonds 2021).

These debates had a significant impact on proposed policy and SNAP implementation during the 2012–2014 Farm Bill hearings.⁸¹ The Center for Budget Policies and Priorities documented that a 2013 House⁸² bill cut SNAP “by almost \$21 billion over the next decade, eliminating food assistance to nearly 2 million low-income people” (Rosenbaum and Dean 2013, 1). The report further states that “[t]he majority of the bill’s SNAP cuts come from eliminating a state option known as “categorical eligibility” (ibid., 1). According to the Congressional Research Service (2014), most of the contention animating this bill centered around concern for budget and deficit. In a 2013 iteration of the Farm Bill, the House of Representatives voted to exclude SNAP reauthorization from the omnibus Farm Bill for the first time since 1973, citing that it should be authorized on its own. Ultimately, the final 2014 Farm Bill maintained both the feature of categorical eligibility and the reauthorization of SNAP.⁸³

⁸¹ The 2008 Farm Bill expired in 2012, was extended, and reauthorized in 2014. (CRS, 2014)

⁸² Both the House and the Senate submit a bill, which is merged into one through the “conference” process.

⁸³ But did change the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program payments, “According to information from June 2012, this change to benefit calculation is expected to reduce household benefit amounts in approximately 17 states.” (Congressional Research Service 2014)

However, it eliminated funding for SNAP outreach, added new felony exclusions, and included \$200 million over FY2014 and FY2015 for the SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) program.

Sedimented Discourses Of Work And Self-Sufficiency

In the years after the 2014 Farm Bill, SNAP legislative debate continued along the trajectory that began in mid 2010. In 2015, the House Committee on Agriculture conducted a full legislative review of SNAP, with 16 hearings over the course of a year and half. Resonating with contemporary discourses surrounding SNAP priority issues, several hearings⁸⁴ dealt exclusively with what Peck (2001) identified as “workfare state” policies mandating work in exchange for benefits. Chairman Congressman Conaway opened the first of these hearings with this statement:

We can all agree that no one ought to go hungry in America, and SNAP is essential in protecting the most vulnerable citizens during tough times. For many it is a vital lifeline to keeping food on the table. What we don’t want is for this program to hold people back from achieving their potential. I believe there is a role for SNAP, but we need to have a complete, clear understanding of its mission and purpose. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today as we explore where this program has been, where it is now, and what it could be for participants and taxpayers in the future.

In this, Rep. Conaway preempts that “no one ought to go hungry,” but then shifts focus to SNAP as having the capacity to “hold people back from achieving their potential.” He also makes a distinction between “participants” and “taxpayers.” In this series of hearings, solutions did not measure reductions in hunger, but rather evaluated employment in SNAP as a marker of success.

⁸⁴ See Chapter 2: Dominant Discourses in SNAP Legislative Hearings from 2000-2018 and Table 2.2 for the titles of those hearings and overview of work-related discourses.

Very similar rhetoric circulated within Senate hearings after the 2014 Farm Bill. In a familiar pattern, discourses linked the integrity of SNAP to taxpayer perception. This focus was illustrated by Senator Brown (D-OH) in the 2017 hearing on *Nutrition Programs: Perspectives for the 2018 Farm Bill*:

Surely, people think the benefits are much greater than they are. People always have a story about somebody that they judged standing in line next to them or whatever. Sometimes it is a bit about race. Often it is not. It is just whatever, when taxpayers see others up close, the stories are told, as you know.

Here Senator Brown generalizes that people believe “benefits are much greater” and points to the assumptions held about those receiving SNAP assistance. His statement that “[s]ometimes it is a bit about race. Often it is not” obscures the racialization of poverty and the ways in which federal assistance programs have been racialized as non-white. Sen. Roberts (R-KS), Chairman for the Senate Committee on Agriculture opened that same 2017 hearing with the following comments:

As we conduct this review, it is important to remember the purpose of these critical nutrition programs. They are not about long-term dependency; they are about giving aid in times of trouble. They are about ensuring our nation's security, helping folks become productive members of our economy, and about assisting the vulnerable among us who cannot help themselves. ... Now, much has been made of the, quote, “work requirements,” but it is our job to be deliberative and informed when considering how we truly achieve the goal of enabling those who are receiving public assistance to attain self-sufficiency. Now, the last Farm Bill included a significant investment in work pilots to test effective methods of ensuring the long-term success of folks in need of assistance. We will need to build on that investment and continue to test proven methods of success.

These comments clearly rest upon the rhetoric of dependency and the need to “[help] folks become productive members of our economy.” For Sen. Roberts (R-KS), the mission of SNAP is to enforce self-sufficiency. He omits that up until this point, as they “continue to test proven

methods of success” the USDA or other offices of the federal government have yet to measure the impact of “work requirements.” In fact, despite the fact that PRWORA-driven work requirements for both TANF⁸⁵ and SNAP have been in place for over two decades, and that these reforms reduced the overall number of people receiving assistance, there are limited data to support how well they work to alleviate poverty. The Congressional Research Service (2016) CRS notes that “[d]espite the central role of sanctions in enforcing work requirements, little research focuses on the implications of sanction policy, even in TANF” (23). TANF work requirements overwhelmingly decreased participation in welfare, which was cited as a measure of welfare reform’s success (Schram and Soss 2001; Lindhorst and Mancoske 2003). Yet this “success” has done nothing to impact federal rates of poverty and has even been accompanied by an increase in the number of people falling into the category of “deep poverty” (<50% federal poverty limit) (CBPP, 2018). Conveniently, this lack of research on the implication of work-related sanctions was omitted from all debates regarding SNAP work requirements.

In his pivot from work requirements to “enabling those who are receiving public assistance to attain self-sufficiency,” Sen. Roberts (R-KS) showed the true current mission of the SNAP program. This mission was also evidenced in the current (2021) materials provided by the USDA. The primary federal website explaining SNAP provides links to other information, but includes very little actual information about SNAP, except the following statements in three different places: “Ending Hunger and Moving People Toward Self-Sufficiency”; and “SNAP provides nutrition benefits to supplement the food budget of needy families so they can purchase healthy food and move towards self-sufficiency;” and also “Ensuring access to

⁸⁵ See note 6.

nutritious food while helping to pave a pathway to long-term success.” While the USDA might highlight food access and “ending hunger” in the SNAP program, it has done little to show how enforcing self-sufficiency actually ends hunger.

The legislative discourses were notably coded and disembodied, few legislators or witnesses specifically used gendered or racialized language. However, stepping back to note patterns – legislative discourses of failing urban places and self-sufficiency are directly reminiscent of the “culture of poverty,” and failed Black family structure that has a long history (Taylor 2016; Muhammed 2010) and then solidified in the Moynihan report (Greenbaum 2015; Loyd and Bonds 2018; Hinton 2016; Rainwater and Yancey 1967; Katz 1989). In this way, self-sufficiency is a direct extension of dependency discourses that had been tied to Black motherhood (Quadagno 1994; Monnat 2010; Sparks 2003; Soss et al. 2003; Taylor 2016).

I argue that through these years of study, legislative focus on work requirements have sedimented the idea of work as requirement for food assistance as a central part of the mission of SNAP, justified through discourses of SNAP dependency, self-sufficiency, fraud, and government waste. In fact, the focus on BBCE and the elimination of ABAWD waivers were two of the three SNAP related items the Trump administration attempted to enact through executive orders during his administration. The 2018 Farm Bill was met with even greater levels of animosity (Monke 2018). The proposed House Bill limited state options for the broad-based categorical eligibility, increased work requirements related to the ABAWD time limit, and included considerations about converting SNAP to a block grant.⁸⁶ The final 2018 Farm Bill

⁸⁶ Political rhetoric on SNAP block grants has increased. From 2011 – 2017, the House Republican Budget Resolutions proposed block granting SNAP. This was “accompanied by cuts of at least \$125 billion over ten years,

maintained broad based categorical eligibility (BBCE) but did increase work requirements slightly (Monke 2018).

Conclusion: Creating The ‘Undeserving Hungry’

I have argued that the legislative debates about SNAP between 2000 and 2018 follow a similar trajectory to those leading up to the 1996 passage of PRWORA. Legislators – many of the same individuals responsible for welfare reform – drew from and extended the racialized, classed, and gendered rhetoric about welfare dependency and fraud to weaken support for a program that had long standing bipartisan support (Poppendeick 1998; King 1999). Because of the widespread support of SNAP, the program was protected from being eliminated as an entitlement as welfare was during PRWORA. However, as I have demonstrated in this chapter through analysis of exemplary quotes, the notion that “no one should go hungry in America” no longer holds broad support.

The neoliberal poverty logics of workfare (Peck 2001) have worked to defund and delimit access to government programs, even as expanding funds for discipline and work requirements were established. Neoliberal discourses about work and government excesses merged with the Tea Party’s politics of resentment (Melamed 2011) in the later years of my study (2010-2018) in ways that increased sanctions and surveillance in SNAP. Legislative discourses about SNAP during this period cast it as a ballooning program and omitted the impact of the recession on hunger and poverty. Seemingly race-neutral discourses about integrity, quality control, and cost-effectiveness were promoted by both parties, emphasizing

or about 20 to 30 percent. Speaker Paul Ryan’s 2014 “Opportunity Grant” proposal proposed to consolidate 11 safety-net and related programs, including SNAP, into a single capped funding stream.” (CBPP, 2017)

the goal of protecting “hardworking taxpayers” from the pathologized poor. These discourses built on well-established discourses of racialized, classed, and gendered dependency and welfare abuse but did so with an increasingly nuanced color-blind framing about the need to protect SNAP for “American taxpayers” who really needed it.

Discourses about hunger and poverty must be contextualized through the stark racial and class inequality characterizing urban economic geographies (Crump 2002; Bonds 2013), and with Goode & Maskovsky’s (2001) assertion of “poverty not [being] a static ‘moral’ condition” but rather a “dynamic historically and geographically contingent process” (16). Only rarely were discourses about waste, fraud, and dependency called into question, as encapsulated in the words of Rep. McGovern (D-MA):

The real problem is that those who work earn so little that they still are eligible for the program. I believe that if you work in this country, you ought not to live in poverty. Where is the outrage over lousy wages? ... what about the indignity of low wages, working hard two, three jobs, and still living in poverty?⁸⁷

Rep. McGovern’s inquiry into the “indignity of low wages” was largely ignored by both parties, corroborating Goode and Maskovsky’s (2001) assertion that “left liberal rebuttal to the underclass argument has been largely unsuccessful ...”, rather “[the] assumption that the poor are lacking in mainstream morality continues to undergird popular and political pity and revulsion” (15). Legislative discourses surrounding SNAP mobilized the need for work requirements though the racialized and gendered construction of the unworthy SNAP recipient. As Brantley, Pillai, and Ku (2020)’s analysis illustrates, SNAP work requirements created racially

⁸⁷ See note 69.

unequal impacts, mirroring what Roberts (2012), Fording, Soss, and Schram (2011), and Monnat (2010) had documented in their analysis of welfare work requirements.

Discourses of self-sufficiency, failing urban spaces, waste, fraud, and abuse drew distinct exclusionary boundaries around SNAP, causing further reductions in the number of individuals who could participate. While SNAP remains an entitlement program, there are now increasing qualifiers excluding the ‘undeserving’ (Katz 2015) hungry, namely, work requirements, poor food choices, and illicit drug use equated with criminality. This has amended the early post-welfare embrace of the notion that “no one ought to go hungry in America,”⁸⁸ with the caveat “unless the poor are dependent, obese, or criminal.” With that, I turn to legislative discourses on obesity.

⁸⁸ As quoted above in Rep. Conaway (R-TX)’s 2015 opening of the House Committee on agriculture’s full legislative review of SNAP. See Note 74.

CHAPTER 4: THE COMPLEX DISCOURSE OF HUNGER AND OBESITY

Introduction

“I don't have a formal speech to give, but just to remind everybody that in the most recent farm bill that we worked so hard on, we secured \$30 million for an obesity study to educate our children on how important it is to be lean and think lean. I would remind everybody that, as a physician, environmental pollution begins at the lips. If you don't take it in, it won't get on.” – 2010, Rep. Kagen (D-WI)

In this 2010 House Committee on Agriculture Hearing to Review Access to Healthy Foods for Beneficiaries of Federal Nutrition Programs, physician and congressman Kagen's (D-WI) comments illuminate several discursive themes explored in this chapter. First, he blames weight gain on individual choices and assumes calorie consumption as the cause. Though he mentions “environmental pollution,” the environment he's describing is within a person's body, rather than the institutionally produced environmental toxins that have been linked to obesity (Guthman 2011). And finally, even in purported times of austerity and discussions about reducing SNAP benefits, he touts the funding of a “\$30 million for an obesity study” premised on disciplining unhealthy bodies. Following Chapter 3, which examined how the undeserving hungry were pathologized as dependent, lazy, and unemployed, in this chapter I document how the poor are deemed uneducated or lazy for being obese.⁸⁹ I examine how the resulting policy solutions emphasize disciplining and controlling of the poor for their food choices.

Since 1995, health institutions⁹⁰ have increasingly warned that individuals in poverty are simultaneously at risk for hunger and obesity, a phenomenon described as ‘the hunger obesity paradox’ (Scheier 2005). In this chapter, I draw on the literature and my own background,

⁸⁹ See Note 8.

⁹⁰ I include a range of federal and professional institutions such as Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Medical Association, National Institutes of Health, and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

training, and experience as a dietitian⁹¹ to present a critical, embodied approach to examining the key discourses surrounding the hunger obesity paradox in order to contextualize key threads apparent in the legislative hearings focused on nutrition, health, and poverty. Grounded in critical poverty and race studies, intersectional feminist critiques, and critical health and food studies, I argue that commonsense nutrition discourses – which are not only pervasive in the nutritional and medical sciences but also inform hunger and nutrition policy – tend to emphasize individual behaviors and choices while failing to acknowledge the many dynamics and urban inequalities that shape hunger and obesity in the United States. The consistent belief that the poor require cajoling, coercion, incentives, or even punishment to maintain a healthy diet underlies these discourses. Such notions both maintain and are reinforced by deeply entrenched racialized and gendered anti-poverty logics that have supported the increasing surveillance and criminalization of the poor (Roberts 2014).

My findings reveal that legislative discourses about hunger created a context in which SNAP recipients were perceived as being incapable of making healthy dietary choices and therefore in need of monitoring and assessment, mirroring neoliberal discourses about personal responsibility and poverty (e.g., Bonds 2015; Fraser & Gordon 1994). I show how legislators framed hunger as a problem *because* it is related to obesity. I then document how SNAP policy solutions were related to obesity rather than hunger prevention. Legislators used obesity to moralize SNAP participants' food choices and highlight a need to enforce personal responsibility. In some instances, legislative discourses went so far as to deny that "actual" hunger still existed by citing high rates of obesity.

⁹¹ See Chapter 2 for my reflexive statement for my evolving understanding of obesity, nutrition, and health.

I argue that obesity was utilized as evidence for SNAP exclusion and that obesity is an increasingly important component within the construction of the “undeserving poor” (Katz, 2015). As Katz (2015) argues, paying attention to how “legislation, administrative regulations, and on-the-ground practices” treat individuals or groups differently serves to identify the undeserving poor (p. 45). Legislators used discourses about hunger and obesity to create SNAP legislation and implement practices conveying the message that deserving SNAP participants made healthy choices and undeserving SNAP participants did not. Enabled through the intensification of surveillance and monitoring of SNAP participants, these ostensibly anti-hunger policies emphasized addressing obesity to reduce hunger, rather than examining the common root causes of hunger and obesity.

Situating the Hunger Obesity Paradox

The concept of the ‘hunger obesity paradox’ first emerged in the mid-1990s (Dietz 1995) as health and nutrition discourses in the United States increasingly emphasized concern about the “obesity epidemic” (Strings 2019; Guthman 2011; A. Gordon 2020). This shift was influenced by ubiquitous health discourses, which held that obesity was caused by poor diet or limited physical activity (Gard and Wright 2005; Campos 2004) and presented dietary reform as a solution. The dynamics of hunger and obesity merged in pediatrician and obesity researcher William Dietz’s case study, which he then theorized that hunger caused obesity (Dietz 1995). While serving in his role at the Nutrition and Obesity Center at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dietz testified at a number of congressional hearings – including this 2009 Hearing to Review the State of Obesity in the United States, in which he described when he became interested in hunger:

When I was in Boston, I had a patient, a 13-year-old girl, who lived with a single mother who was on welfare. Their first check of the month went for housing. By mid-month, they were hungry, and this mother was so concerned that her daughter not go to bed hungry that she was feeding her pasta with added oil or butter. That was instrumental in causing that girl's obesity. When we restructured that family's diet and gave them some additional options, that problem began to resolve. So in that case, it wasn't a question of education, it was a question of food availability, and a uniform distribution of that food availability throughout the month.

Dietz's observation here reiterates the subject of his 1995 case study that health scholars cite as the start of the hunger obesity paradox research (Scheier 2005). In this testimony and in subsequent research, Dietz further defines the dominant understanding of the hunger obesity paradox: namely, that excess caloric intake over expenditure is the predominant cause of obesity. There was an acknowledgement of precarity as related to when food is available, but the solution was still to adjust dietary patterns. Dietz noted his assumption that excess calories from the consumption of pasta, butter and oils was the issue, not environmental stressors related to food precarity or poverty. Furthermore, because dietary change worked for this family, it could be used to justify discipline when it did not work. Later in the same 2009 congressional hearing, Dietz justified situations in which he "had to" file abuse cases with social services against parents for causing their children's weight gain because the parents "were giving too much," a category distinct from other forms of child neglect, but still cause for state interference (ibid). This emphasis on punishment and moralization, which assumes that obesity is caused by poor food choices or a lack of exercise, is an overt extension of the persistent and common shaming of food choices and fatphobia.⁹²

⁹² This justification completely ignores the compounded trauma on the child because of social service interference which can also trigger many health complications, the least of which is weight gain, as well as the documented racist and gendered distribution of sanctioning against Black mothers through social services (Roberts 1991).

The discourse-dependent assumptions that undergirded Dietz's understanding of obesity also encompassed the belief that caloric excess – not poverty – is at the root of the hunger obesity paradox. As blaming caloric excess was, and continues to be, the dominant way of knowing obesity, the growing body of health research on the hunger obesity paradox predominantly focused on inconsistent access to or unhealthy food consumption (Scheier 2005), the role of food stamps (Dinour, Bergen, and Yeh 2007), and a lack of physical activity resulting from unsafe neighborhood environments (Crawford and Webb 2011) without questioning broader causes related to weight gain and hunger. The solutions presented from such research return to a focus on what an individual was consuming or doing to be physically active, even if constrained by their environment.⁹³ Thus, the connections between poverty and obesity resulted in legislators and experts vacillating between performative concern for health to downright derision for obesity. In the following section, I draw from a food justice, health equity, and critical poverty studies lens to challenge the hunger obesity paradox.

A critical examination of the hunger obesity paradox requires focus on the social, cultural, and historical contexts surrounding discourses of poverty, health, food studies, and nutrition, and also the impact of structural racism on both hunger and obesity (Alkon and Norgard 2009; Bradley and Herrera 2016; Carney 2015; Holt-Giménez 2017; Patel 2012). Cadieux and Slocum (2015) have argued that dominant nutrition and health discourses problematize hunger because of its association with obesity and other nutrition-related diseases, and my analysis shows that legislators similarly framed the problem. I align with

⁹³ Discussed in detail under legislative discourses on barriers to healthy choices below.

researchers focusing on structural causes of hunger, noting that hunger itself is the problem – it is not problematic simply because it is correlated with obesity.

Critical poverty studies (Bonds 2015; Goode and Maskovsky 2001; Katz 2015; Lawson and Elwood 2014; Roy and Shaw, 2015) provides an additional framework for assessing the discipline of unhealthy and impoverished bodies through dietary reform. As detailed in Chapter 1 and 3, dominant poverty logics (e.g. the underclass, or culture of poverty) collectively pathologize poverty and hunger as moral failings in ways that are racially coded and that do not account for patterns of discrimination and oppression and structural dynamics like recession and unemployment (Glenn 2002; Katz 2015; Bonds 2015). With this in mind, in what follows, I start with structural causes of hunger and poor health in order to detangle subsequent legislative narratives about health and poverty that blame individual failings and excess consumption.

Using Food Justice To Contextualize Structural Causes Of Hunger

To frame structural causes of hunger, I start with one of the few testimonies utilizing tenets of food justice.⁹⁴ This testimony was starkly different from the dominant ways of knowing and understanding why SNAP participants might have constrained access to healthy choices. In the 2010 *Hearing to Review Federal Nutrition Programs*, Ms. Jessup from the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program and Roots of Change states:

Ms. Jessup: I see the Federal nutrition programs as health programs, as violence prevention programs, and I see food as a human right. There is no scarcity of food. However, there is a political decision not to feed people in the United States. I am witnessing the great unraveling in my fragile community. The nation expects affordable

⁹⁴ As a reminder, food justice “places access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food in the contexts of institutional racism, racial formation, and racialized geographies” (Alkon and Norgaard 2009).

fruits and vegetables from the Valley where people are hungry and food giveaways run out of food. In any other day or time these people in line would be considered good hardworking people. The number one agriculture producing county in the United States, Fresno, is also the Congressional district with the highest poverty in the United States. Full Food Stamp enrollments by eligible families linked to other U.S. nutrition programs is the quickest program and economic stimulus for my community. Food stamp enrollment would solve institutionalized poor diet for poor people that has created racist outcomes in poor health by diet. ... The USDA needs to subsidize food and farming that is healthy for all people. You must lead states and local governments, from the health and environmental perspective, in making healthy food access a high priority through integrated and linked Federal programs. ... on the issue of immigration and fair public charge: I call on you to request ICE and USDA to jointly sign a clarifying directive ... that immigrant families will not be denied a change in their legal status because of accessing food programs for which they are eligible ... People are treated poorly and do not feel welcome at Food Stamp offices. People I have surveyed feel their treatment is racially and class motivated. ...

[--- after other testimonies, the panel opened to the question and answer section and one question related to obesity prevention.]

Ms. Jessup. Okay. I would particularly like to address the obesity prevention issue. Nutrition education, there is plenty of it and it is out there, and it isn't the issue. ... The program I work with works in about 12 different sectors to create environmental change so that when the physician says, "You have to do better with your diet and physical activity," they go back into a community where the zoning is such that there is food access for them that is healthy. That the parks are open and available and have safe places for people to be.

Mr. Fortenberry (R-NE). This is a very interesting point that we have unpacked in previous hearings. The actual access to healthy foods is another issue, not just retraining of habits.

Ms. Jessup. Yes. And so you can say that---

Mr. Fortenberry. Particularly in dense urban communities. It may be a little different where you are.

Ms. Jessup. Well, no. In dense urban communities and in the rural areas where there may only be a liquor store and that is where people get their food. Until we make those changes and create incentives for the business community to really--you spoke before about having to go back. Our distribution systems, the place in between the food and the person are broken, and we really do need to go back to that. Those are big environmental and policy issues around that.

Ms. Jessup points out several key details in her testimony: she underscores that food is a human right; she emphasizes the racialized geography of "The Valley," farm laborer

marginalization, and structural racism in producing racialized health and hunger inequities; and she calls for federal policies across multiple sectors. Ms. Jessup powerfully captures a true paradox of health and hunger in the U.S. when she states that “[t]he nation expects affordable fruits and vegetables from the Valley where people are hungry and food giveaways run out of food.” In describing the “number one agriculture producing county ... [and] the highest poverty,” Ms. Jessup highlights a contradiction that many scholars have noted, which is that those working on the front lines of food production, including farm laborers, who are often highly vulnerable due to citizenship status, have some of the highest rates of hunger in the U.S. (Carney 2015; Holt-Giménez 2017). Mirroring racial and ethnic demographic patterns of farming communities that rely on hand-picked crops, the 2010 Census indicates that Fresno was 53.8% Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau n.d.). In verbal testimony, Ms. Jessup directly placed the blame of low SNAP participation⁹⁵ on the “political decision not to feed people in the United States” causing the “institutionalized poor diet for poor people that has created racist outcomes in poor health by diet.” In this case, Ms. Jessup was talking about “immigration and fair public charge” concerns that signing up for SNAP could be used to deny citizenship status.⁹⁶ Guthman (2011) stresses that health and obesity narratives too often focus on the *quality* of the food produced instead of interrogating the exploitative nature of the food system *labor* that enables the production of cheap, unhealthy food. Structural racism, poverty, economic precarity, lack of autonomy or outright exploitation in employment, are all part of the

⁹⁵ In written testimony, Ms. Jessup indicated that only 50% of eligible families in the Valley are signed up for SNAP.

⁹⁶ As noted in the Chapter 1 under, a comprehensive assessment appropriately contextualizing the scale of immigration rhetoric and policy on SNAP is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Related to public charge, See Congressional Research Service (2020) *DHS Final Rule on Public Charge: Overview and Considerations for Congress* how current Department of Homeland Security final rule on public charge will make it more difficult for non-citizen immigrants “to become lawful permanent residents due to their potential future use of public benefits” (1).

industrialized food system that justifies poor wages to make food affordable and convenient (Patel 2012; Holt-Giménez 2017; Guthman 2011).

When Jessup mentioned “12 different sectors to create environmental change” and produce a “zoning [for] food access” and “parks are open and ... safe” she contextualized this with coalition work involving over 25 different community partners. She noted that most people want to live in healthy, thriving communities, but often this “environmental” discourse can be turned around to locate the blame on an individual for failing in their environment rather than the institutions producing failure (Reese 2019; Biltekoff 2013; Shannon 2014). Discourses of healthy environments and healthy food access are produced through multiple perspectives and ways of knowing about access to healthy foods. In fact, Rep. Fortenberry’s (R-NE) interjection underscored the fact that his perspective locates the problem of “actual access to healthy foods” in “dense urban communities.” Ms. Jessup’s complex interweaving of structural problems in the food system was noticeably absent in the dominant legislative discourse.

Legislative Discourses on Hunger and Obesity -- The Novel Hunger Obesity Paradox

As noted in Chapter 2, there is a clear pattern of dominant discourses that emphasized the problem of obesity much more frequently than malnutrition or hunger. SNAP policies increasingly reflected the idea that those in poverty must be incentivized, taught, or forced to eat a healthy diet despite the lack of evidence impoverished individuals make worse food choices than the rich. At times, legislators even reiterated the USDA’s own research (Garasky et al. 2016) that SNAP participants do **not** make vastly different food purchases than shoppers who are not purchasing food with SNAP. Given this, I argue that the increasing focus on dietary education, incentives, or restrictions stems from the logics of discipline and control rather than

an actual concern for health. Reflecting themes in Chapter 3, legislators more willingly adopted funding for legislative solutions emphasizing disciplinarity and surveillance in lieu of policies that could directly reduce hunger, such as increased benefits.

In the 2001 hearing on the *Nutrition Title of the next Farm Bill* for the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, held at a time when focus on the national “obesity epidemic” had reached a nadir (Guthman 2011; Campos 2004), the connections between hunger and obesity were novel to legislators. Witnesses at the hearing included Ms. Celine Dieppa, a SNAP recipient, Dr. Deborah Frank, director of the Boston Growth and Development Clinic, Dr. Cuberto Garza a professor in the Division of Nutritional Sciences at Cornell University, among others. Each witness had already testified, and this exchange begins during the Q&A section, led by Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), the Chairman of the Committee. Senator Harkin quotes Dr. Garza’s testimony in order to clarify the testimony.

The Chairman. Oh, yes--here it is. “Although incompletely understood, food insecurity--that is, the lack of confidence that food will be accessible consistently--appears to increase the risk of overweight and obesity.” I do not understand that sentence.

Dr. Garza. ... it is becoming increasingly clear that food insecurity, paradoxically, predisposes individuals to obesity in ways that we do not completely understand. We are not certain if the link is with the quality of the diet being incompatible with maintaining a healthy weight, or whether the link is due to overeating when food is available because of the concern that food will not be available in the following weeks. It may be a combination of these and other issues that we do not understand. Additionally, it may have to do with a very serious problem faced by many individuals who are food-insecure: many live in neighborhoods that are unsafe, and thus physical activity is often curtailed. Thus, there is a need for us to look comprehensively at what the causes of what is rightly being called an epidemic and a very alarming one. The solution probably lies not only in improved nutrition but in linking what food policy to physical activity, to how we plan our neighborhoods, how we adjust---

The Chairman. How about nutrition education as a bigger part of our nutrition programs?

Dr. Garza. Exactly. Education will be important. The environment in which individuals will function will be equally important. Paying attention to both should be of extreme concern to the committee.

The Chairman. Let me ask you this. What do you think about the prospect of broadening the Food Stamp Program so that food stamp recipients could purchase with their food stamps vitamin and mineral supplements?

Dr. Garza. I am not confident about that option. I do think that however, implementing the Food Stamp and other nutrition related programs that are sponsored by the Federal Government in ways that would promote of the U.S. dietary guidelines, may be a much more efficacious approach to dealing with the problem of obesity. ...

The Chairman. It has always seemed incongruous to me that you can use food stamps to buy twinkies, but you cannot use them to buy vitamins. A lot of low-income people may not have a good vitamin and mineral intake, which they might be able to get if they could do this. Do you have an observation on that, Dr. Garza?

Dr. Garza. Yes, but the cost of a twinkie per calorie is much less than the cost of any fruit or vegetable that I am aware of. If you are trying to stretch your food dollar, and you are interested in having enough food, the calorie cost of a twinkie is much, much less than the cost of a more highly nutritious food. That is the strategy people are using. If you have to make ends meet, your first goal is to meet your calories.

The Chairman. If people are obese, they do not need more calorie needs.

Dr. Garza. No, but remember that I also said that in fact-- --

The Chairman. They need protein and some other things maybe. Dr. Frank, did you have an observation?

Dr. Frank. Yes. Where I live, one bottle of baby vitamins costs \$8. People get 80 cents per meal per person maximum on food stamp benefits nationally. If the food stamp benefits did not change, and they bought that one bottle of vitamins, that would mean that child would not get 10 meals. I agree with Dr. Garza--and I know this is probably politically not doable--but it seems to me that if food stamps cannot now be spent on dog food, if they could also not be spent on soda and a few other things of low nutrient density and high obesity promotion, that would be helpful. ...

Dr. Garza. I would agree with Dr. Frank.

The Chairman. Ms. Dieppa, tell me about your situation. You use food stamps, and you are working, and I congratulate you for that. Do you take vitamin and mineral supplements or anything like that?

Ms. Dieppa. Yes, I do.

The Chairman. You do. You cannot get them with food stamps, can you?

Ms. Dieppa. No.

The Chairman. How about your daughter?

Ms. Dieppa. She takes children's Centrum vitamins once a day, and I take the same for adults.

The Chairman. I see. This is an interesting question, and we are going to pursue it even more.

This exchange emblemizes how legislators and witnesses conceptualized the problem of and solutions to the hunger obesity paradox. Sen. Harkin's befuddlement - "I do not understand that sentence"- and Dr. Garza's comment that "food insecurity, paradoxically, predisposes individuals to obesity in ways that we do not completely understand" illustrates just how incongruous an idea it was for some to consider that hunger and obesity might appear together. Dr. Garza, Dr. Frank, and Sen. Harkin all built arguments using paradigmatic ways of knowing obesity, namely that obesity is an "alarming" epidemic caused by excess calories.

Within these debates, legislators further solidified commonsense notions about the moral failings of impoverished individuals, especially those considered obese. I consider three legislative solutions crafted in response to the paradox during the two decades of hearings. I categorized these themes as (1) diet education, (2) enforcing personal responsibility (e.g., restricting spending "on soda"), and (3) barriers to healthy choices (e.g., "unsafe" neighborhoods). I included this lengthy exchange in its entirety to show that the three key policy discourses analyzed in this chapter emerged when the paradox was still fairly unknown. Sen. Harkin quickly shifted from "I do not understand" to a focus on multivitamins and diet education, directly silencing Dr. Garza's comments and reiterating his emphasis on poor personal choices and caloric excess as causing obesity, stating "[i]f people are obese, they do not need more calorie needs [sic]," dismissing points about access and steering the conversation back to a focus on behaviors and choices.

Dr. Garza and Frank raised concerns of urban environments and the cost of food, yet, as Sen. Harkin's interruptions make clear, arguments in this vein could be, and often were, summarily dismissed by legislators who focused on policies to correct individual behaviors. The dominance of the 'obesity epidemic' narrative was – and is – so entrenched that legislators do not question the logic that obesity causes poor health and is due to excess calorie intake.

"If Only They Knew, ..." Drawing from Dominant Nutrition Education Discourses

My analysis of SNAP legislative discourses on diet education follows Guthman's (2008) interrogation of alternative food spaces, as she showed white normative food discourses that operated in a color-blind way that "work[ed] to separate and scold others" (p. 395). Like alternative food proselytizers (Guthman 2008), hearing testimonies preached diet education to near saturation point as a multitude of legislators, USDA bureaucrats, food bank directors, academics, nutritionists and dietitians, and doctors provided mutually reinforcing policy rhetoric that diet education is a solution to the hunger obesity paradox. This solution joined previous SNAP programming that had already focused on teaching those in poverty how to eat, now with additional urgency given the 'obesity epidemic.'

Crucial to these discourses is that the assumption about lack of knowledge is unsubstantiated. In the 2007 Hearing before the House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry, Committee Ms. Kim McCoy Wade, Executive Director of the California Association of Food Banks opens with a story:

Forty years ago my mom ... went out to become a VISTA volunteer ... to help other moms learn how to stretch their food stamps. She soon found that living on food stamps, as a VISTA volunteer, it was the moms who taught her how to take that peanut butter and stretch it all month long for soup for your kids.

Ms. Wade's story captures the reality of what research suggests on the vast knowledge of low-income shoppers (Kaufman et al. 1997; Morgan et al. 2009) as "it was the moms who taught her," the VISTA educator, how to stretch her dollar. However, a few sentences later, Ms. Wade pivots and insists on the importance of nutrition education messaging that food banks provided regarding SNAP: "Here are benefits to help you buy food. *Here is how to buy and prepare and consume healthy food*" (emphasis added). This quick turn positions SNAP recipients not as teachers, but as in need of education themselves, in direct contrast to the story she shared about her mom's experience 40 years ago. Ms. Wade additionally shows that the unfounded promotion of education for SNAP recipients has a long history.

These are baseless assumptions that SNAP participants need to learn how to choose, shop for, or prepare healthy food. In fact, USDA research documents that low-income shoppers are economically savvy (Kaufman et al. 1997) and SNAP participants choose similar foods families not participating in SNAP (Garasky 2016). Moreover, despite intensified scrutiny about the food choices made by the poor, all Americans have cooked less and relied on prepared food more for a few generations (Pollan 2013). Both Pollan (2013) and Levenstein (2003) argued that industrialized food practices have systematized food preparation, production, and planning in ways that make preparing your own food economically illogical. Food preparation needs to factor in the cost of one's personal labor and other time constraints (in both cooking food as well as transportation to procure groceries, and other transportation needs for work, meetings, family outings), plus the cost of in-home cooking infrastructure (safe and stable housing with a working stove, sink, and refrigerator plus tools needed to cook). Legislative discourses positioned the SNAP participant in need of diet education as someone not constrained by

precarity in employment, childcare transportation, and housing. In this way, SNAP participants are doubly bound: as detailed in Chapter 3 they are stigmatized as dependent, and relegated to low wage jobs in order to qualify for SNAP. At the same time, the hunger obesity paradox discourses disparage SNAP participants for not preparing healthy foods, fully ignoring the time of labor and other constraints that have decreased food preparation across all American households.

Nonetheless – diet education ruled the conversations I provide several testimonies between 2003 and 2017 to show the consistency and ubiquity of the “if only they knew” (Guthman 2008) rhetoric that presumed the need for dietary education in SNAP. In 2003, the President of the National Association of Farmers Market Nutrition Programs⁹⁷ said of the SNAP Farmer’s Market initiative “We ... assist them [SNAP shoppers] in learning how to shop, what products to buy and teach them how to prepare that product once they get home.” Fourteen years later⁹⁸ the president of a small independent grocery chain described the store’s “6-week cooking program [on] ... how to shop, how to stretch your dollars, how to make your budget work for you, and what you are putting in your basket and how to prepare that and prepare that in a healthy way.” In 2008,⁹⁹ Senator Klobuchar similarly postulated that SNAP participants simply do not understand how to prepare inexpensive healthy food: “It is cheaper to make a peanut butter sandwich ... and throw an apple in sometimes than the prepackaged things that

⁹⁷ Senate, *Hearing to Review the Federal Government's Initiatives Regarding Child Nutrition Programs*. Mr. Wambles - President of the National Association of Farmers Market Nutrition Programs

⁹⁸ Senate, hearing entitled *Nutrition Programs: Perspectives for the 2018 Farm Bill*, Mr. Wright, President of Wright’s Market Inc. remarks

⁹⁹ Senate, hearing entitled *Promoting Health, Preventing Chronic Disease, and Fighting Hunger: Assessment of USDA Food Assistance and Child Nutrition Programs in the Economic Downturn*

you can buy.” Dr. Kennedy, Dean of a leading nutrition school,¹⁰⁰ later corroborated Senator Klobuchar’s statement, indicating that “[n]utrient-dense foods need not be more expensive, but it takes a lot more planning and thinking about how you get not only calories, but nutrients out of the dollar, which gets back to my earlier comment about information given to parents.” In each of these, the diet education particularly emphasized instructions about buying and preparing healthy foods on a budget.

This rhetoric also translated into SNAP programming and funding for diet education. The USDA created a website for inexpensive healthy recipes to, in the words of USDA Secretary Vilsack,¹⁰¹ “allow the SNAP recipients, for example, to be able to figure out how to stretch their resources.” The USDA also distributed funding and promotional materials to local organizations for that “website, Eat Right When Money's Tight” as a critical tool of the USDA by providing, as USDA Food and Nutrition Service administrator, Ms. Paradis¹⁰² argued, a “powerful way to make sure that SNAP recipients are indeed making the most nutritious purchases possible.” The website and promotion were funded in 2009 and 2010, during an ostensible budget crisis. Yet, there was funding available for instruction.

Each of the above excerpts were typical in not naming who, exactly, was expected to be cooking and shopping. Feminist have long argued that family feeding practices and expectations are heavily gendered (DeVault 1991; Koch 2019). Critical food studies research illustrates that the dietary expectations for food preparation hold commonsense assumptions that prioritize

¹⁰⁰ She is the Dean of the Friedman School of Nutrition Policy and Science at Tufts University, responding to Senator Klobuchar in the Senate Hearing from Note 91.

¹⁰¹ Senate, *Reauthorization of U.S. Child Nutrition Programs: Opportunities to Fight Hunger and Improve Child Health*

¹⁰² House, *Hearing to Review Quality Control Systems in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*

norms of the white suburban, typically heteronormative, two-parent household (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008; 2013; Broad and Hite 2014). Normative concepts of “healthy” food practices paired to white higher income women’s food practices (Pirani and Fegitz 2019). Contrastingly, constructions of unhealthy, fatty food consumption has been linked to Black femininity and cooking practices (Williams-Forsen 2006). Nutritional discourses are rife with meanings that associated with the consumption of an “ideal” Western diet and good citizenship (Levenstein 1988; Biltekoff 2013; 2012) and a much longer history of white puritanism, sexism, and the slave trade (Strings 2019). Ristovski-Slijepcevic (2011) and Biltekoff (2013) have demonstrated how healthy eating discourses target non-white women and mothers, particularly in the context of concerns for the obesity epidemic.

Responsibilizing the Hungry

I categorized discourses on the high cost of healthy food, lack of grocery stores, or lack of spaces to play or exercise with the theme of barriers to healthy choices. I argue that such discourses resonated as a more charitable flip side to discourses of enforcing personal responsibility, ones that assumed individuals in poverty must be forced to make healthy choices, since they will not do so on their own. Discourses about enforcing personal responsibility typically promoted various diet restrictions (e.g., soda) in order to discipline poor food choices, while many discourses about barriers to healthy choices focused on incentivizing or promoting healthy choices. Neoliberal poverty logics have significantly featured enforcing or incentivizing responsibility for decades, often situated within a color-blind language that invokes racial thinking without using explicitly racial terms, blames individuals for their own

poverty, and obfuscates the structural relations giving rise to the need for social supports such as welfare (Fording, Soss, and Schram 2011).

Interestingly, many of the very same public health officials and anti-hunger advocates who strongly critiqued workfare and employment-based SNAP restrictions detailed in Chapter 3, were happy to embrace the implementations SNAP undertook to encourage healthy choices (Nestle 2019; Fisher 2017; Imhoff 2019). For example, Marion Nestle, a renowned public health expert on food politics and strong critic of food companies and their lobbyists makes this claim in a review of SNAP: “Antihunger and public health supporters of SNAP want the program to do more and better: to increase enrollments and benefits and *improve diet quality*” (1631, my emphasis added). Even as she makes this assertion, she also critiques “efforts to ‘reform’ SNAP” which she identifies as “a euphemism for budget cuts, enrollment reductions, work requirements, and these days, keeping even legal immigrants off the rolls” (ibid, 1631). Yet, I argue that even the claim of “improving diet quality” is based on the misdirected focus that excess calories cause obesity (Strings 2019; Campos 2004; Gordon 2020) and calories and obesity are the reason for worse health outcomes. Even as Nestle presented a more nuanced critique, she also embraced a discourse emphasizing the unsubstantiated claim (Guthman 2011; Broad and Hite 2014) that SNAP participants make poor diet choices. These claims transitioned seamlessly to policy debates on SNAP diet restrictions.

Policy conflicts over food restrictions have a history nearly as old as U.S. federal anti-hunger relief. For example, the earliest iteration of food stamps temporarily removed soda from the foods that could be purchased with food stamps (Fisher 2017). In my analysis, grocery lobbyists argued against the implementation of SNAP food restrictions indicating that it “would

dramatically increase program cost and complexity.”¹⁰³ They further argued that it “would be completely unworkable for the independent supermarket community” because “[t]he added regulatory burden and costs coupled with an inevitable stigma that our SNAP customers would face may put some grocers out of business and, therefore, make food insecurity worse.”¹⁰⁴

Despite the potential costs, states efforts to restrict SNAP purchases continues to grow. Fischer (2017) documented at least 26 different bipartisan efforts related to food restrictions across 19 states between 2011 and 2015 (118-120).¹⁰⁵ Because these would be considered state options modifying typical SNAP guidelines, the implementation requires approval from the USDA. To this day, state or municipal efforts to implement restrictions have been denied by the USDA and most foods remain available for SNAP purchases.¹⁰⁶

The combined narrative of poor food choices with soda and other food industry influence is a common reason provided for diet restrictions. Proponents argue that restrictions are sound economic principles and when they are not imposed, it is proof of corruption in the Farm Bill. Dr. Paarlberg, a professor of political science and policy, extended this argument in

¹⁰³ At a 2010 *Hearing to Review Quality Control Systems in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*, Mr. Faber, Vice President for Federal Affairs of Grocery Manufacturers Association

¹⁰⁴ At a 2017 hearing entitled *Nutrition Programs: Perspectives for the 2018 Farm Bill*, Mr. Wright, President of Wright’s Market Inc. remarks

¹⁰⁵ In Fisher (2017), see Table 4.2 p. 118-120 “States That Have Introduced Legislation to Restrict Foods from SNAP.” Fisher notes media references to policy proposals in three additional states but could not find documentation. Two were passed by the following states: in 2011, Michigan passed legislation that “urges congress to improve food options in SNAP,” the USDA denied Maine’s 2015 “requested waiver of USDA to limit Soda in SNAP,” and the remaining 24 proposals were not passed (ibid). Smaller municipalities, most prominently Mayor Bloomberg of New York City, have made similar attempts.

¹⁰⁶ The Food and Nutrition Service of the USDA lists what “households CANNOT use SNAP benefits to buy: beer, wine, liquor, cigarettes, or tobacco, Vitamins, medicines, and supplements ... live animals ... prepared foods fit for immediate consumption, hot foods, [and] any nonfood items such as: pet foods, cleaning supplies, paper products, and other household supplies, hygiene items, and cosmetics” (FNS, 2021). Cigarettes and tobacco are notably not food. Yet, it is called out at the top of this list, separate from other non-food items because discourses of fraud and poor choices are deeply entrenched in poverty logics.

his opening testimony for the 2010 *Hearing of the Committee on Agriculture to Review U.S.*

Agriculture Policy in Advance of the 2012 Farm Bill:

My focus as an independent academic is on the politics of food and agriculture. ... Our nation's worsening obesity crisis is going to make passage of a business as usual farm bill more difficult in 2012 because a growing number of critics have become persuaded that Federal policy is one important cause of the crisis. ... Our Federal programs do plenty of things that could be criticized, and I am a critic of many of them, but the one thing you can't say they do is make sweetened foods artificially cheap or make corn or corn-based foods artificially cheap. ... It may be time for these nutrition programs, particularly the SNAP program to stop subsidizing the consumption of caloric sodas. ... These benefits would simply be deployed away from an obesity-inducing product, which isn't even a food product after all. And of course, there is going to be resistance to this from those in the beverage industry that sell caloric sodas, but saying no to this segment of the beverage industry would be a good way to show the critics that the next farm bill is being drafted with the obesity crisis in mind.

Here Dr. Paarlberg combines “obesity crisis” and “obesity-inducing product” with soda lobbyist resistance as a leverage point for the institution of diet restrictions in SNAP. He frames this discourse as protection against critics that the Farm Bill is a cause of the obesity crisis all the while. The discourses interrogating the influence of food corporations on the Farm Bill is warranted, but here Dr. Paarlberg was advocating to use SNAP as a bargaining tool. I am not arguing for unchecked food industry control, but Dr. Paarlberg builds an argument off the subjugated position of the SNAP beneficiary. The use of ‘subsidies’ to create a “farm bill ... with the obesity crisis in mind” draws from long-standing poverty discourses discussed in Chapter 3 that argue what the federal government should and should not fund.

Couched in the paternalist reasoning that these efforts “encourage Americans to eat healthier,” Congress has taken interest in dietary restrictions and in 2017, the House Committee on Agriculture dedicated an entire hearing to the topic. In the hearing, which was

entitled *Pros and Cons of Restricting SNAP Purchases*, Rep. Conaway (R-TX) provided this opening statement as Chair of the Committee:

USDA released a report entitled, *Foods Typically Purchased by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households ...* to assess differences in the purchasing patterns of SNAP and non-SNAP households. ... ***To be clear, when comparing spending on broad food categories, the data show that both SNAP and non-SNAP households make similar food choices.*** However, the report also confirms that there are differences in spending in individual food categories. One can also reasonably infer from the report that billions in taxpayer dollars are being spent on items like sweetened beverages and prepared desserts. ... we can all agree that no one in America ought to go hungry, and SNAP is essential to providing nutrition to the most vulnerable citizens during tough times. Our goal is to provide much-needed nutrition and to encourage Americans to eat healthier. To that end, this Committee has historically advocated for nutrition education and healthy eating incentive programs. Today, we will consider whether additional restrictions should be added to that mix. (*Emphasis added*)

In fact, USDA's research¹⁰⁷ contextualizes Rep. Conaway's statement about "differences in spending in individual food categories." Within the entire group of foods that are categorized as solid fats and added sugars – which includes soda and items like butter, desserts, trans-fat margarines, and candy – SNAP and non-SNAP household purchases were different by 3 cents out of a dollar. In other words, the influence of Conaway's "differences in spending" on calorie consumption from sugar and other added fats was small. Conaway justified the focus on food restrictions by reminding that SNAP participants are using "billions in taxpayer dollars" rather than as a concern for health. The discourses that Conaway deployed in this hearing are typical of legislators, the media, and the public that often construct social welfare programs as a 'drain' on taxpayers and the broader economy. Rep. Conaway's comments also highlight that even though SNAP participants purchasing patterns mirror the broader American public, legislators

¹⁰⁷ From the report: "Expenditure shares for each of the USDA Food Pattern categories (dairy, fruits, grains, oils, protein foods, solid fats and added sugars (SoFAS), and vegetables) varied by no more than 3 cents per dollar when comparing SNAP and non-SNAP households." (Garasky et al. 2016, 4)

still can debate whether or not to restrict their food choices given the ongoing focus on disciplining both the poor and the overweight.

Similar to discourses about diet education, legislators and witnesses make very opaque references to who, exactly, is making poor choices, even as some did couple the discussion with references to higher rates of obesity, and presumed subsequent disease, in Black and Latino households. However, these discourses must be also contextualized through classed, racialized, and gendered nutrition discourses on healthy consumption, choices, purchasing and preparation as described above. (e.g. Koch, Devault, Hayes-Conroy, Strings,) Ristovski-Slijepcevic (2011)) This context undergirds the color-blind and gender-neutral SNAP legislative discourses on food incentives and restrictions.

Many witnesses stressed the cost of healthy food and insufficient benefit allotments running out before the end of the month. This argument for increased benefits was often supported with evidence of the benefits of SNAP to the overall economy. Yet, permanent policy increasing SNAP benefit amounts has only kept up with inflation. Instead, the high cost of food produced policy solutions to incentivize healthy food. These policies came at the cost of disciplining and surveilling SNAP participant behaviors and choices, even as the behaviors were positioned as a natural extension of limited food affordability. In 2010, Rep. Schmidt (R-OH) favored incentives and described a dominant reasoning for incentives in the opening statement of the *Hearing to Review Access to Healthy Foods for Beneficiaries of Federal Nutrition Programs*: “some of our folks that have modest incomes, go to the grocery store, and have to make choices based on dollars, not necessarily on nutrition and healthy lifestyles.” Similar to discourses on diet education and diet restriction, incentives rely on untrue claims that SNAP

participants make vastly different food choices, drawing from poverty and health logics on discipline and control.

Rep. Fortenberry (R-NE), a strong supporter of incentives, opened with this statement in the 2010 *Hearing to Review Federal Nutrition Program*:

We must all foster a culture of wellness and reward behaviors that reduce ... diseases. ... As responsible individuals and citizens I hope that we will personally implement wellness and preventative measures ... The SNAP Program... enables persons in vulnerable circumstances to have access to a wide variety of nutrition selections. As we carefully allocate these resources an important topic of consideration should be the quality and health-promoting choices at the dinner table for families. This principle of healthy food combined with wide stewardship and personal responsibility should guide the goals of this program.

Here Rep. Fortenberry interweaves austerity discourses with discourses about the hunger obesity paradox in his consideration of the allocation of resources for “health-promoting choices.” The wedding of “healthy food combined with wide stewardship and personal responsibility” to guide the SNAP program is an overt crystallization of these two discourses. Additionally, Rep. Fortenberry (re)produces the broad moralization of food and other healthy choices in disease prevention discourses (Campos 2004; Boero 2012) in calling on his colleagues to be “responsible individuals and citizens.” Given the inadequacy of SNAP benefits, incentives policies would be beneficial for much needed increased funds; however, the reinforced discourses of poor choices continued to blame the individual.

Locating Unhealthy Access: Constructing Racialized Urban Space

Discourses focusing on barriers to healthy choices, such as those highlighting the high cost of food or inadequate access to grocery stores, represent efforts to not blame SNAP recipients. Nonetheless, these discourses of reinforced narratives about failing, unhealthy

urban spaces. The logics of choice reinforce individualized solutions and elide the many political and structural causes producing poor wages, precarity in health, cheap convenient food, inequitable access to housing, and highly policed neighborhoods. These discourses reduce complex dynamics to the notion that people who are poor are stuck with cheap, unhealthy food in a poor, unhealthy neighborhood. Not surprisingly, these narratives informed policies incentivizing healthy food or excluding convenience stores.

In his testimony to congress in 2009, Dr. Paige (Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and the Bloomberg School of Public Health) reiterated several dominant health discourses in describing ways of understanding the hunger obesity paradox:

We need to think of obesity as poverty induced, resulting in food insecurity and obesity as part of this continuing spectrum of issues that we are dealing with in populations in poverty. Of course, obesity is not limited to only the population in poverty. Nevertheless, this is a very important population group that is suffering from the epidemic of obesity as a result of the inadequate food purchasing, calorie-dense foods that are available, inadequate numbers of supermarkets and other choices that exist in many of our poor communities, both urban as well as rural throughout our country.

Despite the mention that obesity and hunger are both “poverty induced,” when he cited “inadequate food purchasing” and grocers along with availability of “calorie-dense foods,” Paige reiterated a dominant health discourse on ‘food deserts’¹⁰⁸ detached from examinations of policies that produce urban and rural environments. When inadequate food and grocery access is provided without the historical context of racial segregation in housing (Massey 1994; Rothstein 2017) and retail (Kwate et al. 2013) or white suburbanization (Reeves 2017), health

¹⁰⁸ The 2008 Farm Bill codified the USDA definition and measurement of food deserts. The USDA defines food deserts using census tract measures of high poverty and distance to a grocery store (Ver Ploeg, Nulph, and Williams, 2011). As described by USDA researchers “Some low-income communities in the United States lack stores that sell healthy and affordable food. The lack of store access in these communities--sometimes called food deserts--may contribute to poor diet, obesity, and other diet-related illness.” (Ver Ploeg, Nulph, and Williams, 2011).

experts obscure the structural racism at the root of the problem. For this reason, food activists and some scholars use the terms food apartheid (Penniman 2018) or retail redlining (Kwate et al. 2013) instead of food desert to call attention to how policy and institutions have created inadequate food access across the country.

At a 2010 Hearing to Review U.S. Agriculture Policy in Advance of the 2012 Farm Bill, Rep. Cassidy (R-LA) and Dr. Babcock, the Director of Center for Agricultural and Rural Development and Economics Professor discussed a policy that does not restrict “high density high caloric foods” but only gives the full SNAP value for fruits and vegetables:

Mr. Cassidy: If you say okay, we are not going to allow SNAP to give you full value for high density high caloric foods but you do allow that for fruits and vegetables. It is effectively a differential subsidy for fruits and vegetables in the inner-city store, correct?

Dr. Babcock. That is correct because the demand would shift over towards the fruits and vegetables because of the relative price change. That is correct.

Mr. Cassidy. Yes, so you wouldn't necessarily increase, artificially increase production but you would potentially increase the consumption again just by creating a price differential, if you follow what I am saying.

Dr. Babcock. That is correct. You would subsidize consumption of it but not the production, and that is what I was trying to get at. If you lowered the price, you could either directly lower the price through a subsidy or lower the price through infrastructure investments to lower the costs of getting those fruit and vegetables into inner-cities.

Critically, Rep. Cassidy and Dr. Babcock locate the barrier to healthy food as an “inner-city store,” reflecting dominant food desert discourses that are heavily critiqued for being grounded in language around unhealthy neighborhoods, corner stores, and liquor stores (Reese 2019). These discourses rely on the coded racialized ideas of “failing” neighborhoods that position predominantly urban neighborhoods as unhealthy (Shannon 2014), similarly detached from examinations policies and practices creating urban spaces. Reese’s (2019) critique notes food

dessert discourses utilize one-note perspectives positioning the residents as disempowered and stuck with the choices in their neighborhood. Instead, her ethnographic study in a predominantly Black neighborhood shows agency and self-reliance within community food procurement tactics; she also systematically detailed the long-term state infrastructure disinvestment that caused the “food desert” in the first place (Reese 2019).

Yet, food deserts and failing places are consistent discourses in the legislative hearings. In a 2011 *Hearing to Review Recent Investigations and Audits Conducted by the USDA Inspector General*, Steven Rickrode, Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audit and Rep. Peterson (D-MN) had this exchange:

Rep. Peterson (D-MN). So the fraud isn't happening in the big stores that are electronically capable?

Mr. Young. Right. So what happens is, you just have a total amount. I mean, they might take an adding machine and add that up of what groceries you have, then they input \$50, \$75, whatever the sale might be.

Rep. Peterson. Well, why do we allow that?

Mr. Rickrode. It is tough to catch. I mean----

Rep. Peterson. To be honest with you, you go in these convenience stores and buy your groceries, you are getting ripped off. You are paying two or three times as much as you should. I sometimes wonder why we even let people use these in convenience stores. If you eliminated small stores, it may force people to go in the grocery store. I know we have some places that don't have good access to food centers and so forth, but it just seems like we have found another hole in this thing.

Rep. Peterson's logic prioritized elimination of fraud couched in concern for affordability. In stating “we have found another hole” he exposed where to eliminate SNAP fraud at the expense of those who do not have “good access.” It also points to a failure of the immense food desert research in that geographic access meant nothing to a legislator bent on eliminating

waste, fraud, and abuse. These discourses about fraud and concern for the cost of groceries led to a 2016 USDA proposal¹⁰⁹ to restrict SNAP eligibility of certain convenience stores.

Notably, there was very little legislative discourse on rural food access prior to the USDA proposal. Witnesses (e.g. Dr. Paige and Ms. Jessup) noted poor rural food access, while legislators were noticeably silent on hunger or the use of SNAP in rural areas. However, the proposed eligibility policy received heavy criticism citing how it would impact rural communities. Mr. Beech, legal counsel for Casey's General Stores testified on behalf of National Association of Convenience Stores at a 2016 hearing during the House Agriculture Committee's full review of the *Past, Present and Future of SNAP*:

I grew up in a small town in rural Iowa, and we used to have a lot more services ... many places in the rural Midwest, our customers would have to drive 15 and 20 miles to the next nearest community that would have full services ... We are the only provider, and we provide prepared foods, we are the bakery in the community, and we are the grocery store. So to have folks that are already on the program having to spend additional resources to drive 15 and 20 miles to redeem their benefits, I can't see any rationale for that, and we are really concerned about some of our rural customers having to go through this to do that.

The careful consideration and concern for rural communities was typical of Farm Bill hearings, but most legislative discourses had to do with *other* policies on rural economic development and farm supports. Legislators even describe commodity food supports as a farmer safety net, while often disparaging the safety net of SNAP as related to dependency. The focus of my dissertation was on SNAP, so I cannot adequately compare the legislative discourses on other

¹⁰⁹ The policy proposal limited stores based on proportion of sales of hot foods, the store's ability to stock enough staple foods, and the exclusion of things like stews, soups, and frozen dinners as staple food items. It targeted stores using exclusion of these staple items was exceedingly problematic for individuals who only have consistent access microwaves, not full kitchens, and seemed to be targeted at urban convenience stores. The proposal was ultimately rejected.

rural policies. However, the consideration for rural food access stands in stark contrast to Rep. Peterson's comments above on "forc[ing] people to go in the grocery store." Most of the previous legislative discourse reiterated that poor food access was a problem of 'convenience stores' in urban areas. Once legislators, including Rep. Peterson (D-MN) – a hardline Democrat on fraud and self-sufficiency, heard of the impact on rural communities, legislative pushback against the proposed policy grew. The policy to restrict SNAP eligibility of certain convenience stores was not implemented. This shift in focus regarding rural 'convenience stores' adds to the food desert literature by noting legislative SNAP discourses shielded rural areas from those same problematic discourses that are constructed about failing urban communities.

Conclusion: The Denial of Hunger

Witnesses consistently presented evidence that SNAP benefits have an overall positive benefit on participants' health. Yet, legislators reinscribed the concept that hunger predisposes individuals to obesity and used poor health and obesity in low-income populations as evidence of poor food choices. The "obesity epidemic" and perceived dominant causes in calories is an all-encompassing, commonsense discourse that obscures discussion of structural causes of weight gain. No legislator questioned if there is something other than poor food choices or lack of movement that might predispose someone in poverty to both obesity and hunger.

Combined, these legislative discourses denied hunger evidenced by high rates of obesity and shaped a new definition of the "undeserving poor" (Katz 1989; 2015) in the population of individuals who are both low income and obese. Similar to discourses emphasizing dependency explored in Chapter 3, legislators drew from pathologizing discourses about obesity to draw boundaries around those who do and do not deserve SNAP. This distinction was repeated

through the dichotomous framing of those who make “healthy” choices and those making “unhealthy” choices.

As early as 2001, legislators and witnesses engaged with three discourses: diet education, personal responsibility, and barriers to healthy choices. Ways of knowing nutrition and obesity tied into ways of knowing poverty and all three policy discourses presumed the dietary consumption patterns of SNAP recipients needed to be surveilled and controlled. Together, the discourses delegitimized SNAP with a consistent focus on the taxpayer bottom line and what SNAP should and should not pay for. This final exchange in a 2010 hearing of the Committee on Agriculture to *Review U.S. Agriculture Policy in Advance of the 2012 Farm Bill* encapsulates the intermixed discourses of obesity, hunger, control, and SNAP funding. This is excerpted from a longer exchange on saving money in SNAP. Rep. Peterson (D-MN), the Chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture and Dr. Paarlberg, a Professor of Political Science discuss below:

Dr. Paarlberg. These problems do not ... express themselves the way they used to in actual hunger. ...I don't like the way we try to redefine poverty which is a serious problem as hunger when among the poor now a greater problem is obesity.

Rep. Peterson. Well, in other words what you are saying is we shouldn't put anymore money into these nutrition programs unless we take some of these problems out of the system first, because otherwise we will just be making it worse.

Dr. Paarlberg. No, you can spend exactly the same amount of money. You know, in SNAP benefits, if you disqualify from eligibility some nonfood products that are contributing to the obesity.

The Chairman. Right and I agree with you on that, but there will be pressure to increase spending in nutrition. **I guess what I am saying is I would be reluctant to do that if we don't fix some of these underlying problems.** Would you agree with that?

Dr. Paarlberg. I would agree with that.

The Chairman. Thank you.

Earlier in his testimony, Dr. Paarlberg corroborated the research that in comparing the diet of “the poor ... to the diet of the middle class ... the intake of calories is comparably excessive,” and yet justifies food restrictions for things “contributing to the obesity.” Dr. Paarlberg and Rep. Peterson both agree that the nutrition title, which funds SNAP, should not receive an increase until the “underlying problems” of obesity in the poor is fixed. Dr. Paarlberg uses the obesity epidemic to minimize “actual hunger ... a greater problem is obesity.” This minimizing of hunger ignores the overlap of root causes of both hunger and obesity, namely structural causes of poverty.

Similar to the discourse of workfare analyzed in Chapter 3, legislative discourses about obesity emphasized program integrity and tax-payer funding in ways that cast out the ‘undeserving’ hungry. The emphasis on obesity further legitimated funding targeting dietary discipline and surveillance rather than a focus on making sure that people who are hungry have food. The obesity emphasis also elided documentation of the structural inequities causing both hunger and obesity. The dominant discursive framework promoted by experts and reinforced by legislators maintained that when it comes to obesity, people who are poor must be monitored, educated, or cajoled to not make unhealthy, high calorie dietary choices because SNAP is taxpayer funded. Legislators engaged in the simplified framework that excess calorie consumption over calories needs is the problem, and then reiterated dominant nutrition narratives regarding solutions for obesity, not ways to prevent hunger, thus creating the undeserving hungry. These logics controlling food are wedded to the poverty logics that control or police the poor. The next chapter focuses specifically on the criminalization of the poor within SNAP discourses and how these discourses worked to delegitimize SNAP.

CH 5. POLICING THE HUNGRY: THE USDA'S *OPERATION TALON* AND THE CRIMINALIZATION OF THE POOR

Operation Talon is a success story. I say this not only for OIG [USDA Office of Inspector General] but also for state and local law enforcement agencies whom we helped to locate and arrest these fugitive felons. Even more importantly, Operation Talon is a success for the American people, who know that their communities are indeed safer, now that these people wanted for murder, rape, drug dealing, child molestation, are off their streets and dangerous criminals have been removed from the streets, and that food stamp benefits go only to those who need them. By this operation, we took money back in, by preventing it from going out illegally. - 1998, USDA Inspector General, Roger Viadero

In this quote, USDA Inspector General (USDA IG) Roger Viadero – a former New York City police officer – was introducing a new initiative, called Operation Talon, during a 1998 Appropriations Committee hearing.¹¹⁰ The USDA IG oversees the USDA Office of Inspector General (USDA OIG). Operation Talon was enabled by welfare reform¹¹¹ and combines USDA OIG federal agents with state and local police to ensnare current and former food stamp recipients for committing a form of “food stamp fraud.” USDA IG Viadero’s quote promoting Operation Talon reflects some of the key discourses about hunger and criminality that I explore in this chapter. Examples of common themes in debates about Operation Talon include a focus on the ostensible need to make the American people safer by removing dangerous “fugitive felons” off the “streets;” discussions about the working relationship between federal USDA agents and state and local law enforcement agencies; emphasis on the federal government savings created by “preventing it [money for food benefits] from going out illegally,” and the

¹¹⁰ Additional Hearing information: *Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies for the 1999 budget*. The USDA OIG has a separate budget process than the rest of the USDA, so the USDA IG testifies each year for the Committee on Appropriations.

¹¹¹ See Note 6.

desire to protect the “integrity” of the Food Stamp Program (now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)¹¹² in the process.

In the current chapter, I explore the origins and implications of Operation Talon, a little-known USDA program operating since 1997. As documented in the latest USDA OIG report from October of 2020, at least 18,365 individuals¹¹³ have been arrested through Operation Talon (United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General 2020). Though the disciplinarity of welfare regimes has been well studied (e.g., Soss, Fording, and Schram, 2011), few scholars or members of the general public know about Operation Talon and there is a dearth of research about its operation and administrative logics. In this chapter, I examine Operation Talon as an initiative that powerfully illustrates the twinned logics of state retrenchment and disciplinarity: as the state slashes social welfare in the name of austerity, it simultaneously expands budgets supporting carceral solutions to growing inequality (Peck 2003; Gilmore 2007). Operation Talon is situated within critical years of the U.S. prison boom, a period in which “tough on crime” policies criminalized an increasing array of individuals and activities, giving rise to soaring rates of incarceration and the proliferation and expansion of carceral logics (Camp and Heatherton 2016; Gilmore 2007; Story 2019; Bonds 2021).

¹¹² This chapter primarily includes hearings before 2008, before the name change to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Most of the testimonies say food stamps, for consistency, I do as well.

¹¹³ Total compiled by author via arrests documented in written testimonies and reports. USDA IG Fong’s written testimony to the House Committee on Agriculture in 2010 stated: “As of September 20, 2009, Operation Talon has resulted in 14,645 arrests of fugitive felons wanted for a wide variety of offenses, including murder, arson, assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, assorted drug charges, robbery, fraud, forgery, driving under the influence, extortion and blackmail, sex offenses, domestic violence, larceny, stolen property, and weapons violations. In the second half of FY 2009, OIG agents conducted Talon operations in 5 States, making a total of 264 arrests.” There were at least 3720 Operation Talon arrests reported between 2010 and 2020 in the USDA OIG Semi-Annual Report to Congress (SARC). For 5 of those years, SARC indicated Operation Talon led to “more than” a specific number of arrests, so this is a close, but imprecise number.

USDA IG Viadero’s comments connect with all-too familiar discourses about race, poverty, and crime (Roberts 2014; Bonds 2009). Operation Talon was a program with bipartisan backing, ranging from neutral support to outright enthusiasm. I situate Operation Talon and the discourses that legitimize its ongoing reauthorization within the broader criminalization of the racialized poor, including both financial and institutional commitments to increased surveillance, monitoring, and policing of food benefit recipients. I ask the following questions: How have hunger and access to federal food benefits been criminalized within legislative hearings? In what ways does Operation Talon extend the reach of the carceral state and the surveillance of the racialized and gendered poor and hungry?

During my analysis of hearings, I encountered descriptions of Operation Talon, a program that seemed distinct from the more common discourses around food stamp fraud, violations, and benefits trafficking.¹¹⁴ The descriptions were buried in testimony from the USDA Inspector General (IG). What especially caught my eye was the fact that these descriptions contained discussions about alleged crimes (e.g., USDA IG Viadero’s description above of “these people wanted for murder, rape, drug dealing, child molestation”) that had nothing to do with SNAP benefits fraud. I was struck both by the rhetoric surrounding the program and the dearth of information – scholarly or otherwise – about its existence. I expanded my hearing and secondary data search to document, better understand, and analyze Operation Talon.

Legal scholar Kaaryn Gustafson (2009) documented three specific tools that emerged from welfare reform:¹¹⁵ (1) the Fugitive Felon Prohibitions, (2) Operation Talon, and (3) the Drug

¹¹⁴ See Appendix A: SNAP Policy Fact Sheet.

¹¹⁵ See Note 6.

Felony Lifetime Ban. As Gustafson notes, each of these were emblematic of “new ways for the criminal justice system to make use of welfare administrative data to capture poor individuals” (667). Her research also documented the absence of cost savings associated with these programs (ibid.). Specifically focusing on Operation Talon, Gustafson notes that “food stamp offices [were] used as the sites of sting operations for arresting individuals with outstanding warrants” (ibid., 669-670). She also noted that Operation Talon reported arrests due to many non-violent crimes and that there was limited research on the program impact at the time of her writing (ibid.).

Gustafson’s findings closely connect with other scholarship that examines the criminalization of poverty (Hinton 2016; Katz 2015; Sparks 2003; Muhammad 2010) alongside the retrenchment of public welfare, the rapid growth of the criminal legal system, and the expansion of new forms disciplinarity and policing (Loyd and Bonds 2018; Camp and Heatherington, 2016; Bonds 2021; Gilmore 2007; Roberts 2014). My research draws from and contributes to existing literature on the criminalization of poverty and the carceral state by documenting the role of the USDA OIG in policing access to food benefits and using food stamps as means to arrest so-called “fugitive felons.” I examine Operation Talon as a powerful example of both the interconnections between the welfare state and the carceral state, and the ways in which carceral framings of hunger and poverty work together to justify an expansion of budgets for surveillance and policing, even as funds supporting food benefits and access are sharply reduced.

Specifically, I argue that the USDA OIG drew from and mobilized policies and efforts enacted through welfare reform – particularly the banning of so-called “fugitive felons” from

SNAP access and the linking of social services offices with law enforcement agencies – in order to create Operation Talon. In brief, “fugitive felons” are individuals with a warrant out for their arrest. The USDA OIG worked within food stamp offices and further enlisted law enforcement to conduct sting operations to ensnare those individuals. In what follows, I foreground the analysis in literature on carcerality and poverty. Then I use USDA OIG reports and legislative hearings to document the creation of Operation Talon, before turning to analysis of Operation Talon.

Unsurprisingly, my findings from Operation Talon and of the wider legislative discourses surrounding it reveals a deep antagonism towards the poor, who are constructed as criminal, as abusing the system, and in need of surveillance and control. I document the spatialization of racialized hunger, emphasizing how the targeting of the criminalized hungry is applied to non-white bodies and communities. This amplifies the point made in Chapter 4 that the rural, ostensibly white, poor and hungry are constructed as discursively separate from the urban, non-white poor. My analysis emphasizes that hunger policy cannot be separated from the ongoing construction of social difference and the dynamics of race and racialization. As such, hunger policy making is a race-making process. The USDA OIG and legislative discourses criminalized and racialized the hungry and excluded individuals from accessing essential benefits.

Carcerality and the Urban Poor

I build from the analysis presented in Chapter 3 on the neoliberal, color-blind constructions of poverty (Crump 2002; Bonds 2013; Melamed 2006) in tropes such as the dependent welfare queen (Mink 1994) in ways that conflated poverty with Blackness and

uncaring Black mothers (Roberts 2012), (re)producing racist and sexist stereotypes about social welfare programs. Poverty and welfare dependency rhetoric used the heavily critiqued (Hinton 2016; Katz 2015) 'underclass pathologies,' often directly associated with "drug use, violence, crime, teen pregnancy, [and] single motherhood" (Schram 2006, 146).

The racialized and criminalized construction of the urban poor supports expanding commitments to policing and the surveillance of low-income communities of color. Crenshaw (2012), for instance, traced "the multiple ways in which racially marginalized women experience discipline and punishment ... social control is not only a function of the criminal justice system but a function of the welfare state and of private social ordering as well. ... the problem of mass incarceration is not simply a problem of criminal justice per se but of the disciplinary practices of the state and private social power writ large" (1428).

My use of "policing the hungry" in this chapter's title draws from Hall et al.'s (2013 [1978]) critique of policing and moral panics. Scholarship in critical carceral studies and critical criminology emphasize the social and racial construction of crime and criminality (Hall et al. 2013 [1978]; Muhammad 2010; Kelley 2016; Gilmore 2007; McKittrick and Woods, 2007; Camp and Heatherton 2016; Loyd and Bonds 2018), underscoring how expanded forms of policing and incarceration have little to do with crime and more to do with social control and maintaining racial hierarchies. As Taylor (2016) succinctly notes: "[r]acism and modern policing were thus mutually constitutive in reinforcing the subjugated status of Blacks" (106). Neoliberal discourses relied on the same gendered and racialized pathologies of the poor in justifying devolution of federal programs and workfare alongside the expansion of the carceral state (Peck 2003; Roberts 2014; Bonds 2021).

As scholars have documented, the carceral state extends far beyond the prison through the expansion of disciplinary and surveillance into nearly all aspects of everyday life (McKittrick 2011; Gilmore 2007; Crenshaw 2012; Roberts 2014). Murakawa (2014) demonstrated how the contemporary carceral state was built on older liberal logics during the Civil Rights era. She argued that “with each administrative layer to protect African Americans from *lawless* racial violence, liberals propelled carceral development that, through perverse turns, expanded lawful racial violence” (emphasis in original, p. 26). Similarly, Kohler-Hausmann (2015) examined how welfare retrenchment and criminalization worked together to (re)produce “barriers to the civic and economic participation of poor people, particularly in urban African American and Latino communities” under a “spectacle of getting tough” on crime (p. 99). Criminality legitimates both austerity and the extension of the state’s carceral reach. Further, it reinforces existing racial and gender hierarchies and delimits access to federal benefits for the undeserving poor and hungry. Operation Talon is the manifestation of ongoing debates about assistance fraud and abuse, and carceral logics that define prisons as the solutions to ongoing social problems (Gilmore 2007).

Operation Talon

To document the creation of Operation Talon, I excerpted the text below from the original (estimated to be circa 1997-1998)¹¹⁶ United States Department of Agriculture Office of

¹¹⁶ There is no date in the report, but the library marked it received Feb 25, 1998. It includes information from the December, 1997 Vice Presidential press conference and also has identical information (2235 arrests, map of locations) to what was provided in the IG testimony at the February 1998 Appropriations and 1998 House Committee on Agriculture. As such, I estimate it was written in late 1997 or early 1998.

Inspector General (n.d.) Operation Talon Report which connects welfare reform and the goals of Operation Talon:

“[T]wo [PROWRA] provisions ... significantly enhanced the plausibility of operations such as “Operation Talon” ... the first ... declares individuals ineligible to receive food stamps who are fleeing to avoid prosecution, or custody or confinement after conviction. The second ... authorizes State social service agencies, notwithstanding any other provision of law, to provide the address, social security number, and if available, a photograph of any member of a household to any Federal, State, or local law enforcement officer.

To accomplish Congress’ intent to stop fugitives from receiving food stamps, “Operation Talon” has three goals. These goals are to:

1. remove fugitive felons from the food stamp rolls;
2. remove fugitive felons from the streets to make communities safer; and
3. demonstrate to the States how to carry out the statutory provisions so that they utilize such procedures on an ongoing basis. (1)

The report continues with a discussion about how Operation Talon conducts a “matching” process for identifying alleged “fugitives”:

The ‘matching’ process is a [sic] lengthy and time consuming. First, an individual is identified by comparing the law enforcement agency’s list of fugitive felons with the State social service agency’s food stamp rolls; the individual is then prioritized according to the fugitive’s level of danger to the public. Finally, before an arrest is attempted, the match is verified to ensure there is still a valid, outstanding warrant. Most of the arrests to date¹¹⁷ have been made by teams comprised of State/local law enforcement officers and OIG special agents. Using the addresses developed from the food stamp rolls, these teams combed metropolitan areas, locating and arresting the fugitives identified in the matches. (ibid., 2)

The USDA OIG used the independent authority of its federal office to install USDA OIG officers within food stamp offices, not only to identify a beneficiary’s personal information and provide it to local law enforcement, but also to fund and perform sting operations with these agencies. I argue that by directly implementing ideas and legislation drawn from welfare reform (including the logic and rationale for Operation Talon), the USDA OIG commenced a new project of

¹¹⁷ As of that report, Operation Talon resulted in 2235 arrests in the first year.

policing the hungry and the poor. Operation Talon – a program embedded within the USDA – utilized and expanded the coercive powers of the state to entangle and ensnare a growing number of individuals in the criminal legal system.

This quote¹¹⁸ from a 1998 Appropriations hearing underscores these processes at work. Here Representative Skeen (R-NM), the Appropriations committee chair, interrupts USDA IG Viadero’s description of the initiative to clarify how food stamps were used to entrap an unwitting SNAP beneficiary:

Mr. Viadero: The individual came to the site believing he had an appointment to discuss his food stamp benefits.

Mr. Skeen: You lured him with food stamps?

Mr. Viadero: Yes, sir. Wherever the money is, that is where the bad guys would be.

Operation Talon is a striking example of deeply intertwined nature of the carceral and welfare states, which are often theorized as dichotomous and distinct (Loyd and Bonds 2018). In this instance, access to food stamp enrollment databases facilitated local law enforcement efforts to lure and arrest individuals who sought food benefits. A critical point to again emphasize is that investigatory action made possible through Operation Talon was not focused on food stamp benefits fraud; rather, the extended power of the USDA OIG was used to police, surveil, and criminalize beneficiaries in connection with other alleged crimes.

The USDA OIG initiated Operation Talon in early 1997. In fact, then-Vice President Al Gore held a press conference indicating the program’s success and Presidential support for its expansion later that same year, in December 1997 (United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General, n.d.). The USDA IG, Robert Viadero, first publicly testified to

¹¹⁸ The longer exchange from this hearing will be analyzed in detail below.

Congress about Operation Talon in hearings for both the Appropriations Committee and House Committee on Agriculture in early February 1998. At the 1998 House of Representatives Subcommittee on Department Operations, Nutrition, and Foreign Agriculture for the Committee on Agriculture *Hearing to Review the Enforcement of Antifraud Provisions of the Food Stamp Act*, USDA IG Viadero described how the creation of Operation Talon drew inspiration from the policies associated with welfare reform. In this protracted exchange, then later Chairman Rep. Goodlatte (R-VA) and Rep. Clayton (D-NC) clarified motivations for the program during the question-and-answer portion of the hearing:

USDA IG VIADERO: I can't commend anybody any higher than you folks up here for passing that welfare reform, because prior to that the States ... were prevented from sharing information with us. So what we found was the fugitives out there, they weren't giving their legitimate name and address and birth date to the people that were prosecuting them. Boy, go figure. However, they were giving it to the people with the money. And as a result of that, we ran sting operations. We sent letters out inviting them in and basically said, "We at USDA cheated you. You are owed more benefits." At one site in Chicago, we got 117 fugitives that came forward and said, "I need my benefits. You cheated me. I want them." They showed up at the door. They responded.

... [BREAK]

Mr. GOODLATTE. Let me ask you, how many of them have been prosecuted for food stamp fraud?

USDA IG VIADERO. Not many, because they weren't all arrested on food stamp fraud. The food stamp fraud issue, with the legislation that passed, it is illegal for a prison inmate or a fugitive to receive food stamps.

Mr. GOODLATTE. All right. That was in the legislation.

USDA IG VIADERO. Right. That was passed in welfare reform. Also in welfare reform, it gave us for the first time a really great investigative tool. We were able to take from the individual county records the fugitives, the outstanding fugitive felons—and again, we only looked at felons. As an example, in New York City, we are very happy to report, because of computer matching we got 64 that were also on food stamps or related rolls.

... [BREAK]

Mrs. CLAYTON. Would you say it was incidental, the authority that you got in the welfare reform, or this legislation prohibited felons from having food stamps was the

cause of the arrests? Is it purely coincidence or was it this was a part of the initiative that caused us to be rid of all of these felons?

USDA IG VIADERO. I have to say it was part of the initiative to get rid of them.

Mrs. CLAYTON. It was part of the initiative?

USDA IG VIADERO. Yes, ma'am.

Mrs. CLAYTON. I thought that was what was meant, and so I just wanted the record to suggest that.

This exchange reveals the USDA IG's extension of his office's disciplinary reach, as these were not individuals wanted for food stamp fraud or violations, per se. In fact, Viadero reiterates that it was a supposed "food stamp fraud issue" that informed the implementation of welfare reform policies making "fugitives" newly ineligible for food stamps. Supported by the authority of the USDA OIG, new efforts emerged to find, ensnare, and then exclude these individuals from food benefits. Within the exchange, Rep. Clayton (D-NC) indicates her support and refers to "all these felons" abusing food stamp benefits in a way that was emblematic of the presumed criminality federal officials and legislatures associated with the food stamp program overall. As a reminder from Chapter 3, the primary concern for SNAP administrators in the post-PRWORA era was low participation in the program. Moreover, abuse in the food stamp program is historically quite minimal and was in fact decreasing.

This lengthy discussion hints at the disturbing methods used by the USDA OIG to capture "fugitives" receiving food stamp benefits. For example, starting in 1997, the USDA OIG sent food stamp participants official letters on behalf of the USDA indicating they were owed additional benefits. When individuals arrived at food stamp offices to collect their owed benefits, local police were waiting to ensnare individuals. Rather than questioning the implications of using food assistance to facilitate policing and arrests, both legislators and the

USDA IG position the program as a win-win that both protected against wasteful government spending and rooted out so-called “fugitives” who might also be hungry. Not surprisingly, those with outstanding warrants are understood as criminal, even without a conviction.

The example of Operation Talon – and the logics and funding supporting it – resonates with scholarship illustrating that the implementation of disciplinary welfare structures has very little to do with waste and reduction in government expenditures; rather these efforts have much more to do with enabling the coercive state through expanded surveillance and monitoring of the poor (Roberts 2014; Peck 2003). Moreover, the exchanges underscored that discussions with the USDA OIG often had little to do with the efficient delivery of food benefits, but rather focused extensively on rooting out of fraud and eliminating people from food stamps through Operation Talon, felony exclusions, or program violations.

Constructing the Hungry “Fugitive Felon”

The following excerpt from the 1998 Appropriations Subcommittee hearing for the USDA OIG budget justification with Representative Skeen (R-NM), the committee chair, and IG Viadero emphasizes how the USDA IG utilized language about “violent crime” in discussions about Operation Talon:

USDA IG Viadero: As of January 13th this year, Operation Talon has resulted in 2,235 arrests of fugitive felons, the vast majority of whom were food stamp recipients or former recipients. These fugitives included numerous violent and dangerous offenders who were wanted for murder, child molestation, rape and kidnapping. ... An example of the type of individuals we arrested is a fugitive for selling a large, very large, quantity of marijuana. He was arrested at a sting site in Chicago, Illinois. The individual came to the site believing he had an appointment to discuss his food stamp benefits.

Mr. Skeen: You lured him with food stamps?

USDA IG Viadero: Yes, sir. Wherever the money is, that is where the bad guys would be. When he was confronted by a Cook County sheriff's deputy, the fugitive attempted to

flee, running down a small corridor where an OIG agent and a local police officer tackled him and subdued him. This fugitive later threatened to burn down the Cook County detention facility and kill the police officers and the agents. This picture we have now shows the weaponry this one person was carrying, eight knives, 11 assorted lengths of steel pipe, two screwdrivers, one wrench.

Mr. Skeen. He must have been a pretty healthy individual to carry that much hardware around.

USDA IG Viadero. In addition to that, he also had the materials for the Molotov cocktails he was threatening to use. Interesting fellow. Operation Talon is a success story. Even more importantly, Operation Talon is a success for the American people, who know that their communities are indeed safer, now that these people wanted for murder, rape, drug dealing, child molestation, are off their streets and dangerous criminals have been removed from the streets, and that food stamp benefits go only to those who need them. By this operation, we took money back in, by preventing it from going out illegally.

In his description of dealings with a “fugitive for selling a large, very large, quantity of marijuana,” USDA IG Viadero reiterates the violence of the encounter and the heroics of the USDA OIG agent and a local police officer for subduing him. There is no discussion on the fact that the person fled when unexpectedly confronted in a fake “appointment to discuss his food stamp benefits.” Nor is there emphasis on any specific criminal record pertaining to the apprehended individual. Instead, the USDA IG draws from hyperbolic and generalized descriptions of the violent “fugitive felons” – rapists, murderers, child molesters – to champion Operation Talon.

Embedded within food stamp offices, USDA OIG special agents were given access to review outstanding warrants and cross-referenced those them with “social service records.” Only after gaining access to this information did USDA agents work with local law enforcement in their efforts to ensnare “the worst of the fugitives” at the office. In the 2000 Appropriations

hearing, IG Viadero reiterated how instrumental his office was in initiating the Operation Talon “matching process:”¹¹⁹

... We are looking at the worst of the fugitives. We take those warrants and compare them against ... social services records on food stamps, because ... they give their right address to the people that are giving the money out and food stamps are cash equivalents. It is a secondary currency, if you will.

In this, Viadero’s rhetorical emphasis on “bad guys” seeking a “second currency” illustrates the way in which food benefit recipients are positioned as criminal. It further accentuates the emergence of Operation Talon during a period marked by the rampant growth of new drug policies and “tough on crime” legislation that criminalized an increasing array of low-level offenses and supported soaring rates of incarceration (Murakawa 2014; Taylor 2016; Bonds 2009; Bonds 2015). These discourses were essential to the widespread growth of prisons and the targeting and incarceration of Black individuals disproportionate to rates of crime in the United States (Taylor 2016; Camp and Heatherton 2016; Alexander 2010). Further, the USDA IG utilized language that locates violent crimes within urban neighborhoods of color and on “the streets.”

¹¹⁹ The “matching” process is detailed above.

Figure 5.1 Scan of Operation Talon report table (p.8) arrests by state through March 30, 1998

Arrests Made During Operation Talon (as of March 30, 1998)

Location	Arrests	Location	Arrests	Location	Arrests
Alameda County, CA	374	Indiana, All Locations	59	Oklahoma City, OK	19
Atlanta, GA	153	Jackson, MS	30	Pennsylvania, All Locations	101
Baltimore, MD	112	Louisville/ Lexington, KY	85	Phoenix, AZ	80
Chicago, IL	470	Milwaukee, WI	65	St. Louis, MO/ E. St. Louis, IL	23
Cincinnati, OH	131	Minneapolis/ St. Paul, MN	16	Tacoma/Seattle, WA	59
Columbus, OH	49	New Castle, DE	15	Topeka/Shawnee County, KS	6
Dallas, TX	208	New Jersey, All Locations	240	Washington, DC	5
Ft. Worth, TX	82	New York City, NY	64		
OPERATION TALON-TOTAL ARRESTS: 2,446					

Source: United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General (1998)

The USDA OIG used a generalized framing of violent crime in official reports as well. For example, the United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General (1998) Semiannual Report to Congress echoed the praise surrounding Operation Talon, noting that it was highly successful in capturing “dangerous felons wanted for murder, child molestation, rape, and kidnapping.” These criminalizing discourses bolstered an exaggerated cost savings justification for the expenses of Operation Talon, deemed it a success, and supported its nationwide expansion. Figure 5.1 (below) documents the number of arrests in different states, showing the quick expansion from a single pilot program in 1997 to 23 locations by March 30, 1998.

Figure 5.2 Scan of Operation Talon report table (p.8) arrests by offense through March 30, 1998

Crimes Committed by Felons Apprehended in Operation Talon

Offense	Total Arrests	Offense	Total Arrests
Murder	12	Kidnapping	6
Attempted Murder	10	Assault	127
Child Molestation	12	Robbery	91
Rape	7	Drugs	700
Attempted Rape	2	Other	1,479

Source: United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General (1998)

Mirroring language of violence in testimonies, the report claimed that of 2446 total arrests, “over one-third of those arrested were sought in connection with violent crimes or *illegal drug activity*” (ibid., 7, my emphasis added). However, my analysis of Figure 5.2 from the same report reveals that the *violent* crimes the USDA OIG listed in the narrative only accounted for 1.5% of all Operation Talon crime arrests that year. Instead, and not surprisingly, many of those swept into the system via Operation Talon in 1997-1998 were apprehended under the generic category of “drugs” (700 of 2446 (28.6%)), and 1479 out of 2446 (60.47%) are simply listed as “other” (United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General 1998, 8). Analysis of the *actual* data about Operation Talon in Figure 5.2 compared to the USDA IG’s report and testimony language illustrates how discourses of violent crime were combined with discourses on drug activity. These discourses were mobilized to expand and validate the program reflecting moral panics about crime that were used to expand the carceral state and maintain racial hierarchies (Hall et al, 2013 [1978]; Camp and Heatherton, 2016).

Figure 5.3 Operation Talon scan of the table named “Figure 1” on page 16 the Semiannual Report to Congress FY2001-First Half, data disaggregated by the type of Operation Talon offense, the number of arrests, and states through March 31, 2001

Figure 1
Operation Talon Results

CRIMES – UCR Categories	AZ	CA	CO	CT	DE	DC	FL	GA	IL	IN	KS	KY	MD
Group A Offenses													
Arson	1					1				2	2		1
Assault Offenses: Aggravated Assault, Simple Assault, Intimidation	20	5	9	4		3	5	23	13	26	4	16	73
Bribery													
Burglary/Breaking and Entering	5	3	7			2	2	11		18	3	4	7
Counterfeiting/Forgery	8	2	7				9	6		36	1	11	10
Destruction/Damage/Vandalism of Property												1	11
Drug/Narcotic Offense: Drug/Narcotic Violations, Drug Equipment Violations	116	36	15	3		4	15	14	361	52	12	45	35
Embezzlement		2											
Extortion/Blackmail	1												
Fraud Offenses: False Pretenses/Swindle/Confidence Game/Credit Card/Automatic Teller Machine Fraud, Impersonations, Welfare Fraud, Wire Fraud	22	313	4		4		6	2		8	5	62	35
Gambling Offenses: Betting/Wagering/Operating/Promoting/Assisting Gambling, Gambling Equipment Violations, Sports Tampering													2
Homicide Offenses: Murder and Nonnegligent Manslaughter, Negligent Manslaughter, Justifiable Homicide							2	3	1	2		1	7
Kidnapping/Abduction								5				1	2
Larceny/Theft Offenses: Pocket-picking, Purse-snatching, Shoplifting, Theft from Building, Theft from Motor Vehicle, Theft of Motor Vehicle Parts or Accessories, All Other Larceny	35	14	48	3	1	1	15	16		123	1	21	71
Motor Vehicle Theft	2	1					1	3		6			2
Pornography/Obscene Material													
Prostitution Offenses: Prostitution, Assisting or Promoting Prostitution										4			2
Robbery	1	2					9	27	6	5	4	6	7
Sex Offenses: Forcible Rape, Forcible Sodomy, Sexual Assault With An Object, Forcible Fondling								9	1	2	1		3
Sex Offenses: Nonforcible Incest, Statutory Rape	1	2								2			
Stolen Property Offenses (Receiving, etc.)		4									4	3	
Weapon Law Violations	1	2		1		1	1	4		2			2
Group B Offenses													
Bad Checks	3						11	2		2	11	2	27
Curfew/Loitering/Vagrancy Violations													1
Disorderly Conduct	1										2		2
Driving Under the Influence	24	2								24	8	2	
Drunkenness													
Family Offenses, Nonviolent		1					1	5			8	3	
Liquor Law Violations													2
Peeping Tom													
Runaway													
Trespass of Real Property	2		3										6
All Other Offenses	34	16	23	8		30	42	24	161	35	43	70	487
TOTALS	277	405	116	19	5	42	119	154	543	349	109	248	795

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General (2001)

Figure 5.4 Operation Talon scan of the second half of the table named “Figure 1” on page 17 of the Semiannual Report to Congress FY2001-First Half, data disaggregated by the type of offense, the number of arrests, and states through March 31, 2001

	MA	MI	MS	MN	MO	NC	NJ	NY	NV	OH	OK	OR	PA	TX	VA	WA	WI	Totals
		1					2		1	1			1	3				16
	7	4		2	8		45		2	34	1	2	2	67	16	8	4	403
														5				5
	2	6			6	4	44	4	1	3		7		68	1	3	3	214
	2	6	3		8	5	9		2	11		7	5	191	6		3	348
		4			1		1			1		3		9	1			32
	14	16	1	21	46	9	224	7	2	148	1	111	3	252	34	22	9	1,628
		6				4			2						1			15
																		1
		21			7	25	175	3		12	4	13		83	18	3	27	852
																		2
		1			2		4			2				6	3	1		35
	1	1				1	1			2		1			1			16
		22	3		7	7	89	1	4	37	12	27	4	110	23	13	3	711
	3	2					7			4		11		20	5	1		68
														1		1		8
	2	1			5	1	35	1		86	1	2	2	12	7		1	223
	2			1	6		4			2				9		1		41
							1			1								7
	2	5	1		39		45		1	16								120
		1			5		8			4		4		5			2	43
		12	18		86				21	7		3		23	3			231
																		1
									2			6		37			1	6
																		105
					2		60					2	1	9			1	93
																		2
									2									2
					2									1				14
	6	81	16	38	19	19	289	54	2	361		10	1	22	217	7	15	2,130
	41	190	42	62	249	75	1043	70	40	734	19	209	19	933	336	60	69	7,372

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General (2001)

Four years later, the USDA OIG continued to amplify rhetoric about violence stating that “[s]erious crimes perpetrated by those arrested [via Operation Talon] included homicide-related offenses ..., sex offenses (child molestation, rape, attempted rape), kidnapping/abduction, assault, robbery, and drug/narcotics violations” (United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General 2001). This report continued to combine rhetoric on drug activity with violent crime. Additionally, the USDA OIG accentuated violence in ways that were incongruent with reasons for arrest. My analysis of Figures 5.3 and 5.4¹²⁰ from the report shows that in 2001, 50% of Operation Talon actions were for offenses categorized as “drug related” (1628, 22%) or just “other” (2130, 29%). Less than 10% were for the “serious crimes” emphasized in the Operation Talon summary, and the vast majority of those were related to assault (403, 5.5%) or robbery (223, 3%).¹²¹ After “drug related,” the second highest named offense was fraud, with 852 arrests (11.5%) and third was larceny (e.g. pick-pocket, shoplift) with 711 arrests (9.6%). This data raises significant questions about the testified claim above by IG Viadero that Operation Talon was focused on “the worst of the fugitives” but rather, more petty crimes. There was also variability in how states utilized Operation Talon, for example, New Jersey had the most arrests with 1043, followed by Texas with 933, and Maryland 795.

¹²⁰Figure 5.3 and Figure 5.4 are scans of the table named “Figure 1” on pages 16-17 of 2001 SARC report which included the table of disaggregated data by the type of Operation Talon offense, the number of arrests, and states through March 31, 2001 United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General (2001).

¹²¹ Data from the combined 7372 Operation Talon arrests through 2001 yet again reveals how violent crimes were emphasized even as they made up a small portion of the total numbers: homicide-related offenses make up just 35 of 7372 (0.47%), sex offenses are 41 of 7372 (0.56%), kidnapping/abduction are 16 of 7372 (0.22%), assault is 403 of 7372 (5.47%), and robbery is 223 of 7372 (3.02%). Drug/narcotics arrests account for 1628 of 7372 (22.08%) and even with disaggregation by the numerous Group A and B offense categories, a full 2130 of 7372 (28.89%) are still listed as “other.” (SARC, 2001, p. 16-17). See Figures 5.3 and 5.4.

Unfortunately, this report from the first half of 2001 was the USDA OIG's last public report that included disaggregated data by type of alleged offense. Further omitted from USDA OIG reporting and testimony is the fact that welfare reform allowed for benefits denial for probation or parole violation. The opaque data presented could additionally reflect warrants for those violations and the arrests actually reflecting offenses that time had already been served.

A change in leadership at USDA OIG to Phyllis Fong¹²² in 2002 did not disrupt the OIG's approach. Rather it maintained both the rhetorical construction of violent fugitives who abused food stamps and efforts to apprehend such individuals via Operation Talon. At the 2003 House of Representatives Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry for the Committee on Agriculture hearing on the Review of the Operations of the Food Stamp Program, USDA IG Fong provided an update on Operation Talon:

[s]ince its inception in early 1997, Operation Talon has resulted 8,793 arrests, simultaneously getting many dangerous criminals off the welfare rolls and off the streets ... For example, Operation Talon identified an individual who, along with two others, was alleged to have executed a victim as part of a cocaine distribution conspiracy. OIG agents and detectives from the New Jersey State Police, the New York State Police, and the New York City Police Department apprehended the individual at the address he reported on his food stamp application.

Here, USDA IG Fong used "many dangerous criminals" to indicate the 'undeserving poor' (Katz, 1989) that Operation Talon excluded from "the welfare rolls." USDA IG Fong specifically provided the details of one arrest using the language of "execution," drug trafficking, and "off

¹²² During the period of my analysis (1996-2018) there have been just two appointed USDA IGs, including Roger Viadero, whose quote opens this chapter and Phyllis Fong, as well as one acting IG, Joyce Fleischman. Viadero was a former NYC police officer before joining the FBI and was appointed by President Clinton as USDA IG in 1994. In 2001 Viadero resigned, and deputy USDA IG Fleischman became the acting USDA IG. President G.W. Bush appointed Phyllis Fong, previously the IG of the U.S. Small Business Administration, in December of 2002. Fong remains the USDA IG today, indicating little turnover in USDA OIG direction and leadership, and maintained similar investigative practices, including Operation Talon.

the streets,” thereby emphasizing the most violent exceptions while simultaneously omitting data on arrests by the type of offense in the USDA OIG public reports about Operation Talon.

Though we might hope to see this characterization shift over time – particularly within sustained critiques of the racial and class implications of the “war on drugs” and mass incarceration (e.g. Alexander 2010) – these characterizations of the violent fugitive abusing food stamps carries forward throughout more contemporary framings of Operation Talon successes. For example, the United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General (2020) celebrates the “arrest [of] fugitives for offenses such as arson, assault, drug crimes, offenses against family and children, robbery, sex crimes, and weapons violations” (41). Again, the emphasis on violence obscures the realities of arrests, legitimates the program, and reinforces assumptions about Blackness and criminality.

Since 1997, Operation Talon led to the arrest of over 18,629¹²³ individuals. All USDA OIG testimony and every report surrounding Operation Talon led with the apprehension of fugitives wanted for violent and serious crimes. Yet, early reports about arrests and the lack of clear data characterizing arrests after 2001 raises significant concerns about the accuracy of such framings. Moreover, these discourses of violence are spatialized, with Operation Talon rhetoric specifying urban locations, drawing on the coded yet clearly racialized depictions of urban spaces of danger, criminality, poverty, and Blackness (Kelley 2016; Brahinsky 2011; Brewer & Heitzeg 2008; Muhammad 2012).

¹²³ See note 113.

Spatializing The “Fugitive Felon”

Throughout testimonies and reports, the USDA IG mobilized the racist and racially coded language of crime as emanating “off the streets” and in “metropolitan” spaces. More explicitly, discussions often named specific cities¹²⁴ and located the actions of Operation Talon in predominantly Black neighborhoods. This spatialization is not surprising given extensive documentation of expanding forms of carceral surveillance in low-income neighborhoods of color, even as urban policing was constructed as color-blind and supported by purportedly race-neutral policies (Taylor 2016; Murakawa 2014).

By 2000, the USDA OIG reports only included state level data. However, IG testimony still highlights *where* exactly Operation Talon was happening. In this excerpt from an Appropriations Subcommittee hearing in 2000 illustrates how USDA IG Viadero drew from discourses about violence in urban locations:

We had a press conference in Beltsville, Maryland, right up the street here and we successfully arrested 726 fugitive felons from Prince George's and Montgomery Counties, and Washington, DC. Also last week, Mr. Seybold attended a press conference for me out in Portland, Oregon, and we arrested 205 felons there. And those were only the most serious ones. Again, I don't have enough money to go out and get them all, nor do the locals. We are looking at the personal crime--person-to-person crimes, the really violent ones. That is what we are targeting. If we had more money, we would arrest more criminals for more types of crimes. We would divest ourselves of the real bad ones and go after everyone else.

In referencing Washington D.C. and the surrounding Maryland county in his discussion of the apprehension of “726 fugitive felons,” USDA IG Viadero’s testimony registered locations that resonated with legislators’ assumptions about crime and ostensibly dangerous places.

Reflecting what Brewer & Heitzeg (2008) described as a “color-blind conflagration of crime with

¹²⁴ The USDA IG specifically referenced Chicago, IL and New York, NY in the testimonies above.

race” (633), Viadero’s naming locations “right up the street here” was code for Blackness and violence without explicitly invoking race. Though Portland, OR – generally seen as a very white city with progressive politics – might seem incongruous with this conflation of urban spaces and crime, it has well-documented white supremacist history and has embraced draconian policies for the poor (Bonds 2013). Viadero used these locations as dog whistles to reinforce perceptions of violence, even though the USDA OIG’s own data reveal that Operation Talon has little to do with “the really violent ones.” By suggesting that they could do more “[i]f we had more money,” Viadero underscored what scholars of neoliberalism have documented: carceral expansion was a justifiable budget expense even in the context of state budget retraction for social services and public supports for the most marginalized and poor (Peck 2003).

Holding Roberts’ (2014) call to add gender to any analysis on “marginality, ethnicity, and penalty” (1776) requires additional reflection about the exaggerated rhetoric about violence in urban spaces used by legislators and the USDA IG. This rhetoric relied upon the discursive and material construction of Black men as criminal and the Black female as “dependent” on the state (Muhammad 2010; Mink 1994; Roberts 2014). The crime data presented in reports surrounding Operation Talon were not disaggregated by race or gender, but there is well-documented¹²⁵ state violence against “poor and low-income black women” (Roberts 2014, 1777). Moreover, Black women make up the group experiencing the fastest rate of growth in incarceration and often become entangled within the criminal legal system through crimes of

¹²⁵ Roberts documents forms of state violence against Black women such as the prison and foster care system (Roberts, 2012); pregnancy, substance abuse, and loss of parental rights (Roberts, 1993); public housing and intimate partner, familial, and police violence against Black women (Richie, 2012); and “Overpolicing and Underprotection” (Crenshaw, 2012, p. 1441).

poverty and drug offenses (Bonds 2021; Crenshaw 2012). Indeed, the time period of this project is situated within heightened legislative and media focus on the so-called “welfare queen” and on “teen mothers” – racialized as Black despite the fact that white women dominate welfare rolls (Schram 2006) – who ostensibly spend “their welfare checks on drugs and liquor” (Sparks 2006, 178). Finally, the USDA IG consistently reiterated the impetus for Operation Talon came directly out of welfare reform law, and initial data reveal it targeted drug offenses, specifically. While this analysis cannot answer Roberts’ (2014) call to understand the impact on low-income Black women, I do raise significant alarms about who was targeted by USDA agents and local law enforcement operations within Operation Talon, especially since the discourses the USDA OIG propagates about violent crime were starkly incongruent with the actual crime data reported.

USDA OIG, Operation Talon, and Federal Austerity Measures

In my analysis of testimony and supporting documents, I find that in addition to aggrandized discourses about violent crime and “fugitive felons,” the USDA IG also presented an exaggerated estimation of cost savings from Operation Talon to request a nearly 40% increase in budget from 1998 to 1999. USDA IG Viadero leveraged savings to gain support for an Operation Talon budget increase during the 1998 Appropriations hearing, as captured in three exchanges with Rep. Skeen (R-NM), then Rep. Kingston (R-GA), then Rep. Kaptur (D-OH) during the question-and-answer portion of the hearing below. In the first, Rep. Skeen (R-NM) delights in the number of people that will be excluded from food benefits through the work of the USDA OIG:

Mr. SKEEN. Before I go to Mr. Nethercutt, let me ask you, again, how many of those convicted felons and prison inmates did you say, sir? 30,000?

USDA IG VIADERO. There are about 20,000 fugitive felons out there and approximately 16,000 inmates¹²⁶, presently incarcerated.

Mr. SKEEN. So you have got 36,000?

USDA IG VIADERO. There are about 36,000, sir.

Mr. SKEEN. Is that not wonderful?

Rep. Skeen’s “Is that not wonderful?” statement symbolizes the typical legislative satisfaction echoed throughout hearings and exchanges about ridding a government program of presumed criminals. This is a stark encapsulation of Katz’s (1989) ‘undeserving poor’ as the “behavior and character” of those ensnared through Operation Talon do *not* “entitle them to the resources of others” (10). Legislators and the USDA OIG drew on the long history of affixing criminality to Blackness (Muhammad 2010; Taylor 2016) reinforced by decades of social scientific research and public and political discourses that pathologize Black poverty as emerging from a culture of crime and dependency (Katz 2015; Mink 1994; Monnat 2010; Sparks 2006; Kelley 2016; Muhammad 2012).

Additionally, in this 1998 Appropriations hearing, the USDA IG emphasized the need to replace a significant number¹²⁷ of USDA OIG agents that were cut for budget reasons over a four-year period (from 1994-1998). IG Viadero asserted “[w]e have taken the cuts--and ... they [USDA OIG agents] are riding the road and I think they are bringing the toll money back in here.” He reiterated the potential cost savings of \$50 million to the food stamp program through the exclusion of “about 20,000 fugitive felons out there and approximately 16,000

¹²⁶ The removal of individuals who are incarcerated is a separate initiative from Operation Talon, but the USDA OIG promoted them at the same time in reference to cost savings justifying the 1999 budget.

¹²⁷ One report noted the office dropped from 900 to 732 USDA OIG agents over 4 years, but Viadero also mentioned the loss of 135 agents in the two different 1998 Congressional hearings.

inmates” to justify a request of \$21.7 million for a 1999 Law Enforcement Initiative and \$3 million for other expenses. Despite the emphasis on food stamp fraud and Operation Talon in the hearings, my analysis of the USDA OIG supporting documents included a table that broke down the budget request for the \$21.7 million law enforcement initiative (Figure 5.5). The budget break down would have provided distribution of funding at the following amounts: 39.6% for “food stamp fraud” including Operation Talon, 12.9% for investigations into “child nutrition programs,” 22.6% for investigations into “rural rental housing,” and 17.5% for investigations into “emergency responses,” 5% for “backlog,” and 2.3% for technical equipment/surveillance vehicles. Notably, as indicated in the FTE column, this budget provided for 170 full time law enforcement staff, a similar number to what USDA IG Viadero had complained about losing to budget cuts.

Figure 5.5 USDA OIG Budget Request For A 1999 Law Enforcement Initiative In Written Supporting Documents For The 1998 Appropriations Hearing

1999 LAW ENFORCEMENT INITIATIVE (Based on OMB allowance)		
Initiative area	Dollars (in millions)	FTE's
Food stamp fraud	8.6	69
Child nutrition	2.8	23
Rural rental housing	4.9	39
Emergency responses	3.8	30
Farm, export and natural resources backlog	1.1	9
Technical equipment/surveillance vehicles5	0
Total	21.7	170

Source: 1998 Appropriations hearing

Also at the 1998 Appropriations Hearing, Rep. Kingston (R-GA) questioned the reasoning behind the budget request:

USDA IG VIADERO. First of all, this [Operation Talon] was not a funded operation. ...We diverted resources from other investigations in each region, and said let us just see what we are going to come up with on this first go-around. ... And again, it is a very costly operation, travel and per diem costs, so we fundamentally picked locations where we had at least suboffices at, because of these costs.

Mr. KINGSTON. But you are asking for money for it specifically now?

USDA IG VIADERO. Yes, sir, because I tried it as a pilot. It is so successful as a pilot, and there are in excess of 20,000 fugitive felons out there, that we believe are also on food stamps, we need money to go rockin' and rollin' across the country.

Here, with his enthusiasm for “rockin' and rollin' across the country,” Viadero demonstrates an eagerness to expand the carceral reach of the USDA OIG via budget increase for Operation Talon. Again, in the same 1998 hearing Rep. Kaptur (D-OH) asked for cost savings clarification:

Ms. Kaptur: I wanted to ask you, on Operation Talon, you said that more than \$50 million in the Food Stamp Program goes to convicted felons and prison inmates, and that as of January 13th, over 2,000 arrests had resulted in over two dozen cities. Do you have an estimated dollar savings from the arrests made thus far?

Mr. Viadero: From the arrests made thus far, I would think--to date ... approximately 600 people were removed from the program. However, if we took all 2,235 and calculated their contribution there, their estimated earning of about \$150 a month for those people, then it is between \$3-4 million.

Ms. Kaptur: That is a huge amount.

Mr. Viadero: That is if we keep them off for the year.

This quote illustrates the lack of detailed examination into how the USDA OIG calculated estimated exclusions. The cost savings presented here were based upon a *projected* number of “convicted felons and prison inmates.” In its first year, Operation Talon cost \$1.5 million in “diverted funds.” The reported “\$3-4 million” would be saved *only if all* 2235 ensnared individuals were both removed from and then kept off food benefits for an entire year. If this were the case, then Operation Talon would have saved \$2 for every \$1 the USDA spent. It is important to note that these calculations did not account for costs resulting from the USDA OIG

providing overtime and other support¹²⁸ to local law enforcement. Thus, the \$1.5 million only includes USDA costs, not full investigatory costs.

The USDA IG presented the annual cost savings of “\$3-4 million,” to which Rep. Kaptur (D-OH) simply replied “that is a huge amount.” Note, the 1998 food stamp budget was \$17 billion, making the estimate of “\$3-4 million” minimal¹²⁹ by comparison. The emphasis on crime and efforts to root out fraud from so-called “fugitives” who might also be hungry outweighed concern for detailed review over whether Operation Talon was actually worth the expense. Operation Talon was always positioned as a “win-win” protecting against both waste and fraud, with no recorded concern for the tactics used to ensnare individuals.

The unexamined methods or broader fiscal benefit of Operation Talon reflected the twinned logics of neoliberal austerity and disciplinarity (Peck 2003), characterized by government retraction and the defunding of social services – legitimated through discourse about crime, waste, and criminality – even as state commitments for the expansion of the carceral state remain unquestioned. To this day, there remains a lack of any substantial evidence provided about SNAP cost savings made possible by Operation Talon.¹³⁰ Nonetheless, the USDA OIG continued to deploy notions about cost savings through disciplinary exclusions (e.g., sanctions and violations) as a critical part of their overall budget justification.

¹²⁸ Described in detail under “relationship building” below.

¹²⁹ \$3-4 millions of a \$17 billion budget is 0.0176% - 0.0235%.

¹³⁰ My examination finds that 2003 was the last year that cost savings were mentioned related to Operation Talon: At the 2003 House of Representatives Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry for the Committee on Agriculture hearing on the Review of the Operations of the Food Stamp Program, IG Fong’s opening statement includes the following remarks: “... individual States are best positioned to estimate how much money Operation Talon has saved. It is difficult, however, for most States to determine cost savings because, even though a fugitive is removed from eligibility, there may be other people in that household who receive benefits. New Jersey, which has developed a formula for approximating savings, estimates that \$1.9 million has been saved since 1996 in that State.” Yet Fong does not clarify if this includes the cost for local law enforcement outside of state food stamp offices.

Ultimately, the 40% increased budget request was not approved for FY 1999, but additional 1998 Appropriation committee hearing debates focused on the fact that that USDA OIG did not yet have access to the federal Asset Forfeiture Fund (AFF) granted 2 years prior. Rep. Skeen (R-NM) clarified that the USDA OIG was “seeking ... almost a 40 percent increase to your budget for fiscal year 1999, and you have stated that the Department of Justice is holding you up on receiving funds through forfeitures ... [for] more than two years.” The AFF receives funds related to federal investigations resulting in forfeitures, and the USDA OIG can receive and then utilize AFF from forfeitures in which they participated (United States Department of Justice 2019).¹³¹ By 2000, the USDA OIG was receiving AFF and used these funds to support relationships between the federal office of the USDA OIG and state law enforcement through Operation Talon.

Building Relationships to Expand the Carceral State

From its inception, the USDA OIG utilized Operation Talon to build relationships with state and local law enforcement as well as state food stamp offices. Police officers attended the December White House press announcement in 1997 where Vice President Gore promoted the new initiative. According to the USDA IG “[t]hey [the police officers] could not get over the fact that ... 90 percent of the doors they knocked on produced their fugitives.” He went on to note that “as a result, OIG and FNS [USDA Food and Nutrition Services] have signed a joint letter to

¹³¹ “There is a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) ... establishing OIG-USDA’s participation in the AFF ... [for] forfeitures worked with OIG-USDA.” (United States Department of Justice 2019, 20)

all State social service agency heads, informing them of the need to begin similar types of matching in their respective States.”¹³²

The first Operation Talon Report (United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General n.d.) appealed to state expansion by noting that 50% of costs incurred “while investigating fraud in the Food Stamp Program ... including conducting the matches ... are considered State entitlement funds, which means if the States request such reimbursements, they must be paid” (2). Here, the USDA OIG was expressly leveraging the entitlement nature of the food stamp program funding to expand Operation Talon.

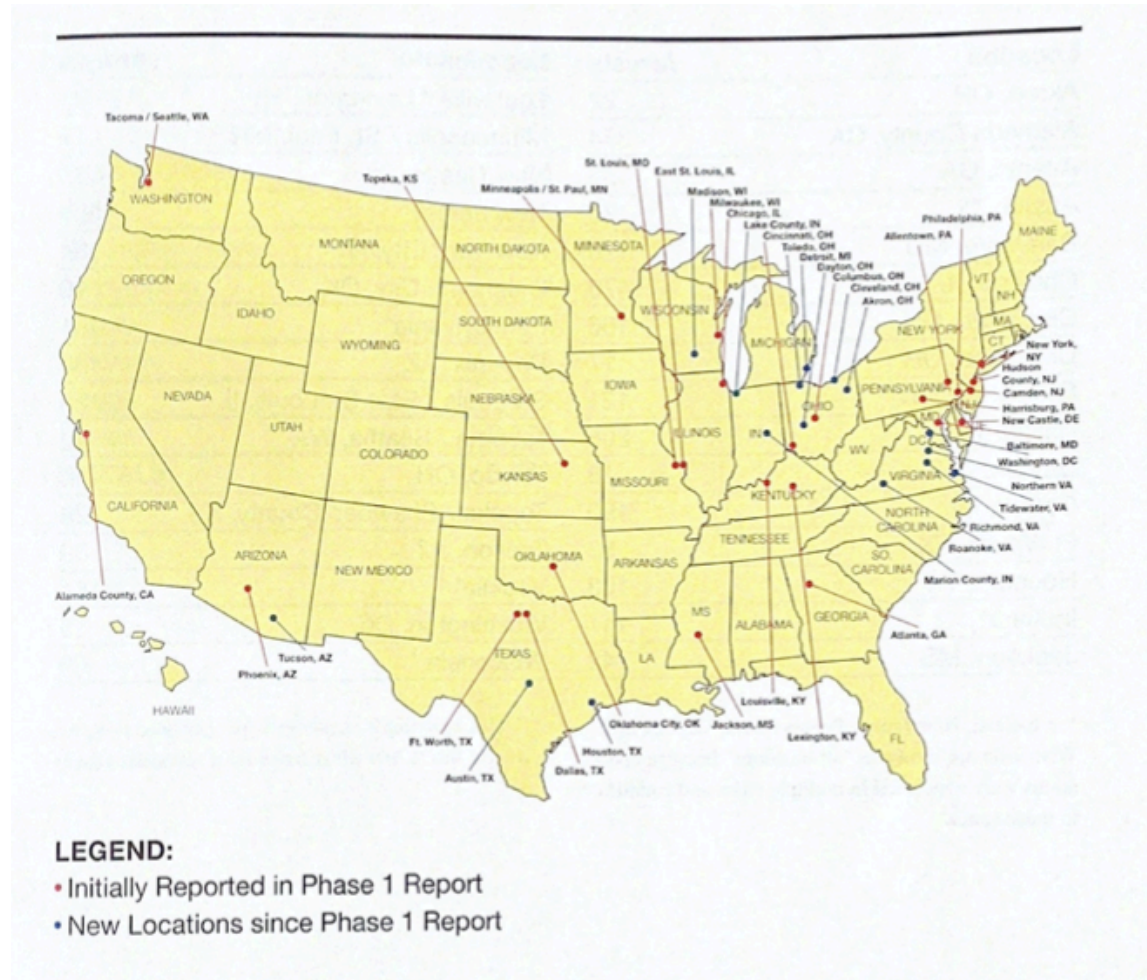
Indeed, Operation Talon expanded quickly. By February 1999, Operation Talon included “42 metropolitan areas in 23 states and the District of Columbia”¹³³ (United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General 1999, 2. See Figure 5.6, below for a map of locations). The map elucidates several details, including the relative dearth of rural areas included in the program and an emphasis on post-industrial, multiracial cities with significant Black and Brown populations. While the USDA IG indicates that Operation Talon initiatives were based in locations of existing satellite stations, their office investigates potential fraud in all USDA programs and includes locations across the country. Operation Talon did require local law enforcement cooperation to verify warrants and coordinate arrests, so locations also required

¹³² This excerpt is from the written USDA IG Viadero testimony for the 1998 House of Representatives Subcommittee on Department Operations, Nutrition, and Foreign Agriculture for the Committee on Agriculture *Hearing to Review the Enforcement of Antifraud Provisions of the Food Stamp Act*.

¹³³ Akron, OH; Alameda County, CA; Atlanta, GA; Austin, TX; Baltimore, MD; Camden, NJ; Chicago, IL; Cincinnati, OH; Cleveland, OH; Columbus, OH; Dallas, TX; Dayton, OH; Ft. Worth, TX; Houston, TX; Hudson County, NJ; Jackson, MS; Lake County, IN; Louisville/Lexington, KY (85); Madison, WI; Marion County, IN; Milwaukee, WI; Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN; New Castle, DE (15); New York City, NY (64); Oklahoma City, OK (19); Pennsylvania, All; Phoenix, AZ; Richmond, VA; Roanoke, VA; St. Louis, MO/E. St. Louis, IL; Tacoma/Seattle, WA; Tidewater, VA; Topeka/Shawnee County, KS(6); Tuscon, AZ; Virginia (“Northern”); Washington, DC (USDA Office of the Inspector General (1999) p. 8 + p. 3 compiled table and map by author).

partnering with local law enforcement with the means to surveillance and sting support operations. Most importantly, the locations of Operation Talon activities reinforced the notion that both crime and “fugitive felons” emanate from urban contexts.

Figure 5.6 Scanned map of Operation Talon report original and expanded locations as of February 1999 found on page 8.



Source: USDA Office of the Inspector General (1999)

After the second year of Operation Talon, at the 1999 Appropriations Committee hearing, USDA IG Viadero described additional personal outreach to the “National Governors Association and the individual superintendents of State police or highway patrols across the

country” and plans to set up a “joint operation between the Office of Inspector General and New York State Police ... using the resources of the violent fugitive warrant squads ... in place.”

The USDA OIG accessed the federal Asset Forfeiture Fund (AFF) for investigations and forfeitures in which they participated,¹³⁴ which was used to create relationships with local law enforcement. In the 2000 Appropriations Committee, the USDA IG described that they used AFF as a means to “refund the amount that these local agencies spend on overtime” and to purchase “specialized equipment such as if we run a sting and we need a magnetometer to ensure the safety of all the parties” in Operation Talon. At the 2001 Appropriations Committee, Viadero described how OIG officers used AFF to electronically track an individual’s food stamp purchases to assist local police:

USDA IG Viadero: we were part of the investigation that found [redacted] in Texas. We were tracking him real time through EBT¹³⁵ systems ... from Kentucky to near El Paso. That is an excellent use of these forfeiture funds. We just so happened to have Operation Talon ongoing simultaneously in El Paso, so we were able to be there on time-in real time, online with local police agencies to give them the information they needed to have this fellow surrender ...

...

Mr. BONILLA. ... And for the record, this person that you are referring to is a serial killer that was being tracked by several law enforcement agencies. That is very interesting. I did not know the extent of your office's involvement in that.

USDA IG VIADERO. We are all over.

Unprompted, Rep. Bonilla, (R-TX), inserted the information that this was a “serial killer being tracked by several law enforcement agencies” reinforcing both the benefit of USDA OIG electronic tracking of food stamp purchases through the EBT system while also championing

¹³⁴ See p. 161 above on how the USDA receives AFF.

¹³⁵ EBT stands for Electronic Bank Transfer, how SNAP benefits are provided.

law enforcement efforts. When USDA IG Viadero stated, “We are all over,” he indicated this expansive national coverage was intentional, and was bolstered by Operation Talon initiatives.

At the 2002 Appropriations Committee, Acting USDA IG, Joyce Fleischman reiterated the benefits of federal and local relationships, and how critical they were to the future protection of “USDA programs and resources” in her opening statement:

[T]he catastrophic events of September 11 highlighted the urgent and increased need for Federal, State and local coordination of efforts to protect the Nation's food supply. I can't say enough about that. Operation Talon, in my estimation, has been one of the most successful operations I have ever seen in some 26 years of Government service. We have bonded, if you will, with a large number of State and local police agencies, as well as social service departments across the country. Using our forfeiture funds, we have purchased equipment for them that they can use, not only in Operation Talon, but in responding to any sort of threat in their particular localities and neighborhoods. I am really pleased with that, and I think it is one of the greatest benefits I have ever seen of asset forfeiture statute authority and work between Federal, State, and local law enforcement agencies. Recently we met with top USDA officials to emphasize these points and to offer OIG's insight and assistance as the Department and each of the agencies undertake an assessment of their vulnerabilities and the development of solutions for these vulnerabilities. OIG regional managers are meeting with departmental field staff and State and local officials, particularly law enforcement and health officials, to alert them and join in a concerted effort to protect the agricultural economy and the Department's assets.

Here, Fleischman mirrored her predecessor’s discourses of “bonded” federal and state agencies and beneficial use of AFF funds “not only in Operation Talon, but in responding to any sort of threat in their particular localities and neighborhoods.” I could not find any inventory on how these funds were used or the type of equipment purchased for state law enforcement. In detailing lessons learned from the carceral reach of Operation Talon, this allowed her office to “offer insight and assistance” as the USDA assessed “their vulnerabilities” to potential future attacks. The IG directly named the “urgent and increased need” noting that she “can't say enough about that” coordination of federal and local efforts to protect the US food supply after

September 11th, reflecting the ways in which the so-called ‘War on Terror’ worked to accelerate the already expanding carceral state (Taylor 2016, 121).

The USDA OIG’s circulation of racialized discourses about poverty that stigmatized and criminalized the hungry flowed across a range of differently positioned actors, many of whom were operating within neoliberal logics that mark the poor as lazy, criminal, and lacking work ethic (Katz 2015). Legislators drew from the well-worn racist tropes about criminals to emphasize the need for disciplinarity as a means to reduce “waste,” “fraud,” and “abuse.” This outsized focus allowed Operation Talon to operate with little examination, allowing the program, and more broadly, the OIG, acting as the USDA’s disciplinary arm, to go unchecked from its creation and implementation in 1997 through today.

That said, as much as it was promoted and celebrated between 1998 and 2003, there was minimal public legislative discourse on Operation Talon after 2003. USDA IG Fong reported out on Operation Talon to the House Agriculture Committees in 2003 and 2010, but there was no evidence of publicly recorded legislative reaction to the report. The Semiannual Report to Congress (SARC) includes Operation Talon in almost all reports from 1998 through the most recently available report in 2020. A relatively unknown and unquestioned initiative, Operation Talon has become quietly enveloped as a disciplinary tool of the USDA OIG.

Beyond Operation Talon: Discourses of Food Stamp Program Abuse

Throughout my analysis, legislators and the USDA IG mirrored the well-worn criminality and disciplinary discourses from welfare reform in discussions of the food stamp program. I present several exchanges emblematic of legislative and USDA OIG discourses on waste, fraud, and abuse to suggest how Operation Talon was similarly framed in other USDA OIG and

legislative discourses and practices regarding food stamp investigations, felony exclusions, program violations, and trafficking. Additionally, despite the extraordinary focus on fraud and abuse in hearings from 2000-2018, food stamp supporters consistently reported low fraud. This finding was primarily met with legislative silence or countered with discourses of criminality.

This testimony from the 1998 Appropriations Subcommittee hearing shows how USDA IG Viadero, while reporting out on Operation Talon, wove in other methods of exclusion to the food stamp program, including exclusion due to incarceration:

I think the surprising part is as we go through and do our State by State jail matches, with people that are in prison and still receiving food benefits, which, to me, is ludicrous, yet we run into people calling us and saying prisoners have a right to eat, and I thought that the dietician at the individual Department of Correction is capable of giving them food. I do not know where they are going to go at 8:00 o'clock at night, if they are going to run to the 7-11 and use a couple of the stamps. [Laughter.] To me, it is absolutely ludicrous, but people will keep them on there because, needless to say, that does impact the families' amount of food stamps, food benefit that's in there. ... We have found instances where a person was sitting in jail in Maryland and his EBT card was being used. So we know it is out there. We know what is happening. That cost with the inmates alone is in excess of--if we get the inmate, we suspend those benefits for a year, we take a 12-month period, that's in excess of \$24 million. That is a lot of money. That is a direct savings that this operation has to the public. We prevent \$24 million from going out there.

These remarks and congressional laughter underscore the USDA IG and legislator derision of those who were incarcerated, and the dismissal of the needs of their families. These comments came at a time when a growing number of poor people of color were incarcerated and emphasize how assumptions about criminality accentuated the lack of concern or care for the poor expressed by policy makers. USDA IG's reference to "State by State jail matches" to exclude individuals who were incarcerated was enacted with welfare reform and has present-day effects. States are required to use the Social Security Administration's Prisoner Verification System to exclude from food stamps anyone convicted of a crime and incarcerated for more

than 30 days. The USDA OIG audits states' implementation of this rule and can suggest sanctions on the state for not following the rule.

The rule that excludes individuals who are incarcerated is also used by states to establish one of many possible "Intentional Program Violations" (IPVs)¹³⁶ and sanction or disqualify individuals from federal food benefits. For example, the state of Wisconsin provides this scenario in their handbook for establishing an FoodShare¹³⁷ IPV claim (Wisconsin Department of Health and Human Services 2020):

Mark is the only person in his family getting FoodShare benefits. Mark finds out he is going to jail for the month, so he gives his QUEST card to his friend, Sally, to do her grocery shopping while he is in jail. (3)

The situation described here is just one of many types of FoodShare fraud,¹³⁸ which the state of Wisconsin defines in the following manner: "If any information you give is found to be incorrect, you may be denied benefits and/or be subject to criminal prosecution for knowingly providing false information" (ibid., 3). An IPV results in disqualification from FoodShare for at least one year and can be made permanent depending on the severity and total number of violations.¹³⁹ "If charged criminally, a court can also bar a person from the FoodShare program for an additional 18 months" (ibid, 4). IPVs are federally defined but states have options in how

¹³⁶ See SNAP Fact Sheet in Appendix A for program violations.

¹³⁷ FoodShare is Wisconsin's name for the food stamp program.

¹³⁸ FoodShare IPVs include "Allowing another person to use your FoodShare benefits to purchase food that is not for your household. Returning items purchased with FoodShare benefits for cash or gift cards. Using FoodShare benefits to buy or trade for ineligible FoodShare items, like alcohol, tobacco, or rent. Using another person's FoodShare benefits, identification card, or other documentation claim." (Wisconsin Department of Health and Human Services 2020)

¹³⁹ IPV "by a person in your household may result in his or her disqualification from FoodShare. This means the person will not be able to get FoodShare benefits: 1) For one year after the first violation. 2) For two years after the second violation. 3) Permanently for the third violation." (State of WI, DHHS, 2020, p. 3) Trading FoodShare for controlled substance like drugs or alcohol for the second time results in a permanent disqualification. Trafficking FoodShare benefits of more than \$500, or trading benefits for guns ammunition or explosives is and automatic permanent disqualification (ibid, p. 4)

they allege and prosecute fraud and determine what results in a permanent disqualification from food benefits.

State fraud control units have been in place within food stamp offices as mandated by the Food Security Act of 1985 (Headworth 2021). Headworth (2021) details federal incentives¹⁴⁰ for investigating IPVs, and notes how within the food stamp offices, “Fraud investigators ... identify rule breaking as deliberate and cite clients’ dispositions to explain the behavior” (24). The sanctions for “rule breaking” are typically administrative, but the fraud investigators can refer clients for criminal charges (ibid, 25). Fording, Soss, and Schram (2011), Monnat (2010), and Roberts (2012) have all documented that criminalized welfare sanctions have a disproportionate impact on Black and Latino households. While much of the investigation and sanctioning of fraud happens at the state office or through local law enforcement, the USDA OIG investigates food stamp trafficking.

In the 2012 House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform hearing titled *Food Stamp Fraud as a Business Model, USDA’s Struggle to Police Store Owners*, Rep. Issa (R-CA) captured a current frame of food stamp trafficking with this statement:

It is not an accident that you find out that somewhere in the neighborhood an entity will trade you \$100 in food stamps for \$50 in cash so you can go score. That score is bad enough, but let's understand somewhere there is a family that relied on food that instead got nothing.

Here, he drew from a color-blind racialized trope of drug use and criminality in discourses of food stamps being exchanged for cash to “go score.” Even though this hearing was purportedly

¹⁴⁰ States receive 35% of recovered funds from an IPV (Headworth, 2021, p. 33).

about problems with policing stores, Rep. Issa managed to blame individual, fraudulent behaviors.

In the same 2012 Oversight hearing, USDA IG Fong described that trafficking food stamp benefits, including the *intent* to traffic, can result in a permanent disqualification, but does not necessarily result in an automatic criminal investigation. Fong further described that limited resources for criminal prosecution often limited conviction for food stamp fraud. Additionally, she detailed how the USDA OIG focused on prosecuting stores related to trafficking as the monetary restitution is much higher and referred individuals who participated in trafficking to state and local officials. Rep. Gowdy (R-SC) inquired about criminal convictions wondering if that could result in stricter punishment – debarment from all federal programs:

USDA IG Fong. I believe that the government suspension and debarment process is an effective process, and USDA has implemented regulations and, as a whole, the Department could do a better job of implementing that. I think that there are concerns, as the Under Secretary has expressed, about timeliness and length of time. I think we need to engage in those discussions because my understanding is that if you have somebody convicted of a criminal felony, that disqualification, while it may be effective vis-a-vis the food stamp program, it is not really as effective for other government programs. And if you have a criminal conviction, it should be a pretty quick process, because the conviction, in and of itself, is sufficient evidence to proceed, so it should not take a long time to do this, maybe a month, two months.

Mr. Gowdy. Well, let me say this. I distinctly remember spending four days in a courtroom prosecuting a lady for disturbing a school, and I spent three days in a courtroom prosecuting someone for throwing an iced tea cup at a DEA agent. So resources and time should not be the only barometer by which we decide whether a case should be prosecuted or not, or else we would never prosecute petty crimes. So whatever needs to be changed in the process, I hope you will give all of us that have expressed an interest in it a list so we can put a little more teeth into the punishments when people systemically defraud the Government.

In this exchange, Rep. Gowdy (R-SC) captured the reality of the criminalization of and the significance of low-level offenses to the expansion of the carceral state (Murakawa 2014; Taylor

2016; Bonds 2015). USDA IG Fong expressed her interest in “criminal conviction” for the purposes of government debarment. Rep. Gowdy’s noted to have USDA IG Fong provide recommendations to “all of us that have expressed an interest” for changing the process shows there were multiple interests in exclusions for “people [who] systemically defraud the Government.” Up through this point, the USDA IG had emphasized and prosecuted stores that participated in trafficking given the focus on monetary restitution. Yet, echoing the foundational logics of Operation Talon, USDA IG Fong indicated interest from her office in finding additional ways to discipline and exclude the ‘undeserving hungry’ from food benefits.

Conclusion: Protecting Program “Integrity” to Exclude the ‘Undeserving’ Hungry

The USDA’s Office of the Inspector General has a mission “to promote economy, efficiency, and integrity of USDA programs and operations through audits, investigations, inspections, data analytics, and reviews” (USDA OIG, 2021). This measure of “integrity of USDA programs” is built on government savings, expanding disciplinary control, or a combination of the two. Like SNAP integrity related to self-sufficiency highlighted in Chapter 3, the protection of program integrity related to presumed fraud has almost nothing to do with the efficient delivery of food benefits or preventing hunger.

The USDA OIG and legislators drew from discourses of dependency, criminality, and poverty (Sparks 2006; Hinton 2016; Greenbaum 2015) and overstated panics regarding crime (Hall et al, 2013 [1978]) in ways that reinforced long standing racial and gender hierarchies (Muhammad, 2010; Roberts, 2014). I focused on one under-explored program of the USDA OIG, Operation Talon, to trace how it was initiated, particularly because it still functioning (United

States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General 2020) but I found no evidence of it being publicly mentioned today.

(Re)producing discourses of criminality in Operation Talon, legislators and the USDA OIG worked together to co-create policies to exclude the ‘undeserving’ hungry and protect program “integrity” through the carceral exclusion of individuals from federal food benefits. While I closed with the brief extension of other food stamp fraud and violation policies, it remains to be seen how the criminalization of hunger appears over time. Additional research is needed to historically situate Operation Talon within the longer context of sanctions and criminalization of “fraud” investigations by food stamp offices since 1985 (Headworth, 2021), the enforcement of excluding incarcerated individuals and those with alleged drug and other felonies, and the increased interest by the current USDA IG in food stamp trafficking and prosecuting individual violations as noted above.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION: HUNGER IN THE MIDST OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

While the vital federal “safety net” (Senator Lugar (R-IN), quoted in King, 1999, p. 370) against hunger was protected from devolution to a block grant during welfare reform, my research documents how protections for the Food Stamp Program frayed over the course of 2000 to 2018. My analysis of post-welfare reform legislative discourses surrounding food stamps, now named the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), illustrates the important connections in the discursive framings of the poor and hungry and the ways that such discourses legitimate austerity and new forms of exclusion to public benefits. I demonstrate how welfare reform significantly impacted the food stamp program. It mandated a stricter work requirement with time limits on benefits, it introduced non-citizen immigrant exclusion, and barred individuals deemed “fugitive felons,” and anyone incarcerated or convicted of a drug crime from food benefits. My examination illuminates how legislators reproduced gendered and racist stereotypes in three overlapping and reinforcing discourses about SNAP that constructed recipients as obese, dependent, and criminal. While SNAP remains an entitlement program, during my period of study, it has sustained increased scrutiny and efforts to reduce the program, including the introduction of a whole host of new disciplinary qualifiers implemented with the goal of excluding the ‘undeserving hungry’ (Katz 1989; 2015).

At the heart of my dissertation is a simple question: what *do* we have money to fund through federal hunger relief? While bemoaning expenditures and costs of the program, my research reveals that legislators readily funded work training programs (Chapter 3), obesity prevention (Chapter 4), and efforts to surveil and police the hungry, further expanding the reach and scope of the carceral state (Chapter 5). Legislators obsessed over details about the

everyday lives of the poor and hungry, examining what they purchased, where they shopped, and whether they made “good” choices. At the same time, my analysis of legislative debates reveals that there was never an assessment as to whether these programs actually reduced hunger or created cost-savings. Rather, legislators questioned whether we *really* need SNAP, citing unsubstantiated high rates of waste, fraud, and abuse (Chapters 3 & 5) and uncritical and paternalistic analyses of obesity (Chapter 4). These efforts are contemporary examples of a much longer history of anti-poverty policymaking designed to blame, discipline, and punish the poor (Roberts 2014; Hinton 2016; Kornbluh and Mink 2019). Legislative debates about federal anti-hunger policy emphasized SNAP program integrity and tax-payer funding in ways that cast out the ‘undeserving hungry.’ Discourses contrasting the (non-white) undeserving hungry against the hardworking (white) taxpayer supported the creation of new exclusionary boundaries around SNAP and (re)produced racialized and gendered assumptions about the poor, who were deemed dependent, obese, criminal, or incapable of making healthy food choices.

In Chapter 3, I showed that the legislative discourses about SNAP in the early years of my study (2000-2009) predominantly focused on low rates of participation in SNAP. These discourses impacted the 2002 and 2008 Farm Bills, both of which included new policies that targeted outreach and the simplification of SNAP sign-up to boost enrollment. In fact, my research shows that the renaming and rebranding of the program from food stamps to SNAP reflected a desire to minimize the stigma associated with the program. Neoliberal discourses about dependency and work were present in these debates but did not gain traction in discourses or policy until the later years of my study (2009-2018), as conservative politics

coalesced around intensifying racial resentment and anti-government antagonism associated with the Tea Party (Melamed, 2011).

During this later period, legislative debates about SNAP cast it as a ballooning program rife with abuse and federal waste. Astonishingly, these discussions omitted analysis of sharpening socioeconomic inequality and the impact of the Great Recession on hunger and poverty. Bipartisan efforts to save taxpayer funds circulated through color-blind discourses about program “integrity,” “quality control,” and “cost-effectiveness.” These debates relied upon well-established discourses of racialized and gendered dependency and welfare abuse but did so with an increasingly nuanced color-blind framing purported to protect SNAP for “American taxpayers” when they really needed it. Contentious SNAP policy debates ushered in new discourses about “self-sufficiency” and the implementation of workfare-style policies, channeling funding to expanded employment and training programs in the 2014 and 2018 Farm Bills. Legislative discourses continued to sow doubt about the integrity of SNAP, through the intensified deployment of notions of waste, fraud, and abuse and people and states “gaming the system.”

While, ultimately, there were no dramatic changes to SNAP eligibility or overall policies in the final 2014 or 2018 Farm Bills, initial bills proposed by the House during these years introduced sweeping SNAP reforms. For example, in an early 2013 version that passed the House but not the Senate, legislators removed SNAP reauthorization from the Farm Bill, passing the Farm Bill without SNAP for the first time since 1973. In the 2018 Farm Bill, early House debates considered, but never submitted, transition to a block grant as part of legislation.

In Chapter 4, I critically analyzed legislative discourses revolving around the so called ‘hunger obesity paradox,’ drawing from foundations of racialized and gendered dietary control. Mainstream health discourses positioned the ‘paradox’ in simplistic terms: hunger is caused by lack of food, but obesity is caused by excess calories, obscuring the deep complexities and racist histories underpinning and producing both dynamics (Strings 2019; Reese 2018; Campos 2004). Obesity was readily used as a scapegoat to blame poor health on poor food consumption patterns, reinforcing the assumption that obesity automatically means poor health. Despite the handwringing about obesity, as evidenced in the hearings themselves, food purchasing patterns are not substantially different between households who participate in SNAP and those who do not, and caloric intake is comparable between individuals who are low or high income. Yet, these unsubstantiated claims were part of a dominant discursive framework of the ‘hunger obesity paradox,’ promoted by health experts and reinforced by legislators.

Debates about the paradox elided well-documented structural inequities causing both hunger and obesity, namely structural causes of poverty such as inequitable access to employment, education, and housing. My analysis of legislative discourses revealed that legislators blamed obesity on poor individual choices. Legislators and witnesses alike positioned the poor as in need of education, incentives, or diet restrictions in order to make nutritious, calorie conscious choices. The emphasis on obesity further legitimated increased funding towards dietary discipline and surveillance, rather than a focus on making sure the hungry have food.

In Chapter 5, I documented a deeply disturbing, yet little researched program illustrating the interconnections between social welfare and the carceral state. Operation Talon, a law

enforcement initiative of the USDA Office of Inspector General (USDA OIG) created in 1997, introduced new forms of surveillance and policing to the food stamp program. Welfare reform enabled law enforcement to request identifying information (e.g., name, address, picture) of SNAP recipients from the social services office without a warrant, and permanently banned so-called “fugitive felons” and individuals with parole and probation violations from SNAP. Under its own congressionally afforded directive, the USDA OIG matched “fugitive felon” database lists with the food stamp lists to identify individuals on both lists. Critically, these were not individuals wanted for food stamp fraud or violations. Rather, they were simply newly ineligible for food stamps through welfare reform. The USDA OIG welfare reform provisions and regulatory structures helped to create Operation Talon, which worked directly with local law enforcement officials to arrest individuals seeking food assistance.

The USDA OIG legitimated the program through “tough on crime” and “war on drugs” rhetoric, exaggerating the type and number of violent crimes, mobilizing racist and criminalizing discourses of urban violence, and citing program cost reductions achieved by the removal of undeserving individuals from food stamps through Operation Talon. While decrying waste and abuse, the USDA OIG facilitated new partnerships with local law enforcement to work together on cases, funding hundreds of hours of police overtime pay and new equipment purchases. Operation Talon was heavily promoted between 1997 and 2002, even cited by Vice President Gore as a presidential initiative. I did not find evidence of public discussion about Operation Talon after 2003. However, its “success” and current arrests continue to be included in the

most recent USDA OIG Semi-Annual Reports in September 2020. Since 1997, Operation Talon has led to the arrest of over 18,629¹⁴¹ individuals.

Sowing Doubt in Federal Hunger Relief

These findings all beg the question of *why* I found such a legislative emphasis on discourses of waste, fraud, abuse, criminality and obesity. To consider this question, I summarize the negligible changes in food benefit allotments. In 2001, benefits averaged \$0.81 per meal and \$75 per person/month (equivalent to the 2021 purchasing power of \$2.33 and \$216, respectively). In 2018, on average, benefits provided \$125 for a single person and \$255 across all households and \$1.40 per meal. While it might look like per meal purchasing power decreased, these time periods cannot be directly compared because the reported average is impacted by household size, which varies year to year.¹⁴² Yet, purchasing power certainly has not dramatically increased. Furthermore, even in an improved economy, more than one quarter of all households with children headed by a single woman (28.7% in 2018), and nearly one fifth of all Black households (19.1% in 2019) experienced hunger, which was the *lowest* percentage hunger documented in either of these household groups for the time period provided (2001-2019) (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service 2019). Much like during welfare reform, discourses about the undeserving hungry sowed doubt in SNAP, justifying funding cuts to a purportedly ballooning program and preventing benefits

¹⁴¹ See note 113.

¹⁴² 2001 and 2018 averages cannot be directly compared, since the reported average is impacted by household size which varies year to year. For example, there has been a consistent increase in SNAP participation in households with an elderly member (over 60), and the average would include small household size and small monthly benefits – some as low as the 2018 minimum allotment of \$16 per month.

increases for recipients, even during a recession. Further, the doubt offered protection against potential outrage for low benefits amidst abject hunger in a way that persists during stark economic crisis, including the current pandemic.

In 2020, very necessary precautions to prevent COVID outbreaks halted the typical work patterns and brought the global economy to a standstill. The pandemic exacerbated gaps in federal hunger relief that have long existed. Wolfson and Leung (2020) report that at the start of the pandemic in March 2020, food insecurity rates tripled from 2019. In July 2020, 43.3% of households under 250% of the poverty line experienced hunger, with hunger documented in 47.7% of Black, 51.2% of Latino households, and 39.8% of white households; 57.9% of households with children; 63.5% of individuals who lost their job; and 71.9% of households with more than one job loss (ibid, 1764. See also, Feeding America 2021). Further, Wolfson and Leung (2020) note that there were minimal changes between March 2020 and July 2020 in rates of hunger, which would have included emergency SNAP allotments and stimulus payments related to the pandemic.

For additional insight, I summarize the impact of The Families First Coronavirus Response Act on SNAP in 2020. The Act enabled a 15% increase to SNAP benefits, suspension of strict work requirements, and additional flexible funding for SNAP in order for states to respond quickly with hunger relief. The Trump administration's interpretation of 15% emergency increase did not allow for an extension of the maximum SNAP benefits allotment. As noted by Rosenbaum (2021) at the Center for Budget Policy and Priorities, "[u]nder this interpretation, the 40 percent of SNAP households that *already* qualified for the maximum benefit didn't qualify for an emergency allotment" (emphasis in the original). This means that, in 2020, the

families with the lowest income and the fewest cash resources – **40% of all SNAP households** – did not receive the congressionally authorized emergency increase in SNAP benefits. The Biden administration reversed this policy (Rosenbaum 2021). Additionally, as recently as February 2021,¹⁴³ all 23 House Committee on Agriculture Republicans voted to *not extend* the emergency increase in SNAP benefits during Farm Bill budget reconciliation. The 25 Democrats on the committee voted in favor, so the COVID-related emergency benefits are extended through September 2021. In the hearing, Rep Cammack (R-FL) also submitted an amendment to reallocate SNAP emergency funds towards SNAP workforce and training, which failed to pass.

In his comments during the hearing, Rep. McGovern (D-MA) reminded his colleagues that, on average, the SNAP emergency funding provides an additional \$27 per month, in the middle of a pandemic. I cannot overstate that these emergency funds – which only were extended in 2021 through a 25 to 23 vote – provide less than \$1 per day or \$0.30 per meal. While atrocious, this is not shocking considering the onslaught of legislative discourses that circulated around waste, fraud, abuse, and obesity, which I documented in the congressional agricultural committees between 2000 and 2018.

Making Changes To Anti-Hunger Policy And Future Inquiries

As a dietitian by training, grounded in feminist critiques and critical poverty and race studies, and after reviewing 138 legislative hearings between 2000 and 2018 on the largest federal hunger relief program, I close this dissertation with a few suggestions and further inquiries into SNAP policy changes. First and foremost, legislators and administrators must find

¹⁴³ In the Feb 10, 2021 Agriculture & Nutrition FY2021 Budget Reconciliation Markup. (U.S. House of Representatives Office of the Clerk 2021)

a better way to listen to SNAP participants and gather feedback. For it to be an effective program, SNAP should respond directly to the needs of participants, but it was unclear if and how SNAP participant input is ever received.

In my review of testimonies, it was apparent that, *like me*, most of the hearing witnesses – medical, nutritional, economic, bureaucratic, policy, legislative, charitable hunger, and food bank executive experts – had little to no personal experience living with hunger or receiving SNAP benefits. There were only four witnesses who were identified as current or former SNAP participants in *all* of the legislative hearings. For reference, in 2019, SNAP served approximately 40 million individuals in a given month. Moreover, legislators patronizingly treated SNAP participants in legislative hearings. The typical “go to” legislative witness for understanding lived experiences with hunger was not a person who had actually experienced hunger, but rather was an academic researcher on food insecurity or a hunger relief non-profit executive. Clearly, given the power hierarchy of administrators over SNAP participants, this endeavor to solicit feedback should not be undertaken lightly as it runs the risk of further marginalizing or exploiting the life experiences of SNAP participants. The individuals most affected by SNAP policy changes are also the ones who would create a better and more responsive hunger relief system to their needs.

I offer two suggestions for anti-hunger advocates: to push for an unqualified increase in benefits and to call for an end to Operation Talon. These both will require directly calling attention to the dog whistle discourses of SNAP waste, fraud, abuse, and obesity for what they really are: racist and gendered stereotypes drawing from a much older racist history of disciplining the poor in the U.S. My project contributes to examinations about the

criminalization of hunger, but more work in this vein is needed, particularly research on SNAP access for immigrants, Indigenous nations, rural areas, farm and food labor practices, and health as related to the Farm Bill. I detail my two calls for anti-hunger advocates below.

Increase SNAP Benefits

In general, advocates should push to increase SNAP benefits. Given how small SNAP benefits allotment are, and how many Americans experience hunger, this should be easy. And yet, as evidenced above in the Republican House Committee on Agriculture vote to end the 15% increase – an average \$0.30 per meal, during a pandemic – it will not be easy. For what it's worth, Rep. McGovern – one of the sole legislators in my study to talk about the structural causes of hunger causes (e.g., low wages, and the need for multiple part time unbenefited jobs) – is attempting to draw from the current lessons of the pandemic and use his position on the Congressional Rules Committee to launch a national Hunger Initiative. Rep. McGovern's federal hunger relief initiative could draw cross coalition support in Congress for increased SNAP benefits while calling attention to root causes of poverty. Increasing SNAP benefits does not replace living wages, affordable housing, equitable access to jobs, health care, and education. Yet, SNAP can respond effectively and quickly to provide much needed hunger relief. The ultimate goal should be to work towards the elimination of SNAP, not through exclusions and restrictions, but living wage jobs, adequate healthcare, and safe and secure housing and neighborhoods. But improving safety in communities cannot be achieved through the intensification of policing and the expansion of the carceral state, which leads to my second call for anti-hunger advocates.

End Operation Talon and the Criminalization of Poverty

Operation Talon must be eliminated. Moreover, the program – which has operated for over two decades with little to no oversight or public attention – must be investigated to document what it has funded, how it has been used by the USDA Office of Inspector General (USDA OIG), and who it targets. Some of these objectives could be achieved through the elimination of all welfare reform policies that resulted in criminally-based exclusions from SNAP and allowed for the creation of Operation Talon. Efforts must also include the elimination of warrantless law enforcement access for identifying information from social services offices. Ultimately, the goal must be to abolish the permanent SNAP ban for anyone convicted of a drug felony, individuals alleged to have violated parole or probation, and so-called “fugitive felons,” as well as to eliminate the temporary ban for those who are incarcerated. We must also demand transparency in how the USDA OIG decides what they investigate. Operation Talon was a specific directive under the Inspector General, not a direct request from Congress or an administration. Whether Operation Talon is typical of all USDA OIG investigatory practices remains to be seen.

While I traced the origin of Operation Talon, future work should situate the initiative within the longer context of criminalization of hunger. This effort would require additional inquiry into how SNAP violations are investigated, tracked, sanctioned, and criminalized. As a reminder, unintentional violations are errors made by participants when signing up for SNAP that could increase their benefits received, while intentional violations can also increase benefits but require substantiated proof of the participant’s fraudulent activity. Examples of intentional violations include lying about income or intentionally omitting an asset source in

order to qualify for SNAP. In my analysis of discourses about waste, fraud, and abuse, I noted legislators blurred this idea of intention compared to unintentional errors in SNAP. However, the USDA incentivizes state offices to investigate both intentional and unintentional violations by allowing the state to keep a portion of the funds recouped through reduced benefits.

Headworth (2021) completed in-depth interviews of 42 investigators, including administrators, in five nationally distributed SNAP fraud investigation units located within the SNAP offices. He described the revamped investigative efforts of one office, veiled as “Eastcoast” and operated by an administrator with the pseudonym “George:”

In Eastcoast, administrator George came into his position with a mandate from state officials to overhaul their program integrity system. Among the changes he stressed was pursuing intentional violations, rather than settling for unintentional violations. To advance this goal, he hired more investigators, increasing the fraud unit’s capacity to substantiate comparatively labor-intensive intentional charges. He also emphasized training and instructing investigators to commit to intentional fraud charges. George shared bar charts evincing these efforts’ effects; over a three-year span, his unit went from establishing about five times more unintentional cases than intentional cases to establishing nearly equal numbers of unintentional and intentional cases. Like his counterparts elsewhere, George values intentional fraud cases, and he is proud of this change.

More research is needed to understand the Eastcoast “mandate from state officials to overhaul their program integrity system” to determine if this example is an outlier or if it is a broader mandate reflecting stepped efforts that would further expand the carceral state. In addition, Headworth (2021) found that across all regions, fraud investigators positioned SNAP participants’ “rule violations as largely intentional and internally motivated” (40). More research is needed to understand if this is how SNAP fraud investigation units have *always* thought of participants’ rule violations, and how these units operate in general.

There are substantial cases of fraud investigated yearly, but beyond Headworth (2021), I found limited explanation for how the investigations work, or if and how the USDA validates state claims of fraud. In 2016, SNAP fraud investigations increased 33.31% from the previous year, with 963,965 total investigations, almost half, 450,976, were in the state of New York alone (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service 2017). SNAP participants have the right to file a complaint with the USDA office of Civil Rights if they perceive their rights were violated (for example as related to a denial of benefits or a fraud claim). The 2019 USDA civil rights report indicated 129 of 277 newly alleged violations related to the Farm Bill were against the office of Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) (United States Department of Agriculture Office of the Secretary 2020).¹⁴⁴ In addition, the USDA Office of Civil Rights only found 4 violations of Civil Rights in 2019 out of the over 600 cases in their backlog of cases (ibid.). None was related to FNS (ibid.). This report did not disclose the reasons behind the findings, nor the methods of investigating Civil Rights violations, but simply reported out numbers of cases by USDA agency.

Hunger, Immigration Policy, and the Food Chain

The ongoing pandemic has underscored the limited protections for food workers at all points of the food chain and the deadly impacts of exploitative food labor practices. Many food workers have been deemed “essential” and as such have been made vulnerable to viral exposure, illness, and death. For example, one of the founders of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers – a human rights organization with roots in community organizing of farmworkers –

¹⁴⁴ FNS is the USDA department in charge of SNAP.

recently detailed poor living and working conditions for farmworkers, making them highly vulnerable to viral spread, likening it to a present-day Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (Asbed 2020). Similarly, Jordan (2020) traces the hypocrisy of negative rhetoric of immigration and "the cloud of deportation" non-citizen farm workers have faced for decades, even as they have been deemed "essential" during the pandemic. The United Food & Commercial Workers International Union (2021) tallies their union members' reports of COVID, and just reported new spikes in cases: since March 1, 2021, there has been a "national 30 percent spike in COVID deaths of grocery workers and 24 percent increase in grocery workers infected or exposed to the virus. Miranda (2021) reports "Amazon, which has 1.3 million front-line employees in the United States, reported in October it had recorded almost 20,000 cases across its Whole Foods Market and Amazon locations." The Food and Environment Reporting Network is collecting data from local news reports and the state health officials, and reports that as of April 2021 there were 13,065 COVID cases in farmworkers, 17,906 cases in food processors, and 58,741 cases in meat packers (Douglas 2021).

Patterns of who works in food system jobs – farm laborers, dishwashers, line cooks, food delivery, grocery workers, food processing, and fast food workers – are highly racialized and gendered. In their creation of metrics for measuring racial equity in the food system, Rodman-Alvarez and Colasanti (2019) compiled several studies that showed racial, gender, and/or ethnic inequities in wages, benefits, and upward mobility in food chain workers, which included "any laborers involved in physically moving food throughout the food system, from farm to fork. Food chain workers include those who 'plant, harvest, process, pack, transport, prepare, serve, and sell food'" (definition from the Food Chain Workers Alliance, in Rodman-

Alvarez and Colasanti, 2019, 5). Racism, poverty, economic precarity, lack of autonomy or outright exploitation in employment are all built into the food chain jobs and poor wages are justified so food can be both cheap and convenient, reinforcing the exploitation of highly vulnerable workers due to their citizenship status (Guthman 2011; Patel 2012; Holt-Giménez 2017). I am reminded of Ms. Jessup’s 2010 testimony in the Hearing to Review Federal Nutrition Programs,¹⁴⁵ when she captured a true paradox of health and hunger in the U.S.: “[t]he nation expects affordable fruits and vegetables from the Valley where people are hungry and food giveaways run out of food.” Farm workers in her community are hungry, exposing the violence of system. Given the exclusion of non-citizen immigrants from SNAP, an extraordinary percentage of the U.S. food system labor force are ineligible for food support.

Some of this might be changing. A Government Accounting Office (GAO) report commissioned by Senator Bernie Sanders corroborates what food labor activists have been exposing for at least a century: food system jobs are low wage jobs. Indeed, two of the top three industries with the largest number of employees participating in federal health care and SNAP program are those working in the restaurant and grocery sectors even though 70% of all workers surveyed worked full time (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2020). This led Sen. Sanders to describe SNAP and federal health care as subsidizing WalMart and McDonalds, as both corporations were at the top of the listed employers of individuals participating in SNAP and federal health care (Rosenberg 2020). The GAO report must be combined with the fact that most non-citizen immigrants are excluded from federal relief, including SNAP, meaning that they would not have been captured in this report. Many non-citizen immigrants who are a pillar

¹⁴⁵ See Chapter 4, under the heading “Using Food Justice to Contextualize Structural Causes of Hunger” for more.

of the U.S. food chain labor force, experience extraordinary rates of hunger (Carney 2015). This fact implicates the broader food system in exploiting workers, producing hunger in their own workers, and then justifying it for the sake of low-cost food in the U.S.

Future Connections: The Farm Bill, Exploited Labor, and the Hunger Obesity “Paradox”

In Guthman’s (2011) detailed analysis of ‘obesity epidemic’ discourses, she detailed the multitude of ways that research on weight and health, even when attempting to consider environmental factors, still emphasizes individual behavior changes and excess calorie consumption. Moreover, she argues that this focus on individual consumption distracts from much larger systemic issues. For example, she cites a vast critique of the political influence of the food lobby, in particular corn and sugar subsidies, in producing the ‘obesity epidemic’ because it was inducing soda consumption. In her critique, Guthman (2011) stressed that abhorrently low food worker wages cannot be pulled apart from discourses of health and obesity. She describes fast, convenient food as:

... a triply good fix for American capitalism. It entails the super-exploitation of the labor force in its production, it provides cheap food to support the low wages of the food and other industries by feeding their low-wage workers, and it absorbs the surpluses of the agricultural economy, soaking up, as it were, the excesses of overproduction to keep the farm sector marginally viable. For that matter, it has also substituted for an adequate social safety net. (174)

Guthman’s note regarding fast convenient food as a “substitute for an adequate social safety net” resonates with the diet education discourses that I documented in Chapter 4. SNAP participants are disparaged for not working, even as low wage jobs impede time for food preparation. As such, the focus on the individual not only ignores potential structural causes of obesity as Guthman noted, it also fully ignores structural causes of hunger, such as low wages.

It is notable that the legislators' self-reinforcing loop that blamed SNAP participants' health on their own poor food consumption was embedded within broader debates of the Farm Bill.

Food system lobbyists from industries reliant on marginalized food labor practices (e.g. produce and commodity growers, the meat industry, the grocery lobby, the restaurant industry, and food processors) have a strong influence on the Farm Bill and USDA policies (Nestle 2013; Imhoff 2019). The Farm Bill policy both encourages and incentivizes the production of inexpensive food at the hands of a marginalized labor force. And yet, outside of Ms. Jessup discussing widespread hunger in her farmworker community,¹⁴⁶ I saw little to no discussion of poor wages or examination of the U.S. food chain labor exploitation and how that produces hunger.

This complex connection between the larger food system practices, health, and hunger, combined with the influence of immigration rhetoric and policy on the food system practices, was beyond the scope of what I could analyze. That said, because of SNAP's connection to the Farm Bill, future analysis of federal hunger relief must examine how the Farm Bill interacts with exploitative food labor production practices, immigration policy, and overall national health policy. This effort will situate how the Farm Bill, in addition to legislating SNAP, constructs and reinforces the 'undeserving' hungry in America.

¹⁴⁶ See note 149.

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APPENDIX A: SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) POLICY FACT SHEET

THE FARM BILL

SNAP (formerly the Food Stamp Program) has been authorized through the Farm Bill since 1973. Since 1933, Farm Bill legislation reauthorizes the previous Act, and adds or adjusts programs in a current bill. Unless specified otherwise, Farm Bill programs are authorized and funded for the 5-year duration until the next Farm Bill debate, but can be amended in the interim or extended if the authorization period ends. The official short titles of 2000-2014 U.S. Farm Bills are: Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, Agricultural Act of 2014.

Federal funding for SNAP is authorized through the omnibus Farm Bill under the bill's Nutrition Title. The most recent Farm Bill is the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 passed on December 20, 2018 (Aussenberg and Falk 2019), and is the basis for any spending estimates provided.¹⁴⁷ The Congressional Budget Office estimated the Nutrition Title accounted for three fourths of projected 2018 Farm Bill spending, with SNAP estimated to receive almost \$65 billion (98%) of the Nutrition Title (Aussenberg and Billings 2019).

PARTICIPATION

SNAP is an entitlement program “authorized as open-ended mandatory spending” (Aussenberg and Billings 2019) meaning there are federal funds available to pay the SNAP benefits for all households who qualify for the program. As an entitlement program, SNAP caseloads increase and decrease concurrent with economic changes (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2019a). SNAP participation and spending rose because of the 2008 recession, reached a historic peak in 2013, and declined yearly from 2014 – 2019 (Aussenberg and Billings 2019). On average, monthly SNAP participation was 47.6 million in 2013 compared to 35.7 million in 2019 (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service 2021).

There are federal rules regarding SNAP eligibility, work requirements, and ineligibility. States have the option to submit waivers in how they apply some of these rules (details below). Benefits are established by and paid through federal funds as allocated in the Nutrition Title but are administered by individual state offices (this includes all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, and Guam).

Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)

Broadly referred to as “welfare reform” PRWORA replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), an entitlement program that provided cash payments to families, with the block grant program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in 1996. TANF funded programs meet one of four policy goals “1. provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of their relatives; 2. end dependence by needy parents on government benefits through promoting work, job preparation, and marriage; 3. reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and 4. promote the formation

¹⁴⁷ The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) included temporary increased monthly SNAP benefits and suspended some eligibility requirements (D. Rosenbaum 2021). All SNAP policy discussed in this Fact Sheet does not include the temporary changes due to FFCRA, nor the increase in SNAP funding because of that.

and maintenance of two-parent families.” In 2016, 24% of TANF expenditures included traditional cash aid, with the rest funding other noncash aid programming. This impacts SNAP *Categorical Eligibility* as discussed below.

PRWORA enacted changes specific to SNAP, including: 1. Instituting the Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents (ABAWD) work requirement and time limit (more below) 2. Enabling the initiation of Operation Talon by allowing shared information between state SNAP offices and police 3. Enacting a lifetime ban on SNAP for drug-related felony convictions and temporary ban for persons who are incarcerated or are were considered “fugitive felons.” 4. Banning any non-citizen immigrant.

ELIGIBILITY (Income/Asset or Categorical)

Federal Income and Asset Tests: Households with a net income of 100% of the federal poverty level (FPL) and liquid assets below \$2250 qualify for SNAP. Eligibility limits are higher for households that include any elderly individual (over 60) or an individual with a disability, fixed at 130% of the FPL and \$3500 in liquid assets.

Categorical Eligibility (Traditional or Broad-Based): the household is automatically eligible because they receive some needs-tested support, the asset test is not required.

Traditional Categorical Eligibility (minimum federal requirement): all households that receive cash aid benefits from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and state-financed General Assistance (GA) programs qualify for SNAP.

Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE) (state option): eligibility includes the receipt of *noncash aid* in any program that is funded by TANF (or the associated Maintenance of Effort (MOE) state funds) with an income limit of 200%. For example, to make a household SNAP eligible, states send a brochure or refer a person to a social service hotline for any TANF/MOE program with an income limit of 200%. “[A]s of July 2019, 42 jurisdictions operated broad-based categorical eligibility to make most or all households in their state with whom the state welfare office comes in contact SNAP eligible.” States vary in the gross income they use to determine BBCE ranging from 130% - 200% FPL for households without an elderly or disabled member.

Some states choose to use elements of categorical eligibility somewhere between “traditional” and “broad-based,” through the receipt of *only specific* noncash TANF support programs, such as childcare or counseling. Even with widespread use of BBCE, 85.3% of households without and 76.9% of households with an elderly or disabled member had gross incomes below the FPL in 2016. 4.2% of households without and 7.7% of households with an elderly or disabled member had a gross income between 131% - 200% of the FPL in 2016.

Regardless of how a household is deemed eligible, benefits are determined for everyone the same way as described below. Meaning, even if a household is categorically eligible, net income may be too high to result in a SNAP allotment. The minimum monthly benefit, was \$15 in 2019. Once eligibility is determined, state agencies have flexibility in how long they certify households for benefits. States can certify households with an elderly or disabled member for a maximum of 24 months and all other households for a maximum of 12 months.

WORK POLICIES

General work requirements: It is critical to note that SNAP has long had a work requirement, national standards were established with The Food Stamp Act Amendment of 1970. SNAP recipients ages 16 – 59 must register for work, participate in SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) or workfare if assigned by state, take a suitable job, and not voluntarily quit or work less than 30 hours per week without a good reason. The state cannot disqualify someone for non-compliance to work requirements if there is “good cause” (e.g. illness, household emergency, lack of transportation, or other circumstances beyond the person's control).

Exemptions to this include, caring for a child under 6 or an incapacitated person, participation in an alcohol or drug treatment program, in school (not college) or a training program at least half-time, or unable to work due to a physical or mental limitation.

Work Requirement and Time Limit for Able Bodied Adult Without Dependents (ABAWD): SNAP benefits are limited to 3 months out of 3 years for those aged 18 – 49 who are able to work and don't have dependents, unless they volunteer, work, or participate in an employment and training program for 80 hours per month, or participate in the state's “workfare” program. Exemptions are the same as general work requirements (as listed above), pregnant, or sharing a household with a child under 18.

ABAWD State Waivers: Based on high unemployment rate and low job availability, states can apply for a waiver to the ABAWD time limit rule for either the entire state or specific areas within a state. USDA is reporting a decline in waivers, even among eligible states. In 2015, there were 31 statewide & 13 partial state ABAWD waivers, 9 states had no ABAWD waiver. In 2018, there were 8 statewide & 28 partial state ABAWD waivers, 17 states had no ABAWD waiver.

SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) programs: Food Stamp Act of 1985 (P.L. 99-198) required all states to implement an Employment and Training (E&T) program by April 1, 1987. All states are required to have a SNAP E&T program, but it is designed by the state and program requirements vary. SNAP E&T can be voluntary, or states can require SNAP E&T participation as a condition of SNAP eligibility. States are not required to provide ABAWD SNAP recipients with SNAP E&T. If states pledge to offer SNAP E&T spots to all ABAWD SNAP recipients in danger of losing eligibility, the state receives extra E&T funds from a pool shared between pledge states.

INELIGIBILITY

Most non-citizens, most college students, residents of most institutional settings, households with members on strike, boarders, and individuals who are uncooperative or fail to provide information to verify eligibility are ineligible for SNAP.

Intentional Program Violations (IPVs) “SNAP benefits are denied those who intentionally violate program rules, for specific time periods ranging from one year (on a first violation) to permanently (on a third violation or other serious infraction); and states may impose SNAP disqualification when an individual is disqualified from another public assistance program. Those who transfer assets for the purpose of qualifying for benefits are also barred.” (Congressional Research Service 2018)

Felony Charges Through PRWORA, anyone who is currently incarcerated or convicted of a drug-related felony is not eligible for SNAP. States can also check SNAP beneficiary lists against federal and local databased on outstanding felony warrants.

States can opt out of the drug felony disqualification. The SNAP State Options Report lists “examples of modified disqualifications include: 1) limiting the circumstances in which the permanent disqualification applies (such as only when convictions involve the sale of drugs); 2) requiring the person convicted to submit to drug testing; 3) requiring participation in a drug treatment program; and/or 4) imposing a temporary disqualification period.”(United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, 2018c, 21).

The 2014 farm bill added additional criminal disqualifications, including aggravated sexual abuse, murder, sexual exploitation and abuse of children, sexual assault, or similar State laws, and who are also not in compliance with the terms of their sentence or parole, or are a fleeing felon, from receiving SNAP benefits.

BENEFITS CALCULATION

Once eligibility is determined, benefits are calculated based on household size, the maximum benefit, and net household income. Each fiscal year a maximum benefit is calculated using the USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan, the cheapest diet plan that can meet the household’s minimum nutrition requirements. The household is expected to spend 30% of their income on food, so this is subtracted from the maximum benefit to determine the household monthly allotment. SNAP benefits can only be used to purchase food and are issued to an individual in the household through an electronic bank transfer card. In 2018, the average monthly SNAP allotment was \$131 for a single person and \$239 for a household of 2 people and averaged \$1.40 per meal per person (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2019b).

APPENDIX B: LIST OF LEGISLATIVE HEARINGS¹⁴⁸

138 Congressional Hearings are listed by date and title. Several hearings leading up to the reauthorization of the Farm Bill are grouped under one generic name (e.g., Hearings to Review U.S. Agriculture Policy in Advance of the 2012 Farm Bill). As such, multiple dates are listed to indicate multiple hearing days with the same hearing name. I did this to follow the practice of the Government Printing Office for how the hearings were grouped and bound together, but did consider each hearing to be separate. The lists are separated by legislative committee. The * indicates documents from the expanded search specific to Operation Talon.

House Committee on Agriculture

- *2/5/1998: Review The Enforcement Of Anti-Fraud Provisions Of The Food Stamp Act
- *8/5/1999: Review of the Operations of the Food Stamp Program
- 6/12, 6/27 & 6/28/2001: Formulation Of The 2002 Farm Bill: (Forestry, Food Stamps) Hearings Before The Subcommittee On Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, And Forestry
- 7/24/2003: Review of the Operations of the Food Stamp Program
- 2/14/2007: Hearing to Review the 2007 Farm Bill Proposals of the U.S. Department of Agriculture
- 3/13/2007: Review the Federal Food Stamp Program and Its Impact on Children's Health
- 5/2/2007: Hearing to Review U.S. Department of Agriculture's Release of Program Beneficiaries' Social Security Numbers And The Department's Information Systems, Generally
- 7/23/2008: Hearing to Review Short and Long Term Costs of Hunger in America
- 3/26/2009: Hearing to Review the State of Obesity in the United States
- 4/29/2009: Hearing to Review the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
- 6/24/2009: Hearing to Review Implementation of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008
- 8/5/2009: Hearing to Examine New and Innovative Ways to Improve Nutrition and Wellness Programs
- 1/25/2010: Hearing to Review Federal Nutrition Program
- 3/10/2010: Hearing to Review USDA's Information Technology Systems
- 4/14/2010: Hearing To Review Access To Healthy Foods For Beneficiaries Of Federal Nutrition Programs And To Explore Innovative Methods To Improve Availability
- 4/21/, 4/30, 5/3, 5/4, 5/14, 5/15, 5/17, 5/18, & 6/28/2010: Hearings to Review U.S. Agriculture Policy in Advance of the 2012 Farm Bill, Parts 1& 2
- 7/28/10: Hearing to Review Quality Control Systems in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
- 6/2/2011: Hearing to Review Recent Investigations and Audits Conducted by the Usda Inspector General
- 6/24, 7/13, 7/14, 7/20, 7/21, 7/27, 7/28, 9/8, & 9/13/2011: Agricultural Program Audit
- 12/1/2011: Hearing to Review Updates on USDA Inspector General Audits, Including SNAP Fraud Detection Efforts and IT Compliance
- 3/9/2012, 3/30, 4/20, 2012: Part 1 - The Future of U.S. Farm Policy: Formulation of the 2012 Farm Bill
- 3/28/2012: Hearing to Review H.R. 3283, H.R. 1838, and H.R. 4235
- 4/25/2012, 5/8, 5/10, 5/16, 5/17, & 5/18/2012. Formulation of the 2012 Farm Bill – Part 2
- 7/24/2014: Hearing to Examine the Role of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Relation to Other Federal Assistance Programs
- 7/30/2014: Hearing to Review the Impact of Enforcement Activities by The Department of Labor On Specialty Crop Growers
- 9/17/2014: Hearing to Review The Implementation Of Section 4022 of The Agricultural Act Of 2014: Pilot Projects To Reduce Dependency And Increase Work Requirements And Work Efforts Under The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
- 2/25/2015: Past, Present, and Future of SNAP
- 2/26/2015: SNAP Recipient Characteristics and Dynamics
- 4/15/2015: The World of Nutrition and the Role of the Charitable Sector

¹⁴⁸ See Methods p. 23-25 for methods of obtaining source material

- 5/20/2015: The World of Nutrition, Government Duplication and Unmet Needs
- 6/10/2015: The Means to Climbing the Economic Ladder
- 6/25/2015: How Our Welfare System Can Discourage Work (This was a joint hearing with the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources)
- 7/15/2015: Developing and Using Evidence-Based Solutions
- 10/27/2015: Breaking the Cycle
- 11/18/2015: The National Commission on Hunger
- 1/12/2016: Addressing Special Populations
- 3/2/2016: Examining State Options
- 5/12/2016: The Retailer Perspective
- 6/22/2016: Evaluating the Effectiveness and Outcomes in Nutrition Education
- 7/6/2016: Evaluating Error Rates and Anti-Fraud Measures to Enhance Program Integrity
- 9/13/2016: Improving Innovation and Success in Employment and Training Programs
- 11/16/2016: Opportunities for Improving Access to Food
- 2/3/2016: Hearing to Review Incentive Programs Aimed at Increasing Low-Income Families' Purchasing Power.
- 3/17/2016: Hearings to Examine USDA Organization and Program Administration
- 2/15/2017: Rural Economic Outlook: Setting the Stage for the Next Farm Bill
- 2/16/2017: Pros and Cons of Restricting Snap Purchases
- 2/28, 3/9, 3/16, 3/21, 3/22, 3/28, 4/4, 6/7, 6/8, 6/22, 7/12 & 7/18/2017: The Next Farm Bill Hearings

Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

- 9/12/2000: USDA Civil Rights
- 6/28, 7/17, 8/13/2001: The New Federal Farm Bill
- 7/19/2001: The Nutrition Title of the New Federal Farm Bill
- 8/4/2001: The New Federal Farm Bill Field Hearing from Worthington, Minnesota
- 8/17 & 10/27/2001: Farm Bill Issues
- 8/18/2001: Agriculture in Rural Communities Drafting and Implementation of A New Farm Bill
- 8/20/2001: The New Federal Farm Bill Field Hearing from Stewartville, Minnesota
- 9/26/2001: The Administration Perspective with Regard to the New Federal Farm Bill
- 9/17/2002: Implementation of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002
- 4/3/2003: To Review the Federal Government's Initiatives Regarding Child Nutrition Programs
- 5/14/2003: To Review the Implementation of the 2002 Farm Bill
- 6/23, 7/17, 7/21, 7/24, 8/15, 8/16, 8/17, 9/8/2006: Regional Farm Bill Field Hearings, including in: Cape Girardeau, Missouri, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Ankeny, Iowa, Redmond, Oregon, Grand Island, Nebraska, Great Falls, Montana, Lubbock, Texas
- 8/11/2006: Field Hearing on 2007 Farm Bill
- 1/31/2007: The Role of Federal Food Assistance Programs in Family Economic Security and Nutrition
- 2/7/2007: Discussion of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Bill Proposal
- 3/6/2007: Child Nutrition and the School Setting
- 3/12/2007: 2007 Farm Bill Opportunities for Vermont and the Northeast
- 3/12/2007: Colorado Views on Federal Agriculture and Rural Policies: the 2007 Farm Bill
- 4/3/2007: Northern Plains Priorities in the 2007 Farm Bill
- 4/10/2007: Field Hearing to Examine Federal Food and Nutrition Assistance Program
- 4/14/2007: Iowa and Nebraska Views on Federal Agriculture and Rural Policies: the 2007 Farm Bill
- 12/8/2008: Promoting Health, Preventing Chronic Disease, and Fighting Hunger: Assessment of USDA Food Assistance and Child Nutrition Programs in the Economic Downturn
- 3/4/2009: Improving Nutrition for America's Children in Difficult Economic Times
- 11/17/2009: Reauthorization of U.S. Child Nutrition Programs: Opportunities to Fight Hunger and Improve Child Health

- 5/26/2011: Food for Thought: The Role, Risks, and Challenges for American Agriculture and the Next Farm Bill in Meeting the Demands of a Growing World.
- 5/31/2011: Opportunities for Growth: Michigan and the 2012 Farm Bill
- 6/23/2011: Farm Bill Accountability: The Importance of Measuring Performance, While Eliminating Duplication and Waste
- 3/7/2012: Healthy Food Initiatives, Local Production and Nutrition
- 5/7/2014: 2014 Farm Bill: Implementation and Next Steps
- 6/12/2014: A National Priority: The Importance Of Child Nutrition Programs To Our Nation’s Health, Economy and National Security
- 2/24/2015: The Agricultural Act of 2014 Implementation After One Year and Farm Credit Administration Pending Nominations
- 5/7/2015: A Review of Child Nutrition Programs
- 5/6/2017: Growing Jobs and Economic Opportunity: Perspectives on the 2018 Farm Bill from Michigan
- 9/14/2017: Nutrition Programs: Perspectives for the 2018 Farm Bill
- House Oversight Committee
- 3/8/2012: Food Stamp Fraud As A Business Model: USDA’s Struggle To Police Store Owners, Committee On Oversight And Government Reform House Of Representatives

Ways and Means Committee

- 7/17/2003: Waste, Fraud, And Abuse in programs under the Committee’s jurisdiction

House Committee on Budget

- 7/9/2003: A closer look: the inspectors general address waste, fraud, and abuse in federal mandatory programs

House Committee on Budget: Task Force on Welfare

- 7/19/2000: Food Stamp Fraud: Why Trafficking Persists and What Can Be Done About It

House Committee on Appropriations: Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

- *2/4/1998: Appropriations for 1999
- *2/11/1999: Appropriations for 2000
- *2/17/2000: Appropriations for 2001
- *3/14/2001: Appropriations for 2002
- *2/14/2002: Appropriations for 2003

House Committee on Government Reform

- *2/10/1999: Fraud and Waste in Government Programs

Committee on the Judiciary, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice Oversight

- *7/9/2003: The Chronic Threat to Safety, Law, and Order

CURRICULUM VITAE

Renee E. Scampini

EDUCATION

University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee	Milwaukee, WI
Ph.D., Urban Studies Program	August, 2021
Boston University	Boston, MA
M.S., Nutrition and Dietetic Internship	1.25.2007
University of Wisconsin - Madison	Madison, WI
B.S., Nutritional Science	5.20.2001

DISSERTATION

The Food Police: Food stamps, surveillance, and the construction of the undeserving hungry I fused the disciplines of urban studies and nutritional science to analyze the relationship between marginalized social identities and food systems, specifically how hunger is reproduced by structural racist, gendered, and classist discourses. I analyzed how legislators, advocates, and academic experts structure discourses of hunger in congressional hearing debates related to the federal Food Stamp Program, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Acknowledging racialized and gendered patterns of hunger in the U.S. is central to my research, yet federal policy debates rarely directly addressed the inequitable distribution of hunger. I found that over the course of 2000-2018, legislative discourses increasingly constructed SNAP recipients as dependent, obese, or criminal. Discourses contrasting the (non-white) 'undeserving hungry' against the hardworking (white) taxpayer supported the creation of new exclusionary boundaries around SNAP and (re)produced racialized and gendered assumptions about the poor, deemed dependent, obese, criminal, or incapable of making healthy food choices.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Graduate Assistant, UWM Graduate School	3.2017 – current
University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee	Milwaukee, WI
<i>Foster graduate student professional development in the Graduate School's Preparing Future Faculty and Professionals workshop and online course: Grad 801. Work across campus to encourage the dissemination and completion of Grad SERU an evaluation of graduate student life. Coordinate and support dissertation student work through Dissertation BootCamp and ReBoot writing group. Advise programs, departments, and schools and colleges in the creation and governmental implementation of Accelerated Master's Degrees at UWM.</i>	
Lecturer, Urban Studies Program	8.2015 – 5.2017
University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee	Milwaukee, WI
<i>Create an original online Urban Studies Program course: "Food and the City" under the extensive seminar topic: Urban Studies 360: Perspectives on the Urban Scene. Implement the course exploring the role of inequality and globalization and their respective impacts on food accessibility and hunger in urban areas. Encourage students to use a critical lens on the global and local food systems' structural oppression and marginalization of people, both historical and present. Encourage discussion and creativity in students' engagement with the content through assignments such as: educated opinion posts, self-reflections, and group projects. Examine how urban agriculture projects in Milwaukee and beyond may represent a social movement for a more just society and environmental sustainability, but only when it is a community-led, rather than an outsider-led, food sovereign project.</i>	

- Research Assistant, Joseph J. Zilber School of Public Health** 3.2016 – 8.2017
University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Milwaukee, WI
Racial Disparities Project: Follow detailed protocol and procedure to rigorously study how epidemiology, public health, and social science literature frames research aims, utilizes race and ethnicity as variables, and approaches the study of the causes of racial/ethnic health inequalities.
- Project Assistant, Urban Studies Program** 8.2014 – 8.2015
University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Milwaukee, WI
Supported several faculty projects in Geography, African and African Diaspora Studies, and Nonprofit Management.
- Faculty, Department of Dietetics** 8.2012 – 5.2014
Mount Mary University Milwaukee, WI
Coordinate with all dietetics faculty members to support and adapt a cohesive program curriculum founded in scientific nutrition principles as required by the accrediting body of the Academy of Nutrition in Dietetics. Develop and implement curricula on mandatory subjects in dietetics covering clinical, community, and food service nutrition. Produce materials for and instruct on nutrition in health and consumerism for courses in Food Service Sanitation and Safety. Integrate lecture and hands-on clinical educational experiences in Medical Nutrition Therapy courses. Review and analyze vast policy changes that effect health and nutrition for courses on Community Nutrition. Supervise and encourage dietetics students as they participate in clinical, in-service, and practicum experiences to establish their roles within the community of dietetics professionals.
- Research Coordinator and Intern Preceptor** 3.2007 – 9.2011
University of Massachusetts Medical School-Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center Waltham, MA
 Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) Program
Establish training protocol in understanding the learning and nutritional needs of people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (I/DD) for graduate dietetics interns. Precept dietetics trainees, interns, and graduate practicum students as well as integrate feedback and support positive interactions between intern students and the I/DD community. Design, develop and implement curricula for nutrition activities, classes, and programs for people with I/DD in schools. Collaborate with team to apply for foundation and NIH grants, coordinate advisory board, staff and participants, and collect and analyze data on a multitude of concurrently running NIH-funded grants. Manage and execute grant protocols performing tasks including: staff hiring, fiscal reconciliation of monetary spending, and compliance with safety and monitoring board regulations.
- Lead Facilitator, Boston University-Metropolitan College** Summer 2009 – Summer 2012
Developed proficiency with online course management system and oversaw and mediated discussion among students and facilitators. Communicated with and aided professor regarding facilitator and student needs.
- Adjunct Instructor, Emmanuel College, Boston, MA** Spring 2011
Implemented curricula on nutrition in health, consumerism, and food safety. Developed and appraised students' coursework.
- Teaching Assistant, Boston University, "Field Experience in Nutrition"** 1.2005– 5.2006
Verified competencies and learning objectives of dietetic interns to ensure they met accreditation standards of Commission on Accreditation for Dietetics Education (CADE), now known as Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics prior to the national registration exam for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

COMMUNITY SERVICE & ENGAGEMENT

- Executive Team, Outreach & Programming** 6.2017 – 3.2020
University of Wisconsin Milwaukee Food Center and Pantry (FCP) Milwaukee, WI
Advise direction and founding of the FCP. Engage and inform the UWM community about the FCP and recruit volunteers. Recruit, hire, and support the Spring 2018 FCP Student Advisory Board. Create and implement

volunteer orientation procedures. Enhance the FCP mission through new collaborations and event programming.

Board of Directors Kompost Kids, Inc <i>Direct and develop programming and community compost networks to augment the Kompost Kids mission of education and organics reclamation to create living soil. Cultivate soil and community through compost advocacy. Build and sustain relationships with other local non-profits supporting environmentalism, sustainability, public health, science education, and community-based agriculture projects.</i>	9.2015 – present Milwaukee, WI
Committee Member Milwaukee Food Council: Collective Impact and Anti-Racism Praxis Groups	2015 – present Milwaukee, WI
Advisory Board Member Slow Food Southeastern WI: Committee for Board Recruitment and Retention	2018 Milwaukee, WI
Committee Member Institute for Urban Agriculture and Nutrition: Community Action Council	2017-2018 Milwaukee, WI
Community Forum Administrator UWM Online Graduate Student Resource Network	2017 – present Milwaukee, WI
Committee Member, Garden Compost Specialist The Guest House of Milwaukee Cream City Garden Committee	2016 – 2020 Milwaukee, WI
Committee Member, Community Team UWM Climate Action Carbon and Resiliency Plan Advocacy Committee	2019 – present Milwaukee, WI
Nutrition Advisee Special Olympics Massachusetts	2010 – 2011 Marlborough, MA
Nutrition Advisory Board Member Jewish Family & Children’s Services (JF&CS)	2008 – 2011 Waltham, MA

PUBLICATIONS

Scampini, R. (2019) Growing Power, Inc. In *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*. Retrieved from:
<https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/growing-power-inc/>

Scampini, R. (2015) Urban Agriculture: Growing Potential in Milwaukee’s 15th Aldermanic District. *e.polis: Online Student Journal of Urban Studies*, 7, 44-58.

Weems M., Truex L., **Scampini R.**, Fleming R., Curtin C., & Bandini L. (2017) A novel weight-loss tool designed for adolescents with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 117(10), 1503–1508.

Bandini L., Fleming R., **Scampini R.**, Gleason J., & Must A. (2013) Is body mass index a useful measure of excess body fatness in adolescents and young adults with Down Syndrome? *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 57(11), 1050-1057.

Evans E., Must A., Anderson S., Curtin C., **Scampini R.**, Maslin M., & Bandini L. (2012) Dietary Patterns and Body Mass Index in Children with Autism and Typically Developing Children. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 6(1), 399-405.

Bandini L., Flynn A., **Scampini R.** (2010) Overnutrition. In Lanham-New S., Roche I., & MacDonald H. *Nutrition and Metabolism*, 2nd Edition. Wiley-Blackwell Publishing.

Bandini L., Anderson S., Curtin C., Cermak S., Evans E., **Scampini R.**, Maslin M., & Must A. (2010) Food Selectivity in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Typically Developing Children. *Journal of Pediatrics*, 157(2), 259-64.

Fleming R., Stokes E., Curtin C., Bandini L., Gleason J., **Scampini R.**, Maslin M., & Hamad C. (2008) Behavioral health in developmental disabilities: A comprehensive program of nutrition, exercise, and weight reduction. *International Journal of Behavioral Consultation and Therapy*, 4(3), 287-296.

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS & CONTRIBUTIONS

History of Food Justice in Milwaukee (Contributor). Humanities Action Lab.

Milwaukee Fresh Food Access Report (Contributor). City of Milwaukee, Department of City Development. (April, 2019)

Programs Addressing Food Insecurity on College Campuses. Presented at the Feeding Wisconsin Hunger and Health Summit. (March, 2019)

Food and Neighborhoods. Roundtable Moderator at the Urban Studies Program Student Forum. (April, 2018)

Nutritional Racism: (Re)Producing Concepts of Urban Poverty Through Hunger Research. Presented at the Graduate Association for Food Studies Conference. (April, 2017)

Planting Seeds Screening and Talk Back. Panel Moderator Urban Studies Program Student Forum. (April, 2017)

Racialized Food Systems and Inequitable Access. Presented at the Urban Studies Program Student Forum. (April, 2016)

Urban Agriculture: Growing Potential in Milwaukee's 15th Aldermanic District. Presented at the Urban Studies Program Student Forum. (April, 2015)

BOARD CERTIFICATION

Registered Dietitian License #964905

OTHER CERTIFICATIONS

Protection of Human Research Subjects Certification, Recertification 2007, 2010, 2013, 2016
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)

Responsible Conduct of Research Certificate of Attendance Spring 2015
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Science and Research Integrity Professional Development Series

ServSafe Certified Instructor & Registered Proctor 2.2013
Certificate ID: 1031229

Master Urban Gardener Spring 2009
Boston Natural Areas Network (BNAN) Boston, MA
Learn effective horticulture and leadership techniques in order to provide gratis expertise to gardeners foraging into urban landscapes. Personal volunteer locales include the BNAN Learning Garden and other community gardens.

HONORS/AWARDS

2020 University of WI – Milwaukee, Women's Resource Center, Womxn's Achievement Awards

2019 University of WI – Milwaukee, Student Excellence Awards Nominee, Agent of Change

2019 Feeding Wisconsin, Hunger and Health Summit Student Fellow

2011 Massachusetts Dietetic Association, Young Dietitian of the Year

2011 Massachusetts Dietetic Association, ANCE Scholarship Recipient

2000 University of WI – Madison, Dean's Honors List