“Food Insecurity in America: In Defense of SNAP”

Alfredo Morabia

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[musical interlude]

AM Hello, welcome! This is the December 2019 podcast of the American Journal of Public Health. This month, Professor Marion Nestle has commissioned a set of articles to review the history, politics, and public health implications of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, abbreviated as SNAP and formerly known as the food stamp program. In this podcast, we will first see with Joanna Simmons, who used food stamps herself, how the system works and whether it is useful. Then with Marion Nestle, we will review the history of SNAP, what the program has achieved, and whether it can be improved. I am Alfredo Morabia, Editor-in-Chief of AJPH, and we are November 2, 2019.

I’m reaching out first to Joanna Simmons who is a single mother in New Jersey who has received food stamps in the past. I wanted to understand how the program works and how effective it is. Good morning, Joanna!

JS Good morning.

AM So, where are you today?
JS  I am in south Jersey right now, I am actually home, just recently getting off of work.

AM  Okay, and so you work at night?

JS  Yes, I work overnight, I work from 6pm to 4am.

AM  Got it, and so tell me a little bit about your family and you and what led you to request the nutritional assistance.

JS  Um, currently I’m not nutritional assistance—I’m not on the SNAP anymore.  Um, but I was.  I was a single mom with three kids and it was what I needed at the moment to help take care of me and my family.

AM  So, what was the situation then?  Why did you need to apply?

JS  Um, I was working a minimum wage job at Dunkin Donuts at the time and that’s when minimum wage was, I think, 6 or 7 dollars, something like that, and just wasn’t enough to make ends meet, you know, having to pay rent and bills and also buying food.  So, the SNAP was there to supplement and help me at least purchase food for the children.

AM  Got it, and so Joanna, to make people understand, you know, our listeners, exactly the process, let’s imagine that I had to request SNAP and what would I do in practice to get it?  What would you recommend I do to get the supplement?

JS  Well, you either have to go down to whatev—your local social services office or you can apply online. If you’re going to the office, you’ll be there probably all day long and you gotta go early in the morning and fill out your application, you gotta wait for a case worker to come see you and talk to you and she’ll let you know based, you know, person to person, um if you were eligible or not.  And, my case, when I moved out to Jersey, and before I started working, I was able to apply online, and I was able to get my SNAP benefits that way without having to sit in the office all day long.  But, that’s pretty much
how it goes. You’ll fill out your application, you’ll wait for a case worker, she’ll discuss your income or not income or requirements, and then she’ll let you know if you’re eligible or not.

AM And so if I’m eligible, how much time will it take until I get the supplement?

JS Up to 30 days, it’s up to 30 days from when—well I know online is up to 30 days from when you apply until your, a case worker gets back to you and then you receive your [card]. In office, I’m not absolutely sure, but I think it happens in like a matter of days like if you go into there and you speak to someone, I think they issue you a card the same day, and then the next day your benefits should be there.

AM Okay, and then so once I’m recognized eligible and, how does it work? What do I receive? How do I get the food?

JS Well, you’ll receive a little card, something like a debit card; it’ll say, it won’t say SNAP on there but it’ll say like whatever state you’re from like Jersey says Family First, Pennsylvania says Access, and this card you can use in like any grocery stores or like you know Sam’s Club, BJ’s, Walmart, anyplace that sells food, and you can use it just like you would use a debit card, to purchase not-cooked food items, like any kind of groceries or things like that.

AM Got it, and so how much is there on the card?

JS It depends, like it depends from family to family, how many kids you have or what your income is, if you’re a single person, you know, it all, it’s based on how many people there is in your family and what the income is. I can’t give you a definite amount.

AM So, I’m a single father and I have two children and they are six and eight years old. Do you have an idea how much I may get through that situation?
JS  When it was me and my two, we, I was getting 357 a month, so it was me as a single mom and two of my children and I was making minimum wage so I was making under, I was making I would say I guess like the state eligibility amount and I was getting $357 a month.

AM  Got it, and Joanna, what have been the greatest aspect of receiving SNAP for your family and you?

JS  It kind of eases your mind when you know that they’re coming, like the day that you receive your food stamps you know you can go buy food and you know your kids are going to eat that day and you know kind of just takes that part of you know being stressed out off of you, because you know things are going to be, at least food-wise, taken care of for at least two maybe three weeks.

AM  I understand, and could SNAP have worked better for you than it did?

JS  Um, I mean SNAP could probably be a little better; if you learn how to budget, it kind of stretches pretty far, but it’s never going to last from month to month, like it’s never going to last from the beginning until you get your food stamps again, like it’s just not enough, like that’s just never—it never was enough. I mean, if they can somehow supplement and like give you a little extra just to get by that last week or so, will probably be a little bit better. That’s all I can think of.

AM  Okay, and if you had to choose between making $15 an hour or receiving SNAP, what would be the best solution for you?

JS  I’m taking my $15 an hour. I’m not going to, I can’t, I don’t currently make $15 an hour yet, but I can’t see me swapping out my income right now just to receive food stamps. Like, it’s not even a smart thing to do, because your food stamps are not going to cover
your rent, it’s not going to cover your bills, it’s not going to cover your household items, but if you’re smart enough with your $15 an hour, you can pay those things and still manage to get, you know, food and stuff in the house. There’s no way I would swap out my income for food stamps.

AM Well, that makes a lot of sense. Joanna, is there anything you’d like to add about your experience with SNAP?

JS SNAP was definitely there for me when I needed them. It was, you know, it helped when I needed them, it was there all, you know, up until I didn’t need it anymore. And, I can’t say anything bad about it. I mean, I’m sorry for those who have a bad light on it and think that some moms or most moms are just getting food stamps because they don’t want to get out and get a job. The majority of the time I had food stamps, I had a job, but I, honestly, I couldn’t complain. I mean, it was there when I needed it, and it helped me out, it helped me out a great deal.

AM Alright, thank you very much, Joanna, I know you’re multi-tasking now; you’re coming back from work, you must be tired, and I really enormously appreciate you giving the time to enter this interview.

JS No problem, you are very, very welcome.

AM Okay, take care, Joanna, have a great day, bye bye.

JS Bye bye.

[musical interlude]

AM Let’s now call Marion Nestle. Marion Nestle is Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Foods Studies, and Public Health. She’s emerita at New York University in the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies which she chaired from 1988 to 2003 and from
which she retired in September 2017. She’s also the author of numerous best-selling books about politics of nutrition, the last one being titled Unsavory Truth: How Food Companies Skew the Science of What We Eat, and it was published in 2018.

Hello, Marion!

MN  Good morning!

AM  How are you this morning?

MN  I’m very well, how about you?

AM  Well, I’m in DC. And you, where are you?

AM  Great. So, Marion, this SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, you know, what does nutrition assistance mean?

MN  Well, nutrition assistance means, in this particular case, that people who are of low income are qualified and eligible and entitled to receive an electronic benefit card that is essentially a debit card that allows them to buy pretty much any food at a supermarket, with a few exceptions, up to a certain amount of money a month as a benefit to which they’re entitled, if they qualify.

AM  Is it common that people need to be assisted for their nutrition and food?

MN  Well, this particular program has 40 million participants. There are 40 million Americans who get electronic benefit cards for about $125 a month on average for a total cost of about $65 billion a year. It’s the largest of the food assistance programs, it’s pretty much the most important one, by far.

AM  But how did we get there?

MN  Oh, this is a very long story that goes back to the Depression when farmers were producing vast amounts of food but nobody had any money to buy it. Farmers were
going out of business and either just going bankrupt or destroying their crops or their animals, and the idea that people were hungry, there were people on bread lines waiting for food, the idea that people were hungry when farmers were destroying food caused a political crisis, and the government started a program of distributing surplus foods to the poor. So that was the origin, and—

AM  So, just to place it historically, this was in the 30s, that was FDR? Franklin Roosevelt?

MN  Yeah, it was during the depth of the Depression when farmers were going out of business and starving because they couldn’t sell their products, and people were—excuse me—people were starving because they didn’t have any money because there were no jobs. So, this was a situation in which the government dreamed up a win/win. It would buy the farmers’ products and distribute them to the poor, and this was a program that would help farmers and help the poor at the same time. Eventually, this developed into a food stamp program where people could buy stamps, and if they bought the stamps they would get extra ones that would enable them to have free commodities—still a program to help farmers and to reimburse farmers, but the retailers didn’t like that, so they lobbied for and eventually got what turned out to be a retail program.

AM  So, food stamps and SNAP is the same thing, right?

MN  Yeah, SNAP is the new name, it was changed a couple of farm bills ago in order to recognize that nobody was using stamps anymore. They were using essentially debit cards and to recognize that it was a nutrition assistance program.

AM  I mean, this notion of nutrition doesn’t mean, does it mean anything? Because you said during the Depression there was hunger. Is it also a question of hunger today, of malnutrition, of food insecurity? What’s the role of SNAP, exactly?
Well, the role of SNAP is to make sure that people have enough to eat. The term that’s used these days to describe the situation is called food—we don’t have people starving on the streets in the United States, at least not visibly. What we do have is a situation called food insecurity which means inability to have a reliable source of food on a daily basis through legal means, so if people are food insecure they don’t know where the next meal is coming from. And the SNAP program is designed to increase people’s food security so that they have money to buy food and won’t be hungry which is the sensation of not having enough food—a very unpleasant sensation, by the way, or suffer from malnutrition which is physiological signs of inadequate nutrient or calorie consumption. And it’s been an extraordinarily effective program in raising people out of poverty. It raises millions of people out of poverty and solves the food insecurity problem for a large number of people—as I said, 40 million participants, roughly.

So how do you know it’s effective?

Well, there are thousands, literally thousands of studies of SNAP. If you go on the Department of Agriculture’s website, this is a program that’s run by the Department of Agriculture because of its historic origins in farm programs, and that’s part of the weakness of the program is it’s run by an agency that really doesn’t like it very much. So, that’s a big problem, but there have been literally thousands of studies that have looked at the effectiveness of SNAP, what it does, who it reaches, who its members are, who the participants are, why they’re participating, what you have to do to encourage people to participate, and of course it’s a highly politically contested program because, on the one hand, public health advocates don’t think it does nearly enough and on the other
hand people who are opposed to government expenditures on the poor think that it does way too much. And it’s—

AM And what’s your opinion? Does it—

MN Well, I’m a public health—I’m a public health person, I’d like to see SNAP be a much stronger program, provide much greater benefits to people who need them, particularly since half the people on SNAP are children, make sure that every child has enough to eat. It seems to me that’s a reasonable thing for a civilized country to do, and I also think that SNAP could do a better job of encouraging people to eat healthier foods. That’s not something that it currently does because junk foods and ultra-processed foods are so much cheaper than other kinds of foods, SNAP participants tend to try to make their dollars go as far as those dollars possibly can.

AM So, Marion, you say that the SNAP could do more so that, if I understand well, today there are 40 million people on SNAP, there should be more people on SNAP?

MN Well, the, the enrollment in SNAP has been declining over the last several years, in part because there has been so much effort put into making sure that SNAP participants have to work, introducing impossible work requirements, because there aren’t jobs for people who are on SNAP, really, not very many—making sure that undocumented immigrants are not qualified for these kinds of programs under the public charge rule that’s been put forth by the current administration. Anyone who is likely to require public benefits will not be eligible for citizenship. And these kinds of introductions have made it very uncomfortable for people to go onto SNAP. They think it’s too dangerous, and so they’ve been dropping out. That’s highly unfortunate because there’s so much evidence that the program has done so much good.
So, is the program in peril? Will it be eliminated or what’s coming?

Well, I think we’re seeing constant pressures to reduce enrollments in SNAP and to reduce the cost of SNAP. There’s been one proposal after another to try to eliminate loopholes that allow states to put people on SNAP rolls, even though the SNAP rules officially don’t allow it, rules to do things like take away minor benefits for SNAP participants—but it’s a difficult problem to get rid of in part for moral reasons. I mean, America, a lot of Americans still think it’s a good idea to not have people starving on the streets and also because of SNAP’s location in the farm bill. SNAP is the elephant in the farm bill. It takes up roughly 80% of the expenditures of the farm bill, it’s in the farm bill for historical reasons, its origins in farm programs, and it’s not possible to pass farm legislation without also having SNAP passed all of it as well, because of the logrolling that put SNAP in the farm bill in the first place. So, for political reasons it’s very difficult to get rid of it, but you certainly can do everything that you possibly can to reduce enrollments which is what this administration is doing.

But Marion, it seems to have been a very smart idea to put SNAP in the farm bill. Do you remember who did that?

Well, that was President Lyndon B. Johnson who was a master at politics and he realized that the only way that he was going to get farm legislation passed and food assistance passed was to link them together, and he linked them together in a classic case of logrolling. SNAP wasn’t in the farm bill at the time. They were separate pieces of legislation, but he basically got legislators to agree that I will vote for your farm support if you will vote for my food assistance programs. Food assistance programs benefitted [urban] dwellers more than they benefitted people in urban areas. That’s actually
switched now and there are more SNAP participants in rural areas now than there are in urban areas. It’s a complicated story; it’s a mess, politically, and public health people ought to be defending SNAP in every possible way because it’s all we’ve got.

AM Got it, but it needs to be defended but it also needs to be expanded and it also needs to be qualitatively improved, if I understand what you said. So, what do you think? Should we have a green new SNAP?

MN A green new SNAP? If we were starting over, I’m not sure what come if we were starting over, we would start with income support which was the—in 1969, the White House Conference on Food Nutrition and Health, which is just celebrating its 50th anniversary, participants at that conference in 1969 argued strongly for an income support program, cash assistance. That has never been politically viable in the United States, and so SNAP is what we’ve got and what we have to deal with. We do have another food assistance program, WIC, the Women, Infants & Children program, that gives participants a debit card that they can only spend on a specific set of foods, and those foods are designed to improve the health of women and children. That’s a possible option, and it’s highly debated; it’s something that needs a lot of discussion and moving forward on it, and right now any kind of discussions like that are completely impossible because there’s so much pressure to decrease enrollments in SNAP and to undermine the good that it does do, that the only thing that public health advocates can do right now is to do everything they can to protect SNAP as it is.

AM And how do you we do that?

MN Oh, through the political process, screaming at our local representatives to defend it, trying as hard as possible to demonstrate that any efforts to reduce SNAP or to weaken
SNAP are destructive and are going to hurt the country, and to deal with Congress in the way that the political process works. So far, Congress has held off the worst of the proposals and I hope they will continue to do so.

AM Because we don’t hear too much about SNAP in the debates, in the political debates, in the political arena. Doesn’t seem that SNAP is really on the forefront of politicians’ concerns?

MN Well, we need a poor people’s movement in the United States. What we really need is a strengthening of civil society and a strengthening and empowering of the poor to demand a piece of the extraordinary economic success of the United States, which in many ways has come at the expense of the poor. And, you know, I don’t know what you do about political organizing, classic public health organizing seems to me the appropriate response to all of this which is to go into communities and to work with the communities to get for the communities what they most need. And I wish everybody were doing that because it’s needed very, very badly. We need a much stronger civil society in the United States, unions, community organizations, movements.

AM Marion, thank you very much. We’re going to stop on those wise words, and hopefully the message will go through. Thank you very much for that.

MN My pleasure.

[musical interlude]

AM Alright, at the end of these interviews, it appears that SNAP is still a very effective program. More than 10% of the population receives it, mostly children. Maybe not as generous as it should be, given the tremendous wealth inequalities in this country, but still a program that is being threatened by an administration which believes that people
who suffer from food insecurity are the only ones responsible for their problems. It needs to be defended, but it also appears that SNAP was invented in the 30s during the Great Depression as a means for the state to buy their production from farmers and give it to needy people. It was in those times a win/win situation, but today food stamps cannot replace a decent wage. As stressed by Joanna, food stamps only buy food, but a decent wage allows you to pay for your rent, clothes, and all your needs. Generalizing at the minimum wage of $15 per hour will allow people to transition from an assisted life on SNAP to a life they can better manage themselves entirely.

[<i>musical background</i>]

AM I’m grateful to all my interviewees for their time and willingness to share their ideas. I also thank Emily D’Agostino and Michael Constanza for comments and edits on an earlier version of the podcast. Francis Jacob composed the country tune, and this is Alfredo Morabia at AJPH. For more podcasts including podcasts in Chinese and Spanish, visit us at <a>www.ajph.org</a> or subscribe to it on your usual podcast app. A full transcript of the podcast is available on the AJPH website for persons with hearing disabilities. That’s it, thank you for listening.

[<i>musical postlude</i>]