



Hunger. Where Does ABPsi Enter the Debate?

Personal Responsibility, Public Interest and Social Justice

Hunger is a physical sensation that signals a desire for food. Across the United States, one in six people are struggling with hunger and millions more are at risk (Feeding America, 2014). Hard working adults, children and seniors who are not always able to make ends meet may be forced to go without food (Feeding America, 2014). The social debate over hunger and proper nutrition usually focuses on food insecurity and the role of government to deliver food to the hungry poor. Policies favorable to domestic agriculture, and in support of food security, were seen as sustainable market based solutions to the hunger problem. A critical conflict in this debate rests on the assumption that hunger is a problem of demand exceeding supply; however, these policies also represented an over reliance on government to resolve food inequities among the poor, creating concerns in the face of rising debt and unsustainable need.

Hunger can be viewed from different sides of the problem: 1) the plight of the poor and 2) failures in public policy. Lack of infrastructure, distribution inefficiencies, and inadequate access present barriers that are beyond the individual control of vulnerable families. Additionally, racism and anti-poor prejudice creates a level of enmity towards those that are in need. These attitudes further dehumanize and label individuals as the victim. Dehumanization helps to form the impetus and support to reduce or get rid of federal funds that protect hunger in America.

In examining the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) cuts, there is partisan debate about the role of the government, but general agreement suggests that the government is charged with protecting its citizenry. This protection is the purported purpose of such governmental agencies as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the Farm Bill. However, the government is not above the influence of capitalistic and other interests, which compromise its responsibility to provide accurate information and regulate industries for the benefit/protection of Americans. This compromise is evident in relation to nutrition as provided (supposedly) by SNAP benefits. Thus, beyond the question of whether or how to fund benefits to needy individuals/families is the question of the ethics of the government and industry in relation to food in the first place.

Food security is a human right. In fact 50 years ago the “War on Poverty,” which rode the heels of the Civil Rights movement, declared “freedom from want” as one of the four fundamental human rights (Fisher, 2000). Hence the “War on Poverty” enacted legislation such as the Social Security Act, Food Stamp Act and Economic Opportunity Act as solutions to the consequences of poverty (e.g. juvenile delinquency, hunger and employment). However, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) suggested federal cash assistance programs for impoverished individuals are ineffective, foster dependency on the government and prevent individuals from escaping poverty. African Americans’ strife and economic struggle became the key to advancing such a notion as they were blamed for their meager conditions and need for the government to save them from themselves. For instance, while Whites are the largest racial group on welfare, African Americans remain the face of poverty and are often regarded as the beneficiaries of such government assistance (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Since Reagan's 1976 presidential campaign



where he characterized a woman from southside Chicago as reaping the benefits of welfare and government assistance to live a lavish lifestyle most working folks cannot afford, African American women receiving government cash assistance have persistently been stereotyped as the welfare queen (Gilliam, 1999; Levin, 2013).

The materialization of systemic racism and economic inequality in the United States has unduly stricken African Americans with unemployment, underemployment, poverty and food insecurity. For instance, the unemployment rates of African Americans (13.8%) are twice that of their White counterparts (7.1%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Even when employed, African Americans' median income continues to be 55 percent of that of White Americans (Harris, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Actually, the poverty rate for African Americans in 2012 was 28% which is triple that of non-Hispanic Whites (9.7%) (Feeding America, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Furthermore, one in four African American households are food insecure in contrast to one in 10 White American households (Feeding America, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Food insecurity in the African American community is compounded with the manifestations of racism (e.g. poverty, unemployment, underemployment and race-related stress) and subsequently is detrimental to African Americans' growth and development, particularly African American children. Adverse effects of poverty and food insecurity on child development cover a range of maturational and social milestones. Poverty and resultant food insecurity are significant risk factors leading to poor developmental, cognitive and academic outcomes. Higher risk for antisocial behaviors and mental disorders have also been associated with sustained experience of poverty and hunger (Chilton & Booth, 2007). Moreover, African Americans typically experience trauma from chronic exposure to food insecurity.

Racial discrimination dynamically governs, influences and perpetuates poverty and food security in America. As a commitment to social justice, we support governmental policy changes to protect the right of people to feed themselves with dignity. Because ABPsi is a critical voice in service to the vulnerable, we make several recommendations on this issue.

First, we urge Congress to reinstate the cuts to SNAP, given the vulnerability of our community, and the harm these cuts will have, as outlined in this position paper. Second, we encourage and support our community in addressing issues of health and nutrition independent of government action. We can accomplish this through creating and supporting personal and community gardens that teach individuals how to grow their own food which may reduce overall costs to government and to the individual. Furthermore, ABPsi requests equitable distribution of nutritional resources. Societal disparities, between African American and White families, require government action. High rates of unemployment, crime, poverty and other social ills limit educational success and job prospects. SNAP eligibility requirements have become more strident and stringent and poor families are falling through the cracks. Some incarcerated and chronically unemployed individuals are examples of these vulnerable groups. African American families living in densely populated cities are vulnerable to highest poverty rates. Issues of crime, violence, poor housing and underemployment/unemployment further complicate challenges related to food insecurity. These issues affect the African ancestry community nationally and internationally and ABPsi is taking a stance on the troubling impact of food insecurity in our communities.



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