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The Safety Net

Food Stamp Use Soars, and Stigma Fades

By JASON DePARLE and [ROBERT GEBELOFF](#)

MARTINSVILLE, Ohio — With food stamp use at record highs and climbing every month, a program once scorned as a failed welfare scheme now helps feed one in eight Americans and one in four children.

It has grown so rapidly in places so diverse that it is becoming nearly as ordinary as the groceries it buys. More than 36 million people use inconspicuous plastic cards for staples like milk, bread and cheese, swiping them at counters in blighted cities and in suburbs pocked with foreclosure signs.

Virtually all have incomes near or below the federal poverty line, but their eclectic ranks testify to the range of people struggling with basic needs. They include single mothers and married couples, the newly jobless and the chronically poor, longtime recipients of welfare checks and workers whose reduced hours or slender wages leave pantries bare.

While the numbers have soared during the [recession](#), the path was cleared in better times when the Bush administration led a campaign to erase the program's stigma, calling food stamps "nutritional aid" instead of welfare, and made it easier to apply. That bipartisan effort capped an extraordinary reversal from the 1990s, when some conservatives tried to abolish the program, Congress enacted large cuts and bureaucratic hurdles chased many needy people away.

From the ailing resorts of the Florida Keys to Alaskan villages along the Bering Sea, the program is now expanding at a pace of about 20,000 people a day.

There are 239 counties in the United States where at least a quarter of the population receives food stamps, according to an analysis of local data collected by The New York Times.

The counties are as big as the Bronx and Philadelphia and as small as Owsley County in Kentucky, a patch of Appalachian distress where half of the 4,600 residents receive food stamps.

In more than 750 counties, the program helps feed one in three blacks. In more than 800 counties, it helps feed one in three children. In the Mississippi River cities of St. Louis, Memphis and New Orleans, half of the children or more receive food stamps. Even in Peoria, Ill. — Everytown, U.S.A. — nearly 40 percent of children receive aid.

While use is greatest where poverty runs deep, the growth has been especially swift in once-prosperous places hit by the housing bust. There are about 50 small counties and a dozen sizable ones where the rolls have doubled in the last two years. In another 205 counties, they have risen by at least two-thirds. These places with soaring rolls include populous Riverside County, Calif., most of greater Phoenix and Las Vegas, a ring of affluent Atlanta suburbs, and a 150-mile stretch of southwest Florida from Bradenton to the Everglades.

Although the program is growing at a record rate, the federal official who oversees it would like it to grow even faster.

“I think the response of the program has been tremendous,” said Kevin Concannon, an under secretary of agriculture, “but we’re mindful that there are another 15, 16 million who could benefit.”

Nationwide, [food stamps reach about two-thirds of those eligible](#), with rates ranging from an estimated 50 percent in California to 98 percent in Missouri. Mr. Concannon urged lagging states to do more to enroll the needy, citing [a recent government report](#) that found a sharp rise in Americans with inconsistent access to adequate food.

“This is the most urgent time for our feeding programs in our lifetime, with the exception of the Depression,” he said. “It’s time for us to face up to the fact that in this country of plenty, there are hungry people.”

The program’s growing reach can be seen in a corner of southwestern Ohio where red state politics reign and blue-collar workers have often called food stamps a sign of laziness. But unemployment has soared, and food stamp use in a six-county area outside Cincinnati has risen more than 50 percent.

With most of his co-workers laid off, Greg Dawson, a third-generation electrician in rural Martinsville, considers himself lucky to still have a job. He works the night shift for a contracting firm, installing freezer lights in a chain of grocery stores. But when his overtime income vanished and his expenses went up, Mr. Dawson started skimping on meals to feed his wife and five children.

He tried to fill up on cereal and eggs. He ate a lot of Spam. Then he went to work with a grumbling stomach to shine lights on food he could not afford. When an outreach worker appeared at his son's Head Start program, Mr. Dawson gave in.

"It's embarrassing," said Mr. Dawson, 29, a taciturn man with a wispy goatee who is so uneasy about the monthly benefit of \$300 that he has not told his parents. "I always thought it was people trying to milk the system. But we just felt like we really needed the help right now."

The outreach worker is a telltale sign. Like many states, Ohio has campaigned hard to raise the share of eligible people collecting benefits, which are financed entirely by the federal government and brought the state about \$2.2 billion last year.

By contrast, in the federal cash welfare program, states until recently bore the entire cost of caseload growth, and nationally the rolls have stayed virtually flat. Unemployment insurance, despite rapid growth, reaches about only half the jobless (and replaces about half their income), making food stamps the only aid many people can get — the safety net's safety net.

Support for the food stamp program reached a nadir in the mid-1990s when critics, likening the benefit to cash welfare, won significant restrictions and sought even more. But after use plunged for several years, President Bill Clinton began promoting the program, in part as a way to help the working poor. President [George W. Bush](#) expanded that effort, a strategy Mr. Obama has embraced.

The revival was crowned last year with an upbeat change of name. What most people still call food stamps is technically the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

By the time the recession began, in December 2007, "the whole message around this program had changed," said Stacy Dean of the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#), a Washington group that has supported food

stamp expansions. “The general pitch was, ‘This program is here to help you.’ ”

Now nearly 12 percent of Americans receive aid — 28 percent of blacks, 15 percent of Latinos and 8 percent of whites. Benefits average about \$130 a month for each person in the household, but vary with shelter and child care costs.

In the promotion of the program, critics see a sleight of hand.

“Some people like to camouflage this by calling it a nutrition program, but it’s really not different from cash welfare,” said Robert Rector of the [Heritage Foundation](#), whose views have a following among conservatives on Capitol Hill. “Food stamps is quasi money.”

Arguing that aid discourages work and marriage, Mr. Rector said food stamps should contain work requirements as strict as those placed on cash assistance. “The food stamp program is a fossil that repeats all the errors of the war on poverty,” he said.

Suburbs Are Hit Hard

Across the country, the food stamp rolls can be read like a scan of a sick economy. The counties of northwest Ohio, where car parts are made, take sick when Detroit falls ill. Food stamp use is up by about 60 percent in Erie County (vibration controls), 77 percent in Wood County (floor mats) and 84 percent in hard-hit Van Wert (shifting components and cooling fans).

Just west, in Indiana, Elkhart County makes the majority of the nation’s recreational vehicles. Sales have fallen more than half during the recession, and nearly 30 percent of the county’s children are receiving food stamps.

The pox in southwest Florida is the housing bust, with foreclosure rates in Fort Myers often leading the nation in the last two years. Across six contiguous counties from Manatee to Monroe, the food stamp rolls have more than doubled.

In sheer numbers, growth has come about equally from places where food stamp use was common and places where it was rare. Since 2007, the 600 counties with the highest percentage of people on the rolls added 1.3

million new recipients. So did the 600 counties where use was lowest.

The richest counties are often where aid is growing fastest, although from a small base. In 2007, Forsyth County, outside Atlanta, had the highest household income in the South. (One author dubbed it “Whitopia.”) Food stamp use there has more than doubled.

This is the first recession in which a majority of the poor in metropolitan areas live in the suburbs, giving food stamps new prominence there. Use has grown by half or more in dozens of suburban counties from Boston to Seattle, including such bulwarks of modern conservatism as California’s Orange County, where the rolls are up more than 50 percent.

While food stamp use is still the exception in places like Orange County (where 4 percent of the population get [food aid](#)), the program reaches deep in places of chronic poverty. It feeds half the people in stretches of white Appalachia, in a Yupik-speaking region of Alaska and on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

Across the 10 core counties of the Mississippi Delta, 45 percent of black residents receive aid. In a city as big as St. Louis, the share is 60 percent.

Use among children is especially high. A third of the children in Louisiana, Missouri and Tennessee receive food aid. In the Bronx, the rate is 46 percent. In East Carroll Parish, La., three-quarters of the children receive food stamps.

A recent study by [Mark R. Rank](#), a professor at [Washington University](#) in St. Louis, startled some policy makers in finding that half of Americans receive food stamps, at least briefly, by the time they turn 20. Among black children, the figure was 90 percent.

Need Overcomes Scorn

Across the small towns and rolling farmland outside Cincinnati, old disdain for the program has collided with new needs. Warren County, the second-richest in Ohio, is so averse to government aid that it turned down a federal stimulus grant. But the market for its high-end suburban homes has sagged, people who build them are idle and food stamp use has doubled.

Next door, in Clinton County, the blow has been worse. DHL, the international package carrier, has closed most of its giant airfield, costing the county its biggest employer and about 7,500 jobs. The county unemployment rate nearly tripled, to more than 14 percent.

“We’re seeing people getting food stamps who never thought they’d get them,” said Tina Osso, the director of the Shared Harvest Food Bank in Fairfield, which runs an outreach program in five area counties.

While Mr. Dawson, the electrician, has kept his job, the drive to distant work sites has doubled his gas bill, [food prices](#) rose sharply last year and his health insurance premiums have soared. His monthly expenses have risen by about \$400, and the elimination of overtime has cost him \$200 a month. Food stamps help fill the gap.

Like many new beneficiaries here, Mr. Dawson argues that people often abuse the program and is quick to say he is different. While some people “choose not to get married, just so they can apply for benefits,” he is a married, churchgoing man who works and owns his home. While “some people put piles of steaks in their carts,” he will not use the government’s money for luxuries like coffee or soda. “To me, that’s just morally wrong,” he said.

He has noticed crowds of midnight shoppers once a month when benefits get renewed. While policy analysts, spotting similar crowds nationwide, have called them a sign of increased hunger, he sees idleness. “Generally, if you’re up at that hour and not working, what are you into?” he said.

Still, the program has filled the Dawsons’ home with fresh fruit, vegetables, bread and meat, and something they had not fully expected — an enormous sense of relief. “I know if I run out of milk, I could run down to the gas station,” said Mr. Dawson’s wife, Sheila.

As others here tell it, that is a benefit not to be overlooked.

Sarah and Tyrone Mangold started the year on track to make \$70,000 — she was selling health insurance, and he was working on a heating and air conditioning crew. She got laid off in the spring, and he a few months later. Together they had one unemployment check and a blended family of three children, including one with a neurological disorder aggravated by poor nutrition.

They ate at his mother's house twice a week. They pawned jewelry. She scoured the food pantry. He scrounged for side jobs. Their frustration peaked one night over a can of pinto beans. Each blamed the other when that was all they had to eat.

"We were being really snippy, having anxiety attacks," Ms. Mangold said. "People get irritable when they're hungry."

Food stamps now fortify the family income by \$623 a month, and Mr. Mangold, who is still patching together odd jobs, no longer objects.

"I always thought people on public assistance were lazy," he said, "but it helps me know I can feed my kids."

Shifting Views

So far, few elected officials have objected to the program's growth. Almost 90 percent of beneficiaries nationwide live below the poverty line (about \$22,000 a year for a family of four). But a minor tempest hit Ohio's Warren County after a woman drove to the food stamp office in a Mercedes-Benz and word spread that she owned a \$300,000 home loan-free. Since Ohio ignores the value of houses and cars, she qualified.

"I'm a hard-core conservative Republican guy — I found that appalling," said Dave Young, a member of the county board of commissioners, which briefly threatened to withdraw from the federal program.

"As soon as people figure out they can vote representatives in to give them benefits, that's the end of democracy," Mr. Young said. "More and more people will be taking, and fewer will be producing."

At the same time, the recession left Sandi Bernstein more sympathetic to the needy. After years of success in the insurance business, Ms. Bernstein, 66, had just settled into what she had expected to be a comfortable retirement when the financial crisis last year sent her brokerage accounts plummeting. Feeling newly vulnerable herself, she volunteered with an outreach program run by [AARP](#) and the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Food Banks.

Having assumed that poor people clamored for aid, she was surprised to find that some needed convincing to

apply. “I come here and I see people who are knowledgeable, normal, well-spoken, well-dressed,” she said. “These are people I could be having lunch with.”

That could describe Franny and Shawn Wardlow, whose house in nearby Oregonia conjures middle-American stability rather than the struggle to meet basic needs. Their three daughters have heads of neat blond hair, pink bedroom curtains and a turtle bought in better times on vacation in Daytona Beach, Fla. One wrote a fourth-grade story about her parents that concluded “They lived happily ever after.”

Ms. Wardlow, who worked at a nursing home, lost her job first. Soon after, Mr. Wardlow was laid off from the construction job he had held for nearly nine years. As Ms. Wardlow tells the story of the subsequent fall — cutoff threats from the power company, the dinners of egg noodles, the soap from the [Salvation Army](#) — she dwells on one unlikely symbol of the security she lost.

Pot roast.

“I was raised on eating pot roast,” she said. “Just a nice decent meal.”

Mr. Wardlow, 32, is a strapping man with a friendly air. He talked his way into a job at an envelope factory although his boss said he was overqualified. But it pays less than what he made muscling a jackhammer, and with Ms. Wardlow still jobless, they are two months behind on the rent. A monthly food stamp benefit of \$429 fills the shelves and puts an occasional roast on the Sunday table.

It reminds Ms. Wardlow of what she has lost, and what she hopes to regain.

“I would consider us middle class at one time,” she said. “I like to have a nice decent meal for dinner.”

Matthew Ericson and Janet Roberts contributed reporting.

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