While most of the world eats to live, Americans live to eat. Or at least this is what is portrayed by network television shows like *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives* and *Guy's Grocery Games*. Food has become such a focal point in American culture that it has become entertainment, something whimsical, even a game. This characterization of American food habits, however, entirely disregards the daily realities of millions of food-insecure Americans. As a necessity of life, food is universally fundamental for both subsistence and personal well being. The ability to put food on the table is an objective deeply rooted in the American work ethic and spans all eras of American history. For millions of Americans, however, this objective is often not a feasible reality. From widespread starvation in Jamestown to the plight of the urban masses in the late 19th century, to 2020, which has witnessed record numbers of families seeking food assistance, hunger has relentlessly followed each and every generation of Americans.

After several years of decline in food insecurity, the coronavirus pandemic and ensuing economic downturn have left the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program (FSP), overwhelmed by the demand for assistance. In 2019, nearly 38 million Americans were considered food-insecure, lacking reliable access to sufficient nutritious food. Feeding America estimates that in 2020, amidst the pandemic, an additional 16 million Americans will be at risk of food insecurity. The lasting effects of this catastrophic economic downturn are likely to render more Americans in need of SNAP than ever before. Yet, as it often goes with federal programs, the FSP’s quantifiable success has ebbed and flowed throughout its existence and the program undoubtedly has its flaws. While some legislators point to these shortcomings as cause to prevent expansion or even shrink the program, the federal Food
Stamp Program has been and continues to be effective and essential in America’s fight against hunger and must expand its outreach as more Americans seek assistance. In order to enact sustainable changes, it is imperative to examine how the program has historically adapted to dynamic challenges.

**Historical Background**

Efforts to combat hunger are as old as our nation. In one of the first recorded organized efforts to provide food aid, the Humane Society of New York City provided meals for families of debtors beginning in 1787. The program expanded to give food assistance to the poor in 1791 and eventually established the nation’s first soup kitchen in 1802 (Smith). For the next century, the responsibility of hunger alleviation fell on the shoulders of local organizations, often religiously affiliated, which sponsored local soup kitchens and food pantries. It wasn’t until the Great Depression, when demand for food assistance went far beyond the capacity of localized efforts, that the federal government intervened in the battle against hunger.

Initially an outgrowth of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), the first Food Stamp Program launched in Rochester, New York in 1939. By 1943, the issues that prompted the FSP, “widespread unemployment and unmarketable surpluses” (Short History), were virtually nonexistent, and the program met a brief demise. While on the campaign trail in 1960, having witnessed the horrors of poverty and malnutrition in West Virginia, presidential candidate John F. Kennedy vowed to expand food welfare if elected into office, a promise he kept in 1961, when an executive order revitalized and broadened the FSP. The subsequent Johnson and Nixon administrations continued to grow the program, passing the Food Stamp Act in 1964 and greatly expanding the FSP budget throughout the decade. The late seventies through the early 2000s
gave way to substantial revisions in the FSP’s policies, most significantly a reduction in benefits and a fundamental change in name and function. As the demands of food-insecure Americans evolved, the FSP was rebranded as SNAP while Electronic Balance Transfer (EBT) cards allowed for simplified food distribution.

**Young, Scrappy, and Hungry: The Birth of the Food Stamp Program (1939-1943)**

In 1939, Milo Perkins, the first administrator of the Food Stamp Program, could not get past the irony of the decade: farmers had large surpluses and were being paid to leave fields fallow while thousands of city-dwellers starved across the nation’s cities. Along with Henry Wallace, the Secretary of Agriculture at the time, Perkins founded the FSP, which was tremendously effective in closing the gap between surplus and starvation and would leave a crucial precedent of a welfare program that simultaneously benefited the economy.

The devastation of the Depression struck urban centers with unimaginable hunger and strife. At one point in 1932, New York City soup kitchens were dishing out eighty-five thousand meals daily (NYC by Numbers). Like Perkins, many Americans began to question why nothing was being done to “bridge the chasm” (Short History) between farmers and hungry citizens. To Perkins and Wallace, the answer was clear.

The pair saw an opportunity to solve the trifold problems of agricultural surpluses, struggling grocers, and starving citizens. For every one dollar of “orange stamps” that could purchase any food product, families received fifty cents of “blue stamps” that could only be used to buy USDA designated surplus items (United 2). This plan was heartily welcomed by Rochester residents. A column from the Danville Register Bee recorded shoppers’ thoughts, with the first food stamp recipient commenting that he would “certainly take advantage” of the
government program, and another customer claiming that she thought the “program would work fine” (Food Stamps). The program did not just work fine; it worked great. Families now had a 50% increase in purchasing power, grocers were receiving more business, and agricultural surpluses decreased (United 2). Responding to the popularity of the stamps in Rochester, the program expanded across the nation over the next four years, reaching an astounding 20 million hungry Americans (Caswell).

The FSP could not have achieved such quantitative success without its goal of economic recovery and a model of dynamism and regulation. The 1939 Report of the Secretary of Agriculture outlined the guiding principles of the program, citing restrictions on the purchase of tobacco and alcohol as a necessary precaution against program abuse. To this day, a widely held misconception is that SNAP benefits can be misused. However, from the very birth of the FSP, regulation has made it so that food stamps can only buy necessary items. Beyond regulation, the food stamp plan was built “upon a flexible basis,” making it possible “in times of stress to stabilize [our] whole economy” (United 2). The FSP not only set out to feed families, but to create a program that would have far-reaching effects for farmers, businesses, and ultimately, the national economy.

While the circumstances of economic fallout today are vastly different from the Great Depression, hunger among the unemployed is consistent. The FSP was fundamentally made to expand in times of crisis and it must continue to do so today, just as it did in 1939. Food stamp benefits were put on pause in 1943 as demand for food assistance dwindled due to mobilization for war (Klein), yet the FSP and similar welfare of the era undoubtedly contributed to national recovery. The triumph of the first FSP owes nothing to luck, but rather careful innovation and
recognition by Perkins and Wallace that a social safety net also had the capability to remedy an economic downturn - a lesson that is just as critical today as legislators work to mend the nation’s multifaceted problems.

“Food is strength, food is peace, food is freedom”: JFK & LBJ Revitalization (1961-1971)

In West Virginia in 1961, more than a quarter of a million residents lived on the edge, malnourished and in dire need of assistance. The gravity of the situation weighed heavily on the mind of Senator John F. Kennedy. In 1959, the Eisenhower administration had distributed twenty dollars a year per family in need (Kennedy 2). To Kennedy, this was “a shocking figure,” a figure that could “not drive off hunger or disease, a figure which the next Democratic Administration would change” (Kennedy 2). Following the precedent set by the first FSP, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson recognized the unique needs of their decade and utilized the program not only to eliminate hunger, but also as a method of diplomatic goodwill.

True to his word on the campaign trail, Kennedy made food assistance a top priority. In fact, his very first executive order revitalized the FSP for the first time since the Depression. The order focused on increasing the nutritional variety of distributed food and made an amendment to the original FSP that excluded surplus items as part of the program (United 3). For families in West Virginia, Kennedy’s pilot food stamp program was a godsend. Grace Strain, a facilitator of one of the first programs, “used to worry about children going hungry,” but felt confident that once food stamps were firmly established, “no child would ever go to bed hungry in West Virginia” (First Food). Following the legacy Kennedy left behind, President Johnson swiftly passed the Food Stamp Act of 1964 to pull FSP regulation under Congressional jurisdiction (United). With a flexible growth model mirroring that of Perkins and Wallaces’ program, the
renewed FSP grew exponentially in its first few years, reaching 6 million participants by 1970 (Short History). Though this era of reborn food stamps did not eliminate the need for food aid in America, it did play a significant role in reducing malnutrition. By the mid-70s, the starvation that Kennedy was so shocked by in West Virginia had nearly been erased, now replaced by the concept of food insecurity. Despite the persistence of food insecurity to this day, the most extreme ends of poverty have been alleviated, thanks to the pilot programs and subsequent Food Stamp Act guaranteeing American citizens the most basic necessities.

Both Kennedy and Johnson saw the potential of the FSP beyond domestic benefits; they recognized and seized the opportunity to ingratiate the nation with the rest of the world during a rather incendiary decade. Kennedy noted that food aid to other countries was “a helping hand to people whose goodwill and friendship we want,” (Kennedy) a platform that appealed to voters both for its promise of domestic assistance and improved international relations. Similarly, President Johnson, upon signing the Food Stamp Act, proudly reported that the US would be “sharing 7% more of [our] food with other peoples than in 1960” (Johnson), a diplomacy milestone that put America at the forefront of the global fight against hunger.

While naturally diverging from the FSP’s economic and surplus elimination goals of 1939, Kennedy followed in the footsteps of Perkins and Wallace in using the program’s innate flexibility to combat multiple challenges specific to the decade. Kennedy envisioned not only a stronger American future but a brighter global one as well. “Food is strength, food is peace, food is freedom,” he remarked while campaigning (Kennedy). Put best by the World Food Program, “Kennedy’s time on earth may have been cut short, but his impact on the world’s hungry will
live forever” (History’s Hunger). The power of the FSP lies within its radiating effects on society. Kennedy used the program to combat malnutrition in a strained domestic and global environment, while Perkins and Wallace targeted agricultural surplus, hunger, and struggling businesses. Both eras provide examples of how an up-to-date FSP program can address multiple challenges at once.

Legislation & Legacy: The Future of Food Stamps (1974-Present)

President Nixon is not remembered particularly fondly by American history, yet his indispensable contribution to the FSP paved the way for the system that it is today. In a May 1969 speech to Congress, Nixon proclaimed that the fact that “hunger should persist in a land such as ours is embarrassing and intolerable” (Samuels). Alarmed by the rates of food insecurity in the US, the Nixon administration rolled out the FSP to all fifty states and expanded the program budget to match benefit amounts to the cost of a nutritionally adequate diet. Most critically, Nixon laid the groundwork for a major overhaul of the FSP that would be completed in 1977.

SNAP, as it functions today, is the product of bipartisan collaboration between Senators George McGovern and Bob Dole. The joint effort culminated in the Food Stamp Act of 1977, which improved accessibility by outlining eligibility qualifications and establishing anti-fraud protocol. Most importantly, the FSP no longer required payment for stamps, meaning the assistance was finally reaching the lowest-income Americans (Short History). The FSP flourished under these new regulations until President Reagan enacted substantial cutbacks as part of his “bootstrap” economic plan. While campaigning, Reagan used the imagery of a
“strapping young buck” using food stamps to purchase steaks to attack the FSP as an agent for unnecessary government handouts and a promoter of laziness. Following Reagan’s implementation of income tests, work requirements, and a freeze on federal funding, by the end of his time in office, hunger rates had once again soared - except this time, under reduced eligibility, fewer Americans were able to access FSP benefits.

Bearing witness to the damage the budget cutbacks caused the FSP, Congress passed the Hunger Prevention Act of 1988, reversing the changes Reagan made, once again expanding the program (Short History). A noteworthy accomplishment of this new legislation was the introduction of Electronic Balance Transfers (EBT), which promised to reduce fraud and ease transactions, allowing beneficiaries to pay in the same manner as customers not using food stamps would.

The FSP, having been renamed SNAP under the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act, reached peak participation in the years following the 2008 recession, topping out at 48 million beneficiaries in 2013 (Bauer). The budget for benefits expanded nationwide as families increasingly sought aid, which proved to be remarkably successful; the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that SNAP prevented 10 million Americans from going hungry in the worst years of the recession (Rosenbaum). Since 2013, food insecurity rates have steadily decreased. The current pandemic, however, not only threatens this progress but also rivals all previous records of food insecurity.

SNAP now faces an astonishing 54 million Americans potentially in need of assistance, with 23% of households reporting not having enough money for food, compared to 16% at the
height of the 2008 recession (Bauer). This March, the USDA increased benefits by 40% under the economic stimulus and relief bill known as the CARES Act. States are taking advantage of this expanded budget through P-EBT, benefits specifically for children who are unable to receive their free or reduced-cost meals at school. Despite the unprecedented unemployment and food insecurity of this pandemic, the Trump administration continues to insist that SNAP funds be cut by 30%. To historian Andrew Coe, Trump’s alternative suggestion of distributing “harvest boxes” is reminiscent of Depression-era food lines — the very crisis that birthed the food stamp program — and demands that beneficiaries “humiliate themselves for their poverty and need” (Coe). Yet, those on the front lines of fighting hunger maintain that the “program is the single most powerful anti-hunger tool that we have” as well as “one of the most important economic development tools” (DeParle). The disconnect between the current administration and the realities of food-insecure citizens has the potential to add to the economic and social consequences if SNAP is not maintained.

The future of some SNAP participants is in limbo as the first coronavirus relief bill expires and Congress stalls over details on the second. Hunger will not wait for Congress to catch up. Most imminently, legislators must push for the SNAP benefit expansion to span not just the length of the pandemic, but the length of the economic downturn that will outlive the pandemic crisis. Just as the FSP provided support for economic recovery at the time of its creation, SNAP today has the power to be a cornerstone of rebuilding both nutritional and financial health. Beyond this, SNAP has to leverage the technological tools of the times, a tradition the program has maintained throughout its evolution, such as with the use of EBT systems to curb fraud. Software developers in Chicago have already produced an app that
determines one’s eligibility for SNAP within minutes, a twenty-first-century adaptation that could be the next major step taken by the program (Free). SNAP’s unique historical ability to conform to the needs of an era while simultaneously pushing the limits of innovation must continue to guide legislative changes forward for the betterment of the American public.

From reducing agricultural surplus in the Depression, to its use as a diplomacy tool in the sixties, to its adaptations for a pandemic, SNAP’s outreach stretches far beyond providing meals for the needy. If food security is critical to a nation’s success, then the affordable availability of that food will pay powerful dividends back to society. In the midst of a health crisis, subsequent economic fallout and social unrest, we cannot forget the hungry. We must look to the ingenuity of Perkins and Wallace, Kennedy, Johnson, McGovern, and Dole to improve national food security. Their legacy — addressing the most fundamental concerns of America’s neediest citizens — must live on through SNAP today.


“Food Stamps Put $50,000 in Business.” *The Register Bee* [Danville, VA], 20 May 1939, p. 12.


Rosenbaum, Dottie. “Boost SNAP to Capitalize on Program’s Effectiveness and Ability to
Respond to Need.” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, 18 July 2020,

Samuels, Dorothy. “There Was a Time When Ending Hunger Was a Goal for Republicans and Democrats.” *The New York Times*, 20 May 2013,


“USDA Increases Monthly SNAP Benefits by 40%.” *United States Department of Agriculture*, 22 Apr. 2020,
“Food Stamps Put $50,000 in Business.” The Register Bee [Danville, VA], 20 May 1939, p. 12.


The White House proudly proclaimed that last year it had distributed more than five and one-half million dollars in food surpluses to the people of West Virginia. But this means that every man, woman and child in the program received little more than twenty dollars worth of food for the entire year -- twenty dollars worth of flour, corn-meal, rice and -- on special occasions -- a little lard, dried milk and eggs. These statistics are not an occasion for pride. Twenty dollars worth of this limited variety of food is not enough to maintain health or build strong bodies. Twenty dollars does not drive off hunger or disease. Twenty dollars is a shocking figure -- a figure which must be changed -- and a figure which the next Democratic Administration will change.