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The Right to Food in the U.S.: The Role of SNAP

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Abstract: The “right to food” has been formally implemented in some countries and, in other contexts, it is used as an exhortation for governments or other entities to take actions to reduce food insecurity. What exactly is meant by this right, how the demands of meeting this right can be met, whether countries can actually meet this right, and multiple other questions have emerged in discussions about the right to food. Often absent from discussions about the right to food is how specific food assistance programs can and do play a role in reducing food insecurity and, hence, helping to meet the goal of the right to food. In particular, whether the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) is a useful model for ensuring the right to food. I begin this paper with a consideration of the right to food and the obligations this imposes on a society based on Roman Catholic teachings on the right to food. If a country is to have a right to food, whether or not this is being met should be measurable. I therefore consider a measure, the Food Security Supplement (FSS) that has been used in the U.S. Under the auspices of this definition, I discuss five components of a right to food and how SNAP does and does not meet these components. In concluding remarks, I discuss where this paper falls short and potential ways of furthering this conversation.

For over 50 years, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) has been at the forefront of efforts to reduce food insecurity in the U.S. (Bartfeld et al., 2015). Over this same time period, there has become more of an emphasis on ensuring the “right to food” in both high-income countries (HICs) and low-income countries (LICs). What exactly is meant by this right, how the demands of meeting this right can be met, whether countries can actually meet this right, and multiple other questions have emerged in discussions about the right to food.

Often absent from discussions about the right to food is how specific food assistance programs can and do play a role in reducing food insecurity and, hence, helping to meet the goal of the right to food. And, in particular, how the specific construction of SNAP can ensure a right to food has not been discussed. In this paper, therefore, I consider the insights that can be drawn from SNAP and, in fact, I argue that SNAP can be a model for other countries interested in formalizing the right to food.

I begin this paper with a consideration of the right to food and the obligations this imposes on a society. There are both secular and religious considerations of this topic and I do not try to be comprehensive in this short article and, instead, I concentrate on Roman Catholic teachings on the right to food. While, of course, this is necessarily limiting, the advantages to doing so are that the Catholic Church has established an extensive set of writings on this topic, these perspectives have informed non-religious approaches to the right to food, and the writings are designed to be applicable even to non-Catholics.

If a country is to have a right to food, whether or not this is being met should be measurable. I therefore consider a measure, the Food Security Supplement (FSS) that has been used in the U.S. and in other HICs and LICs. Included in this discussion is a brief overview of

some of the determinants of food insecurity insofar as addressing these may be seen as useful to establishing a right to food. Under the auspices of this definition, I discuss five components of a right to food and how SNAP does and does not meet these components. In concluding remarks, I discuss where this paper falls short and potential ways of furthering this conversation.

The Right to Food

Describing the Catholic Church's teachings with respect to the right of food and its place in the broader set of CSTs would be far too long for an article of this type. Therefore, I will concentrate on quotes taken from Papal Encyclicals and letters from Popes on this topic¹.

Its [the Church's] desire is that the poor should rise above poverty and wretchedness, and should better their condition in life; and for this it strives.

Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), paragraph 28

This document has had a profound influence on CST. While this quote does not specifically mention the right to food, it does serve as a basis for the Church's perspective on this topic insofar as it emphasizes the duty of Catholics to address issues of poverty which necessarily includes issues of hunger.

Every man has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services.

St. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963), paragraph 11

This encyclical, 70 years after *Rerum Novarum*, uses the language of rights and explicitly states that individuals have the right to food. Included within this statement, is that social

¹ Papal encyclicals are letters from the Pope to Catholics on important issues of doctrine. While directed towards Catholics, they often have implications beyond the Catholic Church.)

services (e.g., SNAP) are ones that individuals should be able to access in order to realize these rights.

In teaching us charity, the Gospel instructs us in the preferential respect due to the poor and the special situation they have in society; the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others.

St. Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), paragraph 23

With respect to both positive and negative rights, individuals will, at times, need to give up some of their own rights. In the case of ensuring the right to food, St. Paul VI explicitly notes that this is the case for those with more financial resources. While this need not be giving up resources such that others can obtain a right to food, it often is the case including, e.g., for food assistance programs which are funded through taxes.

Those who are more influential because they have greater share of goods and common services should feel responsible for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess... the church feels called to take her stand beside the poor, to discern the justice of their requests and to help satisfy them, without losing sight of the good of groups in the context of the common good.

St. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), paragraph 39

While not stated in the context of rights or, more narrowly, the right to food, St. John Paul II continues the emphasis on the need for others to help those in need. His emphasis is even stronger insofar as he notes "...be ready to share with them all they possess." This point is made even stronger when he further says "...it is the Lord Jesus himself who comes to question us...[if we don't meet this demand] (paragraph 13)."

Jesus taught his disciples to pray by asking the Heavenly Father not for "my" but for "our" daily bread. Thus, he desired every person to feel co-responsible for his brothers so that no one would want for what he needs in order to live. The earth's produce forms a gift which God has destined "for the entire human family".

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, 12 November 2006

In the Lord's Prayer, which is said in every Mass, attendees state "...give us this day our daily bread..." and this is what Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI is referring to in this Encyclical. The language of rights is not explicit here but it is conveyed in the notion that individuals should feel responsible for others. He is also specifically noting that what the earth produces is for all of us, not just those with the resources to purchase and consume that food.

Food Insecurity

Since 1996, the Food Security Supplement (FSS) has been on numerous surveys in the U.S. In particular, it has been included on the Current Population Survey (CPS) and, via the information collected there, has been used to derive the official food insecurity measures for the U.S. (The following discussion borrows from, e.g., Gundersen, forthcoming.) To measure food insecurity the FSS consists of 18 questions, 10 for households without children and 8 for households with children, each relating to financial constraints. Examples of survey questions include "Did you or the other adults in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?" (the least severe question), "Were you ever hungry but did not eat because you couldn't afford enough food?", and "Did a child in the household ever not eat

for a full day because you couldn't afford enough food?" (the most severe question). See, for example, Coleman-Jensen *et al.* (2018) for the complete set of questions.

Based on responses to these 18 questions, households are delineated into three categories. A household is said to be *food secure* if they respond affirmatively to two or fewer questions.² These households have had access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. A household is said to be *low food secure* if they respond affirmatively to three to seven questions (three to five for households without children). These households contain at least some household members who were uncertain about having, or unable to acquire, enough food because they had insufficient money and other resources for food. A household is said to be *very low food secure* if they respond affirmatively to eight or more questions (six or more for households without children). These households contain one or more household members who were hungry, at least at some time during the year, because they could not afford sufficient food. The categories of low food secure and very low food are often combined and called food insecure.

Figure 1 shows the official rates of food insecurity and very low food security (VLFS) from 2000 to 2017 (Coleman-Jensen *et al.*, 2018; Table 1A). I include both of these measures insofar as some may argue that having a right to food entails avoiding VLFS even if avoiding low food security doesn't constitute being denied a right to food. Irrespective of the measure, the patterns are similar insofar as the food insecurity rate was relatively steady at about 12 percent and the VLFS rate at about 3.5 percent. Under both measures, the rates increased dramatically for both groups in 2008 with the onset of the Great Recession with rates remaining at elevated

² Some questions ask respondents if something happened "never, sometimes, or often". A response of "sometimes" or "often" is counted as an affirmative response. Other questions ask respondents if something happened "almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months". A response of "almost every month" or "some months but not every month" is counted as an affirmative response.

levels through 2014. Although the rates have fallen recently, under both measures they are still higher than pre-recession levels.

The aggregate rates of food insecurity and VLFS mask the variation in the probability of being food insecure by geography and by demographic characteristics. In terms of geography, this can be seen from Figure 2, a map of estimated food insecurity rates for children by counties in 2016 taken from <http://map.feedingamerica.org/>. In some parts of the country, including the upper Midwest and the Northeast, food insecurity rates are lower than the national average. In contrast, there are areas where rates are especially high, e.g., the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia. Even within states, there can be dramatic differences – consider the much higher rates of food insecurity in counties with Indian Reservations in North Dakota. Beyond geography, as covered in Gundersen and Ziliak (2018), the following have all been associated with higher rates of insecurity, even after controlling for other factors: low incomes, limited levels of human capital, low levels of physical and financial assets, income volatility, job loss, lack of child support, living in areas with higher food prices, living in single-parent households, having a disability, and chaotic households.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Below, the dimensions over which SNAP coincides with the dimensions of the right to food are covered. Of course, a key question is whether, in the main, SNAP leads to reductions in food insecurity. On the surface, it may appear that this isn't the case insofar as food insecurity rates are substantially higher among recipients compared to non-recipients. For example, in 2017, the food insecurity rate among SNAP participants was 50.1 per cent while SNAP-eligible non-participants had food insecurity rates of 23.4 per cent (Coleman-Jensen *et al.*, 2018; Table 8).

This result is expected insofar as SNAP is designed to reach those who are at the greatest risk of food insecurity. After controlling for non-random selection into SNAP, however, using a variety of empirical methods, it is estimated that participants are between 5 and 20 percentage points less likely to be food insecure than nonparticipants. (See, e.g., Gundersen *et al.*, 2017, and references therein). Given that the central goal of the program, to reduce food insecurity, is met one can make the argument it is successful.

Reach Those in Need

The rhetoric regarding ensuring a right to food has generally been that assistance should be directed towards those without the resources and other means to purchase enough food. And, as seen in the material above, this is the way CST has generally approached this. The structure of SNAP is consistent with this approach insofar as households are eligible for SNAP if they satisfy three criteria demonstrating limited resources. First, there is the gross income test in which the household's income (before any deductions) must be less than 130 per cent of the poverty line (\$25,100 for a family of four in 2018). Some states have set more lenient thresholds of up to 200 per cent of the poverty line. The gross-income test is waived for households with seniors or persons with disabilities but they must meet the other two components of the eligibility criteria. Second, the household's net income – gross income less allowable deductions including dependent care and medical costs – cannot exceed the poverty line. Third, a household's total assets do not exceed \$2,000; \$3,000 for a household with a senior or disabled member. This test is now waived in most states.

The directing of SNAP based on need is further incorporated into the structure of benefits. A household with a net income of zero receives the maximum SNAP benefit. In 2018,

this amounted to \$640 per month for a family of four. For each additional dollar in net income, benefits are reduced by 30 cents or, if the income is in the form of earnings, by 24 cents. This distinguishes SNAP from other assistance programs which distribute benefits in a lump-sum manner that is independent of income once someone is eligible.

Create Effective Mechanisms

For an assistance program to be successful, individuals need to be able to utilize the benefits or have the potential to utilize those benefits if they are needed³. If the benefits are not able to be utilized, the program does not help to ensure the right to food. In the U.S., well-stocked retail food outlets are located virtually everywhere (albeit, in some areas more than others) and, as a consequence, if one has the resources, one can purchase sufficient quantities of food. SNAP uses this well-developed retail structure as a way of getting food to recipients. Namely, SNAP recipients receive an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card which can be used at all large-scale grocery stores in the country and many smaller-scale stores selling food. So, there is an effective mechanism that is used to ensure people are able to use their benefits without the need to, say, have food mailed to them or go to a designated pick-up spot.

Fully Fund

Food security requires having enough food at all times throughout the year and during both good and bad economic times. An assistance program to enable a right to food therefore should be designed such that funds are available for the full year and in every year, irrespective of the

³ Health insurance would be an example of a program that is only utilized in times of need. In the U.S., then, for, e.g., Medicaid, the ability to access medical care would be required but with the recognition that benefits may not be used.

health of the economy. One way to ensure this is to have a program be an entitlement program, i.e., a program which expands or contracts automatically and not at the discretion of the government or another entity running a program.

SNAP is an entitlement program. What this implies is seen in Figure 3 which displays the number of people enrolled and total expenditures on SNAP from 1980 to 2017. From 2000 to 2013, there were annual increases in both of these measures and this was achieved without any need for the government to authorize these expenditures. Since 2013, however, there has been a decline annually, primarily reflecting improvements in economic conditions (Ganong and Liebman, 2018).

Provide Enough to Those in Need

If a country is to guarantee a right to food, it should do so at a level which is enough to remove recipients from food insecurity. As noted above, SNAP participants are less likely than eligible non-participants to be food insecure after controlling for non-random selection into the program and, in this sense, recipients are better-off than if they didn't receive benefits. Nevertheless, a high proportion of SNAP participants are still food insecure. For example, in 2017, 50.1% of SNAP households were food insecure while 23.1% of non-recipients with incomes under 130% of the poverty line were food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2018; Table 8).

Thus, an argument can be made that an increase in SNAP benefits is needed to more effectively meet the demands for a right to food. One recent proposal urges an across-the-board increase of 20 per cent in the maximum SNAP benefit (Ziliak, 2016) which would lead to reductions in food insecurity, albeit the extent this would occur isn't measured. Gundersen *et al.* (2018) examined this issue by considering a question on the CPS that asks how much additional

income households would need in order to be food secure. The authors find that increasing benefits by a lump sum of \$41.62 per week for SNAP households would lead to a reduction in food insecurity of approximately 60 percent among SNAP participants at a cost of roughly \$25 billion. This would represent an approximately 35% increase in SNAP expenditures.

In addition to inadequate benefit levels, one may also question whether the current federally-established threshold of 130% of the poverty line is sufficient to meet the demands of CST to reach those who are most vulnerable. Because the probability of food insecurity declines with income, it then follows that the food insecurity rates of those with incomes below 130% of the poverty line is lower than those with incomes between 130 and 185% of the poverty line – 39.6% versus 21.8% (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2018; Table 3). Nevertheless, this would seemingly be a high enough food insecurity rate to be of concern. In response, 27 states and the District of Columbia have set their gross income limit higher, up to 200% of the poverty line. Not all of these households would be eligible for SNAP since they still have to meet the net income test but a high proportion are eligible, especially in states with high housing costs. Gundersen et al. (2018) find that if all households with incomes between 130 and 185% of the poverty line who are not currently receiving SNAP were to receive SNAP and this amount was sufficient to remove them from food insecurity, the total cost would be \$22.2 billion and, among these households, there would be a 63.5% decline in food insecurity in this population.

Ensure Dignity and Autonomy of Recipients

A right is given to someone without imposing arduous conditions upon an individual. Consider the process of voting in the U.S. After registration and going to a polling booth (or voting via absentee ballot), there are not further requirements imposed. For example, one does not have to

demonstrate specific knowledge about candidates, justify why a vote was made, pass some form of IQ test, etc. The right to food as manifested in SNAP is constructed in a similar manner insofar as, after meeting the eligibility requirements and recertifying as needed, individuals do not have to meet further requirements. There have been two broad sets of proposals to place further requirements on SNAP recipients. A consideration of these proposals demonstrates how, if approved, could arguably be seen as an impediment to the right to food.

The first set of proposals is to impose work requirements on SNAP recipients. Currently, some SNAP recipients do face restrictions on their ability to receive benefits beyond the eligibility criteria. Namely, unemployed able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) between the ages of 18 and 50 are only eligible for SNAP for 3 months in any 36 month period. In recognition of the burden this places on some SNAP recipients and potential SNAP recipients, states can and do ask for waivers from this requirement in areas that have high rates of unemployment and/or a lack of available jobs. Proposals have been made to limit the ability of states to receive waivers and to expand the number of individuals subject to this test; i.e. up to the age of 60 for ABAWDs and requiring at least one parent to work if there is no child under the age of 6 in the home. The recent Farm Bill did not include these provisions⁴.

A second set of proposals entails the imposition of restrictions on what individuals can and cannot purchase with their benefits. This is consistent with how, since its inception, there have been attempts to restrict purchases of certain food items through SNAP. These attempts aim to “improve the nutrient intake of recipients”, to prohibit the purchase of “luxury items”, or

⁴ If a program were to impede work effort by its very structure then this could actually be seen as an impediment to the right to food. And, some assistance programs do have this structure whereby the tax rate is so high such that work is discouraged, especially near the eligibility threshold. While SNAP does have this so-called “cliff effect” at the eligibility threshold, the decline in benefits at the threshold is limited because benefits fall as someone approaches the threshold. In addition, at other points in the distribution, the tax rate is about 24% for dollars earned which is unlikely to be seen as an impediment.

to condemn certain food products. Recently, these restrictions have concentrated on specific categories of food deemed to be “unhealthy”. In addition, some have argued for supplying recipients directly with selections of food (so-called ‘Harvest Boxes’) rather than providing funds for purchasing their own food. As covered above, a central reason for the appeal of SNAP is its guarantee to families that they can choose which foods are most appropriate for their families at a local food retailer.

Unlike with work or other requirements, restrictions on purchases would not remove people from the program. The concern, though, is that these restrictions would lead to an increase in stigma due to SNAP recipients feeling singled out as being irresponsible and incapable of making food purchases; worries that some of what has purchased is not allowed, which would be revealed to others in the check-out line; and a negative message about the program in general through the explicit presumption that SNAP recipients are inferior to those not receiving SNAP benefits. Stigma is a central reason found in studies of why people who would otherwise be eligible do not participate in SNAP and other assistance programmes e.g., Reutter et al. (2009).⁵ Even though the effect is less direct than with work requirements, the result is the same – fewer people able to access the right to food.

With respect to CST, imposing restrictions on food purchases would be wrong insofar as it positions SNAP recipients as the “other” rather than as part of the broader community. Put differently, SNAP recipients would be told what foods to purchase or not purchase in ways that non-recipients would not be told including non-recipients who benefit from other government

⁵ In addition to stigma, transaction costs can discourage participation. For example SNAP recipients will take longer to make purchases at the check-out line; they will need to spend more time figuring out which food items are eligible for purchase with SNAP benefits; and the number of stores accepting SNAP benefits would likely decline due to the higher costs of processing SNAP sales. However, households receiving high benefit levels will likely continue to participate because the benefits will be seen as larger than the additional costs of participation. Reductions in participation will likely be among those who receive low benefits from the programme.

benefits (e.g., Social Security recipients, government workers). This importance of solidarity with poor persons and what it demands of us is portrayed here:

Solidarity helps us to see the ‘other’ – whether a person, people, or nation – not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our neighbor, a helper (cf Gn 2:18-20), to be a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.

St. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), paragraph 39

Conclusion

This paper articulates one definition of the right to food – eliminating food insecurity – and argues that one policy intervention – SNAP – is a model to achieve this goal. In considering this issue, I have further considered this from one perspective, a Roman Catholic perspective on the right to food. As such, this paper is necessarily limited. I therefore conclude with five directions for future considerations of this issue by agricultural economists, economists, theologians, and others.

First, one may believe that the demands for a right to food entails that households should not be VLFS rather than they should be food secure. If this were the case, the discussion of SNAP would still hold except that total expenditures on SNAP could be proportionally lower insofar as it would have to raise households above a lower threshold. Research to date has examined the impact of SNAP on food insecurity – future research may consider its impact on VLFS.

Second, the right to food in this paper has been defined as a positive right. One must also consider the dimension of the negative right to food. An analogy can be drawn with the right to voting. This has a negative right – e.g., individuals should not be prevented from voting but it also has a positive right – e.g., a society needs to incur the not insubstantial costs to provide the means to vote. So it goes with the right to food insofar as actions taken by the government or other entity may impede individuals from obtaining food. As examples, technologies to enhance the amount of food produced may be hindered (see Qaim, 2016 for a consideration), zoning regulations may prevent food stores from locating in low-income areas (see Courtemanche et al., forthcoming for the indirect evidence of this), taxes on food lead to price increases and subsequent higher probabilities of food insecurity (see Gregory and Coleman-Jensen, 2013 for the connection food prices and food insecurity), etc. The various ways government regulations and pressures from various entities threaten the right to food also need to be examined.

Third, while SNAP is one tool in the U.S. to reduce food insecurity, given the diversity of determinants of food insecurity, one should not anticipate that it will eliminate food insecurity or even VLFS. And, so it is the case with SNAP. As two examples, SNAP is not currently available for undocumented persons and it may not have high enough benefits for persons with mobility disabilities who facing challenges in getting to food stores. The potential responses of our society – including many non-governmental solutions like food banks under the Feeding America umbrella – need to also be considered. A critical component of this are policies (and removal of policies that impede) economic growth. As seen in Figure 1, the health of the economy is closely tied to food insecurity.

Fourth, at least over some dimensions, the usefulness of SNAP in LICs is limited. For example, some LICs may not have the supply chain infrastructure needed to have food available

at all times throughout the year; many LICs do not have the fiscal resources to fund a program like SNAP; the magnitude and consequences of food insecurity in LICs is much more severe than in the U.S. necessitating programs beyond SNAP; etc. So, how something akin to SNAP would be implemented in LICs will result in a program that is markedly different than in the U.S. Nevertheless, the structure of SNAP and how it does (and does not) meet the right to food is perhaps useful as a consideration by other countries.

Finally, the justifications for a right to food have been created in multiple religious and secular traditions and this paper only considers what may be entailed in a right to food from a Catholic perspective. Future work may wish to consider how SNAP may not meet the demands of a right to food from other perspectives, including, of course, from a more well-presented Catholic perspective.

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Figure 1: Food Insecurity and VLFS Rates by Year

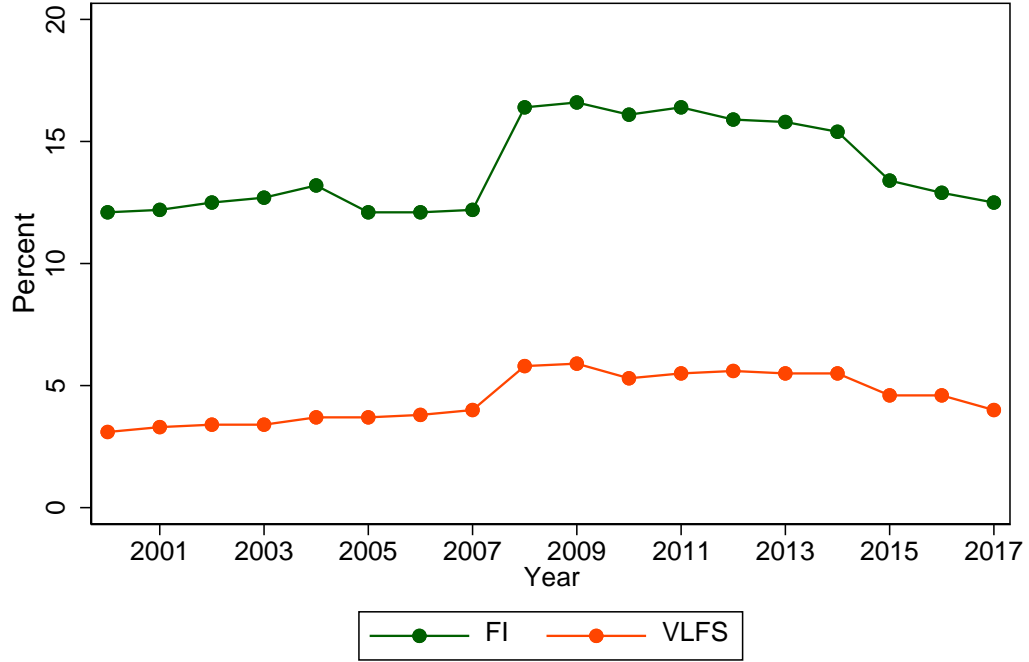


Figure 2: Child food-insecurity rates

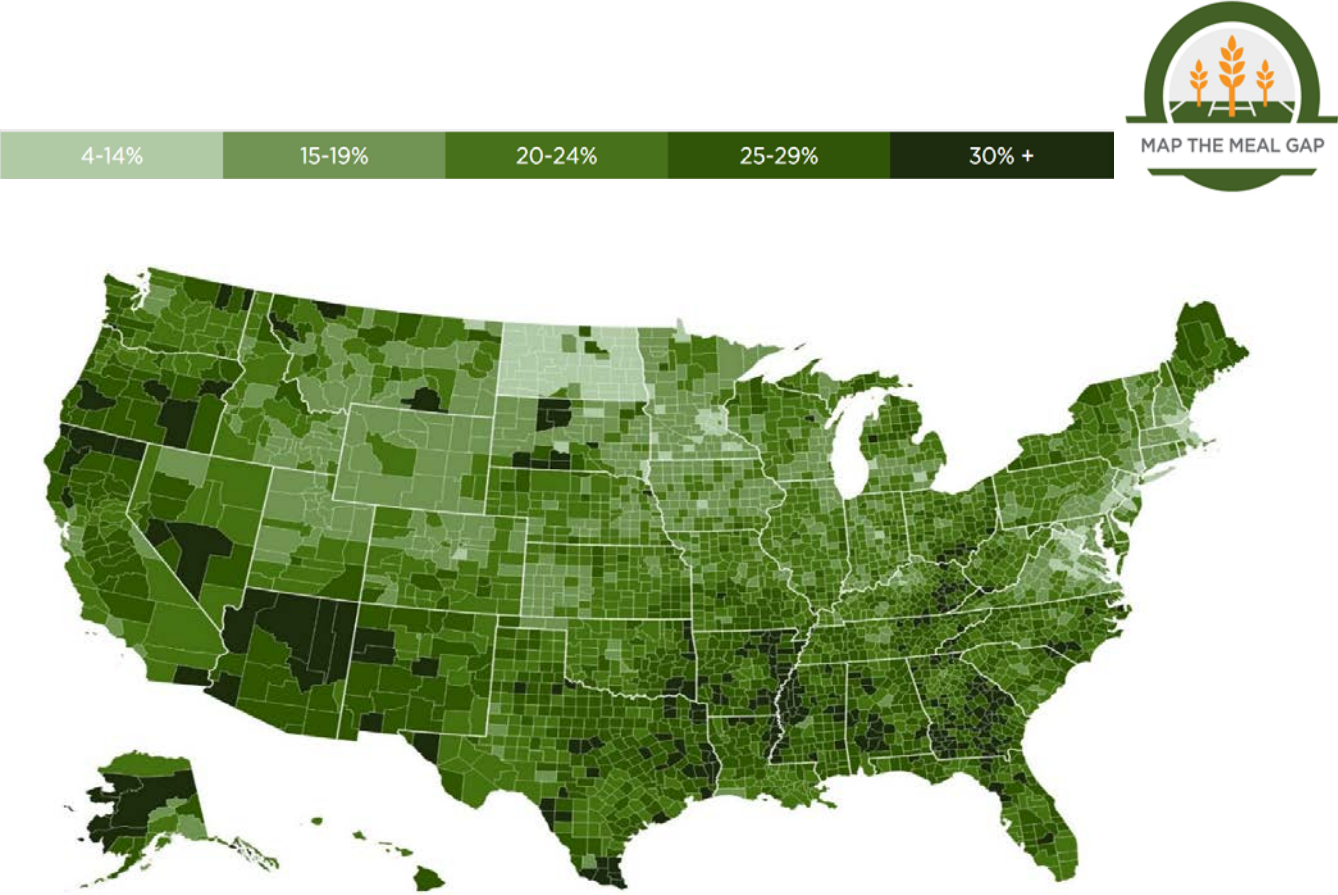


Figure 3: SNAP participants and expenditures

