

Feeding Everybody

How Federal Food Programs Grew and Grew

James Bovard

It was 1967. In the previous five years, the number of people receiving food stamps or surplus commodities had declined by 38 percent, the number of poor had declined by almost 30 percent, the economy was booming, and incomes were rising 2 or 3 percent per year. But the Great Society was floundering: Liberals took a beating in the 1966 congressional races, urban riots were eroding middle-class guilt, and Vietnam was beginning to overshadow domestic events. The War on Poverty, begun with such fanfare in 1964, was petering out, and the liberal agenda appeared out of gas.

And then hunger was discovered.

This is the story of how a handful of isolated incidents became justification for vastly increasing dependency in America; how a trivial number of examples stampeded Congress into a sweeping expansion of the welfare state; how congressmen repeatedly exaggerated the extent of hunger in order to justify trying to feed everybody; and how government, even though it increased spending twentyfold, still could not achieve its original goals. This is also the story of government at loggerheads, as one program spends \$18 billion a year to subsidize diets while other programs and regulations do everything possible to raise food prices, in effect preventing the poor from getting adequate nutrition as cheaply as possible.

Congress first vastly overestimated the amount of poverty-related hunger, then set food assistance eligibility levels far above the poverty line, and then insisted that anyone eligible for food aid would go hungry unless government fed them. From the late 1960s to 1980, Congress continually expanded eligibility, redoubled benefits, and ordered campaign after campaign to recruit people for the dole. Yet the federal government today knows almost as little about the extent and causes of malnutrition as it did in 1967.

The history of food assistance programs since the late 1960s marks an important change in the American welfare state, from self-sufficiency as an honor and a right to government exhortations that people accept handouts and relinquish their pride. The expansion of food assistance is as much a revolution of principle as of policy.

No one knows the total number of people government is feeding today. Federal food programs have roughly 70 million enrollees—more than quadruple the 1960 enrollment of 16 million. Families can simultaneously participate in seven food programs, and many get more from the government than self-supporting families spend on their food.

Now that the federal government has entered the “feed everybody” business, as one group after another has become eligible to eat at everyone else’s expense, govern-

ment takes responsibility for feeding people under 20 and over 60 regardless of their or their family’s income. The cutoff income for federal food assistance for a family of four (\$18,315) is now close to the median annual income for a full-time, year-round worker (\$16,955 in 1981). Forty-five percent of pregnant women and infants in America are eligible for food handouts.

Bad Precedent

From 1939 to 1943 the U.S. Department of Agriculture distributed food stamps to 13 million people, largely to help dispose of agricultural surpluses. The original food stamp program was chock-full of fraud and abuse; the USDA estimated that 25 percent of all coupons were abused, and the program was discontinued.

For some years afterward, the poor somehow managed to feed themselves. A 1955 USDA dietary survey found that only 25 percent of America’s roughly 43 million poor had bad diets—diets containing less than two thirds of the recommended daily allowance for essential nutrients. Seventy-five percent of the poor provided themselves with adequate diets even though only a third were on public assistance.¹

Nevertheless, in 1958 sixteen bills were introduced in Congress to bring back food stamps. At 1958 House Agriculture Committee hearings, during the worst recession since World War II, Representative Victor Anfuso (D.-New York), apparently going for the headlines, declared, “. . . ten million people in the United States . . . have inadequate incomes to buy the food they need . . .”² Representative George McGovern urged a food stamp program to provide benefits to 7 million or 8 million poor folk. There was no feeling among the committee or witnesses that tens of millions of Americans needed free or subsidized food. And it was not surprising that some of the poor were having trouble buying food, since the USDA was spending more than \$2 billion a year to drive up food prices through price supports, acreage allotments, cropland set-asides, and the Food for Peace program to dump surplus commodities overseas.

In 1961 President Kennedy’s first executive order initiated pilot food stamp programs in West Virginia and other states. Kennedy also doubled the number of surplus commodities that government distributed to the poor; enrollment in this program jumped to 6.4 million.

Kennedy’s pilot food stamp program was tightly run, included nutritional education, and required participants to buy stamps at an average of 60 percent of face value, depending on family income. When counties converted

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from surplus commodity distribution to food stamps, many families dropped out because they were afraid the USDA would check their incomes too closely, or because the program was no longer worth their while. In St. Louis, for example, a person simply had to declare himself needy to be eligible for free commodities.³ A 1967 General Accounting Office report found that between 30 and 40 percent of participants in the commodity distribution program had incomes exceeding program-eligibility limits.⁴ Also, many families did not want to tie up their money in food stamps even though the stamps paid on the average a 66 percent bonus over cash costs; that is, for \$6 one could receive \$10 worth of stamps.

There was a widespread consensus that the limited federal food assistance programs had alleviated what little severe hunger existed. Michael Harrington, the self-proclaimed socialist whose book *The Other America* did more than anything else to make poverty a public issue again, wrote in 1962, "To be sure, the Other America is not impoverished in the same sense as those poor nations where millions cling to hunger as a defense against starvation. This country has escaped such extremes." Har-

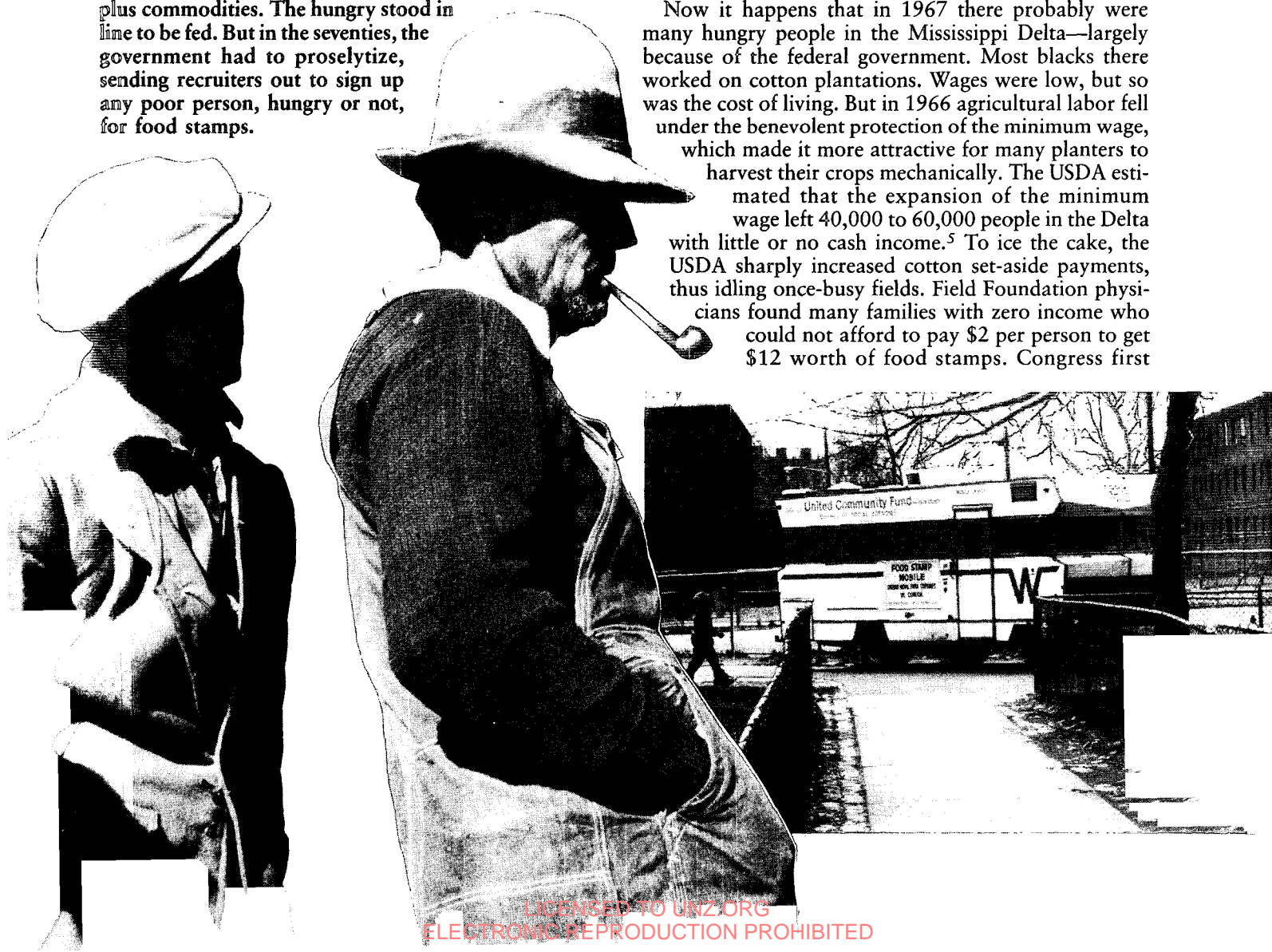
In the thirties, when crop failures, the Depression, and strikes created hunger, the government distributed surplus commodities. The hungry stood in line to be fed. But in the seventies, the government had to proselytize, sending recruiters out to sign up any poor person, hungry or not, for food stamps.

ington's book openly sought to inflame public opinion, but even he would not contend that America's poor were hungry.

From 1963 to 1966 the *New York Times* did not run a single article on hunger in America. President Johnson sought to raise his sagging political fortunes in 1966 by declaring a war on hunger, but he was concerned solely with foreign hunger, and his campaign appeared to be largely intended both to justify dumping our agricultural surpluses on the world market and to distract attention from Vietnam. In a March 1967 *Look* magazine article, Senator George McGovern declared, "We are losing the race against hunger," but the article dealt with world hunger and did not even mention hunger in America.

Then, in April 1967, Senator Robert Kennedy and the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty held hearings on the War on Poverty in Mississippi. At the time, 20 percent of Mississippians were already receiving surplus commodities or food stamps. Kennedy found examples of acute poverty and malnutrition. The Field Foundation, a nonprofit organization concerned with poverty and race relations, quickly sent a team of physicians to examine 600 children in the Mississippi Delta, and they found sufficient suffering to justify a wholesale expansion in government aid.

Now it happens that in 1967 there probably were many hungry people in the Mississippi Delta—largely because of the federal government. Most blacks there worked on cotton plantations. Wages were low, but so was the cost of living. But in 1966 agricultural labor fell under the benevolent protection of the minimum wage, which made it more attractive for many planters to harvest their crops mechanically. The USDA estimated that the expansion of the minimum wage left 40,000 to 60,000 people in the Delta with little or no cash income.⁵ To ice the cake, the USDA sharply increased cotton set-aside payments, thus idling once-busy fields. Field Foundation physicians found many families with zero income who could not afford to pay \$2 per person to get \$12 worth of food stamps. Congress first



wrecked the local labor economy and then was shocked that men without jobs had trouble feeding their families.

The hunger issue was heating up, but it needed more credibility to play in Peoria. The Citizens Crusade against Poverty sponsored the Citizens Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States. The chairman of the crusade was Walter Reuther, head of the United Auto Workers. The board rounded up a handful of doctors, held hearings in Alabama, Texas, South Carolina, and Kentucky, and issued a report in April 1968 entitled *Hunger U.S.A.* The report was largely anecdotal, including a picture of a scrawny dog with the caption, "Where you see a starving dog such as this one, you'll find hungry people." The report concluded with a shot-in-the-dark estimate that there were "10 million or more" Americans who could not afford adequate diets. The report offered few facts or statistics to back up its estimate. It listed 256 "hunger counties" in the United States, chosen solely on the basis of statistical data on infant mortality rates and the number of poor on the dole and food assistance programs.

A Way of Life

The Citizens Board report was the basis of a CBS documentary in May 1968, which found a few people who said they were going hungry because government would not feed them and concluded by denouncing our callous society. Dr. Raymond Wheeler of the Citizens Board announced, "Slow starvation has become part of the Southern way of life." Together, the board report and the CBS documentary made hunger a national issue.

More than any other single document, the board report was responsible for the food assistance explosion. It is surprising that the report was so respected. It used infant mortality figures from 1951 to 1960 even though statistics for 1965 were available. It contrasted the number of poor in 1960 with the number getting food assistance in 1967 even though the number of poor had declined by 12 million in the interim.⁶ In 1968 House hearings Dr. Leslie Dunbar, cochairman of the board, said that only about half of the "hunger counties" had food assistance programs; in fact 194 of 256 did. Under questioning, board physicians admitted that their estimates were hypothetical and defended numerous inaccuracies and mistakes by saying that the report was a rush job and that the important thing was for Congress to act immediately. Much of the suffering the board attributed to malnutrition due to hunger was actually due to parasites.

Nationwide, many localities were amazed to find themselves designated hunger counties. The *Milwaukee Journal* on May 25, 1968, after investigating reports that Sawyer County, Wisconsin, was a hunger county, concluded, "In talks with a variety of residents, no one could be found who believes this to be true." The chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Robert Poage, wrote to health officers in each of the 256 so-called hunger counties, and almost all responded by reporting little or no known hunger or malnutrition due to poverty. Even under the guidance of Secretary Orville Freeman, a New Deal liberal, the USDA in 1967 contended that only 6.7

million of the poor—not 10 million, as estimated by the Citizens Board—had bad diets or would have had bad diets in the absence of food programs.

The board's reasoning was epitomized by a statement by Dr. Dunbar. After observing that only 18 percent of the nation's 30 million poor were getting federal food handouts, Dr. Dunbar concluded, "We cannot assume that any of the remaining poor—those on neither program [food stamps or commodity distribution]—are getting food."⁷ This little gem of logic became the guiding light for food assistance for the next decade.

But what was the dietary status of the poor in the mid-sixties? In February 1968 the USDA released results of its 1965 dietary survey, showing that 64 percent of the poor had good or adequate diets. The number of poor with bad diets increased from 25 percent in 1955 to 36 percent in 1965 despite sharp increases in public assistance enrollments. The two nutrients in which the poor were the most deficient were vitamin C, supplied by fresh fruits and vegetables, and calcium, supplied by milk. The *New York Times* reported on March 27, 1968, that the "downturn in nutritional value was attributable largely to a national turning away from milk and milk products, fruits and vegetables."

And why should that have occurred? USDA marketing orders kept the price of fruits and vegetables high, and price supports helped inflate the cost of milk. In fact, the same year that the dietary survey showed that 36 percent of the poor had calcium deficiencies, the USDA effectively ended the sale of reconstituted milk. Dairies had previously mixed milk powder, butterfat, and water to produce a drink that tasted like milk but cost 20 percent less because of savings in transport costs. But the USDA decreed that reconstituted milk could not be sold for less than the price of whole fluid milk, a regulation intended solely to protect dairy farmers' income and help reelect Wisconsin congressmen.

So, instead of modifying policies that artificially increased the price of nutritious foods, the government accelerated its across-the-board feeding approach. On May 6, 1969, President Richard Nixon declared, "That hunger and malnutrition should persist in a land such as ours is embarrassing and intolerable . . . The moment is at hand to put an end to hunger in America itself for all time." The programs that had remained manageable under the Johnson administration—food stamps, school lunch subsidies, and others—went into orbit during the Nixon years. President Nixon sponsored a White House conference on food and nutrition, which urged the president to declare a national emergency and give food stamps to anyone who said he needed them. In 1970 and 1971 food stamp eligibility was expanded; in 1973 legislation was passed mandating that every jurisdiction in the United States offer food stamps by June 1974.

Swallowing Pride

Even though food stamp enrollment quadrupled between 1968 and 1971, Congress mandated an outreach program for states to recruit people for food stamps. A USDA magazine reported that food stamp workers could often overcome people's pride by saying, "This is for

your children' . . . the problem is not with welfare recipients but with low-income workers: It is this group which recoils when anything even remotely resembling welfare is suggested." By early 1972 the magazine could announce, "With careful explanations . . . coupled with intensive outreach efforts, resistance from the 'too prouds' is bending. More and more are coming to the conclusion that taking needed assistance does not mean sacrificing dignity."⁸ But according to USDA surveys, most of the poor did not need federal aid to have an adequate diet.

In March 1972 President Nixon announced Project FIND to locate and recruit 3 million elderly poor for food assistance. Despite mass mailing of information to almost 30 million retirees, and despite home visits and telephone campaigns by 36,000 Red Cross volunteers, only 190,000 elderly signed up. The GAO found that in

No longer people who occasionally needed a helping hand, [the poor] became a social class by definition incapable of feeding itself.

most counties surveyed, recruiting efforts enticed fewer than 3 percent of the elderly poor onto the food dole.⁹ Apparently, many felt that despite having been labeled poor by some bureaucrat, they could feed themselves.

In 1973 the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Hunger Needs, chaired by George McGovern, released *Hunger 1973*, a report intended as "a profile of the half-full, half-empty plate which the federal food programs represent to the nation's poor . . . after reaching the halfway mark . . ." The report observed, "Whether the real poverty count is 25, 26, or even 30 million persons, the fact that only 15 million of the poor participate in any food assistance program . . . indicates that the hunger gap is far from closed either for the country or the individuals concerned." The *New Republic* editorialized, ". . . almost half (48%) of the poor still do not receive adequate food . . . 12.7 million people who ought to be getting either food stamps or commodities have not been."¹⁰ The Senate Select Committee published a list of "failure to feed" counties in which fewer than a third of the poor were on food doles. This sufficed for evidence of the committee's claims of widespread hunger.

In five years the definition of hunger changed from insufficient food to low income and no federal food handout. Even though the USDA reported that almost two thirds of the poor did not have bad diets, congressmen insisted that any poor person not being fed by the government must be hungry and malnourished. A radical change occurred in the concept of the poor. No longer people who occasionally needed a helping hand, they became a social class by definition incapable of feeding itself. The fixation on food program enrollments is even more surprising, considering that many of the poor not

enrolled were receiving some other kind of public assistance intended to help cover food costs, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

In 1974 the Senate Select Committee held a conference to rescue the hunger issue from oblivion. Conference participants agreed that despite a fourfold increase in federal food aid since 1968, "we have moved backwards in our struggle to end hunger, poverty, and malnutrition." The *New York Times* gave the conference a front-page headline: "U.S. Needy Found Poorer, Hungrier than Four Years Ago."¹¹ Even though food stamp enrollment had zoomed from 3 million to 16 million and the number of poor was roughly the same, things had somehow worsened. As usual, the evidence was anecdotal, with no nationwide survey to back up claims.

In 1974 the Food Research and Action Center, a federally funded lobby, successfully sued USDA to require the agency to increase its food stamp outreach efforts. The USDA suggested sending food stamp workers to unemployment offices to distribute leaflets, and in Pennsylvania food stamp aides went to supermarkets to hustle shoppers. By 1976 twelve states had conducted door-to-door recruiting campaigns, and seventeen had conducted telephone campaigns. Door-to-door food stamp advertising became a favorite project for Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) workers.

In Wisconsin 2,000 copies of the Food Stamp Nursery Rhyme Coloring Book were distributed. In Kentucky a traveling puppet show told folks how and why to sign up for benefits. The USDA enlisted Dustin Hoffman, Joyce Brothers, Count Basie, and other notables to do promotional radio spots for food stamps and the national school lunch program.

Grilled Steaks

A typical 1975 USDA brochure announced, "You are in good company. Millions of Americans use food stamps." A leaflet distributed in Maryland and paid for by the federal government showed a gaunt face on the cover with the question, "Did you know some people would rather STARVE than seek HELP . . ." On the inside, the brochure said, "PRIDE NEVER FILLS EMPTY STOMACHS . . . Are you one of thousands of Maryland residents who . . . have too much pride to consider applying for help? Then you need to know more about the Food Stamp program. Food Stamps should NOT be confused with CHARITY! In fact, food stamps are designed to help you help yourself."

The Community Services Administration funded scores of local and national food stamp advocate organizations to increase enrollment in food programs. The Office of Economic Opportunity called in 1971 for community action agencies to "prick the public conscience" over the need for more food handouts, declaring, ". . . food stamps are not used as often as they ought to be, particularly by the intermediate income families among the poor."¹² Total funding for food advocacy organizations probably exceeded \$100 million in the 1970s.

In 1975, when food stamp enrollment neared 20 million, public outcries over food stamp recipients who

drove Cadillacs and grilled steaks broke the political sound barrier. A full-page ad in *Parade* magazine offered a booklet telling how people earning \$16,000 a year could qualify for food stamps. The General Accounting Office reported in 1975 that 18 percent of all food stamp benefits were fraudulent or excessive.¹³ The Joint Economic Committee estimated that up to 73 million Americans were eligible, and a USDA assistant secretary said that under current rules, participation could rise to 110 million. The Ford administration tried to reduce benefits sharply for half the recipients, but Congress resisted.

Ridiculous Stigmas

In 1977 the purchase requirement for food stamps was abolished, and the program became a straight handout. Congressional supporters did this explicitly to increase enrollment by 3 million; the Congressional Budget Office estimated that the change would add up to \$2.7 billion a year to food stamp costs. In 1977 the head of USDA's Food and Nutrition Service declared,

I'm aware that there is a welfare stigma for people who use food stamps, but it's ridiculous . . . It is, in fact, far more desirable that people meet their nutrition needs with food stamps than that they drive their cars over federally financed roads.¹⁴

In 1979 USDA Assistant Secretary Carol Tucker Foreman complained, "There are areas of the country and particular age groups in which participation levels are outrageously low."¹⁵ The USDA continued trying to round up and enlist anyone who chanced to fall under eligibility guidelines. Also in 1979, Congress expanded enrollment by broadening eligibility and allowing additional deductions for medical and shelter expenses.

Between 1977–78 and 1979–80, the poor suffered another significant reduction in their calcium intakes—by an average of nearly a cup of milk per week. Calcium was already the most widely deficient nutrient among the poor in 1977, but that did not deter Congress from increasing the dairy support price from 75 to 80 percent of parity in 1977, nor did it deter President Carter from further increasing the support price on the eve of the 1980 election. Almost 40 percent of the poor do not get sufficient calcium in their diets.

Under pressure from the Reagan administration, Congress in 1981 and 1982 sought to reduce food stamp expenditures, tighten eligibility, and cut fraud. But the food stamp program will cost \$1.6 billion more in fiscal year 1983 than in fiscal year 1981. Enrollment has surged from 20.6 million to 22 million, and the average monthly benefit has increased from \$39.49 to \$42.67. Food assistance spending has increased 34 percent since 1980 despite President Reagan's promises to cut back welfare spending.

We now have thirteen food assistance programs, including ten for children. Among them:

- The Summer Feeding Program, begun in 1967, now feeds 3 million youngsters each summer. There are no income eligibility limits for this program: As long as a child lives in or visits a low-income neighborhood with a feeding site, he can have a free lunch. In 1977 the GAO

reported that since centers were reimbursed by the meal, some were serving the same children five times a day. Nationwide, fraud and abuse were rampant: Contractors were collecting for nonexistent meals, adults were eating meals designated for children, and kickbacks were enriching the sponsoring organizations.¹⁶

- The Child Care Food Program, begun in 1968, subsidizes food in day-care and other child-care centers. In 1978 Congress removed all income eligibility standards, and the program's cost quadrupled in the following four years. The GAO recently estimated that more than 70 percent of participants now come from families with incomes above 185 percent of the poverty line. The GAO also found that meals served at 62 percent of participant centers failed to meet USDA nutritional standards, and 20 percent of centers had unhealthy conditions, including vermin.¹⁷

- The Supplemental Feeding Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides food coupons for specific dairy, cereal, and infant formula items for pregnant mothers and children under 5 who are judged to be at "nutritional risk." The GAO reports that according to one survey of physicians, only 29 percent of WIC participants showed noticeable nutritional improvement from WIC foods, and 53 percent showed either no deficiency or no benefit.¹⁸ The third most prevalent nutritional deficiency justifying free WIC food is obesity. Roughly 80 percent of WIC participants are already on food stamps.¹⁹ The Commodity Supplemental Food Program serves the same clientele as WIC but provides food instead of coupons; in Washington, D.C., only about half the enrollees bother to pick up the free food.²⁰

- The Congregate Feeding for the Elderly, begun in 1966, provides free meals five times a week for citizens over 60, regardless of income, and for their mates, regardless of age. Along with Meals on Wheels, it fed 3 million elderly in 1982.

- The School Breakfast Program serves breakfast to an average of 3 million children each school day. Congress thought that low-income families could not afford to feed their youngsters breakfast, even though 84 percent of participants come from families already eligible for food stamps. The federal government also pays 14 cents per breakfast for middle-class students who eat at school.

- The National School Lunch Program serves 23 million children a day—9.9 million for free, 7 million at reduced prices, and 6 million who "pay" but still eat federally subsidized lunches. The federal subsidy per "paid" lunch amounted to \$65 per middle-class child (from a family earning 185 percent of the poverty level) in fiscal 1981; the Reagan administration has since reduced the subsidy. George McGovern, Hubert Humphrey, and other liberals pushed hard in the early 1970s for a universal free lunch program, and in 1977 Congress authorized special subsidies to schools that provided free lunches for all children, regardless of income.

Hunger Hoax

For fifteen years politicians have insisted that the main purpose of food programs is to fight hunger, and for fifteen years the programs' main effect has been to raise

the incomes of tens of millions without appreciably affecting their nutrition. Liberals and the media have perpetrated a hunger hoax to justify sharply increasing the income of the welfare class.

Two thirds of the 8 million new food stamp recipients between 1968 and 1972 were public assistance recipients who were automatically added to the rolls, thanks to vigorous federal and local recruiting. Until 1977 public assistance recipients were automatically entitled to food stamps, regardless of their income. Food stamps were extended to public assistance recipients even though public assistance was already supposed to be covering or helping cover food costs. Charles Hobbs, Governor Reagan's welfare director, estimated, "In 1976 the welfare family of four received, on average, cash and in-kind benefits totalling \$14,960—an amount slightly higher than the median family income in that year."²¹

If a person quits a \$50,000-a-year job and has few assets, he is eligible to receive food stamps the following month.

Food stamps are also generally available to the unemployed, whether they quit work or were discharged. This is because the program calculates eligibility solely on present income: If a person quits a \$50,000-a-year job and has few assets, he is eligible to receive food stamps the following month. The GAO estimated that 70 percent of food stamp errors stemmed from recipients' misreporting their incomes, and the USDA inspector general's office found that 30 percent of the recipients of free and reduced-price lunches were ineligible.

A 1983 GAO report found that food stamp fraud and abuse averaged a billion dollars a year. The report noted, "Officials in the states GAO visited said they had not tried to identify more overissuance cases because there have been no requirements and few financial incentives."²² In 1980 and 1981, when roughly \$2 billion in stamps was overissued through error and fraud, state governments managed to recover only \$20 million—just 1 percent of the loss.²³ In Los Angeles and New York City, people who finagled excess benefits received a single letter telling them to pay money back; there was no followup. In Washington, D.C., where 15 percent of the population received food stamps and, according to the GAO, abuse was widespread, not a single person was prosecuted for fraud between 1978 and 1980. The GAO also reported that the federally funded Food Research and Action Committee "advised food stamp recipients that they did not have to make restitution for receiving too many benefits."²⁴ (FRAC received \$150,000 from the federally funded Legal Services Corporation in 1982 and has been given \$50,000 so far this year, money it is using to help people sue the USDA and bring class-action suits to block proposed cutbacks in nutrition spending.)

In testimony before the Joint Economic Committee in May 1983, Office of Management and Budget Director David Stockman said, "In 1981, fully 42 percent of all dollars expended on low-income benefits went to households which, when that aid was included, had incomes above 150 percent of the poverty level."

Until 1981, strikers were allowed to get food stamps immediately after going on strike. In some places, such as the Illinois coal fields, special food stamp offices were set up to handle the rush after a major walkout. Students easily qualified for food stamps until 1980; a GAO study in 1975 found that 13 percent of the students at one university were on the dole.²⁵

Many farmers complain that because of food stamps it is difficult to find people willing to help harvest crops. The *San Juan Journal* editorialized on August 22, 1975, that the food stamp program "is cultivating, encouraging, and abetting a generation of loafers in Puerto Rico." (Almost 60 percent of the island's residents were receiving food stamps.) Treasury Secretary William Simon in congressional testimony cited the views of the director of the Puerto Rico Manufacturers Association and the president of the Association of General Contractors, "who say some industries are in danger of shutting down operations because they cannot find workers. This is occurring in spite of the fact that unemployment on the island is 20 percent."²⁶ One 1975 study found that "recipients of food stamps with some wage income choose to work fewer hours when food stamps are available. The decrease in income from work is roughly equal to the subsidy so that the two cancel out and there is no net gain in income."²⁷

The farcical work registration requirements are another example of how income redistribution masquerades as food stamps. The GAO reported in 1978 that of 620 able-bodied adult food stamp recipients required to register for work, only three actually got jobs.²⁸ Until 1981 the only penalty for refusing to work was suspension of benefits for thirty days. Thus someone could refuse a job and still get benefits every other month; his or her family was entitled to receive benefits even though the head of the household refused work. The USDA is known for being rough on its workers; the GAO noted, "Merely showing up at the worksite constituted compliance with the workfare obligation."²⁹ Federally funded legal service programs often sue local governments to stop food stamp work programs.

Where Does the Money Go?

Federal food programs largely replace food that people would have bought for themselves. A Congressional Budget Office study found that a dollar's worth of food stamps increased a family's food expenditure by only 57 cents; the other 43 cents simply replaced money the person would have spent on food anyway.³⁰ A recent study of Supplemental Security Income recipients whose food stamp allotments were cashed out found that each additional dollar of food stamp payments increased food purchases by only 14 cents.³¹

Despite a thirtyfold increase in federal spending for food assistance for the poor since 1955, there has been

little or no major improvement in lower-income diets. As the table below shows, the average poor person in 1955 was already getting adequate nutrition. The poor's intake of essential nutrients in 1955 already exceeded the National Academy of Science's recommended daily allowance for 1980.

	1980 RDA	Average Intake in Lower-Income Diets	
		1955	1979-80
vitamin A	5,000 I.U.	8,120 I.U.	8,391 I.U.
thiamin	1.4 mg.	1.58 mg.	2.07 mg.
riboflavin	1.6 mg.	2.21 mg.	2.62 mg.
ascorbic acid	60 mg.	94 mg.	137 mg.
calcium	800 mg.	1.11 g.	1.05 g.
protein	56 g.	100 g.	101.9 g.
niacin	16 mg.	17.1 mg.	—
calories	2,700	3,180	2,897

The 1980 RDA is for males aged 23 to 50. The 1979-80 survey included other nutrients not surveyed in 1955.³²

The Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Science notes, "As there is no way of predicting whose needs are high and whose needs are low, RDA (except for energy) are estimated to exceed the requirements of most individuals, and thereby insure that the needs of nearly all are met."³³ And the USDA 1977-78 survey of low-income household diets concluded, "Food used both by households participating in the food stamp program and by those not participating was sufficient, on the average, to provide the 1974 RDA for food energy and the 11 nutrients studied."³⁴

The 1979-80 study showed a sharp drop in the number of low-income households (both users and nonusers of food stamps) meeting the RDA for all nutrients and food energy—from 42 percent in 1977-78 to 39 percent in 1979-80.³⁵ This occurred despite a 3.6 million rise in food stamp enrollment, a 6.4 percent increase in the real value of the average food stamp benefits, and a 60 percent increase in federal monthly expenditures on food stamps (from \$404 million to \$642 million).

Nutritionally Adequate

Further evidence of the irrelevance of food stamps to lower-income nutrition comes from a 1982 USDA study on food stamps and lower-income elderly:

After using regression analysis to control for the effects of other variables, there were no statistically significant differences between program participants and eligible nonparticipants in the intakes of the nine nutrients studied.³⁶

The 1979-80 survey of lower-income household diets revealed that the average low-income person eligible for but not using food stamps achieved the RDA for nine of thirteen nutrients; the average food stamp user met the RDA only for eight. Of those nutrients in which both groups were deficient, there was a significant difference between users and nonusers on only one—vitamin B₆ (food stamp users consumed 79 percent of the RDA, and

nonusers 72 percent; nutritionists say that any diet with 70 percent of the RDA is adequate though not ideal). Nonusers had higher average intakes than food stamp users for three nutrients for which one or both groups fell short of the RDA (calcium, iron, and magnesium).³⁷

If federal food assistance was intended to fight hunger, then it was an abject failure, since the poor consume fewer calories now than in 1955. The decline in calorie consumption among the poor stems largely from decreased fat intake and is mainly a result of personal choice. If hunger was widespread among the poor today, they would buy more calorie-dense, fatty foods, and fewer fruits and vegetables. Scattered cases of individual hunger may exist, but it makes no sense to make 40 million people eligible for food stamps because of half a dozen families shown on the evening news.

If food stamps were necessary for the majority of the poor to feed themselves, then the poor who do not use food stamps would not eat as well as those who do. In fact, a 1967 USDA study showed little difference in the nutritional status of food stamp users and nonusers of similar income and background. A 1972 USDA Consumer Expenditure Diary Survey reported that food stamp households "spent approximately four times as much for nonalcoholic beverages (excluding fresh whole milk) than did non-food stamp households"—largely for soft drinks. Kenneth Clarkson observed in his 1975 book, *Food Stamps and Nutrition*, that food stamp recipients frequently buy more sweets and convenience or packaged foods instead of fresh fruits and vegetables and dairy products. The 1977-78 USDA survey of low-income household diets found that food stamp participants consumed more luncheon meats, sausages, soft drinks, cereals, and fruit punches than nonparticipants; low-income nonusers ate more eggs, tomatoes, dark-green vegetables, and grain mixtures.³⁸

The National School Lunch Program receives \$3 billion a year in federal money to provide one third of the recommended daily allowance for schoolchildren. But the GAO has repeatedly pointed out that the government's lunches do not even meet the government's standards. In 1977 the GAO noted, "The absence of any indication that the program is having a benefit upon the health of either needy or nonneedy children raises questions about the nutritional value of the lunch."³⁹ In 1978 the GAO reported that lab tests found that a random sample of school lunches "were significantly short in as many as 8 of the 13 nutrients tested . . . Separate tests in New York showed that at least 40% of the lunches did not meet USDA requirements as to quantities served."⁴⁰ In a 1981 followup, the GAO concluded, ". . . all types of lunches fell short of providing the recommended levels of as many as 7 of the 14 nutrients tested, some to a serious extent."⁴¹

Ineffective

Nor has the school breakfast program proved its salt. The *American Journal of Public Health* reported in 1978 that only two studies of the school breakfast program had reported beneficial effects; five others had found no difference.⁴²

The GAO's conclusion on WIC was that "reliable assessments of its overall results and benefits have not been made."⁴³ Dr. George Graham of Johns Hopkins University told the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee in 1982 that "... most of the apparent benefits of the WIC program are the result of its usefulness in increasing utilization of prenatal and pediatric health services by some groups who habitually do not make regular use of them."⁴⁴ Since families of four with incomes up to \$18,318 are eligible, most participants either get food stamps already or can afford to feed themselves. And more than 81 percent of recipients share WIC food with the family, thus minimizing nutritional effect on the pregnant woman and young child.

While government is doling out free food worth billions, federal efforts at nutritional education have been a singular failure. The USDA spent millions of dollars a

Food policy has been shaped by waves of hysteria, by accounts of elderly people who eat dog food, and by politicians competing to appear generous.

year on nutrition education between 1955 and 1965, when American diets sharply deteriorated. The GAO reported that conflicting federal regulations on food labeling contribute to consumer confusion on healthy eating habits and that "federal efforts to inform the public [about nutrition] are sometimes unduly complex, duplicative, and contradictory."⁴⁵ Instead of teaching people how to get their money's worth out of their food dollars, government tries to rain perpetual subsidies upon them with the vague hope that they will eat better.

A recent *New York Times* editorial, entitled "Poorer, Hungrier," cited a list of statistics on infant mortality, short-statured 4-year-olds, and declining school lunch enrollment. The editorial naturally concluded, "Given what's happening to the hungry in America, this administration has cause only for shame."⁴⁶

For a decade and a half, food politics has been dictated by fear of shame—by the dread that somewhere, somehow, some journalist will find a child with a bloated stomach and provoke another national uproar. Liberals still have close to no understanding of how programs actually work. The *Times* castigated President Reagan for wanting to trim the Child Care Food Program by over 25 percent. Yet over 70 percent of the benefits go to families with incomes above 185 percent of the poverty line. The *Times* says of WIC, "Nine million needy women and children are eligible for the program"—as always, eligibility in itself is taken as proof of need. Yet families of four with annual incomes of \$18,315 are eligible; that figure is roughly equal to the national median for full-time, year-round workers.

The news media are repeating the same errors that they made ten and fifteen years ago. There is still a rush to

portray all lower-income people as being in dire need and incapable of feeding themselves. Even though food stamp enrollment has increased by 2 million since President Reagan took office, popular accounts portray budget cuts as threatening millions with starvation.

Food policy has been shaped by waves of hysteria, by rarely verified accounts of elderly people who eat dog food, and by politicians competing to appear generous. Politicians have another motive besides: By raising eligibility levels, they have helped dispose of government's embarrassing agricultural surpluses. Politicians have long acted as though government can feed people better than people can feed themselves. Programs like school lunches continued growing despite repeated proof that government meals fail to provide good nutrition at least as often as—and for the nonpoor, more often than—private meals.

The Congressional Budget Office, which is staffed largely by liberal Democrats, conceded in 1980:

Despite some limited cases of severe malnutrition found by the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty in the Mississippi Delta in 1967, statements that severe malnutrition exists on a national scale have never been documented, even during the early years of the "War on Poverty" programs.⁴⁷

"Ten million" was the rallying cry of the late sixties; but since almost twice as many poor people had good or adequate diets as had bad diets in 1965, it is likely that at least half of the 10 million poor with bad diets ate badly because of habit rather than sheer need. And of those, several million were probably already receiving food stamps and surplus commodities. Thus, although in 1968 there may have been 2 million or 3 million people with poor diets who were not receiving federal food assistance, Congress responded by increasing food stamp enrollment by 20 million and increasing nutrition spending twentyfold. Yet malnutrition still exists, and it will exist as long as eating is a matter of individual choice. In diet, as in everything else, some people will always make bad decisions. We cannot end malnutrition without ending people's control over their own diets.

Charades

Pulitzer-prize-winning journalist Nick Kotz wrote in 1969 that "hunger provided a meaningful new metaphor for the issue of poverty in affluent America . . ."⁴⁸ Liberals realized in the late 1960s that handouts had lost their appeal to the majority; a new cover was needed for increasing redistribution. Thus the myth of mass hunger was born—largely as a tactical move to evade the backlash against the Great Society. Probably many of the people clamoring for massive increases in the late 1960s sincerely believed that more free food was really needed. But many others—especially some of the leaders—were probably aware of the charade.

Proof that redistribution alone was the main motivation is that the programs continued expanding long after they had reached the levels that proponents originally said would end hunger in America. Office of Economic

Opportunity Director Sargent Shriver said in 1967, when the federal government spent roughly \$700 million on food assistance, that another billion dollars would be sufficient to end the problem. Another billion dollars was appropriated, and then another, and still another—and yet the more money spent, the hungrier the poor supposedly became. Eventually, only government provision of a full diet for all citizens with low incomes was seen as satisfactory.

The issue of mass hunger has emotionalized and muddled American politics for the past sixteen years. It is easy to understand why politicians and much of the media cling to the myth: If it were widely recognized that most of the poor are not severely deprived and not tottering on the edge of starvation and not utterly helpless, the rationale for a vast array of welfare programs would disappear. Politicians made a mockery of the definition of need and denigrated the poor in order to expand the pork barrel. We now have a hodgepodge of ineffective food programs because congressmen believe they can win votes by supporting subsidies for people who can feed themselves.

If government is resolved to take care of everyone, it would make far more sense to fight malnutrition than hunger. Hunger can usually be rectified by individual effort, but malnutrition is more often the result of ignorance or sheer poverty. The Congressional Budget Office noted in 1980 that “specific nutrients could be added to children’s diets through targeted fortification schemes. Vitamin fortification could provide for 100% of a child’s RDA for less than \$3 a year in ingredient costs.”⁴⁹ In 1975 Stanley Lebergott wrote in *Wealth and Want*, “Fifty dollars worth of milk plus vitamin pills annually would bring every poor family up to the U.S. nutrition average.”⁵⁰ Indeed, passing out vitamin pills to the poor would be far cheaper and more effective nutritionally than current programs and would not destroy anyone’s incentive to provide for himself.

Charles Schultze, President Carter’s chief economic adviser, estimated in 1971 that federal agricultural policies add 15 percent to the retail cost of food. Journalist Nick Kotz observed in his 1969 book, *Let Them Eat Promises*, that the Food and Drug Administration and the USDA prohibit domestic marketing of many super-enriched food products being marketed by American corporations in Third World countries. The FDA prohibits manufacturers from adding nutrients to candy and soft drinks—or to any other food that in its opinion lacks “nutritional logic” to justify the enrichment.⁵¹

Debilitating Dependence

The working and elderly poor who are too proud to go on the dole are caught in a crossfire as social workers beg them to abandon their independence while politicians destroy the purchasing power of their food dollar. It is farcical to hear politicians sobbing over the poor’s plight while they try to raise food prices by hook or by crook or by PIK. George McGovern, the leading advocate for increased food assistance during the 1970s, pushed high price supports for almost all commodities. Though he was generous to the poor who surrendered their indepen-

dence and went on the dole, he showed no sympathy for low-income families who tried to feed themselves.

There are probably still a handful of hungry people in the United States despite the federal government’s efforts to foist food on them. But the answer is not to increase food assistance—if that would abolish hunger, then hunger would have become extinct long ago. Many of the stories in the press about hungry kids deal with families who get food stamps or other food aid but fail to budget properly. When individual irresponsibility or imprudence is the cause of hunger, it makes more sense to provide soup kitchens rather than a month’s worth of food stamps. National policy should not turn on the most sensational examples the evening news team can find.

The great myth underlying the growth of food assistance is that nutrition is largely dependent on income. But in 1955—when half the poor lived in rural, non-

Either food stamps are unnecessary for the vast majority of recipients, or every other major federal assistance program is a failure.

metropolitan areas—the Household Food Consumption Survey found, “In farm diets, most nutrients other than ascorbic acid were little affected by income.”⁵² The CBO concluded in 1977, “It still remains unclear if increased food purchases . . . means improved nutritional status.”⁵³ The great majority of bad diets, now as in 1955, are due to ignorance and bad habit, not low income.

The astounding thing about the growth of food aid is that for almost every targeted group, a federal program already existed to help the poor feed themselves. Most of the surge in the food stamp program in the late sixties and early seventies came from automatically enrolling the recipients of public assistance—a program that was supposedly helping the poor buy food. Throughout the 1970s, Congress strove to increase food stamp enrollment among the elderly, whose increased Social Security benefits were supposedly justified by their need for a decent standard of living. (And in 1974, Supplemental Security Income payments were added to give a decent income to any elderly who missed the Social Security bonanza.) Food stamp advocates insist that food stamps are vital for the unemployed—for whom unemployment compensation benefits were created in 1935, specifically to prevent them from going hungry. Either food stamps are unnecessary for the vast majority of recipients, or every other major federal assistance program is a failure.

The other food assistance programs—from WIC to school lunches to school breakfast to child care—feed people who either are already eligible for food stamps or do not need a handout to feed themselves. We can be humanitarian without paying for eight meals a day for poor people. If Congress cannot summon the courage to tighten the food stamp program, it should at least end

duplicate benefits and abolish food handouts for anyone above the poverty line. Taxpayers should not be coerced to feed those who can feed themselves.

Hunger has become an issue to conjure with—a political magic wand to mesmerize the public's critical fac-

ulties. Despite a thirtyfold increase in food aid for the poor since 1955, there has been little or no improvement in their diets. Food programs have wasted billions, lured millions onto the dole, and perpetrated the myth that a low income is automatically debilitating.

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How Not to Cut Crime

Rehabilitating Criminals Cannot Cut Crime

Ernest van den Haag

Two issues concerning rehabilitation have been amply discussed. Penologists have inquired: "Do rehabilitation programs reduce recidivism?"¹ Recently the effectiveness of all programs has been questioned. In turn philosophers have debated a moral problem: "Should criminals be punished for their past crimes according to what is deserved? or, should they be subjected to future-oriented treatment programs and released when rehabilitated?" Lately there has been a return to the justice and away from the treatment model, at least theoretically, but the problem has not been resolved. Legislation and sentences continue to reveal an untidy compromise between rehabilitative (treatment) and justice (desert) ideas. However, I do not propose to discuss either the philosophical or the empirical issue mentioned.² Rather, I want to address a theoretical question, which, as far as I know, has not received much attention.

Chronic Crooks

Let me assume that rehabilitation is 100 percent successful. This "total rehabilitation" exceeds the wildest dreams of dedicated proponents, but the assumption will help us focus on the crime rate. Total rehabilitation means that every convict who serves any sentence—be it thirty days, or thirty years, in prison, or on probation—becomes a law-abiding citizen upon release; there is no recidivism at any time.

If all criminals were recidivists, total rehabilitation would reduce the crime rate to zero. But recidivists start as first offenders. Indeed, some of the worst crimes are often committed by first offenders. Most murders are.³ Since it could affect criminals only after their first conviction, even total rehabilitation could not significantly reduce the homicide rate.

The proportion of muggers, rapists, or burglars apprehended and convicted upon their first offense is small. Even habitual criminals often remain unapprehended or unconvicted for a long time while continuing their criminal activities. Therefore they could not be rehabilitated. Thus, even without recidivists, crimes would continue to be committed by first offenders and by unconvicted multiple offenders. One may reasonably estimate that although recidivists, including career criminals, undoubtedly commit a disproportionate number of many crimes, they do not commit most crimes in most categories. The

more unconvicted offenders start, or continue, criminal activities, the less the elimination of recidivism would reduce the crime rate. Even total rehabilitation might make only a modest dent in the crime rate.⁴

Let me make a second heroic assumption. Suppose that

Car thieves, burglars, dentists, or prostitutes sell the proceeds of their activities, or render services for which there is a demand by others.

up to now most crimes were committed by recidivists and only a small proportion by unconvicted offenders. Recidivism now is eliminated by our first assumption. One is tempted to infer that the crime rate will be greatly reduced. After all, we are assuming, *arguen-*

do, that recidivists committed most crimes and that they no longer commit any. However, it does not follow that fewer crimes will be committed. An increase in criminal activity by nonrecidivists is likely to offset the assumed elimination of recidivists from the criminal population.

We can understand why the crime rate will not fall if instead of considering the problem most theories of crime causation dwell on ("who commits crimes and why?") we ask: "Why is the crime rate neither higher nor lower than it is?" The subject ultimately is the same. But the different focus of each question leads to a different answer. The first question produces a concern with individual psychological motivation for crime; the second takes motivation as a datum and considers what else determines the number of persons (or of acts) in each crime category.⁵

The number of persons engaged in any activity, lawful or not, depends on the comparative net advantage they expect. Thus, the number of practicing dentists, grocers, drug dealers, or burglars depends on the net advantage they expect these occupations to yield compared with other occupations available to them. The number of persons engaged in an occupation does not change unless the expected comparative net advantage does,⁶ and it can be shown to change when the net advantage does. Further, if the attrition rate is stable, retired dentists, drug dealers, or burglars will be replaced at a rate that maintains the number of active practitioners so that it equals the number attracted by the expected comparative net advantage.

In short, the rate at which dental or criminal acts will be committed remains unchanged, unless the net advantage

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