Food Assistance Programs And The Aging Population Policy Analysis

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Executive Summary

Food insecurity is a national predicament, including people and families with little to no access to food due to economic and social conditions. While the population of the elderly continues to increase, so does the menace of hunger. The government has made propositions to enable budget cuts, resulting in an adverse shift in existing policies and programs. This has come at a time when funding and increased aid are needed. The intended policies and reforms will worsen the food insecurity catastrophe, especially for the most vulnerable in society—the ageing population. This paper analyses the current issue of hunger in the ageing population and the policy that addresses the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that addresses hunger in the ageing population.

Introduction

Food insecurity, as per the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), is described as “The deficiency of reliable and sustained accessibility to adequate healthy food” (What Is Food Insecurity in America, 2018). The largest and most vulnerable population, the ageing population, presumably struggles with inadequate nutrition due to derisory social and economic situations. The matter of food insecurity is foreseen to worsen over time due to the worsening economic situation and the rising ageing population (Bhargava et al., 2012). Numerous programs have been put into place to aid in easing the vulnerability of the older population, such as Meals on Wheels, a program that delivers food at home to assist people unable to obtain a balanced and nutritious diet (Campbell et al., 2015). This report examines the current issue of hunger amongst the ageing population and the respective policy that addresses the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) policy, which addresses the problem.

Food Insecurity in the Aging Population: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

The federal policy mandated to reduce food inadequacy in the U.S. is the Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program, denoted SNAP. Initially, this policy was referred to as the Food Stamp Program. Its main objective is to support low-income households by providing them with access to nutritious and healthy meals through food-redeemable benefits (Cunnyngham, 2010). However, reference to existing literature reveals that this issue is worsening regardless of assistive programs that have been set in place (Cunnyngham, 2010). Research shows that SNAP is not precisely designed to reduce food insecurity among the aged, as much of the eligible older population has failed to utilize the benefits due to lack of education, insufficient resources, and numerous other factors that have acted as barriers to participation (Cunnyngham, 2010). This analysis intends to scrutinize the SNAP as a policy set up to annul the current threat of hunger among the elderly in the U.S. since the program is "just not showing any results"—even though various studies support the success of these programs in reducing food insecurity (Campbell et al., 2015; Ingraham, 2017).

The Social Problem

With the rising population of the elderly and the deteriorating U.S. economy, it is anticipated that the population of food-insecure senior citizens may exceed 8 million by 2040 (Bhargava et al., 2012; "Feeding America," 2018). The older generation, predominantly susceptible to health-related illnesses, should have adequate access to nutritious food (Lee & Frongillo, 2001b). In addition, most older individuals depend on supplemental medications to maintain their well-being, but food-insecure people will be forced to opt between food and supplemental medications, which can severely impact their health (Srinivasan & Pooler, 2018).

Population Group

It is foreseen that the percentage of the aged population depending on food aid will rise at a dramatic rate shortly (Lee & Frongillo, 2001a). Despite the predicted trend, most existing literature emphasizes food insecurity in children and the population in general (Lee & Frongillo, 2001a). One study that has been carried out shows that 43% of the aged qualified for SNAP benefits are registered in the program and obtaining support ("Feeding America," 2018). This is a pressing issue since, as much as there is a significant need for elevated research in this particular area, there is also a need to offer educational programs that assist the older population in utilizing the benefits of food assistance programs such as SNAP.

Human Rights and Justice Framework

From a human rights approach, food insecurity poses a severe challenge for the U.S. government since this entails an effect on the well-being of its citizens. Ayala & Meier describe the human rights framework as the leeway for dealing with food insecurity (2017). Utilizing this thought frame will enable "people to pursue liability concerning the government responsibilities instead of acting as

submissive recipients of government goodwill" (Ayala & Meier, 2017). Citizens, regardless of their age, have a right to access different levels of nutrition: the right to obtainability at the national level, the convenience right at the household level, the right to suitability at the household level, the right to worth and competence, at the individual level (Ayala & Meier, 2017). There have been numerous arguments that, though all these rights may seem basic, the lines surrounding food as a fundamental right have become indistinct (Ayala & Meier, 2017). The lack of food, especially for the elderly, mirrors a human rights issue since these people have a fundamental right to good health and sufficient nutrition.

Despite the lack of enough food being seen as a fundamental rights issue, ageing individuals continue to encounter health repercussions (Srinivasan & Pooler, 2018). Research has shown that some older adults are not eligible for food assistance benefits even though they are in need, and those who qualify are unaware of the benefits they can utilize within the food programs (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2018). It is paramount that a rights-based approach is incorporated into the food and nutrition policies to ensure that the legal policies are correctly integrated as core mandates into the program (Ayala & Meier, 2017). It is the responsibility of federal policies to make sure that the aged have equal access to food and nutrition as other people, especially in the face of the worsening social and environmental circumstances.

Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice

There is too much controversy encompassing the right to access SNAP benefits from social justice. A considerable percentage of the aged are not eligible or have no access to the benefits even though they are in dire need of food. The debate surrounding who is more deserving of government aid is often related to such benefits as SNAP (Walter et al., 2018). The socio-demographic and economic elements that limit the availability of household resources are poverty, illiteracy, race and benefits participation (Lee & Frongillo, 2001a). In the current economic environment, where the cost of living has skyrocketed, the ability of older people to earn a decent income is minimized; thus, their ability to afford their food becomes a struggle (Srinivasan & Pooler, 2018). Likewise, from the viewpoint of the economic justice framework, older people often do not work; if their finances are minimal, they will most definitely have to weigh their options and make sacrifices based on their limited income (Ayala & Meier, 2017). Most of them have to choose between buying medications and nutritious food, which should not be an option (Ayala & Meier, 2017). From the environmental justice perspective, the emphasis is on the deficiency of fresh, nutritious food in low-income households. The phrase "food desert" describes the situation whereby there are little to no healthy meal choices, making it hard to achieve the daily nutritional requirement (Bernstein, 2017). This problem calls for assistance in regions considered food deserts to make it possible to assuage food insecurity among the aged population.

History of SNAP

A group of individuals initiated a food-delivery program after the issue of food insecurity became recognized nationally as a social menace that urgently needed intervention. The initiative later became a national organization. The first U.S. food initiative that delivered food directly to homes was in Philadelphia in 1954; the program's goal was to assist the low-income older generation in meeting their nutritional needs ("America's Charities," 2018; Campbell et al., 2015). The program was made up of high school kids who volunteered to cook diet-based meals and deliver the food to homes within the community with individuals challenged by age or disability (Campbell et al., 2015). Similar programs were being created nationwide and have since been transformed into a program known as Meals on Wheels ("America's Charities," 2018). A later systematic review of most of the home-delivered meals showed a notable increase in the recipients' health (Campbell et al., 2015). Research done showed that the aged population enrolled and taking part in the program were unlikely to be checked into a hospital in more than twelve months, as well as unlikely to "exhibit uncontrolled diabetes" as compared to those not taking part in the program (Campbell et al., 2015). Even though the study focused on the benefits of home-delivery programs and their role in improving the health of the elderly, there was a need for more research to ascertain the participation of this particular group in the program (Campbell et al., 2015). The 1964 Food Stamp Act was put in place as a reaction to the escalating food insecurity in the U.S. (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2018). The act was meant to improve the agricultural economy and increase food abundance and sustenance among the vulnerable in the community through the Federal-State Program of Food Assistance ("Food Stamp Act," 1964). The name was later changed to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, but the vision, goals and benefits continued as before. Since its inception, the duty of this program has intensely improved as a response to the augmented necessity for a resolution to the country's hunger problem (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2018).

Contemporary Policy Strategies

Numerous nationwide programs, such as Meals on Wheels, serve as nutrition aid, but the only federal policy meant to improve food insecurity is SNAP. This program focuses on the challenge of food insecurity by supplementing low-income households with financial assistance to attain suitable and healthy meals (Cunnyngham, 2010). Out of all the strategies, SNAP is the most straightforward and all-inclusive answer for dealing with food insecurity.

To be eligible for SNAP benefits, an individual needs to have a household income not exceeding 130% within the poverty line, a net income not exceeding their household-specific amount, and cumulative assets not exceeding $2000; these requirements vary from state to state (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2018). In 2016, $67.8 billion worth of SNAP benefits were assigned to the needy (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2018). The program allocates an average of $254 for each household each month. A high majority of households spend the entire amount and still find themselves deprived (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2018).

The responsibility of SNAP can be analyzed by applying Gilbert and Terrell's benefit-allocation framework (Gilbert & Terrell, 2002). SNAP allows benefits based on distinct eligibility requirements such as age, residence, employment, household size, assets, nationality, disability and income ("Eligibility," 2017; Gilbert & Terrell, 2002). The social provision allocated entails the limited benefit allotment offered to SNAP beneficiaries by use of an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card, which is replenished every month ("Eligibility," 2017; Gilbert & Terrell, 2002). The EBT card is usable for purchasing specific goods except for alcohol, tobacco, hot food, medicine and any other items that do not fall into the food category ("Eligibility," 2017). The federal government entirely funds SNAP benefits; federal and state governments split the cost of administrative components of the program ("Food Research," 2018). Even though the program has been productive in decreasing food insecurity, research has questioned whether SNAP requires reform to increase the potential of totally alleviating the challenge (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2018). Research also shows that over 55% of SNAP beneficiaries still disclose that they are food deficient, meaning there is potential for growth within the program (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2018). Additionally, out of the households that are unqualified for SNAP benefits but are about to "cross the eligibility threshold," 27% report being food insecure (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2018). The policy changes should focus on intensifying the eligibility criteria and the monthly number of benefits disbursed to needy individuals.

Policy Evaluation

In its present condition, SNAP functions to improve human rights and ensure that all citizens have access to sufficient and nutritious meals. Even though this is the mandate that SNAP stands by, it is a challenging task, and SNAP cannot achieve it as it is now. The policy is ineffective in so many areas, and it is possible to head in the right direction by ensuring that all eligible individuals are trained on how to access the SNAP benefits. To empower social and environmental justice, all the barriers to proper access to SNAP benefits must be eliminated. For example, the biggest reason many eligible aged individuals do not exploit SNAP benefits is that they find the process complicated (Pooler et al., 2018). A review conducted by Mulik & Haynes-Maslow examined the credibility of complying with the nutritional requirements proposed by MyPlate while taking part in SNAP (2017). The proposition from the researchers is that since low-income individuals are more susceptible to diet-related chronic illnesses, it is paramount to study the link between utilizing SNAP benefits and eating an unhealthy diet (Mulik & Haynes-Maslow, 2017). The researchers continued to suggest that low-income households depending on SNAP benefits for sustenance play a part in reducing health-related diseases such as diabetes (Mulik & Haynes-Maslow, 2017). A suggestion was also brought forward that more extensive research needs to be done to analyze the actual cost of a healthy diet for SNAP to implement better reforms (Mulik & Haynes-Maslow, 2017). The cost of health care has shot up, which has led to emerging controversies that have spilt over to contemplations on reducing the budgetary cost of SNAP.

However, cutting down on these costs will have an innumerable impact on the already increasing cost of healthcare through redundancy of health of the food-insecure aged population (Bhargava et al.,

2012). Moreover, SNAP funding has been reduced since 2019, when President Trump proposed a SNAP budgetary cut of $213 billion (Rosenbaum et al., 2018). He proposed shifting costs to state and non-profit organizations, limiting the eligibility criteria by plugging benefits to prominent families and changing the definition of the elderly from 60 to 63 (Rosenbaum et al., 2018). This policy is taking the wrong direction of what was initially intended to leave vulnerable individuals, especially the elderly, to face the burden of food insecurity. The necessary policy change is that SNAP fails to target specific issues encountered by older adults and does not aid older immigrants in accessing food (Rosenbaum et al., 2018). Many older people are eligible to receive SNAP benefits, but the illiteracy regarding applying for the benefits has put this group in dire situations (Cunnyngham, 2010; Nam & Jin Jung, 2008). As stated earlier, SNAP needs reforms to include a clause for training and screening tools. This will ensure an all-inclusive system that incorporates immigrants and non-nationals. It is important to make sure that senior citizens at health risk have easy access to these benefits to have good health, saving the government the cost of health; thus, it is vital to equip them with the skills and resources to utilize SNAP.

Further Recommendations

Ageing adults are at risk of failing to access nutritious diets, and necessary measures need to be set up to alleviate this challenge. A high percentage of the elderly who are eligible to have access to SNAP benefits either have no clue about their eligibility or cannot access the benefits; thus, there is a need to increase participation (Cunnyngham, 2010). Renewing existing policies to include awareness and resource access will go a long way in alleviating this problem. In addition, there needs to be clear indications of the eligibility criteria since many controversies have arisen from them. The proposed budget cuts on food assistance programs will have a detrimental effect on the ageing population. Extensive research on what works and what does not is of great importance in shielding the health and well-being of the older vulnerable population.

Conclusion

In the last few years, food insecurity has become a national social challenge in the U.S., harming the elderly. The existing policy has attempted to alleviate the problem; the program has proven successful since its inception, but more room for growth and reforms is needed. While there are other programs in existence, for instance, Meals on Wheels, whose primary mandate is to fight food insecurity, there is a federal duty to make sure that vulnerable individuals, especially senior citizens, do not lose their right to access nutritious, healthy diets. With the plans to execute budget cuts on SNAP benefits and make the eligibility criteria rigid, many deserving individuals will face an aggravated burden of food insecurity.

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