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Consuming Poverty: The Unexpected Politics of Food Aid in an Era of Austerity

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CONSUMING POVERTY: THE UNE XPECTED POLITICS OF FOOD AID IN AN ERA OF AUSTERITY

By

MAGGIE DICKINSON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

CONSUMING POVERTY: THE UNEXPECTED POLITICS OF FOOD AID IN AN ERA OF AUSTERITY

By

Maggie Dickinson

Advisor: Professor Leith Mullings

This dissertation tracks the remarkable growth of food assistance in the U.S. over the past fifteen years and asks what this expansion of food aid means for poor people living in New York City. Much of the scholarly literature on welfare policy in the U.S argues that social programs have become more stingy and punitive, particularly since the passage of welfare reform in 1996. On the surface, this does not seem to be the case for the food stamp program or for emergency food providers like soup kitchens and food pantries. Since 2001 food stamp rolls have risen 120% in New York City, reflecting national trends. Today nearly fifteen percent of Americans are enrolled in the program and nearly as many have accessed food from an emergency food provider. Prior to welfare reform in the 1990’s, welfare recipients and their children made up the majority of the food stamp caseload. Today, the typical food stamp recipient is a low-wage worker who does not earn enough to afford basic household necessities like food. Far from a simple return to Keynesian welfare policy, the growth of food assistance reflects a broader restructuring of the US welfare state, which increasingly subsidizes low wage labor but does little for the unemployed. By placing the growth of food assistance programs squarely in the context of welfare reform, Consuming Poverty demonstrates how welfare programs have been restructured to benefit the working poor, punish the unemployed and produce an enormous
network of quasi-private charities that are expected to fill the gaps in the safety net. This transformation of the social safety net is aimed at regulating work and, to a lesser extent, health in an era of low wages, flexible employment and a costly obesity epidemic that disproportionately affects poor people.
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List of Abbreviations

ABAWD – Able-Bodied Adult Without Dependents
CBO – Community Based Organization
EFCB – Emergency Financial Control Board
EFP – Emergency Food Program
EFAP – Emergency Food Assistance Program
EITC – Earned Income Tax Credit
ES – Eligibility Specialist – a person who processes SNAP applications
FSET – Food Stamp Employment and Training Program
FTC – Failure to Comply
HPNAP – Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program
HRA – Human Resource Administration
JOS – Job Opportunity Specialist – a city worker who processes cash assistance applications
MDR – Mandatory Dispute Review
NCA – Non-Cash Assistance food stamp case
PRWORA – Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act
SNAP – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
TEFAP – The Emergency Food Assistance Program
TANF – Temporary Assistance to Needy Families
USDA – United States Department of Agriculture
WEP – Work Experience Program
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Chapter 1: The Unexpected Politics of Food Aid in an Era of Austerity

Lester Towns, a soft-spoken, middle aged African American man sat across the table from me, patiently explaining his job and its challenges. He is an eligibility specialist (ES), one of the welfare office workers who certify Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamp)\(^1\) applications for New York City’s Human Resources Administration (HRA). He conducts interviews with applicants and determines whether or not the person applying is eligible for benefits. He and the other ES’s I met described their frustrations, few of which were surprising. They complained of equipment that is old and frequently malfunctions, too much work and too few employees to do it all, too little pay and too little respect, both from the applicants coming in and from the managers who direct the flow of their work. But Mr. Towns’ biggest frustration was a new attitude from management and city officials that in his opinion was “misleading the people about everybody who is eligible for food stamps.” When I asked him to elaborate, he replied, “the policy with the city is when in doubt, give it out.”

This liberal attitude toward food aid is striking in what is generally described as an era of austerity (Hall, et al. 2013). It also marks a significant departure from the diversionary tactics of 1990’s. Under the Giuliani Administration, street level bureaucrats like Mr. Towns actively prevented poor New Yorkers from applying for food stamps (Davis 2002; IBO 2008; Krinsky 2007). Giuliani famously instituted tough diversionary tactics that kept people off the welfare

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\(^1\) The food stamp program was renamed SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, by the USDA in 2008. New York State changed the name of the state level program to SNAP in 2011. I use the terms SNAP and food stamps interchangeably, since this transition took place during my research. The program was primarily referred to as food stamps in common parlance.
rolls. Predictably, the number of food stamp recipients in the city dropped dramatically in the late 1990’s. Over a seven-year period between December 1994 and December 2001 the number of food stamp recipients decreased from about 1.5 million to 798,000, a reduction of 45 percent (IBO 2008). Street level bureaucrats were accused of such practices as failing to make applications immediately available as required by law, requiring the poor to search for jobs before receiving food stamp assistance, cutting off food stamps to needy families who were still eligible for those benefits, and sending hungry individuals to food pantries instead of screening them for emergency benefits. In 1999 several of these complaints were confirmed in a report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and in a federal court ruling against the city (2004; IBO 2008).

In what appears to be a striking departure from Giuliani’s anti-welfare policies, the food stamp rolls have risen 120% under Mayor Bloomberg’s tenure – a fact his administration touts as a success. This growth was no accident. Much of it came before the onset of the most recent economic crisis and is due at least in part to policy shifts by the Bloomberg Administration that eased access to food stamps. From a low of 800,000 recipients in 2000, the food stamp caseload reached nearly 1.1 million by December 2004 and soared to 1.8 million by 2012. These numbers reflect similar national trends. The steady growth in the national food stamp rolls during the Bush Administration, from just above 18 million in 2001 to 27 million in 2008, gained even more momentum as the recession took hold. By the end of 2012 the rolls reached a record 47 million Americans, or around 15% of the population, and a program cost in excess of $75 billion (FNS, 2012).

Republican Presidential hopefuls in the 2012 elections tried to pin the growth of the program on President Obama through coded racial appeals calling him ‘the food stamp
president’ and saying he won his re-election campaign by appealing to ‘takers’ and ‘giving them stuff’ (Haney-Lopez 2014). But the food stamp rolls had been rising well before Obama took office. The growth of the food stamp program is something of a puzzle. Though the recession that began in 2008 has certainly contributed to the growth of the program, it does not explain why the rolls started rising in 2001. How do we explain this massive expansion of food aid and what does it mean for the way poor people experience poverty in the contemporary U.S.?

Welfare programs have seen rapid expansions in the past. In the 1960’s, the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program grew 217% in large cities like New York over the course of a decade (Piven and Cloward 1993, 186). Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have argued that welfare protections are expanded in response to widespread civil disorder. One can imagine welfare workers like Lester Towns being told by their supervisors to ‘give it out’ as political pressure mounted to do something about urban unrest. However, the years between 2001 and 2011, when most of this growth took place, can hardly be characterized as a period of popular insurgency and high social movement activity. What led to the expansion of the food stamp program over the past decade is not so clear.

This dissertation seeks to explain the growth of the food safety net in recent years and to demonstrate the uneven effects of this expansion for poor New Yorkers. I combine a detailed legal and policy history of food aid programs with two years of ethnographic work with food stamp and food pantry clients, street level welfare bureaucrats, and anti-hunger advocates in New York City to show why and how policy makers like Bloomberg have invited poor people back to the table, both literally and figuratively. I argue that the growth in the food safety net is linked to two developments.

The first has to do with a fundamental shift in welfare provisioning in the wake of welfare
reform. Welfare programs in the U.S. have long been characterized as residual programs, providing meager, stigmatized resources for those who are out of work and indirectly enforcing the work ethic by keeping benefits below the even the lowest wages (Esping-Andersen 1990; Piven and Cloward 1993). Scholars have shown that over the past several decades welfare programs have been restructured to intervene directly in the labor market, enforcing participation in the low-wage labor force through both punishments and incentives (Collins and Mayer 2010; Morgen, et al. 2010; Peck 2001; Soss, et al. 2011; Wacquant 2009). I argue that the food stamp program has to be understood in the broader context of welfare reform and restructuring.

The program has been re-branded as a ‘work support’ and receipt of benefits is increasingly contingent on labor market participation. By tying food stamps to work, they have become both a key incentive and a key punishment, encouraging poor New Yorkers to accept the increasingly poor terms employers are offering their workers. The restructuring of the program in the wake of welfare reform explains much of its political popularity. In New York City, the Bloomberg Administration has taken an unusually hard stance on food stamp work requirements alongside concerted efforts to expand enrollment among the ‘working poor’. Debates over the future of the SNAP program taking shape on the national level make close analysis of the way the program has been restructured at the state and local levels crucial for understanding the implications of various policy proposals.

The second development is that food aid has increasingly been linked to debates about obesity, nutrition, public health and urban health inequalities. Growing concerns over the links

\[\text{2} \text{ The literature on the relationship between SNAP, obesity and public health is too large to fully represent here. This research has mainly been carried out by medical researchers, nutritionists and economists who have made contributions to the debates over how to restructure the program to incentivize healthy eating.}\]
between poverty, obesity and chronic diet related disease have led policy makers to put public health concerns at the center of food policy. The Bloomberg administration has been at the forefront of attempts to shape food aid policy in ways that address these pressing public health concerns (Barnhill 2011). There is increasing pressure from both political elites and public health advocates to restructure food aid programs as public health interventions (Dinour, et al. 2007; Leung, et al. 2013; Meyerhoefer and Muzhe 2011). By examining these two divergent political projects – incentivizing work and intervening in public health – I will demonstrate how urban elites attempt to balance concerns over economic growth with concerns about public health and sustainability through technocratic food polices that obscure broader questions of equity and justice. In contrasting the lived experience of hunger and food insecurity with a close analysis of food policy, this dissertation will show how food aid has become a dynamic, contested site of urban poverty governance.

**Restructuring Welfare in the Global City**

The welfare regimes that emerged in the twentieth century were built around and constitutive of what James Ferguson calls work membership, which forms the basis of social belonging in industrial societies (Ferguson 2013). Welfare protections were designed to provide economic support to those who were outside the labor market for one reason or another – illness, old age, disability or the need to care for young children. These exceptions to work membership were also designed to maintain race and gender hierarchies in the U.S., excluding African Americans en masse (Katzenelson 2005; Quadagno 1996) and confining unmarried women to the most stigmatized and stingy programs as a way to uphold the norms of the patriarchal family (Abromovitz 1996; Gordon 1994).

Most national welfare state protections in the U.S. were first established in the 1930’s
during the New Deal and were expanded in the 1960’s as part of the War on Poverty. This was a period of rapid growth in the U.S. economy and declining income inequality (Piketty 2014). The post-war boom was an era of secure employment and increasing standards of living for many Americans.

The social and economic rights established through welfare programs developed in the 20th century – rights to social security, health care, housing and a modest income for families with children and the unemployed - have been under attack since the 1970’s. In New York, these attacks moved to center stage during the New York City fiscal crisis. In the mid-1970’s, New York City was on the brink of bankruptcy. When President Ford famously denied the city’s request for a bailout, financial elites took over the city’s finances through an unelected Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB). In the view of the bankers who took over the city’s finances, welfare spending and social protections were a problematic expense crippling the city’s economic growth. They used their new authority to make major cuts to city payrolls and other expenditures. Poor people and public employees were imagined and characterized as hungry, greedy and insatiable. It was their insistent right to consume that was framed as a mortal threat to the vitality of the city and later – under Reagan – the nation. Racism played a decisive role in shoring up popular support for this austerity agenda (Haney-Lopez 2014; Neubuck and Cazenave 2001; Quadagno 1996; Tabb 1982).

Poor people’s consumption, protected through a set of social and economic rights, was defined as a problem in a city that was undergoing a massive political and economic transition. Economic elites, particularly in finance and real estate, used the New York City fiscal crisis as an opportunity to put in place policies that solidified an emerging notion of what the city was and who it was for. Roger Starr, a member of the EFCB, put it bluntly, "We should not encourage
people to stay where their job opportunities are daily becoming more remote. Stop the Puerto Ricans and the rural blacks from living in the city. Our urban system is based on the theory of taking the peasant and turning him into an industrial worker. Now there are no industrial jobs. Why not keep him a peasant?" (Tabb 1982) The industrial manufacturing base of the city was actively being dismantled and displaced by an urban infrastructure meant to support finance and real estate interests (Brash 2011; Freeman 2000; Greenberg 2008; Moody 2007; Tabb 1982). In this context the hungry poor - displaced agricultural workers coming from the rural South and the Caribbean - were no longer of use to a ruling elite who had no interest in making profits through industrial production. The poor, then, in the 1970’s were framed as a problematic poor – a surplus population endowed with a set of social and economic rights whose consumption had to be curbed.

This interpretation of social and economic rights as a problem was quite novel in the mid-1970’s. Cutting welfare programs and social expenditures as a means to achieve urban fiscal health was in no way self-evident. But by the 1990’s the Washington Consensus - the idea that social spending and welfare protections were inhibiting markets and global economic competitiveness – had become political common sense (Harvey 2005). It was in this context that Giuliani (and Mayors and Governors throughout the US) achieved massive reductions in the welfare and food stamp rolls.

Mainstream political analysts have largely celebrated this reduction in the rolls as an unqualified success while those on the left have linked this process with a broader process of impoverishment and growing income inequality (Maskovsky and Morgen 2003; Morgen, et al. 2010; Piven 2001). This reduction in aid, through the evisceration of the main cash assistance program for parents and their children, has led some scholars to describe the US as ‘post-
welfare’(Elisha 2008; Fennell 2012) and social theorists have argued that these cuts to cash assistance represent “the continual contraction of welfare in the age of hyper mobile capital and flexible work”(Wacquant 2009). The punitive measures put in place to push those who remain on the cash assistance rolls into the labor market have been theorized as the sine qua non of urban poverty governance (Collins and Mayer 2010; Peck 2001; Soss, et al. 2011; Wacquant 2009). What all of these analysts have in common are a focus on Assistance to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and later Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) as ‘the archetypical American means-tested program’ (Piven and Cloward 1993, 407). The growth in the food stamp rolls, however, suggests the need to rethink some fundamental assumptions about the neoliberal welfare state in the contemporary moment. What does the expansion of food aid mean for the way we think about the welfare state in the U.S. today?

The crusades against cash assistance in the 1990’s were part of a larger political project that identified government spending – particularly on income supports and social protections – as a problem. However, actual cuts to welfare spending at the federal level have been hard to achieve, despite intense campaigns against ‘big government’. Debates over federal spending on welfare programs can be difficult to make sense of because of the hybrid, fractured nature of the American welfare state (Katz 2001; Piven and Cloward 1987), which is made up of dozens of programs. Broadly speaking, welfare state programs are typically divided into social insurance programs that are tied to employment (Unemployment Insurance, Workers Compensation and Disability Insurance and Social Security benefits) and means tested programs. Means-tested programs are not explicitly tied to work and are available to citizens who meet the income
criteria. That is, if a household’s income is low enough, then they qualify for these benefits. These programs include Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), TANF, housing assistance, and SNAP. (For a break down of the relevant programs and a brief history of welfare state development in the US, please see appendix A).

Welfare reform radically restructured cash assistance for poor families by requiring recipients to participate in workfare assignments and job search activities and by imposing time limits on these benefits. One of the ironies of welfare reform is that it is often discussed in terms of cutting spending and reducing budgets in the name of fiscal health, both at the federal and state levels. However, the kind of intensive case management required to move people ‘from welfare to work’, particularly for single parents who require childcare, is both expensive and logistically complicated (cf. Hays 2004; Morgen, et al. 2010). Though TANF caseloads have fallen precipitously since welfare reform was passed in 1996, overall federal spending on the program has not (Ziliak 2011).

Cash assistance for poor families in the US has always been inadequate (c.f. Lein and Edin 1997) and is even more so today. However, taken as a whole, federal spending on both social insurance and means tested programs has proved surprisingly resilient, despite the heavy and repeated attacks on a whole range of welfare programs. More Americans access state funded income supports now than in 1996 and federal expenditures on these programs have been growing (Ben-Shalom, et al. 2011; Voegeli 2010).

Though means-tested programs are theoretically available to all citizens who meet the income criteria, in practice various provisions, like the suitable home provisions, have kept many qualifying citizens off the rolls. For example, in the American South, local welfare administrators often determined that African American women were employable and therefore not eligible for cash assistance prior to the Civil Rights and welfare rights movements of the 1960’s (cf. Piven and Cloward 1993; Morgen et. al. 2010, 21-23).
Table 1. Source: (Ziliak 2011, 2)

While the political rhetoric of policy makers has centered on austerity, budget cuts and restoring fiscal health, the reality at the federal level is that it has proved very difficult to actually cut welfare program budget levels. What we see is that spending on welfare programs is not necessarily shrinking (adding fuel to far right arguments about the U.S.’s ‘limitless welfare state’ (Voegeli 2010), but it is shifting. Means-tested welfare programs that once blunted the worst effects of poverty for poor families and their children now subject these families to complicated (and expensive) workfare regimes. Researchers have found a significant redistribution of expenditures, with more benefits going to low wage workers and less going to the unemployed, in a context of overall spending growth (Ben Shalom et al 2012, 11). In the following chapters, I will be taking a close look at these shifts in welfare provisioning and showing how they impact working class New Yorker’s abilities to make ends meet. My findings suggest that the expansion of food aid paradoxically undermines poor people’s social and economic rights by enforcing work as the primary duty of citizenship (Mead 1986).
This is nothing new, as the U.S. welfare state has long been structured to enforce work through the principle of less eligibility, where welfare benefits are so low and so stigmatized that work at any wage is preferable. The recent expansion of food aid differs from this historical model, however, insofar as food aid is being transformed into a subsidy to low-wage labor, incentivizing work and boosting low wages through means-tested welfare benefits. As labor market participation continues to fall, competition for jobs is fierce and middle wage jobs are replaced by low wage ones (BLS 2014; NELP 2012), widespread precarity and insecurity have become hallmarks of working class life in the U.S. Welfare protections were extended in the post-war era to protect people from certain predictable risks, such as illness, old age or unemployment caused by dips in the business cycle. But in an era when work has become flexible, insecure and unreliable, these predictable risks have changed significantly. With low wage, part-time jobs becoming more prevalent in the U.S., social support is being transformed to protect against the systemic risk of below subsistence wages.

Shifts in spending toward the employed and two parent families suggest that what is at stake in the debates over social protections today is not simply whether or not there will be cuts to existing social programs, but the restructuring of these programs as part of a broader shift in poverty governance. The extensive scholarly focus on the restructuring of TANF and the massive growth of the penal system has solidified a common understanding that urban poverty governance has taken a decidedly punitive turn. By focusing on an area of welfare provisioning that has expanded rapidly over the past decade, I argue that urban poverty governance is not exclusively punitive. As my findings will show, “interventions that punish the poor work hand in hand with efforts to support and incentivize the poor” (Soss, et al. 2011, 9).

4 This transformation of the food stamp program parallels the structure of the Earned Income Tax Credit, a means tested welfare program that is explicitly tied to work.
The relationship between the state, the market and citizens has been radically transformed over the past several decades. Esping-Anderson’s claim that the growth of welfare states in the twentieth century indicates that states “are now institutions predominantly occupied with the production and distribution of well-being” may still be true. But even modest well-being is no longer a right associated with citizenship in the U.S. Increasingly, state funding and welfare programs are designed to produce and distribute well-being through the market. But out of these shifts, “new maps and categories of entitlement emerge” (Petryna 2004). The growth of the food safety net provides us with a window into how these new categories of deservingness are being negotiated and deployed and, perhaps, some insight into new political possibilities. As we will see in Chapter Five, for example, concerns over public health and food inequality present a wrinkle in the work-first approach to food aid.

Both concerns over public health and a staunch commitment to work-first welfare reflect Bloomberg’s conception of the city as a corporate entity (Brash 2011). Through close analysis of the way food aid is being deployed in the city, we can see the ways that poverty policy has been reformulated to produce desirable citizens at the very bottom of the income scale. In an interview early on in his first term, Mayor Bloomberg reflected, "I've spent my career thinking about the strategies that institutions in the private sector should pursue, and the more I learn about this institution called New York City, the more I see the ways in which it needs to think like a private company.” Bloomberg’s approach, imagining the city as a business and running it as such, means viewing the working class primarily as employees. This is a classically conservative, paternalistic approach in which political and economic elites accept some obligation for the welfare of their ‘subjects’, but this obligation is premised on “appropriate loyalty and morality” (Esping-Andersen 1990, 40).
His administration’s response to intra-urban competition has been to pursue policies that transform New York into a good place to do business, which includes the cultivation of a compliant low-wage labor force. This corporatist view of the city, in which the line between public and private has become thoroughly blurred, has given rise to a new approach to welfare provisioning. Welfare policy has been re-tooled under Bloomberg to benefit the ‘good citizens’ who have access to jobs by making programs like food stamps more accessible and by subsidizing and incentivizing low wage labor. Bloomberg’s approach has more thoroughly wed city functions, including welfare policy and administration, to the needs of a business community that views the city itself as a business. This view of the city as a corporation has broad implications for poverty governance and for Bloomberg’s approach to public health.

The High Costs of Cheap Food

In the Giuliani era, food aid was characterized as a problem, allowing ‘takers’ to live comfortably as they drain public coffers, doing harm to the city and its vitality. Today, poor people’s consumption is also framed as a problem, but a problem of a different sort. Obesity and chronic illness are consistently described as “a serious and costly health problem facing our nation, costing 152 billion in direct medical costs annually and 73 billion in indirect costs from lost productivity, higher insurance premiums and absence from work” (APHA 2013). Obesity and diet related illnesses are consistently described in market terms – as a cost to the overall economy. Chronic illness like diabetes, heart disease and hypertension disproportionately impact poor New Yorkers and blacks and Latinos are affected at higher rates than whites (Kim, et al. 2006). Many of the initiatives to reduce obesity explicitly link poverty, eating habits, and urban fiscal health. These linkages are made particularly clear in this passage from a New York Times article on the growing epidemic of type two diabetes in New York City: "The work force 50
years from now is going to look fat, one-legged, blind, a diminution of able-bodied workers at every level presuming that current trends persist.” The article goes on to warn, “These people will not be able to function in society without significant aid” (Kleinfield 2006).

It is in this context that poor people’s consumption has emerged as a new kind of threat to the imagined future of the city, but it is no longer the threat of an entitled, industrial working class that is increasingly superfluous to capital accumulation. Instead, the obesity epidemic and the high rates of diabetes in New York are framed as endangering the productivity of the future workforce while costing the city through publicly funded health expenditures. In response, Bloomberg has made reducing obesity and chronic diet related disease a centerpiece of his administration. Perhaps ironically, it is the vestiges of embedded liberalism, specifically the obligation to provide medical treatment and care for the poor and disabled workers, which has made diabetes and chronic illness such an acute political problem. But concerns about the ‘obesity epidemic’ are also inflected by corporatist concerns about an individual’s duty to work. As Julie Guthman points out, "it is not only the cost of health care but also the idea that those who are not healthy hurt the nation that has made obesity seem such a social problem" (Guthman 2011, 55). Perhaps just as important as health costs are concerns over a growing segment of the population that won’t be able to contribute to society through work.

Where the poor in the 1970’s were identified as a surplus population and an unnecessary drag on the urban economy, today’s poor are imagined as a low wage labor force catering to every imaginable need of the urban elite – as nannies, dog walkers, food service workers, delivery men and women, baristas, nail technicians, etc. But this is a labor force whose wages have been pushed down below the level of subsistence. Low wage, temporary and insecure labor have become the norm for large swaths of the working class in New York. In response, poor
New Yorkers make do by relying on the cheapest, most filling and (often) the unhealthiest foods available on the consumer market. As I will show in Chapter Five, making do on a tiny food budget means thinking carefully about what to eat and when to eat it.

I spoke to soup kitchen and food pantry clients at length about their employment histories, their experiences with the welfare office, their ability to eat well (or at all) and their health. Vincent, a lanky forty-five-year-old white man, was a regular at the North Brooklyn Food Pantry for several months while he was out of work. Like so many in his situation, he found himself rationing the cheapest foods he could find. When I met him for an interview at the North Brooklyn food pantry, he described a typical scenario. “I said to myself on Friday, I got a couple more slices of white bread and some peanut butter and a couple of Ramen noodle soups that are $.25 and I got to the pantry on Monday so that's actually like Friday Saturday… Like three days. Am I going to make this last? You know, and thinking about that all weekend. And it's crazy. It's insane man. It's like whoa.” In the absence of steady, sufficient income, Vincent’s eating habits represent both a survival strategy and a risk.

This heavy reliance on modern day ‘proletarian hunger killers’ (Errington, et al. 2012; Mintz 1995) has troubling public health implications. Public health experts have consistently linked cheap food to poor health(Darmon and Drewnoski 2008). What has been called the nutrition transition, from grain-based diets to diets heavy in fats, sugar and salt, is typically accompanied by a transition in health outcomes – from hunger and infectious disease to obesity and chronic illness(Drewnoski 2004; Popkin 1993; Sobal 2004). This nutrition transition has become a major public health concern and a policy priority, particularly as the future projections of the costs of ill health spiral upward.

Cheap food is both a problem and a solution. Cheap foods like instant noodles keep
people from starving. But they do so at a cost. In the context of a partial, residual welfare state, these costs are born both by individuals and by society at large. Chronic illnesses like diabetes are generating new kinds of biological citizenship (Petryna 2004) and consequently new demands on the state. As large numbers of people become incapacitated from what are often perceived as diseases caused by lifestyle choices, these lifestyles increasingly become something that must be governed. The consumption choices of the poor are fast becoming an object of regulation aimed at reducing future claims on the state. Bloomberg’s attempts to shape food aid as a nutrition program and a public health intervention are motivated by concerns about the high social costs of these cheap foods. As we will see, his administration’s attempts to regulate consumer choices elide the broader social processes that structure what and whether poor New Yorkers are able to eat. The social processes that produce poverty and food insecurity have “come to be embodied as biological events” (Farmer 1999, 5). These biological events, in turn produce new policies and new political possibilities.

Welfare Reform and the Race to the Bottom of the Low Wage Labor Market

Welfare reform has not been incidental to the process of reducing wages below the level of subsistence and pushing poor New Yorkers into reliance on cheap and unhealthy food. The economic crisis that began in the 1970’s with stagnating profits has resulted in a massive restructuring of the US economy as commodity production is replaced by service provision as the bedrock of the US economy. These services - care work of various kinds, including cooking, looking after children, the ill and the elderly, and house work - have historically been carried out by women in the home for no pay. But as women enter the workforce in large numbers, these tasks have become commodified as services that Americans pay cash for. That is, they become work. This work, long performed by poorly paid domestic laborers – often women of color who
worked as maids, cooks and nannies – has expanded exponentially over the past half-century and is likely to continue growing at a rapid pace.

Historically having ‘help’ has been something only well-to-do mostly white women could afford (Mullings 1997). But the commodification of household labor has created a huge pool of cheap ‘help’ that even low-income families can access. These cheap forms of help range from fast-food restaurants and processed, prepared foods in the grocery store to the proliferation of daycare centers and home health aids. These growing industries are the mainstay of employment growth in the US, producing thousands of new, poorly paid jobs for the American working class. As Susan Thistle writes, “The conversion of women’s domestic tasks into work done for pay has been the area of greatest job growth over the past thirty years” (Thistle 2006, 102). She argues that almost two fifths of the increase in jobs since 1970 was due to market takeover of household and caring tasks. Some of the most remarkable growth has come in the food service industry, as Americans of all income levels increasingly eat food prepared outside the home. The factory-like production of fast food has been the key to lowering the costs of prepared food and putting it in reach of even poor households (Fantasia 1995; Levenstein 1993; Schlosser 2002; Thistle 2006). Even more rapid growth has taken place in the realm of routine domestic care for the sick, elderly and young and “the commercialization of women’s domestic realm will continue to provide the bulk of new employment over the first decades of the twenty-first century” (Thistle 2006, 106).

What constitutes ‘work’ in this evolving economic landscape is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated. Work is an intensely political concept. The narrow definition of work as paid employment excludes an enormous amount of economic activity (Williams 1976, 334-337). What looks very much like work is often unrecognized as such. Many of the people I
met over the course of my research were unemployed, but made money through informal employment - collecting bottles and cans, scrapping metal, day labor, babysitting - what one man succinctly described to me as his 'hustle' (c.f. Lein and Edin 1997; Mullings and Wali 2001).

Evidence suggests that these forms of labor are on the upswing in the urban US, particularly in North Brooklyn, where this study takes place (Kim 2013). North Brooklyn was one of the most heavily industrialized neighborhoods in New York City in the 1970’s (Susser 1982). Manufacturing employment has declined precipitously in the area, falling 72 percent in Williamsburg, and 60 percent in Greenpoint between 1991 and 2002 (Planning 2013). Javier Bosque, the director of one of the oldest food pantries in the area, captured the shifts he’s seen in the neighborhood and in his agency’s response.

In each time we are trying to respond to the needs of the people in the area. Some of the programs were successful in the past. They are not anymore. For example, we used to have an office to provide jobs in connection with the factories. This area had a lot of factories. Now they are converted into apartments. And recently in the last two years we discovered a new need. It was the daily workers. They congregate on the corner behind the library. They congregate here and it’s a bunch of undocumented, most of them, and they need help. They need a place to rest, they need a bathroom, they need some food, they need...they need organization; they need to learn basic English to communicate. That’s the newest mission. We have union meetings every Wednesday. We try to organize them and fight for their rights. .... This is an area that is new. It was not here three years ago.

This sea change in what constitutes work in the US, the value placed on this work and the treatment of the people who perform it comes with its own set of complications. Unlike industrial manufacturing, which pursued a spatial fix to the problem of falling profits – that is, lowering labor costs by moving production to areas of the globe where labor is cheaper, these growing sectors of the US economy have no spatial fix. Care of the elderly and sick, house keeping, and the retailing of food and other consumer goods cannot be moved off-shore. Since there is no spatial fix for these sectors, they have pursued what Collins and Mayer have called a
‘relational fix’. They argue that workfare and welfare reform were part of the creation of a race to the bottom in service jobs that tracked with the global race to the bottom in manufacturing (Collins and Mayer 2010). The institution of workfare, along with an undermining of immigrant labor rights and the creation of a large population of formerly incarcerated people who can be legally discriminated against in the labor market (Alexander 2010) exerts downward pressure on the wages and rights of all wage workers.

The emphasis of welfare reform was to get poor people to accept a job – any job – no matter how poorly paid or insecure. Prior to welfare reform, low wage workers were often subsidized by welfare in hidden ways – through reliance on family and friends who received benefits and could watch children while they worked (Newman 1999; Stack 1974). The welfare reforms of 1996 have largely drained these social networks of women who have time to be involved in their community and kin networks and who can do small jobs, keep an eye on children and neighbors, volunteer in the schools and do the work of maintaining community. Importantly, welfare reform has drained these neighborhoods of women who were politically active, distributing resources in their neighborhoods and defending publicly funded resources, like schools, firehouses, and feeding programs (Susser 1982), what Leith Mullings has termed “transformative work” (Mullings 1995). Welfare policy has shifted so that low-wage workers are now subsidized directly through work supports like food stamps and the earned income tax credit. Poor women can no longer choose to care for those in their own networks and are increasingly forced to sell their caring labor on the market to those who can afford to pay.

These shifts in the labor market have produced income stagnation, declining job prospects and increased insecurity for all low-skilled workers in the U.S. (Nash 1989; Pappas 1989; Susser 1982). But people of color, who were concentrated in these low-skill
manufacturing occupations, have been impacted the hardest by this economic restructuring (Bourgois 1996; Wilson 1997). High rates of unemployment and spatially concentrated poverty among African Americans were mobilized as key tropes in the drive to reform welfare in the 1990’s (Hancock 2004). Welfare reform became a racially coded appeal to whites who increasingly associated both poverty and welfare with African Americans (Gilens 1999; Neubuck and Cazenave 2001; Quadagno 1996; Soss, et al. 2011). Race played an outsized role in shoring up political support for welfare restructuring that undermined the ability of all low skill workers to resist falling wages and deteriorating labor conditions.

But this race to the bottom produces its own challenges. Downward mobility runs the risk of creating a dangerous political instability. Further, as caring labor is increasingly commodified, we are confronted with the question, how much can we reorganize forms of care without imposing significant costs? As Sylvia Federici points out, “the degree to which the marketization of food production has contributed to the deterioration of our health (leading, for example, to the rise of obesity even among children) is instructive”(Federici 2012). Reliance on commodified forms of care for the urban poor – fast food and pre-packaged foods in particular – are increasingly understood as contributing to ill health and producing new forms of social instability.

The welfare apparatus, which has been used to regulate the labor force, has taken a new form by subsidizing low wage workers. This represents a new governance strategy that differs from Keynesian interventions in significant ways. I argue that what has often been characterized as a roll back of Keynesian welfare protections through austerity measures is perhaps best understood as roll out of a new kind of governance strategy that is adapting to changes in global capitalism and urban development. The language of austerity is misleading, because it implies
that less money is being spent. This couldn’t be further from the truth. Money is being spent, but the question is, on what? To what end? Welfare spending is still quite high, but how that money is being spent and on whom is very different today and very poorly understood. As Lawrence Mead has pointed out, changes to the welfare state have not, primarily, been about spending, but about what he calls “social authority” (Mead 1992). Changes to the welfare state since 1996 are primarily about regulation – who is being regulated and how. This dissertation aims to make sense of how the welfare state has been re-organized and what impact this has had on everyday people’s calculations about how to make ends meet in ‘post-welfare’ urban America.

**Governing the Poor in the Luxury City**

Bloomberg’s approach to food aid can be seen as an attempt to resolve two very different concerns. On the one hand, his administration has remained staunchly committed to a work first approach to welfare, keeping in place almost all of Giuliani’s restrictive and diversionary welfare policies and keeping the cash assistance rolls at historic lows even through the recession. This policy approach extends to food stamp policies aimed at the unemployed. Individuals and families who are not working ‘on the books’ are made to work for their food stamp benefits. Chapter Three looks at the way the food stamp program functions, and fails to function, for the unemployed. As we will see, unemployed New Yorkers are routinely cut off from their food stamp benefits for failure to comply with work rules. In this chapter, I document unemployed families’ attempts to hold onto food stamp benefits and their Kafka-esque tales of multiple trips to the welfare office, bureaucratic mismanagement and misinformation, and prolonged periods of hunger and deprivation. These punitive measures for the unemployed are the ongoing legacy of
planned shrinkage, a governing strategy that emerged in the fiscal crisis era that actively attempts to displace the very poor from the city (Tabb 1982).

On the other hand, the Bloomberg administration has attempted to shape the food stamp program to encourage low wage workers to become self-actualizing, health conscious consumers who will not become an unnecessary drag on the economy in the future due to ill health and disease. His campaign against obesity is one of the signature achievements of his administration. The rationale behind these efforts is to “create strategies to lower health care spending and lost productivity”. One of these strategies has been to try to reframe the food stamp program as a work support and as a nutrition program – supporting (or enforcing) healthy eating on the part of low-wage workers. I repeatedly heard welfare administrators frame the program as “A big support for working people.” Robert Doar, the Commissioner for Human Services told me that, “Bloomberg has transformed the food stamp program, doubling enrollment since the time he came into office. It’s more than a welfare program, but a work support. Bloomberg came in and the numbers went up because he talked about it as a work support.” At the same time, the Commissioner complained that, “it’s called the supplemental nutrition assistance program, but its not doing enough on nutrition. We want to do more.” One of the things Bloomberg wanted to do was to ban the use of food stamps for the purchase of sugary soda, but the USDA turned down this request. Doar lamented, “We just wanted to try it.”

The contours of this approach, re-framing food stamps as a work support and making it more restrictive in order to promote public health, are both policies aimed at producing a vital, healthy working poor, as I will show in Chapter Two. This chapter provides an ethnographic account of Ziliak’s findings that, “SNAP has evolved into a work supplement for educated, near-poor households” (Ziliak 2013, 12). However, this liberalization has done little to alter welfare
administration for unemployed New Yorkers who continue to be subject to restrictive welfare policies that exacerbate hunger and food insecurity. This bi-furcated policy approach creates stark distinctions between the working poor and the unemployed and their imagined place in the city, which is increasingly marked by differential access to food and food aid. Jeff Maskovsky has described this as the ‘workist consensus’ that excuses ‘the persistence of poverty by dividing the poor into the categories of the deserving (those who are worthy of assistance because they work) and the undeserving poor (those who are unworthy because they do not receive wages for the work they do)’ (Maskovsky 2001 476). Taken together, this approach represents an advanced form of urban corporatism that ties social and economic rights – including the right to food – to an obligation to work. In the absence of full employment, this policy approach inevitably contributes to hunger, food inequality, and ultimately, poor health for those who cannot secure work. Charity is left to do the work of the state, but as we will see in Chapter Four, the charitable response to hunger is both ineffective and politically fraught.

**Studying the Politics of Hunger: A Note on Methods**

The people I met over the course of this research navigated a complicated system of welfare programs, formal jobs and informal employment, and charity to make ends meet. Changes in their circumstances had profound effects on whether and what they could eat. The race to the bottom in the labor market has come at a great price – one that is being navigated day in and day out by poor New Yorkers whose very lives depend on the kinds of resources they can cobble together out of what’s left of the safety net and a labor market that provides little in the way of security or sufficiency.

This study of food stamp policy and its meaning for poor and working New Yorkers is based on ethnographic data collected through 18 months of participant observation in a soup
kitchen and food pantry located in North Brooklyn. In addition to field notes, I conducted in-depth interviews with food insecure community residents and longitudinal case studies of their changing circumstances. I also conducted focus groups with welfare office employees and interviews with welfare administrators, anti-hunger advocates, and the directors of 7 of the 12 local soup kitchens and food pantries in North Brooklyn. My primary role has been as an advocate for individuals attempting to access public benefits – mostly food stamps, but also TANF/Public assistance. This field work has included working alongside volunteers to pack and give out pantry bags and hot meals, accompanying individuals to the food stamp office to document their interactions with case workers, filling out food stamp applications and mediating problems with cases as they arose, and attending meetings and trainings for Community Based Organizations, advocates and welfare administrators. These daily activities and interactions have been documented through extensive field notes.

The anthropology of hunger and food insecurity is broad and has made important contributions to our understanding of who is hungry and why (DeRose, et al. 1998). Ethnography is particularly suited to understanding every day household and community arrangements that contribute to food security or insecurity. Pottier argues that anthropologists need to consider policy and how it is formulated as an ethnographic subject in addition to the local specificities of how food insecurity is experienced. He suggests that a policy oriented approach makes anthropological contributions relevant to a broader audience and can better contribute to the reduction of hunger (Pottier 1999). This study builds off of Pottier’s suggestion by taking policy as its main object of ethnographic inquiry. That is, I ask how changes in policy – both in its implementation and it codification into law and practice – impact people’s experience of hunger and food insecurity. Sidney Mintz writes that, “the most profound ethical
issues are raised by the assertion that every living human being has a sacred right to eat because decisions are being made all the time that – by their inevitable consequences – end up causing people to die of hunger. Establishing the linkages between such decision making and its victims, exposing those linkages so that the decision making itself becomes ethically visible, may be a task remote from anthropology’s older concerns. But it is well worth any anthropologist’s time today” (Mintz 1996, 11). Studying policy and its effects on individuals is central to establishing these links.

One of the questions I grappled with in this project was how to see the state, particularly when state actors were not interested in being seen. At the beginning of my research, I sent a proposal to New York City’s Human Resources Administration (HRA), asking to do participant observation in a welfare office. They denied this request quite firmly, leaving me to weigh my options. I ended up setting up a food stamp outreach program in a food pantry. I attended trainings at the New York City Food Bank on how to help people enroll in the program online. This, in and of itself, was instructive and something I may have missed had I been in the welfare office proper. Community based organizations are becoming heavily involved in food stamp outreach and enrollment, enlarging the reach of the state while containing the costs of this expansion(Crenson and Ginsberg 2002; Cruikshank 1999).

I saw the state from many angles, in interviews where informants would complain about their interactions with street level bureaucrats, as I accompanied people to the welfare office, and in my own interactions as I intervened on people’s behalf when they came to me seeking help with problems. I also conducted three focus groups with front-line employees in the welfare office to round out these observations. The line between the state and non-state actors in the realm of welfare provisioning comes down to who has the power to determine whether needs are
legitimate and whether resources will be extended. This process of determination takes place on multiple levels and is constantly being negotiated. Part of tracking this process is that I had to participate at these different levels in order for an even partial picture of how this process was unfolding to emerge. These negotiations take place between clients and front line employees in the intimate interactions of the eligibility interview, but also at the level of advocates and high level administrators, policy makers and elected officials. Bloomberg’s unwavering commitment to work first welfare became a public dust-up with his deputy commissioner and was publicized in the New York Times. Front line employees question clients to ‘get things out of them’ in ways that matter greatly as to whether or not a person will receive benefits. Advocates email welfare workers to point out mistakes and demand redress on behalf of clients. Poor people counsel one another about what information to put down and what to leave out on an application.

Patterns emerge from situating oneself at the crossroads of these efforts to feed poor New Yorkers – in an emergency food program, doing food stamp outreach and becoming a resource to the local community by helping with food stamp applications and welfare office disputes. What often felt like exceptional cases or simple mistakes became visible patterns after seeing them dozens of times. This study does not focus on a narrow demographic group, but looks at a broad cross-section of low income Americans who rely to varying degrees on food programs. I ask how these various groups are affected by policy and how these policy decisions are experienced. These experiences were documented in interviews and field notes as I accompanied my interlocutors to the welfare office, sent emails and made phone calls on their behalf.

As Phillipe Bourgois has argued, “the best way to document the inadequacy of social services is to …assist, accompany and document”(Bourgois 2011, 4). The core of my ethnographic work was as an advocate and resource for individuals in their dealings with the
welfare office. But unlike Bourgois in his study of homeless heroin addicts, I did not confine my research to the most abject residents of the city. Though many of the people I met and interviewed were homeless and struggled with addiction, others were barely clinging on to a middle class lifestyle. In conducting interviews and participant observation with a range of community residents, my findings are essentially comparative. I was able to detect patterns in people’s treatment, their ability to access welfare benefits, and their access to food. In doing so, I document not only the inadequacy of social services, but also the adequacy – the people for whom social services work quite well.

Working with the North Brooklyn Food Pantry, I began a food stamp outreach program at their site. I attended multiple trainings offered by the New York City Food Bank about how to screen people to see if they were eligible for benefits, to apply online and to mediate problems that arise with local welfare offices. These efforts are part of a broader move in New York City to engage community-based organizations (CBO’s) in food stamp outreach and enrollment. Anti-hunger advocates in New York have pioneered several important programs to connect food pantry and soup kitchen clients with food stamp benefits and the Bloomberg Administration has been a willing partner in these efforts. New Yorkers can apply for food stamps directly in CBO’s as well as submit applications online. At the North Brooklyn Food Pantry, I set up regular weekly hours where I was available to assist people with their food stamp cases. I informed people through flyers distributed in all of the pantry bags and at meals at several of the local area pantries, senior centers, daycare centers and local businesses. I also used local parent listservs and contacts through other community organizations to reach potential food stamp recipients who do not also rely on food pantries.

5 I have changed the name of the pantry where I worked to the North Brooklyn Food Pantry in order to protect the anonymity of my informants.
I attempted, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing, to assist people in getting welfare benefits, to resolve disputes, to defend themselves in fair hearings and to write down what happened. Over the course of 18 months, I assisted 57 people with food stamp cases. Some of these were straightforward and simple. Others were complicated and required multiple emails, phone calls and visits to the local welfare office. I also spoke to dozens of other food pantry clients, volunteers, staff and community members about applying for benefits without actually assisting them in any direct way with their case. These formal and informal conversations were invaluable in bringing to light the factors that prevent some people from accessing benefits and empower others.

In addition to this advocacy work, I also conducted in-depth interviews with 38 individuals who rely on food programs. These interviews focused on people’s work histories, histories of applying for and receiving welfare benefits, use of soup kitchens and food pantries and eating habits over time. Out of these 38, I was able to follow-up with 24 either with formal interviews or in informal interactions for a period of one month or longer. I was able to follow 8 for six months or more to track their experiences with public benefits, work and housing. Many of the people I met through the food pantry I would see and talk to on a weekly basis over the course of several months. Many of these people also disappeared and became impossible to reach if they lost their housing or if they moved away to find work somewhere else. As Ida Susser points out, one of the problems of social science research is that it fixes people in seemingly static categories – poor, homeless, welfare dependent, working – when in real life these are conditions that people move in and out of as their personal circumstances change (Susser 1996). One of the challenges of this study was to track this movement over time, from work to welfare, from housed to un-housed, and to ask how these changing circumstances
affected an individual’s ability to access welfare benefits, food and adequate resources. Statistics about hunger, homelessness, poverty and unemployment are often how social problems become named and known. But this kind of population science is separate from the everyday lived reality of most people, even as this statistical way of knowing impacts them in profound ways.

Food program policies in New York City and nationally are important ethnographic objects. The codification of law and practice impacted and shaped the experiences of the people I met as they attempted to make ends meet. Much of this policy history was gleaned from archival news sources, interviews with eight anti-hunger advocates, seven food stamp caseworkers, and field notes from participation in monthly meetings with HRA officials and Community Based Organizations working on hunger. My observations about barriers to these programs were confirmed in interviews and conversations with advocates from around the city who do this advocacy work every day. In addition to these interviews and observations, I reviewed local newspapers and scoured data collected by local think tanks and research institutions to build an understanding of the magnitude of poverty and hunger, the contours of the welfare system in New York, and the local labor market conditions.

Taken together, the picture that emerged was one of an approach to hunger and poverty that reflects what Gavin Smith has termed “selective hegemony” (Smith 2011). I found that welfare protections and food aid are being extended to a select group in order to shore up hegemonic power at the same time that other groups are subject to coercion or are left to rely on charity. “Neoliberal states today do not see their role as one of counteracting the inequities of capitalism but rather enhancing its field of operation. And as dominant blocs increasingly represent finance so the role of social democracy in enhancing the state-productive project is redrawn” (Smith 2011). Workers have been displaced en masse through the loss of
manufacturing jobs and this surplus labor force has been pushed into informal and entrepreneurial labor, with intense competition for the jobs that remain. This shift in the way the urban labor force is organized has been accompanied by a shift in the way the social and economic citizenship rights are understood.

I argue that the contemporary welfare state, the growth of private charities and emergent concerns around food and health inequality have to be understood in this context. The political movements of the post-war era focused on inclusion in the labor market, in the voting process, in housing and consumer markets and in welfare protections offered by the state. These fights for inclusion demanded full and equal citizenship rights for previously excluded groups – African Americans and other racial minorities, women, gays and lesbians. These struggles were premised on the ideas of extending the social and economic rights associated with citizenship within the nation state. But as the relationship between the state, capital and the global working class has shifted, new questions emerge about what a politics of inclusion might look like. The shared national prosperity of the post-war era is no longer shared and it is no longer national. Instead, urban dwellers are increasingly brought into circuits of accumulation as consumers and as the targets of privatized welfare programs. Urban dwellers take on consumer debt, educational and housing loans and other forms of consumer credit. At the same time, private contractors make profits off of providing services to the poor. In the past, changes in technology and production shifted labor needs, dislocating large numbers of people from established social worlds. Re-allocating that labor from the rural south to the industrial north was a tremendous upheaval and the expansion of welfare in the 1960’s was one way this upheaval was addressed (Piven and Cloward 1993). Today we are witnessing similar upheaval, but one in which that labor has not been productively reallocated in any significant way. As we will see in the
following chapters, the problem and the response are qualitatively different as the terms of citizenship are being redrawn.

The ideology of work and reward has been enormously important for regulating the American labor market and American society in general. Its breakdown – the idea that work will no longer bring material rewards – is a tremendously unsettling force. Recent political unrest in the US, in the Occupy movement and in a growing wave of labor actions on the part of public employees and low wage employees like fast food workers in the private sector, have forced these issues onto the political stage. In a recent speech on income inequality, President Obama addressed the issue of wealth primarily accruing to the 1%, saying, “It undermines the very essence of America, that idea that if you work hard, you can make it here.” Though these issues have only recently been taken up explicitly in the national political discourse, the problem of governance is a long-standing one. Economic restructuring has been addressed through the growth of direct forms of control, primarily the penal system and, post-9/11, the expansion of the law and order state more generally (Maskovsky and Cunningham 2009; Wacquant 2009). The growth of the penal system has had devastating impacts on poor communities and communities of color in particular (Alexander 2010). But systems of coercion are far more difficult to maintain and far less effective than systems of control based on consent. In an era of economic restructuring and downward mobility, with falling wages and an increasing atmosphere of insecurity and doom, welfare programs re-tooled as work supports and public health interventions do the important political work of buttressing consent. As we will see in the following chapters, food, as both a biological necessity and a rich site of meaning making, is at the center of these efforts.
Chapter 2: The Carrot: Welfare as Work Support

The welfare office that serves North Brooklyn is a grim looking brick building set on a small side street half a block away from an elevated subway line. Coming down off the green metal stairs and turning the corner onto this quiet block would be a relief from the noise and chaos of the main street if you were just out for a stroll. But if your destination is the welfare office, turning this corner is more often than not an exercise in anxiety. Would there be a line? How far down the block would it stretch? Would we get to see someone today or would it be a wasted trip? I regularly accompanied people to this office over the course of 18 months of field research. We felt lucky when we came around the corner and there was no line. We felt even luckier when we went inside and there were only a few dozen people standing in between the winding ropes. On a good day, we would be up at the intake window in twenty minutes. On a bad day, it could take an hour or more just to tell someone why we were there – to apply for food stamps, to drop off additional documentation, to attend a meeting to resolve a dispute or any number of other reasons. The intake worker would hand us two tickets, eight and a half by eleven sheets of colored paper with a number on them, and tell us which waiting room to go to. Food stamp only cases were on one floor and cases involving public assistance – a full case – were on another. This physical separation of the two functions reflects a larger bureaucratic and political distancing between cash assistance, which is commonly referred to as ‘welfare’, and the food stamp program in New York City.  

The diversionary tactics that led to a precipitous drop in both TANF and food stamp rolls following the 1996 welfare reforms (see Davis et al 2001), are still a significant factor for those applying for cash assistance (TANF or Safety Net Assistance), but are no longer as much of a concern for food stamp only applicants. This is partly due to the bureaucratic reorganization of welfare offices and the creation of a new title, Job Opportunity Specialists, to handle cash assistance cases. Food stamps are still administered by clerical employees.
This chapter focuses on the shifting contours of the safety net, particularly in regard to the growing food stamp program, which, I contend, is one of the most paradigmatic programs of the contemporary urban welfare regime. Scholars are increasingly focused on the distributional effects of the welfare state after welfare reform, showing that since 1996, less aid goes to the very poor – those making 50% of the poverty level ($9,545 annually for a family of three) or less. Even more troubling, the number of Americans living in extreme poverty, that is, on less than two dollars a day, has increased substantially since 1996 (Schafer and Edin, Edelman 2012). Poverty at the very bottom of the economic spectrum has intensified considerably, even though overall welfare spending has increased (Ben Shalom et al 2011). Much of this increased welfare spending benefits the near poor or those whose incomes put them just above or below the poverty line (Ben-Shalom et al 2011, Schafer and Edin 2012).

A poster that hangs in the local welfare office in North Brooklyn makes this shift in spending priorities and poverty governance exceedingly clear. It reminds applicants, who often spend hours and hours in these waiting rooms, that “there are few choices on welfare and even fewer dollars” and that “A job is your path out of poverty”. What’s striking about the poster is not that it advocates work as the antidote to poverty, but how strongly it advocates work supports – welfare programs and entitlements that can be used to supplement low wages.

who, as we saw in chapter one, are told by their supervisors, “When in doubt, give it out.” This is a significant departure from the way food stamps were administered in NYC in the late 1990’s when caseworkers were responsible for administering both programs. Furthermore, in the waiting room for food stamp only cases, the receptionists actively encouraged clients to submit their applications online or through the mail, something that is not possible for cash assistance cases.
There are few choices on welfare and even fewer dollars

A Job Is Your Path Out of Poverty

Corinne is a single mother with two children. While she was on cash assistance her family was in poverty. She was hired at an entry level salary of $9.00 per hour, earning $15,010 after taxes, and by applying for benefits for which her family is eligible, Corinne raises her family’s income to $40,858.*

A household with 2 children where the parent makes $9 per hour for 35 hrs per week, can increase the value of a year’s salary.

welfare vs. work

Figure 1. A Poster that hangs in New York City Welfare offices

The poster presents Corinne, a single mother with two children and contrasts her income receiving welfare with her income working full time. It states that, “while she was on cash
assistance, her family was in poverty. She was hired at an entry level salary for 9 dollars an hour, earning 15,010 after taxes and applying for benefits for which her family is eligible, Corinne raises her family income to 40,858.” Notably, Corinne’s base salary of nine dollars an hour working full time leaves her earnings several thousand dollars below the poverty line of 19,090 for a family of three. In order for her to turn her nine-dollar an hour job into a 40,858 dollars a year, Corrine would have to receive tax credits, food stamps, a child care subsidy, and child support payments. A substantial chunk of this income ($12,712) would come in the form of in-kind aid. She and her children would also likely still qualify for medical assistance through Medicaid. This combination of low pay and extensive, largely in-kind work supports is emblematic of the new urban welfarism, which is paternalistic and geared primarily towards the working poor (Ben-Shalom, et al. 2011).

What is particularly striking is that this poster explicitly contrasts “welfare vs. work”, even though over half of the income Corinne earns in the “work” scenario is in the form of state administered welfare benefits. What this poster makes plain is that the welfare state no longer targets the neediest Americans, who are offered “few choices and even fewer dollars”. Today, means-tested welfare benefits increasingly benefit the working poor and spending on the programs that benefit this group have expanded in part because this is one of the fastest growing segments of the population. Today one in four US workers have a low-wage job, defined as one paying 10 dollars an hour or less (NELP 2012). As we will see, welfare benefits like SNAP are the carrots used to encourage participation in the low-wage labor market.

The percentage of the labor force working in low wage jobs is growing and it is projected to keep growing (NELP 2012). For these Americans, public benefits are becoming increasingly important for basic functions like putting food on the table. As wages have stagnated and even
fallen for the lowest income Americans (Mishel and Shierholz 2011), welfare state programs are replacing what Katz has termed the private welfare state (Katz 2000). The private welfare state is comprised of benefits associated with a particular employer, which have always been a privilege, not a right. The private welfare state has given some American families unprecedented security through decent wages and robust health and retirement benefits. But because these benefits are not universal, they have also intensified inequalities—particularly along lines of race and gender (May 1985). Esping-Anderson has characterized the U.S. system as one in which welfare programs “are primarily targeted at the really needy, thus cultivating a dualism between the poor (who depend on the welfare state) and the middle classes (who mainly insure themselves in the market)” (Esping-Andersen 1990, 58). However, this private welfare state has eroded rapidly for working class families over the past several decades (Hacker 2006). As employers cast off their obligations to employees, where working Americans should get their benefits has become a matter of debate.

Another poster in the welfare office optimistically suggests that “Getting started in an entry-level job can be tough, but we make sure that you have the key supports that will allow you to improve upon your wages and gain greater independence.” However, many of the people I assisted with food stamp applications did not see clear paths to greater independence, often despite having training, education, and extensive job experience. But jobs where they could support their families or themselves without help from the state—where they would no longer need ‘work supports’—were hard to come by. In fact, much of the job growth in the aftermath of the Great Recession have been in low wage industries, continuing a dominant tendency in the American economy for the past several decades toward downward mobility for working and middle income people (Newman 1999, Pappas 1989, Nash 1989) and increased wealth for the
richest Americans (News 2013). This trend is particularly stark in New York City, the most unequal city in the nation (Roberts 2012).\(^7\)

The policy approach since 1996 has been to modify and expand some means tested welfare benefits to ‘make work pay’. However, this policy approach has not meant designing policies that would force private employers to ‘make work pay’, but has come almost exclusively in the form of increased supplemental welfare benefits and tax credits for working people. Food stamps have become increasingly important, not only for the very poor, families struggling to make ends meet at jobs paying the minimum wage or less, but for people attempting to maintain a toe-hold on the middle class. As college educations (and even advanced degrees) lose their value in an increasingly competitive job market, more and more families and individuals turn to welfare programs to retain some level of security. ‘Work supports’ become the thin line that keeps them from slipping into situations of real hardship. For many of the people I met during the course of my research, combining wages and work supports significantly eased their experience of growing economic insecurity.

**Combining Work and Welfare**

Nydia, a slight Puerto Rican woman with a bright smile and an infectious laugh, is a 35 year old mother of two who grew up in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. She works at a local city-funded day care. The pastor at the North Brooklyn food pantry introduced us because Nydia wanted to get more of the families at her school to apply for food stamps. We worked together on

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\(^7\) According to census figures released in September of 2012, the poverty rate increased a full percentage point between 2010 and 2012, putting NYC’s poverty rate at nearly 21%. Median household income in the city fell $821, compared to a $642 decline nationally, and median earnings for workers fell from 33,287 to 32,210. Median income for the lowest fifth was $8,844, down $463 from 2010. For the highest, it was $223,285, up $1,919. Nearly 1.7 million New Yorkers were classified as poor and approximately 750,000 were subsisting on half the poverty level.
outreach and she would refer people to me if they were having problems with their food stamp cases. Nydia was an outspoken advocate for the food stamp program. She received food stamps herself and would often use her own experience to try to convince others to apply.

In many ways, Nydia’s experience with food stamps represents the shift from reliance on private, employer provided benefits to an increased reliance on means tested welfare benefits for working class New Yorkers. Nydia still lives in the railroad apartment where she was born and which she inherited from her father. She walks just a few blocks to work every morning, much like her father, who had worked as a mechanic in a nearby factory on the waterfront for forty years. She is represented by a union at work, just like her dad was. However, what it meant to be working class in the Greenpoint of Nydia’s youth and what it means today are dramatically different, largely because the city itself has changed. The old waterfront, packed with large, industrial employers, has been replaced by the new waterfront, the site of mega-developments – mostly luxury housing built for a wealthy elite. Nydia’s father made good money and, with the help of a local community organization, was able to buy an apartment. His daughter would never be able to buy a similar apartment in Greenpoint today, where three bedrooms like hers routinely sell for half a million dollars. Nydia jokes that they will have to ‘take her by force’ before she leaves that apartment, and in this respect she is similar to many of the families I met in North Brooklyn for whom affordable housing, whether it is public, rent controlled or family owned, was a key resource in maintaining a decent standard of living.

Nydia’s father also had good health benefits and a pension that ensured he was comfortable in his old age. This pension provided his daughter some financial help when she stayed home to take care of him before he died. His security and his family’s were tied to steady employment with a single employer. Those kind of employment opportunities and employment
related benefits do not exist for Nydia in Greenpoint today. Nydia works in a pre-school as a family assistant. The school where she works is slated to close, caught between city budget cuts and rising rents in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. Nydia had received health insurance through this job, but it wasn’t very good and it was expensive to cover her children under this plan. She and her children’s’ father are not married, though they live together. He does general contractor work when he can get it and takes care of their young son. Since he does not have a regular income, he and their two children qualify for public health benefits through the Medicaid program. Though she works full time, Nydia’s salary is low enough for her family to qualify for food stamps, the earned income tax credit and child care subsidies.

Nydia falls into the narrow segment of working people for whom the safety net actually works – those who can combine work with public programs to maintain a decent standard of living – not much different, in fact, from the standard of living she enjoyed as a child growing up in Greenpoint. Food stamps are fast becoming a key benefit in helping working families make ends meet in the face of stagnating wages, something that has been actively encouraged by the Bloomberg administration. In my interactions with HRA officials and welfare administrators, I repeatedly heard them speak positively of food stamps. As one high level official told me, “We’re very happy to support people with food stamps who work. We want them to get these work supports.”

These efforts are beginning to bear fruit, with steady increases in the number of New Yorkers participating in the program, which increased from 64% of all eligible New Yorkers in 2008 to 76% in 2010, particularly among the working poor, whose participation rates increase from 49% in 2008 to 65% in 2010 (Cunyngham 2012). Because families and individuals in New York State can earn up to 130% of the poverty level ($24,817 for a family of three) and still
qualify for food stamps, the program benefits a wide range of workers and families, from the very poorest citizens to those, like Nydia, who are sole breadwinners falling just shy of earning a living wage for their families. A range of policy innovations since 2000 have made the process of applying much easier, including broad based categorical eligibility, which eliminated the resource test in most states, and increased income thresholds, which are as high as 200% of the poverty level in some states ($38,180 for a family of three). However, the rebranding of food stamps as a ‘work support’ program is in no way complete or uncontested.

Welfare policy and administration often reflect popular perceptions of who relies on these programs, and means tested programs have been particularly impacted by stereotypical and derogatory ideas of race and gender (Abromovitz 1996; Hancock 2004; Neubuck and Cazenave 2001; Quadagno 1996; Soss, et al. 2011). The sharp drop in the food stamp rolls after the 1996 welfare reforms were enacted reflected the punitive, racist discourse of welfare dependency that was translated into practices and policy that actively pushed families off of the rolls. However, since the early 2000’s, there has been a concerted effort, both nationally and at the city level, to distance the food stamp program, both rhetorically and administratively, from ‘welfare’, primarily by re-branding the program as a work support.

This process takes place at many levels, including in top down messaging from policy makers and administrators, policy modifications, training of front line employees and outreach to various communities. Caught between the conflicting goals of restricting welfare for the unemployed and expanding food stamp use among the ‘working poor’, front line employees often see their job as policing the boundaries between those who genuinely deserve help and those who are trying to defraud the system. Nydia’s description of her interaction in the food stamp office when she went to apply for food stamps after the birth of her second child captures
some of the broader shifts in the way the food stamp program is both being administered and understood.

Nydia described the caseworker with whom she met with as “mean” and said, “she was talking down” to her. After discovering Nydia’s husband and children were already in the system because they receive health insurance benefits from the state, she says the worker challenged her, asking, “well, why aren’t you married?” Nydia responded, “That’s none of your business. He’s the father of my children.” To which the case worker responded, “you know what, a lot of these cases are fraud.” This accusation upset Nydia and she told me that she started crying right there in the food stamp office. “And then when I started crying, I felt humiliated. That’s how I felt. And I was like, oh no. Heck no.” She pulled herself together and told the caseworker, “I don’t want to be here. I need to be here because I need to feed my kids. And you know what? I work. I pay taxes. I think I’m entitled to this. Whether it’s for this little bit of time or for an extended period of time, I need this.” After challenging the caseworker’s suspicions and asserting her deservingness, Nydia said the caseworker “brought it down and the rest of the process was smooth.”

Unlike the other means-tested redistribution programs, like the Earned Income Tax credit, food stamps are still administered through local welfare offices, where front line employees, called Eligibility Specialists or ES’s, often see their main job as fraud prevention. ES’s are carefully monitored. A supervisor checks every case the workers put into the system before it is approved and if there are any mistakes, the case comes back to the worker to be fixed. One of the primary concerns in this quality control process is that there are no overpayments to clients because overpayments and errors can result in the state being fined by the USDA.

Lester Towns, an African American ES who works at the North Brooklyn office, worried
about clients “trying to get over or get slick”, because “if (my supervisors) go in the system and see that I did something wrong, of course I get reprimanded, not (the client).” He felt that applicants “don’t want to put income down. They don’t want to put their bank accounts down. They don’t want to fill out anything that they feel that’s gonna make them not receive food stamps.” Tish Taylor, an African American woman who has worked in the welfare office for over twenty years agreed, saying “But by we’re working so long, we know how to pull it out, as far as just, like I said, stuff that gets them in trouble. We know certain things, so we question it.”

The application process is cumbersome and Nydia’s interaction – being accused of fraud or abuse - is common. However, it is easier for some applicants to establish their claims than for others. Applicants like Nydia, who can easily establish themselves as workers who pay taxes and just need a little bit of help, often find that the “process was smooth”, while others struggle to open a case.

There are two main issues that eligibility specialists probe clients about, household composition and reporting income, both of which impact whether a household qualifies for benefits and how much they will receive. Clear documentation of income, especially with paystubs, is one of the easiest ways for workers to ‘make order’ out of a client’s case. Clients who have no work, unstable work, work off the books, or have some other form of irregular income are subject to far more scrutiny. These clients have to document their income with letters, sometimes written by an employer, sometimes written by the clients themselves. Ms. Taylor described her interactions with these clients, telling me, “we say bring the pay stubs, and when the client says they don’t get pay stubs, we get a letter, which we know is a fraudulent thing.” When I asked another ES, Lisa Hicks, if she spent a lot of time trying to make sense of people’s cases she replied, “not make sense. Make order. Because in order to make sense we’d
have to go in their house and say, this doesn’t look right. But make order. Get it to be where we need it to be to help them.” Having a job and proving one’s income is an integral part of this process in the wake of welfare reforms that require all food stamp recipients to work unless they are elderly, disabled or caring for a young child.

Because food stamps benefit a broad cross-section of low income Americans the program itself is subject to various interpretations as an anti-poverty program, a hunger prevention program, a work support, a nutrition program and a welfare program. Many, including recipients and policy makers, go to great lengths to differentiate food stamps from ‘welfare’ or cash aid. Nydia often used her own experience when trying to talk to other parents about the food stamp program.

I’m a big advocate for food stamps. It has helped me tremendously. I try to encourage our parents to enroll. A lot of them are afraid … and I keep telling them that its not welfare. It’s not the same thing. Its food assistance that they are entitled to, especially for their children. With the stigma with food stamps, they’re embarrassed, and I’m like, you have no reason. I’m employed. I don’t make excellent money, but I make pretty decent money and I don’t have an issue at all.

It’s not just her personal experience with the program that informs this advocacy. USDA officials have made the working poor an explicit target of their outreach programs, and NYC officials have worked in partnership with non-profits to expand enrollment through trainings and targeted outreach. Nydia attended one of these trainings and reported that, “they had told us that right now the government had a surplus of food stamps and they’re looking for people to sign up because they know they’ll lose it. So I’m like, come on, go, go go.” Echoing the official line of welfare administrators and policy makers, Nydia draws on ideas of work and family to construct a story of deservingness and entitlement. Nydia, like many working New Yorkers, does not have the kind of employment opportunities that were available to her father. In the absence of good
wages, decent health insurance and a pension, Nydia uses the programs that exist to provide her family with a decent standard of living by supplementing her wages with work supports.

Nydia is one of the people for whom food stamps operate as both a work support and a nutrition program. Like many of the people I met who were able to combine food stamp benefits with regular wages, Nydia felt food stamps helped her and her family eat better.

I noticed that we changed our eating habits a lot once we got food stamps. Like, I started buying more vegetables. It doesn’t cross my mind twice now to buy vegetables like it would have before. And fruits also are a big part of our everyday and not like canned fruit, which is not as expensive, but not as healthy either. Before, I’d be like its like five dollars, where now I’m like, go get a bag of peaches and a bag of frozen mango without any qualms. I was more cautious when I was spending my cash.

Having food stamp benefits meant not having to choose between feeding her children in ways she felt were healthy or appropriate and having enough money left over to pay for basic necessities. Researchers have consistently shown that when low income families have more cash, they buy more nutritious food (Darmon and Drewnoski 2008; McGranahan and Schanzenbach 2013). The experience of downward mobility and stagnating wages are mitigated for families like Nydia’s through public benefits that allow them to maintain a degree of freedom over how they can shop, cook and eat.

**Food, Functionality and Flexible Labor**

North Brooklyn’s economy has been impacted by global economic restructuring, both through the loss of well paid manufacturing jobs (Susser 1982) and through the proliferation of service sector jobs that cater to wealthy elites. Many of the young artists, writers, and musicians who were the core of the early wave of gentrification that began transforming the neighborhood in the 1990’s found work in these industries. Today, re-zoning and active redevelopment of the area have resulted in skyrocketing rents (Marwell 2007; Stabrowski 2011; Susser 2012). Long-term Latino, Polish and White residents, as well as the artists who began to move into the
neighborhood in the 1990’s, have been displaced in huge numbers, as landlords buy out long
term tenants, harass them until they move out, and illegally raise rents, making way for higher
income apartment seeker willing to pay double or triple what previous tenants could afford.\(^8\)

Jeff, a 40-year-old white man, moved to Williamsburg in the late 1990’s as a young film-
school graduate, and quickly became enmeshed in a thriving arts scene. It was a cheap place to
live, a short walk over the bridge to the already gentrified Lower East Side and an easy train ride
to Manhattan. He found work at event companies, helping to set up stages, lights and sound for
parties and charitable events attended by wealthy New Yorkers. Like many of today’s
employers, the companies Jeff worked for rarely offered long-term employment.

Increased insecurity among the urban working classes is, in large part, due to the
increasingly unstable, temporary and seasonal nature of the jobs that are available. These jobs
have replaced the heavy manufacturing that dominated the area in the post-war period and range
from highly paid legal services to poorly paid domestic work (Gordon and Sassen 1992). Many
of the newcomers who began moving into the neighborhood in the late 1990’s were artists of
various kinds supporting themselves by taking on freelance work precisely because it gave them
time to pursue their less commercial interests. Often under-employed, many of the freelance
workers and contract employees I spoke to felt they had to take any job that came up. Jeff
described the boom and bust nature of his work.

In the late ‘90s there was so much work it was silly. Like I could turn down anything,
because all these jobs were for single days or maybe two days. And each thing, they
asked me like, “Are you available Thursday and Friday?” No. Because I knew there was
work Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. And it was just a non-issue,
and you could kind of opt out of anything because there was so much. And then
suddenly there was nothing. Like no one had money.

\(^8\) Interview with Rolando Guzman from St. Nicks Alliance, a North Brooklyn organization
that does housing advocacy work.
Jeff uses food stamps to weather these rough periods when the work he does becomes scarce. Food stamps are one of the few programs available to freelance workers who typically don’t qualify for unemployment insurance when they lose work, because they do not work for a regular employer who makes contributions to unemployment insurance on their behalf. In fact, the number of workers who are eligible for unemployment benefits has been declining steadily for several decades because of changes in the labor force.

Karen, a white woman in her mid-thirties is an artist who has lived in Williamsburg for the past fifteen years. She cobbles together a living from sales of her artwork and freelance jobs as a cameraperson. Talking over coffee one day, she expressed dismay at her inability to support herself. “I worry about paying my bills. About the future. About how long it can last. I mean any kind of inconsistency is really stressful. I feel like I want stability in my life, its just its hard to find these days.” The work she does was particularly impacted by the recession. “It seems like most of the freelance work has dried up.” As the economy went south, so, too, did sales of her work. Karen ultimately applied for food stamps and moved into the back office of a friend’s small store to save on rent. Living in a tiny six foot by eight-foot space, she wondered how much longer she would be able to stay in New York. Like many college educated workers impacted by the recession, Karen grappled with a mismatch between her expectations growing up in a middle class household and her experience of economic insecurity. “It’s intense being month to month and then being in your thirties and being like, ‘really?’ I work this hard. Because we always felt like, if you work hard it pays off and it always did. But that’s just not happening anymore.”

Both Karen and Jeff felt that one of the most important aspects of having food stamps was that it reduced their anxiety and gave them the energy to actually look for work. As Karen
put it, “It’s a bummer to have to juggle all of it. I mean, when you’re trying to look for more ways to find work and make money but also be really hungry and not feeding yourself in the most healthy manner, you know, it definitely takes its toll on your energy and your outlook.”

For Jeff, being able to eat a reasonably healthy diet was seen as a major factor in being able to continue looking for work.

I mean I’m able to buy pretty much whatever I want. But not, nothing really especially expensive. So I imagine if I wasn’t eating at all, I’d be a basket case. I would be like a wreck. But at least I’m like, kind of have a baseline level of functionality. I don’t - I rarely feel hungry.

For freelance workers like Karen and Jeff in an insecure labor market where work is scarce and unstable, food stamps become a source of regularity and consistency that make it easier to cope with the insecurities of the labor market, giving people ‘a baseline level of functionality’ to continue looking for work. Though their food stamp benefits did not cover all of their food expenses, they reported being able to eat a much healthier diet than what they could afford without food stamps.

Jeff described the program as “the smartest public policy that I’m aware of.” He had gone through periods without much work when he did not apply for food stamps. He described the health effects of eating “$1 meals for a year” during one of these periods in the early 2000’s.

What that mostly led to was me being sick all the time and catching every possible cold and flu. And I was just like sick like once a month or something. I just couldn’t not catch anything. To the point that I finally went to a hospital and was like, “Can you just like check my blood work or something? What the hell’s going on?” But then I ended up actually speaking to a nutritionist and being like, “Oh, duh. Well, yeah. Eggrolls and pizza for a year or whatever isn’t - you’re not eating.

For Jeff, food stamps in addition to his wages were enough for him to eat in a way that he felt was reasonably healthy. His experience prior to having benefits and eating based on cost,
as opposed to health, had serious detrimental health consequences. Karen had a similar experience.

On food stamps I feel like I can eat well. I mean, I definitely run out, but I felt like it was almost enough to feed myself. I would get more produce. And more organic stuff and vegetables. I feel like sometimes I default to, like, peanut butter jelly style. I eat a lot more bread when I don’t have money.

Flexible workers, like Karen and Jeff, routinely use food stamps to supplement low and irregular wages. However significant differences exist between those who have regular employment with a single employer, like Nydia, and those who do not. There is considerably more scrutiny of freelance workers who cannot easily document their income or employment status. The differences between Nydia and Jeff’s interactions with the welfare offices speak to some of the challenges confronting these flexible workers in the face of a safety net build around work. Jeff described his interactions when he went to apply.

They want to see pay stubs and all that. And I show them what little I could show them because I don’t get paid that way. There’s like checks but they’re whenever (my employers) get paid themselves because that’s always the first thing I’m waiting on. And then when they can afford to pay me, which sometimes drags on for an incredibly long time. So it comes when it comes. (The ES) was like, “Well, how much money do you make a month?” And I told him, it depends.

After a tense interview in which Jeff felt the ES was accusing him of trying to scam the system, Jeff was denied food stamps. His financial situation was still dire. Though he paid below market rent, he worried about the landlord losing patience with him being behind or paying only part of the rent some months. Like so many in North Brooklyn, maintaining his housing was his first priority, even if his diet suffered. As he made clear, “I do have to pay rent and I do have to keep my electricity from being shut off. And I kind of have stripped away absolutely everything else.” He called the food stamp office to complain about the ES who had initially processed his case and they told him to apply again, so he did. After three months, he
was finally approved and began receiving Food Stamp benefits. However, because his income is so irregular, his case was flagged and he was sent a letter that he was not meeting the work requirements for the food stamp program. The letter required him to report to a work assessment appointment in order to maintain his eligibility. Jeff found the process incredibly frustrating.

I have a job. I don’t need to go to this. I had to sit there all day to show them paperwork that I have a job. They really give you a hard time. You know, it’s demoralizing to not be able to support yourself and they don’t make that process any more…you know, they add to the stress of that.

As work opportunities have become more erratic and the cost of living in North Brooklyn has increased, work supports for freelance workers like Karen and Jeff have become important supplements. However, changes to the program since 1996 that make receiving food stamps contingent on work have increased the both the scrutiny and the bureaucratic hurdles for people with irregular employment. Jeff’s experience, being wrongly denied and then required to report to an additional work assessment appointment made the application process significantly longer and more complicated. As food stamps, and welfare policy more generally, are reframed around the idea of work support, irregular workers are subjected to more intense scrutiny to determine whether or not they are ‘deserving’.

**Discipline and Downward Mobility**

Though food stamps and other work supports provide some comfort and consistency for a broad range of working New Yorkers, the new urban welfare regime does little to ameliorate the pervasive insecurity caused by unemployment. Frances Fox Piven argues that welfare represented a floor under wages and that welfare reform was an attack on the working class because it removed that floor, demonized welfare, made it a culturally unacceptable option, kept the rolls low and reduced income support for all low wage workers, making it harder for them to resist or refuse labor conditions (Piven 2001). Expansions of work supports like food stamps do
ease some of the hardships associated with wage stagnation and irregular work for some segments of the urban working class. But, as income inequality continues to grow in the US, with stagnating or falling wages for the majority of Americans and exponentially larger fortunes for those at the top, the new urban welfare regime has come to reflect a more general neoliberal emphasis on public/private partnerships. The welfare state’s role is no longer to provide a safety net for those who have been left out of the market, but to supplement the earnings of those who engage in work. The result is a heightened risk around unemployment, which can result in both the loss of wages and exclusion from ‘work supports’. The new urban welfare regime helps to ‘make work pay’ for some, but it also increases the risks around worklessness.

The line between work and worklessness can be incredibly stark. Jessica, a middle-aged white woman in her late forties had lived in Greenpoint for over twenty-five years. She raised her daughter in the neighborhood as a single mom, working at various jobs and eventually working her way up to a job making $70,000 a year in marketing. As the recession hit, her company let her go and she went on unemployment. Like so many, she applied feverishly for jobs in her field and, when nothing came of the hundreds of resumes she sent out, she began to lower her expectations. Jessica resigned herself, like so many others, to any job at all. “I kinda feel like at least being in New York, if I have to clean toilets or turn down beds at the Marriott and be a maid or something - or if I worked in daycare or something, I could do that.” As she approached the end of her ninety-nine weeks of unemployment, she grew increasingly anxious, even moving to Texas for a summer, hoping the employment prospects there would be better than in New York. Jessica actively looked for any work, under any conditions. When applications at coffee shops didn’t garner a call back, she told me, “I need a break. Please, I swear to God. I’ll come in at 7:30 in the morning. I’ll work until 7:00 at night.”
After returning from Texas jobless and at the end of her 99 weeks of unemployment with only one hundred dollars in her savings account, she wasn’t sure how she was going to cover her $1200 dollar a month rent and was worried that she would lose the apartment where she had lived with her daughter for the past 12 years. Her pastor recommended that she come see me to help her with applying for food stamps. She came to the food pantry, introduced herself and nervously asked if we could speak privately. She was a smartly dressed middle aged woman whose neat haircut and stylish gold bracelets in no way signaled that this was a woman in dire economic straits. She was visibly agitated and came close to tears several times as we talked. I went over the application, answering all of her concerns, and we submitted it online.

I ran into Jessica on the street a few weeks after she had received her benefits. We chatted for a while and then she told me that she had received a letter requiring her to do a work assignment. Because she was no longer receiving unemployment insurance and had no income, was not disabled and did not have a young child, she was considered an Able Bodied Adult Without Dependents (ABAWD), meaning she would be required to perform a work assignment in order to receive food stamp benefits.

The ABAWD restrictions were passed as part of the welfare reform bill in 1996. They limit food stamp benefits for single, unemployed adults to three months in any thirty-six month period. This legislation also included a waiver, so that states or counties with high unemployment rates would not have to enforce these restrictions. At the onset of the recession in 2008, nearly all the states in the U.S. accepted these waivers, allowing unemployed adults to receive food stamps indefinitely. Since 2008, this group has been the fastest growing demographic in the SNAP caseload, rising 233 percent from 1.7 million adults in 2009 to 3.9 million adults in 2010 (Zedlewski, et al. 2012). The Bloomberg Administration, however,
refused to accept this waiver, even at the height of the recession when unemployment was above ten percent in the city.

Unemployed, working-aged adults in New York City are required to perform workfare assignments in exchange for their SNAP benefits. These assignments are typically for city agencies, primarily working in the parks, the subways, for the sanitation department or in city offices as a clerical worker. Jessica was angry about this and told me that there was no way she was going to ‘sweep the streets or clean up the parks’. Welfare recipients assigned to workfare assignments in these highly visible public spaces are made to wear bright orange or green vests, visibly marking them as welfare recipients. Workfare programs in New York City demonize the unemployed poor, subjecting them to labor in highly public spaces. In doing so, workfare fulfills what Foucault calls the semiotic function of punishment – connecting the unemployed poor and the public spectacle of work experience programs in the minds of the public at large and serving as a warning of what befalls those who ask for and take public assistance (Foucault 1977).

Ultimately, she chose to forego food stamps in the face of work requirements. This was a common response to being asked to work for food benefits. Researchers have found that “in counties with time limits, able-bodied adults without dependents left the program at a faster rate right around the three- to four-month mark when time limits took effect” (Zedlewski, et al. 2012). She had moved out of her apartment and was staying with a friend in the neighborhood. Unable to even contribute food to the household, she didn’t know how long she would be able to stay there.

For Jessica, downward mobility requiring her to turn to the welfare office for help had both economic and moral implications. She saw relying on public benefits as a failure, one that she struggled to explain. Jennifer, like many of my informants, saw applying for food stamps as
“humiliating”. “I think it’s tied to that feeling of not being able to nurture yourself. And you start to wonder – or I did. What is wrong with me? What have I done wrong all along the way that has gotten me to this point? I thought how did it get to this? And you have to recognize that you’re one of many people who are going through this. And that you’re a worthwhile human being regardless of the mistakes that you’ve made.” Being asked to work for her food stamp benefits added to this sense of failure. Eventually she moved out of state to live with her brother and continue looking for work without any aid – no unemployment, no food stamps and no welfare benefits.

The combined effects of welfare reform and the economic downturn are far reaching and are being felt by a large swath of the urban working classes. Hector Vargas, a Job Opportunity Specialist (JOS) who works at the North Brooklyn welfare office enrolling applicants in the two cash assistance programs available to New Yorkers in need, TANF and Safety Net, reported that,

Right now there’s college people coming to apply. People with masters. People who used to make 70 – 80 thousand dollars a year. It’s hard for these people because they are in front of you and they want help. They are more educated than you. They used to make a lot more money than you and now they are asking for help. It’s degrading.

Losing a job can be an incredibly unsettling force, particularly in the contemporary US, where the welfare state has been so strongly recalibrated around work and few other options for making ends meet remain. Jessica’s intimate experience of engaging with these various programs is revealing. Ultimately, her rejection of aid from the food stamp program was animated by her fear of falling into what she called ‘that totally forgotten group’. Though she had spent almost all of her savings, she refused to get food from the local food pantry.

I have found that I’m having a hard time eating. It’s almost like I’ve reached this place where I know I have no resources. And so I just refuse to be hungry. I’m embarrassed. I don’t go and pick up a bag of food. And I know it’s gonna sound terrible. But when I see myself, and when I see the guys who are alcoholics and homeless. I know this is gonna sound really bad. I feel if I sit with them. I’m going to become them. I’m almost
afraid that whatever it is that they’ve experienced is contagious. And that I have to keep somewhat removed. Because if I slip into an identity that is so socially frowned upon. That I’ll never get out of it. It’s really scary. So I kind of hold it. It’s like you keep it at bay just enough so that you can get the help that you need.

Jessica made decisions about the kind of help she would pursue based both on her economic situation and on her perceptions of what constitutes an identity that is ‘so socially frowned upon’. For her, performing an unpaid work assignment in exchange for food stamps or getting a bag of food from a food pantry were social lines that she would not cross. Personal networks play an incredibly important role in how people navigate these forms of aid. Those with middle class networks, like Jessica, can turn to them when faced with a hostile, punitive welfare system, even if that means taking drastic measures like leaving one’s home and moving out of state.

Race is an important factor in determining who can rely on these private forms of help and who cannot. Whites, like Jessica are far more likely to have personal wealth or to have people in their families and networks with personal wealth who are able to support them than African Americans or Latinos (Lui, et al. 2006). The housing crisis and the economic recession have substantially intensified these racial inequalities, with the racial wealth gap between whites and blacks rising from 11-1 in 2004 to 20-1 in 2009 (Kochhar, et al. 2011).

The demonization of welfare that characterized the policy debates around reform in the 1990’s and was heavily racialized and continues to inform popular ideas about welfare and poverty. As a white woman, Jessica’s belief that workfare and charitable food aid mark an identity ‘that is so socially frowned upon’ – even contagious – is significant. Confronted with program requirements that would force her to participate in a public workfare assignment ‘sweeping the streets or cleaning up the parks’ in exchange for food stamp benefits unsettled her sense of self and her ideas about the future in ways that played on a distinct racial imaginary.
Unlike Nydia, Jessica was not able to differentiate food stamps from welfare, because she was not able to claim an identity as a worker. Jessica’s experience of applying for food stamps was much closer to the experience of applying for cash assistance, and, like many people who are deterred by harsh workfare requirements, Jessica turned away from the program. The kinds of help that are available to the unemployed are socially marked through public rhetoric and policy, creating various categories and social distinctions. Race has played an outsized role in creating these distinctions by invoking racist stereotypes to justify cuts to cash assistance and the implementation of publicly punitive workfare programs (Hancock 2004; Neubuck and Cazenave 2001). People faced with unemployment grapple with these social distinctions, choosing some forms of help and shunning others. Choices that were available to Jessica, because of her personal and family networks, are not available to everyone.

The contemporary food stamp program is caught, in some ways, between the revanchist and punitive neoliberal discourse that gave rise to welfare reform in the 1990’s and the new economic realities of the urban working classes, in which state benefits are becoming increasingly important for helping households and workers meet their basic needs. The Bloomberg Administration uses the language of work supports to justify both on-going, punitive work first welfare alongside a new welfare regime that subsidizes poorly paid, insecure work for many urban dwellers. Work is the bright line that separates those who can receive support from those for whom support is conditional. Because Jessica was entering the welfare system without work or an identity as a worker she was not granted unconditional aid.

Lawrence Mead has argued that welfare reform paved the way for a renewed defense of the welfare state, by making work compulsory for aid recipients, requiring reciprocity in the form of fulfilling their citizenship duties of working and being productive. The emergent post-
welfare configuration, with its heavy emphasis on work supports supplementing work for low wage citizen workers would seem to confirm Mead’s prediction. NYC officials actively promote food stamps as a work support to which low income workers are entitled.

However, Mead’s vision of welfare state expansion does not and cannot account for what happens to individual citizens when states and markets fail them – that is, fail to provide jobs or any employment at all. Jessica, like so many of the people I met during the course of my research, desperately wanted to work. Like Mead, she saw her own joblessness as placing her outside the bounds of citizenship and she desperately wanted back in. In the face of a welfare system built around work, she felt there was no help available for her, without submitting to a work experience regime that she felt was degrading and even polluting. Instead she turned to private resources, moving out of state to stay with a relative. Work experience programs act as a diversionary tactic, keeping those with any other alternatives off the rolls, and ultimately privatizing the costs of unemployment, which are being born increasingly by individual families and not the state.  

As Jane Collins and Victoria Mayer have argued, managing the transition to a low wage economy has meant creating a ‘relational fix’ to the problem of capital accumulation. Much has been written about the spatial fix of what is often called deindustrialization in the US, or the global race to the bottom in which large multi-national corporations move manufacturing jobs overseas in order to profit from comparatively low wages elsewhere. However, this process has a corollary within the US, where service sector jobs have largely replaced the manufacturing base in places like North Brooklyn, and, increasingly, middle wage, reliable, white-collar jobs.

A related trend is the high number of young adults who continue to live in their parents’ homes because they cannot find employment. See for example:

Fry, Richard
The ‘relational fix’ manages working New Yorkers’ diminished expectations through a shift in welfare spending and practice that has favored the working poor and has intensified what Piven and Cloward have called the ‘dramaturgy of work’. Work requirements for welfare benefits are administered through the WEP program in New York City, which assigns welfare recipients to jobs in the parks, the subways and the streets, working with the sanitation department. These WEP workers are the public face of punitive welfare reforms enacted in the 1990’s and serve as a particularly visible public spectacle of poverty. Fear of being subject to these punitive welfare policies has pushed unemployed workers, like Jessica, to search for low-wage work, even though she has a history of highly paid, highly skilled employment. Though Jessica has resources, like middle class family members who could support her, work first welfare reforms still played an enormously important role the way she coped with unemployment and poverty, shaping her decisions about the kinds of help to pursue and the kind of work to accept.

Recalibrating the Welfare State

Welfare and work are often portrayed as polar opposites in contemporary US popular discourse, with work being revered as dignified and worthy and welfare being scorned as its opposite, breeding dependency and sloth. However, ethnographers have long demonstrated the interdependence of work and welfare in the lives and economic survival strategies of the poor, blurring stark distinctions between welfare ‘dependents’ and those who work (Lein and Edin 1997; Newman 1999; Scharff 1987; Stack 1974). Though the welfare reforms of 1996 promised to end welfare as we knew it, they did not, in fact, end welfare. These reforms did, however, significantly reshape the relationship between work and welfare.

The state always plays a role in shaping the labor force, and welfare regimes are one of the main instruments used to regulate the poor to accept low wage, often insecure labor
arrangements (Piven and Cloward 1993). Much has been made of the punitive nature of the contemporary welfare regime (Peck 2001; Soss, et al. 2011; Wacquant 2009), which, in the case of the TANF program, compels recipients to accept whatever work is offered to them or face sanctions and often requires them to perform workfare or participate in work experience programs (WEP) that many welfare rights advocates have equated to forced labor and modern day slavery. These are the ‘sticks’ that welfare bureaucrats use to push clients into the labor force.

However, far less attention has been paid to the ‘carrots’ that have proliferated to make low wage labor more attractive and amenable to the working poor. Scholars have certainly focused on the incentives offered to TANF recipients to ease the transition from welfare to work (Morgen, et al. 2010), but this narrow focus on TANF has obscured the broader phenomenon of an expanding category of ‘work supports’ aimed at low wage workers in general and the ways that these redistributive welfare programs, like food stamps and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) are actually being used to subsidize low wage workers in large numbers.

The welfare reforms of the mid-90’s were a watershed moment in an increasingly unstable welfare regime. Part of this movement was an effort to actively move women into the workforce by tying cash aid to work requirements and making receipt of this aid increasingly difficult, punitive, and meager. Another aspect of this welfare regime was to liberalize some forms of aid and assistance for those with low wages, particularly food stamps, through changes to the farm bill in 2002 and expansions of the Earned Income Tax Credit, both before and after the passage of PRWORA in 1996. Because of the extensive scholarly focus on the 1996 legislation and its effects, these other legislative changes have often been overlooked as part of a broader transformation of the U.S. welfare state.
Paying attention to the role programs like food stamps are playing in the lives of working class New Yorkers can tell us a great deal about how the state continues to shape contemporary urban class politics. Wacquant has argued that by gutting welfare benefits and social insurance programs, forcing welfare recipients to accept substandard and insecure jobs and increasing surveillance and penalties for crime, these policies ‘impose precarious wage labor as a new norm of citizenship’ for the lower and lower middle class (Wacquant 2009, xv). This new norm, however, has been institutionalized both through welfare retrenchment and through the liberalization of certain targeted welfare programs that subsidize low wage, insecure wage labor for some segments of the urban working class. Instead of focusing on the gutting of welfare benefits, this chapter looked at how welfare spending has shifted towards low wage employees in ways that smooth over this precarity and insecurity, intensifying the attachments both to poorly paid work and to welfare benefits.

What seems to have emerged in the wake of welfare reform is not so much a post-welfare era as a fine-grained shift in welfare provisioning. People with low paid, regular jobs are the one segment of the population for whom the welfare state functions fairly well. People like Nydia, who had steady work and received food stamps, routinely reported no food hardship, and often reported being able to afford healthier eating, as compared to people who were unemployed or marginally employed, who universally reported running out of food by the end of the month, relying on food pantries and soup kitchens, and having to choose foods based on cost, not health or taste.

This represents what I call the re-calibration of the welfare state, where the focus has shifted from anti-poverty programs targeted to the very poor to income support for the working poor. As Katz argues, “only those Americans with real jobs are real citizens, and this association
has tightened considerably in the last few decades” (Katz 2001). What has also tightened considerably is the link between work and access to public benefits. As Jane Collins points out, “those who even temporarily lose their footing within the labor market lose aspects of their citizenship.” (Collins 2009) Increasingly, one of the aspects of citizenship that is lost along with work is an entitlement to means-tested welfare benefits. As ‘work supports’ for the working poor expand, losing employment means losing these crucial forms of assistance. Though those without work can still qualify for benefits like food stamps, those benefits become conditional. We can see in the experiences of Nydia, Jeff, and Jessica that there are degrees of entitlement that revolve around work. For those who can prove that they have work, either easily, like Nydia, or with some difficulty, like Jeff, they can continue to receive benefits. For others, like Jessica, who could not find work, food stamps are no longer a support, but become so saddled with obligation that she turned to her networks for support instead. These stories represent the better off residents of North Brooklyn, those trying to maintain a hold on the middle class.

Concern has been growing over the hollowing out of the middle class, the loss of industrial employment and the growth of low wage jobs in the service sector. The number of people working full time who still qualify for and rely on food stamps and Medicaid has become a nationally prominent political concern, spawning Congressional research reports, news articles, and as a talking point for organizing campaigns mobilizing low wage workers (NELP 2013; Staff 2013). Public benefits, like food stamps, are one aspect of a new urban welfare regime that subsidizes insecurity for the working poor and lower middle class families, raising important questions about the role of the state which has increasingly stepped in to fill in the breach between what workers can earn in the market and the cost of a family’s basic needs.
Though food stamps have become a crucial supplement for low-wage workers, alleviating food insecurity for a large number of working class Americans, this program both incentivizes work and punishes those who cannot find work. Jessica and Jeff’s experiences begin to touch on the punitive aspects of the food stamp program in New York. But, either by claiming an identity as a worker or by turning to private sources of support, both Jessica and Jeff were able to avoid working for their food stamp benefits. Many of the people I met over the course of my research did not have these kinds of resources and had to engage the welfare system as non-workers. The next chapter traces their experiences as people without formal employment attempting to secure food aid.
Chapter 3: The Stick: Food Aid for the Unemployed

“They hurt you first before they give to you.” – Adwa

“It’s a trap. It’s meant to keep you down.” – Daniel

“They trick you. They’re funny. You can’t beat them. The welfare system is made, it’s designed, for you to fail”. – Jimmy

“Because when I sit in the center, a lot of us just wind up complaining. And it’s always about the same thing. And it’s like I tell them, “Who’s the common denominator? If we all don’t know each other, and we have the same, exact complaints about the way we’re being treated. Is it them? Or is it us? Think about it.” – Stephanie

In April of 2011, HRA’s Deputy Commissioner of Employment and Contracts, who oversees all the job search and Work Experience Programs in the city, came to a meeting of food stamp advocates to explain the Food stamp employment and training (FSET) program, which assigns able bodied adults without children to work experience programs as a condition of receiving food stamps.

She was a young, energetic white woman, dressed in a pantsuit, tall heels and a chunky necklace. She spoke cheerfully about food stamps as a program that “helps people transition from a life of dependence to a life of independence” and framed the program as “A big support for working people.” Non-working people, she explained, were a different story. Just like cash assistance recipients, they were required to report to a work assignment in order to receive their benefits. The number of hours a person is assigned is calculated by dividing the amount of SNAP benefit he or she receives by the minimum wage. If a participant fails to report to a work assignment they get Failure to Comply and sanctions are applied automatically. The first infraction in food stamp only cases results in a 2 month sanction, the second is 4 months and the third is 6 months in which a person cannot apply for or receive food stamp benefits. This system of work requirements and sanctions are the ‘sticks’ used to encourage labor market compliance
and participation.

The Deputy Commissioner reported that as of April 2011, only 1,750 out of 76,000 people in the ABAWD category had been called up and placed in a work assignment through this process. Many of the advocates in the room wondered why the city insisted on pursuing this policy when it affected so few people, unemployment was still so high and it seemed to be enforced almost at random. However, this tacit policy was about to change. HRA had expanded their WEP and Back to Work programs in order to accommodate large numbers of these so-called Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents and they began vigorously enforcing laws that had been on the books for years, but had not been actively applied. Over the next few months, I began to see a steady stream of pantry clients and neighborhood residents who came to see me with letters requiring them to report for a work assessment in order to continue receiving food stamps. They were often full of questions. What is this? Do I have to go? Why haven’t I ever gotten this before? What changed?

The ABAWD rules had been on the books for years and the Bloomberg administration had actively upheld them even though the USDA had repeatedly offered waivers, both before and during the economic downturn (Bosman 2009; Chan 2006).10 What had changed was HRA’s

10 The decision not to accept the waiver was played out publicly in the pages of the New York Times, when, in 2006, Bloomberg’s Commissioner told the press that the city, like many states and municipalities across the U.S., would not enforce the work rules. Apparently, Bloomberg first learned about this from the press and publicly reversed this decision. When he first declined the USDA waiver in 2006 he said it was because “I’m a firm believer that people should have to work for a living” (Chan 2006).

Bloomberg’s approach did not soften in the face of high levels of unemployment brought on by the economic recession that began in the fall of 2007. When the passage of the 2008 stimulus bill revived the issue of the waiver, Bloomberg insisted that ‘nothing had changed’ and that they city would continue to deny benefits to anyone out of work who did not participate in a Work Experience Program and Commissioner Doar said “the city was ready to expand the Work Experience Program rather than allow people to collect food stamps.
capacity to enforce the rules; something the administration had clearly prioritized, despite already understaffed and overburdened welfare offices. But the question remained, why? As we have seen, the Bloomberg administration has been an active proponent of the food stamp program – and a national innovator, allowing New Yorkers to apply online and in Community Based Organizations. The administration has spent a considerable amount of money on outreach, encouraging New Yorkers to apply for the benefit. Why, then, actively pursue these punitive policies that make it much more difficult for some New Yorkers to access food stamp benefits?

The purported reason is to move unemployed food stamp recipients into the workforce. Both food stamp and cash assistance recipients are required to work in one of three areas, maintenance, clerical and community service, and the vast majority are placed in city agencies as a condition of receiving benefits. According to the Deputy Commissioner, the FSET program is not intended to move unemployed food stamp and cash assistance recipients into jobs within these agencies because city hiring freezes mean that no one is being hired.\textsuperscript{11} It is not to give recipients new skills, as she readily admitted, “there are definitely people who are over-qualified for these assignments.” The reason, she explained, “is to get them motivated to find something better. It is to do soft skills. Get them working with others, get them thinking about if I’m

\textsuperscript{11} The Bloomberg administration’s tepid support of any real jobs program also speaks to the lack of will on the part of the city to move welfare recipients into real jobs. The Parks Opportunity Program and transitional jobs programs have been cut from the Mayor’s budget and activists have had to fight to have funding restored in both 2011 and 2012.
making $10 an hour at a job, then I won’t be so poor.”

These work assignments were aimed at the presumed personal failures of the unemployed and were not structured to provide them with jobs, but to influence their inner-most selves – their thought process and their level of motivation. Unemployment, in the context of New York City’s welfare administration, is seen as a personal failing, one that requires invasive social services in order to correct this motivational deficiency. Applying these “technologies of citizenship” (Cruikshank 1999) to the unemployed – even for food aid - exposes work as a crucial factor in our contemporary construction of citizenship. When people do not “act in their own self-interest or appear indifferent to their own development as full-fledged citizens, the limit of the liberal state at the threshold of individual rights, liberty and pursuits must be crossed” (Cruikshank 1999). In post-welfare New York, where citizenship is being restructured around both the right and the duty to participate in the market, poor people’s development as full-fledged citizens occurs, most fundamentally, in relationship to work for wages. Food aid, initially a broad-based political response to hunger and malnutrition – a response to bodily needs – has become tied up in emergent notions of citizenship and belonging. Hunger has been re-instituted as a motivational tool for the unemployed who do not fulfill the primary obligation of citizenship in the contemporary neoliberal moment – selling their labor on the market for wages.

This transition, from a broad based entitlement to food assistance to a welfare benefit increasingly dependent on proper behavior defined by policy makers and welfare administrators,

12 An application for potential WEP employers confirms this view, stating, “The purpose of the Work Experience Program (WEP) is to place public assistance (PA) recipients in Work Experience assignments at government and not-for-profit agencies. Work Experience assignments provide PA recipients with an opportunity to learn about the world of work while they perform tasks that are useful to the sponsoring agencies.” Nowhere in these documents does it mention any obligation on the part of the sponsoring agencies to consider hiring WEP employees or offer them regular employment.
has evolved as part of an increasingly punitive welfare system for the very poor. As Gupta and Sharma point out, “the structure of bureaucratic authority depends on the repetitive re-enactment of everyday practices. These iterative practices are performative in that rather than being an outward reflection of a coherent and bounded state “core” they actually constitute that very core” (Sharma and Gupta 2006, 8). That is to say, the welfare state in the US is not a static thing, but an ever-evolving set of practices that shift over time. This anthropological understanding of the state is important for helping us understand the cumulative effects of small shifts in everyday practices, at all levels of welfare administration and policy making that have produced a shift in urban welfarism, as it is experienced on the ground in New York City.

Welfare reforms are part of a broader transformation in urban poverty governance in which the activist state is re-oriented around new punishments and incentives. As we saw in chapter 2, food aid is a key incentive to induce poor New Yorkers to accept low-wage, insecure labor. This chapter will look at how withholding food aid and tying it to work experience programs becomes a key punishment. This happens in three ways – making people work for food, preventing people from getting on the rolls, and sanctioning people off the rolls. These punishments take shape both through explicit policy design and through bureaucratic error and mismanagement. The ‘official policy’ and the everyday practices that constitute ‘the state’ come together to produce a very concrete result; food poverty and hunger for the unemployed.

**Food Aid and the New Paternalism**

Contemporary poverty governance is characterized by the new paternalism, which “emphasizes the obligations of citizenship as a justification for enforcing behavioral expectations. The new paternalism is a project of civic incorporation that aims to draw its target toward full citizenship” (Soss, Fording and Schram 2009, 6). But, “as the state has been
restructured to operate according to market rationalities, citizenship too has shifted toward an economic register of identity and practice. The status of the democratic citizen, positioned as one who must decide and act collectively with others to gain preferred policy outcomes, has been eroded and partly displaced by the individualistic market roles of consumer, worker, and paying customer” (Schram, et al. 2009).

Lawrence Mead, a proponent of the new paternalism, argues that the central obligation of any citizen is work and that “groups of all kinds find benefit from contributing to society, above all through employment” (Mead 1986, 177). Mead uses this formulation of citizenship based on obligations to defend the welfare state, arguing that, “demanding work is necessary, not to cut back aid to the poor, but to restore common citizenship so that welfare can be defended” (Mead 2005). This is essentially a defense for the expansion of work supports, including food stamps, Medicaid and the EITC, for those who meet the obligations of work if their jobs do not pay enough. This construction of citizenship justifies a situation in which the hunger of a person working a low waged job who cannot afford enough food for themselves or their family is legitimate, while the hunger of a poor person without access to wages is not. If selling one’s labor is a primary obligation of citizenship, then the primary right one earns is the right to consume – not the substantive political rights of collective action, but individual rights pursued through the market. One of the ironies of welfare reform is that the cost of welfare programs has not decreased, even as they have become far less effective at alleviating poverty. Big government, much derided in the debates over welfare reform, has not withered away. The activist state has been re-oriented towards capital accumulation through the creation of citizen-consumers subsidized by the state.
Food stamps – in their current incarnation in New York City – are emblematic of a state actively intervening in capital/labor relations by subsidizing low wages for those who meet their citizenship obligations as Mead has conceptualized them. For those who are unemployed, on the other hand, these benefits are routinely withheld in an effort to punish non-compliance with the ‘workerist consensus’ (Maskovsky and Goode 2001) until they fulfill their obligations as citizens. However, fulfilling these obligations – finding and maintaining waged labor is often easier said than done in the increasingly informal, insecure labor market in New York City. Further, in a labor market segmented by race, immigration status and gender, this formulation of citizenship, attaching social and economic rights to work, becomes a color-blind and gender-neutral way of maintaining social inequalities.

Welfare protections have long been structured in the U.S. to shore up the privileges of whiteness and to maintain an exploited African American and immigrant labor force (Fox 2012; Katznelson 2005; Piven and Cloward 1993). In an era when overt racism is unacceptable, structuring welfare programs in ways that maintain these inequalities becomes more challenging. Soss, Fording and Schram have shown that racial inequalities in the welfare system have been maintained primarily by devolving administration of these programs to the states, and in places like New York, to the municipality (Soss, et al. 2011). Unlike the pre-civil rights era, when poor blacks were routinely denied relief through overt discrimination (Piven and Cloward 1993), today exclusion happens at a much different level. Today African Americans are more likely than whites to live in an area where the most punitive welfare policies are in effect (Soss, et al. 2011). The administration of the food stamp program in New York City fits this model. The city has a much higher concentration of African Americans and has harsher welfare and food stamp policies than the rest of the state. Strict work requirements and exclusionary food aid policies at
the city level are even more troubling, given that New York City is home to the highest concentration of food insecurity in the entire nation, the South Bronx (FRAC 2011). Racial minorities achieved meaningful citizenship through the political struggles of the 1960’s, including access to social and economic rights through welfare protections. These struggles ushered in an era where overt racial discrimination is no longer tolerated. Maintaining racial privilege, then, has meant changing the terms of citizenship itself.

Ultimately this framing of citizenship, as a system of rights and obligations fulfilled through market transactions provides a justification for denying aid – including food aid. Those who do not fulfill the obligations of citizenship are denied access to basic goods. This chapter will explore the ways in which tying food aid to work first welfare policies has resulted in worsening hunger and food insecurity for unemployed New Yorkers who turn to public assistance. The welfare system that has become significantly more punitive and inaccessible for the unemployed through the creation of a nebulous category of workfare workers who are made to work for welfare benefits without any of the job protections or labor rights of formal employment (Goldberg 2007; Krinsky 2007). These workfare programs act as a form of bureaucratic disentitlement (Lipsky 1984) that creates food insecurity – giving rise to new strategies for survival and new understandings about the relationship between citizens and the state.

The connections between work first welfare and food insecurity haven’t been well understood. Hunger happens primarily as a function of bureaucratic disentitlement. “Bureaucratic disentitlement is difficult for the public to apprehend and thus gives rise to little overt opposition. It also tends to be unavailable for inspection by social policy ‘watchdogs’ or, if known to them, is difficult to utilize as a focus for rallying constituency support” (Lipsky 1984,
The connections are murky and take place primarily in the day-to-day operations of welfare bureaucracy. But their impact is very real – creating food insecurity and hunger.

**Working for Food**

Work rules, both for food stamps and for cash assistance, are part of the legacy of welfare reforms passed in 1996 and, in the case of food stamps, were an attempt to bring the program in line with a work-first approach to welfare. The Food Stamp Act of 1977 included an obscure provision establishing work requirements for recipients and these requirements were expanded in 1985. However, the program never actually enforced these requirements or disqualified anyone because of their inability to find work prior to 1996 (Super 2004).

The 1996 welfare reforms were a watershed moment for the food stamp program, tightening the employment restrictions on food stamp benefits in two key ways. The first was the so-called ABAWD (able-bodied adult without dependent) restrictions, which barred all non-elderly, non-disabled recipients who were not caring for small children from receiving benefits for more than 3 months in any three year period – effectively cutting unemployed, childless people off from benefits. The second was that the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the agency within the USDA which oversees food and nutrition programs, including food stamps, used its discretion to allow states to count food stamps, along with cash-assistance grants, as

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13 These rules have been enforced inconsistently and states have typically opted to waive these requirements when unemployment rises. Congressional Republicans have proposed ending these waivers permanently in their 2013 version of the Farm Bill, effectively requiring states to enforce the 1996 work rules, and in so doing, cutting $19 billion from the SNAP program over ten years. In this vein, New York is something of a test case for what will happen nationally if these proposals succeed. Some states with Republican Governors are not waiting for Congress to act and have chosen to decline the waivers, much like Bloomberg has consistently done, cutting several hundred thousand food stamp recipients from the roles in 2013 in states like Ohio, Kansas, Delaware, Utah and Oklahoma.
“wages” of TANF recipients in work programs.\textsuperscript{14}

There were concerted efforts in the 1990’s to overhaul food stamps along with the AFDC program by making it a block grant program, something the Clinton administration opposed. Clinton vetoed the final bill several times over this provision. In the final version of PRWORA, food stamps retained the status of a federal entitlement, meaning there would be no cap on the funding for this program and that it would continue to be available to all qualifying citizens. AFDC, which had been structured as a federal entitlement prior to 1996 was restructured as a block grant, capping the funds available for this program and limiting the number of eligible families that could be served. Families that did apply for and receive cash assistance would be required to search for paid employment and to perform ‘workfare’ assignments in exchange for these benefits.

Even after the passage of PRWORA, there was considerable political wrangling over how to actually implement the new law. Provisions requiring recipients to perform workfare assignments as a condition of receiving cash assistance raised a host of questions about these people’s labor rights (Goldberg 2007; Krinsky 2007). How would they be paid? Would they be covered by minimum wage laws? Could they unionize? What would happen if they were hurt on the job?

In an attempt to clarify workfare rules, the Clinton administration’s labor department

\textsuperscript{14} Using food aid as wages is a long-standing practice among international food aid organizations, dating back to the colonial period. See for example: Davis, Mike 2000 Late Victorian Holocausts. London: Verso.
The contemporary iteration of these food for work programs have been implemented by large humanitarian organizations like the World Food Program. These international programs emerged globally alongside a renewed push towards workfare in the US. See Essex for a review of this history: Essex, Jamey 2012 Idle Hands Are the Devil’s Tools: The Geopolitics and Geoeconomics of Hunger. Annals of the Association of American Geographers 102(1):191-207.
issued a ruling that workfare assignments were subject to wage and hour laws, meaning recipients had to be paid minimum wage for the hours they were required to work. This was far more radical than it might appear on the surface. Paying poor women minimum wage for their workfare assignments would create parity between these workfare assignments and jobs in the private sector. This had the potential to radically alter the relationship between welfare and the labor market, which has long been organized around the principle of less eligibility, meaning welfare benefits are set low enough to make “any job at any wage a preferable alternative” (Piven and Cloward 1993, xix).

In effect, paying recipients minimum wage would undermine the dramaturgical function of the welfare system in which welfare creates a class of people who are poorly treated and can act as a warning to everyone else about what would befall them if they refuse to work. Paying recipients minimum wage for their workfare assignments would put these work assignments on par with jobs in the private sector. As such, this labor department ruling had the potential to transform the TANF program from a stigmatized cash assistance program into a federal jobs program, providing minimum wage employment to unemployed families with children.

The food stamp program was the key to undermining the radical potential of Clinton’s labor department ruling. It was not clear in 1996 that the push to ‘end welfare as we know it’ would end with the passage of PRWORA. Republicans and fiscal conservatives have long had their eye on a whole host of federal welfare programs, including food stamps, Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare. Food stamps, which had narrowly escaped a major overhaul, appeared to be the low hanging fruit for on-going welfare retrenchment efforts. In a defensive move, the USDA approved Simplified Food Stamp Programs shortly after the passage of welfare reform in order to bring food stamps in line with ‘work first welfare’ (Super 2004). Simplified Food
Stamp programs allowed food stamp benefits to be counted as wages for workfare assignments. They also gave states significant discretion in how to apply many of the rules for TANF work requirements to food stamp benefits for families who applied for cash assistance.

The legally dubious practice of counting food stamps as ‘wages’ had been in place since the expansion of WEP in 1995 in New York City (Krinsky 2007). This federal policy decision brought New York City’s practices in line with national legislation and provided legal cover. In addition to allowing food stamp benefits to be counted as wages, this meant that the regulations for these food stamp workfare programs would be determined largely by the states. This gave state and local governments a great deal of discretion in determining how to administer food stamps for individuals and families who were also applying for cash assistance, including how long sanctions can apply to these food stamp cases and who can be cut off – whole families, adult members or no one at all - for failure to comply with work requirements. Currently twelve states employ full family sanctions for food stamps if the adult on the case fails to comply with a work requirement. In New York, sanctions are applied only to the adult’s portion of the food stamp budget for failure to comply, but these sanctions are longer than the minimum length of sanctions mandated by the USDA.

In the context of a welfare system built around work, the question of what defines work, who has access to an identity as a worker and how he or she is compensated become a crucial ones. Since 1996, food stamps have been included as part of the compensation for workfare assignments – essentially requiring families and individuals in need to work for food and making food stamp benefits dependent on compliance with welfare work requirements. Counting food stamps as compensation for work assignments means, in effect, a mother of two who is required to work 35 hours a week in a work experience program is being paid roughly $2.40 an hour in
cash, with the rest of her compensation coming in in-kind benefits – primarily food stamps. Though states are mandated not to violate minimum wage laws in the implementation of work requirements, in-kind benefits represent a loophole, allowing New Yorkers who receive public assistance to be paid largely in in-kind assistance.  

This is increasingly the case as cash assistance grants lose value over time while the value of food stamps is pegged to the rising cost of food. Cash welfare was never linked to increases in the cost of living, and so inaction on the part of policy makers has allowed their value to erode steadily since the 1960’s. Basic welfare grants are worth far less today than they were in 1996. This creates a situation of policy drift, where inaction on the part of policy makers has substantial effects on social programs, but in ways that are hard to identify or organize around. Since 1996 the portion of a workfare worker’s compensation that has come in the form of food aid has steadily increased as the cash portion has steadily decreased. This makes low-wage labor comparatively more attractive to welfare recipients, since obtaining a low wage job would mean that food stamps would become a supplement to their wages instead of being treated as wages in and of themselves.  

As Schram et. al point out, neoliberal restructuring of state apparatus means it can be used “affirmatively as a tool for constructing markets, serving well-positioned market actors, and enforcing compliance for poorly positioned market actors” (Schram, et al. 2009, 742). Allowing

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15 It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to compare the administration of the SNAP program and its attendant work requirements across all the states, though more comparative work on these questions is necessary. However, it is important to note that participation rates in between states vary widely, from a low of 55% enrollment in California to a high of 100% in states like Maine, Oregon, Vermont and Washington. These participation rates indicate that administration matters in terms of who is able to access benefits and who is not, who is made to work for these benefits and who is not, and when and whether individuals and families are cut off from their SNAP benefits. (See Appendix B: SNAP Participation Rates by State).
food stamps to be counted as wages for work experience programs structures these programs in ways that are beneficial to well-placed market actors – employers – because they make even poorly paid work more attractive to potential workers, lowering workers’ expectations and their willingness or ability to resist exploitation by employers.

Many of the people I met who were subject to these work requirements saw them as an affront to their basic rights as workers. As Donald Jones, an older African America man who had lost his job as a gypsy cab driver and had been receiving assistance for several months reasoned,

That’s not really a fair way of looking at it, when you look at it completely. See cash allows you to do a multitude of things. Food stamps only allows – you have limitations. You can’t buy this, you can’t buy that with the food stamps. So I mean I wouldn’t be able to buy soap. I wouldn’t be able to buy any cosmetics. I mean if you’re looking at it – ‘cause (HRA) said they’re looking at it like cash. You say, “Okay, well how much cash are you looking at?” because you’re limited with the food stamps. You can only get so many things and you can’t go into every store. You can’t go in Macy’s with your food stamp card. You can’t buy a pair of socks. Not unless you have the cash on you.”

Donald had been assigned to a work in the Sanitation Department and was required to work there 20 hours a week and also to report to Back to Work, a job search program. Again, by his calculations, the compensation he received was far out of line with the work he was required to perform.

When you think about it, you say, well, it’s only $100 every two weeks. I mean it’s good, but you know, I mean how much can they expect you to do for $50 a week? They want you to do 20 hours here and 30 hours here. Then sometimes I think the thing that aggravated me was when they want to send you to the sanitation, which really, I have no problem if I’m getting good pay. But my goodness, why do you want to send me to sanitation? I’ve got a high school diploma. You know what I mean? I mean I don’t mind doing things, but send me something in the area where I have a little bit of skills, not where I just have to pick up trash and go through all of that. I’m sweeping for six hours, even at $7 an hour, that would be like – what would that be? Seven times six is $42 a day. That would be more than what I’m receiving, so it’s like – what’s going on? Why am I doing this? It’s like it’s not equaling out.

By his calculations, he was being severely underpaid for a job he did not choose and did
not match his skill set. He had a long work history and was more than familiar with the world of work. Like many of the people I met through the course of my research, he identified as a worker and actively pursued employment ‘on the books’. However, the flexible and informal labor arrangements that have come predominate the low wage labor market have made steady work with a single employer increasingly unattainable. His last employer, a cab company, had steadily cut back his hours as business slowed down with the onset of the recession. Eventually he had no work and turned to public assistance. He did not need to be reminded that if he was making 10 dollars an hour he wouldn’t be so poor and told me that,

The structure of welfare, it’s structured in a way that you would - particularly if you have a work history like I do, that you prefer so much more to be working. You work and you know when you’re getting paid. You don’t have to go through the acrobats of everything else. So you don’t have acrobats for a job. You just know what you’re required to do, and you do it.

Like many of the people I met who were given work assignments, it was not the work that he opposed, but the lack of choice and the compensation for this labor, which in his case equaled approximately $2.76 an hour in cash. Others, like Jimmy McCormack, a middle aged white man who had left his job at a grocery store because he was being paid off the books and making less than minimum wage, saw these work assignments as a bad deal, both for him and for working people in general. He would come to the food pantry every week and help out by breaking up boxes. We talked about his public assistance case. He had an exemption for mental illness as a result of a suicide attempt shortly after he left his last job. I asked him if he had ever done a work assignment. He told me,

I can’t see myself doing that. Because, say you work in the parks. Now, the average park worker gets about $8.50 an hour times 8, which is about $72.00 (a day) give or take. Now, for that week I’ll be working down there for 28 hours. So for 28 hours, I’m going to make the $72.00 he’s going to make in a day. And that same 28 hours, they want you working all week. It’s like five hours a day, six hours a day.
Jimmy had struggled to find decently paid work. Unable to afford a Metro card for the subway, he often walked several hours each day going to warehouses and asking if they had anything available.

It’s hard because once you get out - I walked over to Long Island City the other day, I had to walk all the way over the Greenpoint Bridge and about 10 miles that way and about 5 miles that way. And it started getting too cold, and I started getting hungry. You go half way out, you don’t want to go too far because you’re only going to walk it back. It’s not like you’re going to search the places you want to search. Just to find out no, we’re not hiring. Sorry. We’re laying people off.

He had worked as a mover for fifteen years in the late 1990’s, making $125 a day and had recently been offered a moving job paying $8 an hour. “If I worked with this $8.00 an hour, I'll be making about $50.00 or $60.00 a day. I’m taking a $75.00 loss. But times are tough now.” He was intimately aware of the falling price of his labor on the market and saw work experience programs as another way in which the price of labor was being driven down, something he did not want to participate in.

It is no wonder, then, that people often forego this meager cash benefit and its attendant work requirements if possible, choosing to keep their food stamp and Medicaid benefits while pursuing other revenue generating activities – including collecting bottles and cans, babysitting, odd jobs, day labor and reliance on friends and relatives. Many families voted with their feet, closing cash assistance cases and instead choosing to receive just food stamps and Medicaid (see also Soss, et al. 2011, 165).

Jose Nieves, a JOS worker who certifies cash assistance cases reported that, “a lot of people don’t even care about the money because there is no money.” He reported that clients often ask him,

Is there anyway I could get food stamps and Medicaid? You know, they’ll get a job off the books because it’s humiliating; you’re getting in my business. And if you have children, health care is a priority. They don’t want this chump change. It’s a matter of
survival. They need this Medicaid. They need this food stamps. They don’t want to be here.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, food stamps are a crucial support for low wage, insecure workers in North Brooklyn. These ‘work supports’ are no less important for men and women who are without work or whose work is even more insecure and lower-paid than the college educated freelance workers who use food stamps to supplement their insecure incomes. However, the impediments to opening and maintaining a food stamp case are considerably higher for men like Donald and Jimmy, with no higher education and long work histories of low skilled manual labor.

Both Donald and Jimmy struggled with hunger and food security, and both came to the food pantry and the soup kitchen every week to get a bag of food and a hot meal. Donald, who had no children, reported less food hardship than Jimmy, who told me that he often went hungry and even sold his ulcer medication in order to get cash to buy food. Though Jimmy was categorized as a single person, he had a ten-year-old son and used a large portion of his food stamps every month to buy food for him. This was a common scenario among men that I met who were categorized as single adults without dependents, but who were in fact fathers who did not live with their children. These men reported some of the most severe food hardship of any of the people I encountered, because they often used their meager benefits to fulfill kinship obligations that the welfare administration did not recognize. Reginald, an African American father of four, lost custody of his children when his apartment building was condemned and he was evicted. He was a regular soup kitchen patron for several months until he got back on his feet. Muscular and well over six feet tall, he looked like a man who liked to eat. During an interview before dinner was served one night at the soup kitchen, he confessed, “I’ve basically been starving the past three days so my kids could have something to eat. A lot of times I eat a
honey bun and some dipsey doodles before bed and that’s it. I’m starving now so they can have something later.”

I got to know several men in this position because they were regulars at the soup kitchen who looked forward to their ‘night out’ every Wednesday and, often, the only hot meal they ate all week. They often frequented multiple soup kitchens and pantries in order to be able to buy more food for the households where their children lived. Jimmy, who did not live with his son, worried about his son’s well-being and what might happen if there wasn’t enough food in the house.

The wife and I will spend whatever we can to keep the food in the house because if ACS (child protective services) comes in, they can take him if there’s not a certain amount of food there. A gallon of milk, cereal, eggs, protein, vitamins.

Other researchers studying food insecurity have noted that, “Caregivers are often reluctant to admit that their children may not be getting enough food due to shame or due to the fear that their children might be removed from the home by authorities” (Chilton and Rabinowich 2012, 2). Tina Lee’s research on the child welfare system in New York City confirms that this is a legitimate, and widely held, concern among low-income parents (Lee 2010). Given the very real worries that children could be separated from their families if there is not enough food in the house, it is not surprising that these non-custodial fathers went to great lengths to make sure their children could eat.

Other people who fell into the Able Bodied Adult without Dependent category, both men and women, used food stamps to contribute to households where they were staying, sometimes with elderly parents or relatives on a fixed income or with friends. Access to food aid made it possible for them to contribute to a household and this often meant the difference between staying in the good graces of the person they lived with and wearing out their welcome and being
turned out on the street. Cutting off these individual’s food stamp benefits often meant increased food hardship not just for them, but also for their elderly parents or other family members who continued to provide housing for them. In marginal living situations, where people were doubled up and pooling resources, access to food stamps became a buffer, allowing unemployed single men and women to contribute to households and stay off the street or out of the shelters.

Jesus Garcia, a familiar face from the food pantry line, came to see me several months after being sanctioned off food stamps for failing to comply with a work assignment. He lived with his elderly mother and worried about what would happen when she died. He was 48 years old and had been unemployed for over a year, after a long string of jobs as a general laborer. He would be homeless if it wasn’t for his mother and

She’s not gonna last forever. I worry about that a lot. Like, what am I going to do? I don’t want to rob nobody. I don’t want to be in the street selling drugs. That’s not the kind of person I am. I’m too old for that. I never been to jail. But that’s where your mind goes. I’ve got to eat, I need to take a shower everyday, all these little things.

He felt it was demeaning to have to work for food stamp benefits, but after several months with no benefits and no job, he was desperate. He felt no one would hire him at his age. “once you reach 50, 51, nobody wants you because they want someone young they can use and abuse.”

Unable to find work and unable to contribute to his mother’s household, Jesus felt compelled to submit to the work requirements. In this case, welfare rules that restrict food aid to the unemployed work hand in hand with a coercive labor market. From the position of the powerful, it is of little consequence whether Jesus Garcia chooses to take a low paid job or submit to a work experience program. He is free to choose, but in the absence of resources for his subsistence, he finds himself in a position – carefully structured by state and market powers – in which he must act. As Barbara Cruikshank points out, “the powers of the powerful depend not so much on the exclusion of the poor as on recruiting and retaining the voluntary compliance
of their clients in punitive and coercive programs” (Cruikshank 1999, 37).

For men like Donald Jones and Jesus Garcia, single men in their 40’s who were willing and able to work, choosing not to take cash assistance would not relieve them of the burden of working for their food stamps. Post-1996 regulations have hemmed in their options, so long as they cannot find work. And though all three of these men regularly participated in work-like activities – scrapping metal, doing day labor, odd jobs, and on-call work - these jobs were not recognized as work in the context of the welfare administration. Without a regular employer, pay stubs, and tax forms, they could not claim an identity as a worker with all the benefits and ‘work supports’ that go along with it.

The structure of the food stamp program in New York City in some ways has come to resemble a neo-feudal system, in which people who have an employer who can vouch for them can more easily access work supports like food stamps, while those who make their own work – often through informal activities and day labor – are subject to strict work experience regimes and paid primarily in food aid. For each of these men, as their financial situations became more dire, they intensified their attempts to find work and increased their participation in informal labor markets, a common strategy for coping with hunger and food insecurity (Shipton 1990). However, intensification of participation in informal labor markets did little to relieve them of the burden of working for their food stamp benefits, because caseworkers do not recognize these modes of employment.

Employers who pay workers off the books to evade minimum wage laws, give employees irregular hours or hire them on an on-call basis deprive workers of more than just adequate pay or security in their jobs. They deprive them of the social protections built around work, like unemployment compensation, the Earned Income Tax Credit and Social Security credits.
Unemployment compensation in particular is an important buffer between the unemployed and having to rely on a punitive welfare apparatus. I met many unemployed workers who wanted not just work, but “something on paper” that would afford them access to the myriad of work supports available to low-wage workers. When work dries up for these informally employed individuals and they turn to welfare, they continue to be denied worker protections, like being paid a minimum wage in cash, accruing social security credits, and qualifying for the earned income tax credit, even though they are forced to work for these welfare benefits.

Single adults, like Jimmy, Jesus and Donald are hard hit by work first welfare policies, and, perhaps best fitting the image of the unemployed person who is not needed in the home to care for others that, as Michael Katz has argued, has been the perpetual target of claims about the able bodied who ‘should’ be working (Katz 1986). However, this ideal type, the single, employable man, obscures both the caring and kinship obligations that these men often do take on and the reality of today’s informal, flexible labor market that denies these men an identity as a worker, regardless of how desperately they desire or pursue employment. They are by no means, however, the only demographic impacted.

**Failure to Comply, Sanctions and Bureaucratic Disentitlement**

Simplified Food Stamp Programs have a particularly strong impact on parents of young children who apply for cash assistance. Parents of young children who would normally be exempt from food stamp work requirements are required to perform work assignments for their food stamp benefits if they also apply for cash assistance. Unlike non-Cash Assistance cases (NCA in the parlance of New York City’s welfare administration), these families – primarily single mothers – are constantly at risk of losing food stamp benefits because of failure to comply with any one of a myriad of rules and requirements. Linking food stamps to cash assistance
significantly increases food hardship for families who attempt to open a cash assistance case or are sanctioned for failure to comply with work rules or other requirements.

People often come into the system with the idea that they will be able to get help, but experience quickly changes their view. Working with families and individuals who were trying to maintain their welfare benefits made it clear just how challenging it can be to prove your willingness to comply. Families and individuals turned to cash assistance programs as a last resort when they had exhausted all other options, but often found there was little help available.

I met Stephanie Vega, a thirty seven year old Puerto Rican woman, and her fiancé Dominic, a white man around the same age, several months after their unemployment had run out. Stephanie was pregnant and had reached out to a local parent’s listserv, looking for clothing and used baby items, explaining that she was out of work and in need of help. She enthusiastically agreed to do an interview with me, and we continued to meet periodically over the course of the next year. Stephanie described the long slide from a fairly stable working class life to life on public assistance as “a nightmare”.

I was working full-time. I was a customer service representative supervisor. I had a decent job. And he was on unemployment, which was givin’ us the balance – just skimming and making ends meet. He even took the opportunity to get his commercial drivers license with hopes that maybe that’ll advance somethin’. And that didn’t work out – nothing. He didn’t find anything. I was still working, working, working. I took a second job waitressing at night. And it wound up being just too much stress on the relationship. I kept doin’ it. Yeah, we just couldn’t hold it together anymore. Our savings were gone. We had dipped into that. And that was gone. Then I got laid off in October. And that was it. It was the end of the road.

On unemployment, they had applied for food stamps and barely scraped together rent money each month for their small two-bedroom apartment in Long Island. They both looked for work, occasionally getting odd jobs, but nothing permanent came through. Looking for
employment was particularly challenging for Dominic, who had a criminal record. Eventually their unemployment ran out and they had to leave their apartment. A friend who owns a building in Williamsburg offered to let them stay there until they got back on their feet. With no income, Stephanie and her son moved to Brooklyn while Dominic stayed with family in Long Island to continue looking for work. Stephanie applied for public assistance for her and her son and was granted an exemption from work requirements because of her chronic depression.

Even though she was exempt from work requirements, she continued looking for a job. She got a seasonal position at Kmart and jumped at the opportunity to work again, despite being pregnant and there being little hope of it turning into permanent employment.

It’s Kmart. It’s not what I’ve done. Listen, I used to make $37,000 to $40,000 a year. Once this all happened, I applied to McDonald’s. I applied to White Castle. I will take two minimum wage jobs if I have to. You’re overqualified. You’re this. You don’t get the callbacks. You don’t get nothing. I’ll start from the bottom again. Even though my mental state’s really not right, I have no choice but to find something. I can’t live on $264.00 a week with a baby.

After several months, Dominic had exhausted the good will of his family with no work to show for it, and came to join Stephanie and their son to try and find work in Brooklyn.

It is difficult to overstate the impact of the expansion of the penal system in the U.S. over the past several decades on formerly incarcerated individuals’ abilities to secure work. This was an issue that came up again and again in my interviews. Employment applications typically ask about the criminal records of applicants and refuse to consider anyone with a criminal record for employment. Employers regularly conduct background checks on employees. Currently 65 million Americans have an arrest or conviction that comes up in these background checks. The vast majority of these are for non-violent offenses and they can be decades old. Racial bias in policing and in sentencing means that African Americans and Latinos are far more likely than whites to be arrested, convicted and to serve time for minor, non-violent crime. This means that blacks and Latinos are also more likely to have criminal records and to be discriminated against in the labor market, a situation Michelle Alexander has aptly termed 'the New Jim Crow'.

Rodriguez, Michelle Natividad, and Maurice Emsellem 2011 65 Million "Need Not Apply". National Employment Law Project.

Stephanie tried to add him to their public assistance case, since they were now a family of three. What should have been a simple bureaucratic change to their case ended up stretching into a six-month struggle with the welfare office over their benefits. This saga reflected other findings about the exclusionary practices in New York City’s public assistance programs, ranging from unanswered phones, clerical errors, onerous appointments, and a complex web of rules and requirements to which public benefit recipients must adhere, creating a situation where “a seemingly simple problem took on a life of its own, producing misery and chaos for those whose benefits were affected” (McNeil 2011).

Dominic was immediately assigned to the Back to Work program, a job training and placement program required by HRA in order to qualify for cash benefits. Though the goal was job search, he and Stephanie found the program to be more of a distraction from looking for work than any kind of real assistance, echoing a common complaint from welfare recipients assigned to the program.

We were hoping that once we got into public assistance and all that, it would transition us better. I didn’t know much about the system – what the benefits are, what the resources are that you could get. You hear about all these resources that they could give you. I found it to be absolutely, no good to me at all. That’s why we’re still stuck.

After two and a half months of attending Back to Work forty hours a week, sitting in classes and filling out resumes, Dominic was sanctioned for failure to comply. At the time of the sanction, he and Stephanie had not received any additional benefits for him – no increase in their cash benefit or food stamps. He also had not yet been added to their Medicaid case. They continued to receive cash and food stamps only for Stephanie and their son.

We live on the small budget for a family of two. It’s $264.00 a month. It’s $132.00 every two weeks. That’s the only cash we get. Once that’s out, that’s out. And that’s to live on for necessities other than food. The food stamps obviously run out towards the end of the month. So it’s not enough. I needed the actual food stamps from $300 (for a family of two) to $526 for a family of three. It’s a big difference.
In order to make ends meet, they sold clothes, toys and other household goods. Dominic occasionally did odd jobs for a doctor whose office was on their block, but he found he had to turn him down in order to go to the Back to Work Program most days. He was angry and frustrated that he had to turn down small jobs in order to attend a job placement program that was not helping him find work.

Stephanie explained that Dominic’s sanction was for failing to dress properly.

At the Back to Work program, they wanted them to come in with slacks, dress shoes, button-down-shirts, ties, all this stuff. Dominic doesn’t have these. He’s been in general labor all his life. He told them that. He told his caseworker - it says in the pamphlet to bring to your caseworker’s attention. Bring to their attention if you have means to get any kind of attire. He told them. They sent him down to a church that had hand-me-down clothes. What are they gonna have at the church? Are they gonna have button-down - slacks and everything. He’s like, “Why would they make me come down there? They got nothin’. They don’t have nothing like that there. Well, why would they send me? What happened was he went again one day. He walks in. He has to go to the front desk to swipe in. The lady wouldn’t swipe him in. Oh, you have jeans on. He’s like, “I have dark clothing. Yeah, that’s what I have. I have a polo shirt. I already brought this to my case manager’s attention.” He explained the whole thing. “I mean, whatta’ ya want me to do?” “Well, you have to go see your case manager.” He sees the case manager. The case manager tells him, “Well, go home and change.” He says, “Go home. I’m gonna come back with similar to this. What are you sendin’ me home for? I’m here. I need the help. I’m complying. And you’re sending me home. So whatta’ ya want me to do?” So he had to put a grievance in with Back to Work program stating I’m complying. You guys are preventing me from complying because I have a pair of jeans on - no holes. I’m talkin’ about nice jeans.

Many of the people I met who were enrolled in job search activities complained about the inordinate focus on cultivating ‘respectable’ behaviors. They felt it was an exercise in futility.

The emphasis on self-improvement behaviors is experienced as a maddening waste of time for people who want to find work and get on with their lives. Stephanie was incredulous. After weeks of complying and getting no help, Dominic was now being sanctioned.

They sanctioned him. What are they sanctionin’ him for? First of all, they’re sanctionin’ him. He’s never even been on the case. I haven’t even gotten anything. He’s been goin’
to this thing. I haven’t got one penny, one food stamp, one nothing for him. He has no Medicaid or nothin’. They didn’t give him nothin’, not one thing. At this point, I don’t even care about (the cash). I more care about his Medicaid and the food stamps. End of the month, we’re rationing. We have nothing. It’s bad. So he’s frustrated. I’m frustrated - frustrated with the whole system. You’re there. You’re tryin’ to get the help. But you’re sanctionin’ us. You guys are preventing him from complying.

Dominic and Stephanie were far from alone. From April 2006 through April 2009, 25% of New York City family cases with at least one adult or minor teen head of household were sanctioned or in the sanction process (FPWA 2012). 38% of all cases in New York are child only cases, which means that they are not subject to work requirements. In March 2012, 34% (20,995) of the total households (61,263) engaged in welfare work programs in New York City were sanctioned or in the sanction process, and 22% of the broader category of “engageable” households (92,149) were sanctioned or in the sanction process (FPWA 2012). These sanctions can result in the adult portion of the food stamp budget being cut from between 2 and 6 months, depending on how many times the case has been sanctioned, meaning a family of three has to survive on a food stamp budget for two for an extended period of time. As we will see in Chapter Five, these budgets, based on the thrifty food plan, do not provide adequate food for a family, even when they receive the full amount.

Stephanie had tried several times, beginning in June, to have Dominic put on the case and to begin getting food stamps for him. Each time she was told that it would be taken care of only to discover the next month that it hadn’t been. After he was sanctioned in late August, she went to the welfare office several times only to be told she had to file for a fair hearing. The fair hearing process is overwhelmed with cases and it often takes several months to get a hearing date. Because these hearings are expensive, the welfare office often tries to resolve disputes in the office before they go to court by scheduling Mandatory Dispute Review (MDR) meetings. I went with Stephanie to her MDR meeting in late October. She and her family were surviving on
a food stamp budget for two people from late May, when Dominic moved to Brooklyn and Stephanie tried to add him to the case, until mid-October, when I accompanied her to an MDR appointment and he was finally added to the food stamp and Medicaid cases.

People often complained about the double standard in the welfare office. Caseworkers who failed to add someone to a case or failed to mark a person as having attended a meeting were not held accountable for those errors. Mistakes could stretch on for months at a time, creating situations of real hardship for families like Dominic and Stephanie’s. At the same time, failure to report to a single appointment or required work activity could result in failure to comply and sanctions being imposed on a family. As Vicki Lens discovered,

imposing sanctions has become a clerical function rather than an evaluative one. A prime example of the bureaucratization of sanctions is HRA’s use of auto-posting to initiate the sanctioning process. When an individual is required to attend a work appointment, HRA programs its computers to automatically consider the person as having failed to attend unless and until a worker enters the client’s attendance in the computer. Such a system is an open invitation for clerical error, including the failure to record an individual’s attendance, in a bureaucracy processing a massive number of cases each day (FPWA 2012).

Though the stated goal of Back to Work is to move people into jobs, most of the people I interviewed and met who took part in these activities and classes did not find them helpful. Of the 18 people I interviewed who were assigned to either Back to Work or a WEP assignment, not one of them found employment through these activities during the study period. I also spoke informally to several other individuals who had been assigned to these programs and found that they interfered with their ability to look for work. This was especially true for people like Dominic who had a criminal record and found it difficult to find formal employment. These formerly incarcerated individuals often could only find work in the informal sector, doing day labor or off the books work. Dominic tried to look for work on his own, but found that his required activities interfered with his ability to actually find work – whether it was day labor or
more permanent employment.

Taking part in the Back to Work program added additional complications to Dominic’s attempts to find a job. Welfare recipients enrolled in the Back to Work program are required to bring a note on company letterhead from any job interviews they attend that cause them to miss their assigned activities. Dominic felt this put him at a huge disadvantage. “So imagine goin’ on an interview and sayin’ oh, by the way - now you’re gonna put them on blast that you’re on public assistance. That’s embarrassing.” Instead of asking for a letter, he took a business card and told the interviewer it was for is own reference. When he took this to his Back to Work counselor, Stephanie reported,

They wanted to send him home and FTC him because it wasn’t on letterhead. Are you serious? The guy went on an interview. So should he not go on an interview that next time? I’ll miss the interview and the opportunity to possibly getting a job. It makes no sense. They make it difficult. They wanna penalize you. So yeah, it’s a waste of time for him. Might as well be home, tryin to hustle and make $25.00 or $30.00 - whatever you can make.

Though moving individuals ‘from welfare to work’ was a mantra of welfare reform, the real emphasis for front line employees in New York has become moving people through the system as quickly as possible. One JOS worker described the official job description for his position, which emphasized personalized services to move people toward work and independence, as “beautiful”. “It sounds so good, but you know it doesn’t happen. But it’s beautiful. This is the way it’s supposed to work. But we’re doing quantity, we’re not doing quality.” Another woman who works as a JOS worker agreed, saying, “You’re pushing them through. You just get enough information to process and then keep them moving.“

These pressures are partly fiscal, as city hiring freezes have kept staffing levels to a minimum. Pushing clients through as quickly as possible often results in the kind of bureaucratic disentitlement faced by Stephanie and Dominic, who went without benefits for several months.
because of agency error. “Faced with high demand and charged with responsibility of serving people with few alternative resources, public agencies, confronting limited resources themselves, typically develop mechanisms to limit services to eligible citizens while ignoring the costs to clients of the new administrative arrangements (Lipsky 1984, 8).

Front line workers were not unsympathetic to the people coming in for assistance, but the demands placed on them for moving clients along meant they could not take the time to really engage with them in any kind of meaningful way. As Jose Nieves, a JOS worker who enrolls people in cash assistance, told me, “I was born and raised on welfare. So I came thinking I want to do something. I know what my mother went through and I know, and I want to make a difference and I want to be a worker that – you know, after a while you’ve got to put that aside too. You’ve just got to do your job.” As Schram points out, “At the frontlines of welfare reform, neoliberal rationalities do not govern mentalities by imposing all-encompassing worldviews; they do so by organizing fields of practice so that the ambivalent subjects who occupy them can be relied upon to do the work of disciplining the poor” (Schram, et al. 2009, 751).

For families like Stephanie and Dominic’s the effort to ‘push them through’ and ‘keep them moving’ meant that they consistently were not told about benefits to which they were entitled. No caseworker had ever spoken to them about housing assistance, even though being able to pay some rent to the friends with whom they were staying may have enabled them to stay out of the shelter system. The caseworkers with whom Stephanie interacted consistently failed to add Dominic to the food stamp case, even though it was a minor bureaucratic procedure. Stephanie described her interactions,

Every month goin’ down there to the people – every month – seeing them, telling them – the last time I was there in September – and I saw the lady. I specifically told her, “So I’m not gonna have to ration at the end of this month –” She told me, “I’ll fix it. I’ll take care of it.” “What does that mean, ‘you’ll take care of it?’ I’ve been hearing ‘take care
of it’ since June. I just explained to you that I’ve been down here every month.” “Well, I just told you I’d take care of it.” Just like that. “What does that mean?” I told her again, “I need more explanation.” She says to me, “Well, it’s after 5:00. And I have more clients to see.

Stephanie’s interactions reflect what Gupta describes as "the sheer contingency underlying the workings of a supposedly highly rationalized, bureaucratic state"(Gupta 2012). It is a form of bureaucratic rationing that “conveys the message that government is incapable of providing services” (Lipsky 1984, 9). Stephanie and her family, as people who have applied for cash assistance, have found themselves as part of the "categories of poor who are deemed appropriate to neglect" (Gupta 2012) within the bureaucratic workings of the New York City welfare administration. Their experience, of scrutiny, bureaucratic failure and disentitlement that stretched over six months stands in stark contrast to the experiences of families with young children who apply for food stamps alone. Though there has been a substantial effort to make food stamps more easily available to poor New Yorkers, these efforts do not extend to the unemployed who also seek cash assistance, who are regularly subject to disruptions in benefits that cause food insecurity.

Part of the conundrum for those who seek cash welfare benefits comes from the accounting to determine eligibility. Applicants have to prove they are destitute, and even if they receive the full benefit amounts, they will still be far below the poverty line. The difficulty of surviving on so little income meant that “anyone living in relative stability must be cheating the system somehow” (Cruikshank 1999, 109). This presumption of guilt colored interactions with caseworkers. As Jose Nieves, a JOS worker, argued, “Its sad to say, the majority of them are lying. I know they are lying, but its not because they want to.” When welfare administrators believe the majority of clients are fraudulent, it is easy to justify failure to take prompt action on their case. Since everyone knows it is impossible to live on these small TANF budgets, the fact
of one’s survival becomes evidence that there must be some kind of undisclosed income or resource.

These failures and oversights on the part of caseworkers had serious implications for the well-being of Stephanie and Dominic’s family.

Being out here on 300-some dollars for a family of two – out here – in the city – you would think you’d be okay. Absolutely not, the cost of living for the food is too much. So within two weeks, we’re already rationing. I’m tellin’ (my son) Mikey, no. I’m givin’ him toast and jelly, Ramen noodles, nothing that’s very healthy that I would normally feed us. That’s where most of my weight gain came in. The less healthier food is a little bit cheaper. So of course, you’re gonna gain weight on that. That’s not gonna help ya any. So what they’re giving us is not helping. We just make do. Dominic sells his clothes if he has to. Sometime I go without or eat once a day. Mikey has school. I know that at least he’s gettin’ breakfast and lunch. I don’t have to worry. But now I have to worry because I have the baby.

At this point, Stephanie’s voice started breaking up and she could barely hold back the tears. She was 6 months pregnant at the time of our interview. “I can’t just eat once a day. I have to eat healthy for her.”

The rules for a family of three with a young child are fairly straightforward for food stamps. However, the work requirements for cash assistance add several layers of complexity to an otherwise straightforward food stamp case. The ultimate result is often increasingly desperate food insecurity and hunger for a family in need of help. Stephanie needed the full food stamp allotment, but was unable to get it even though she had a young son and was pregnant because her case was governed by cash assistance work rules and requirements. Though the administration of food stamp only cases can entail long wait times and errors, it is far more efficient and responsive, particularly for work exempt cases like those with young children, than the cash welfare system.

The distinctions between NCA and cash assistance cases are further marked by the channels through which advocates can intervene on behalf of a client. I was part of a program
that allowed advocates in community-based organizations to email directly with food stamp offices about issues that came up with clients’ cases. The goal was to resolve these issues over email so that clients would not go to the food stamp offices, which were severely overcrowded. New York City’s welfare administration (HRA) had been criticized in the press and by City Council for over-crowding issues and keeping clients out of the centers had become a top priority. I sent dozens of these emails for various problems with food stamp cases and helped to resolve a host of small issues for food pantry clients and community residents. Whenever I emailed about clients who also had received cash assistance, however, I met a tight wall of resistance. Every time I sent one of these emails, I received a stony reply that boiled down to, “There’s nothing we can do because this is a cash assistance case.”

Food pantries and soup kitchens have become deeply involved in SNAP outreach and enrollment in New York City. These advocates press for expanded SNAP enrollment at both the local and the national levels. Through the New York City Food Bank, many of these advocates meet monthly with top HRA administrators, airing problems that come up at specific food stamp centers. At the meetings, HRA administrators would diligently write down notes and promise to address the advocates’ concerns. The Food Bank, through their network of advocates working in neighborhood based EFP’s, kept statistics on how quickly food stamp offices replied to advocates’ emails and whether or not the issues they raised were resolved in a timely manner. The USDA recognized these efforts by awarding HRA a Hunger Champion Award in 2011 (HRA 2012). But these channels of negotiation were only open to non-cash assistance (NCA) cases. Advocating for cash assistance cases meant going down to the office with the client, waiting for hours and, often, relying on the incredibly burdened, slow and ineffectual fair hearing system, where getting an issue resolved could take six months or longer (McNeil 2011).
Food policy as it is currently structured in the US creates distinctions between who has the right to food aid that largely track with the construction of a new deserving poor. The ‘deserving poor’ in this new formation are those who can combine low wages with welfare benefits, now called work supports. For people who combine work with food stamps, these benefits often empower them to exercise greater control over what they eat and how they feed themselves and their families.

Welfare policies that withhold needed food resources as a punishment for noncompliance with workfare assignments are particularly cruel. It directly undermines women and men’s abilities to provide the necessary care to themselves and their families. To understand what these programs actually do and how they structure the experience of poverty, it is important to recognize the “agony and frustration of women who cannot feed their families the way they know they should be fed” (Van Esterik 1999). As Stephanie explained,

Definitely having choices is now a luxury. It’s especially hard for my child. He’s used to having that choice. ‘Can I have grapes today?’ I don’t have that. What do I have to give him? I have to look. I have some saltine crackers. Maybe that’ll do. So he just says, “Forget it.” Every time he says forget it. I hate it. He wants something. And I can’t give it to him. He just doesn’t want what I can give him. And that’s not fair. It’s so not fair.

Hunger, Food Insecurity and the Implications of Welfare Reform

As Miriam Ticktin points out, “the suffering body must be recognized as morally legitimate, a qualification that turns out to be both exceptional and deeply contextual” (Ticktin 2006, 4). In the context of the US welfare state, the suffering body that works for wages is a legitimate hunger, protected by rights and a responsive welfare administration, while the suffering body that does not or cannot work is an illegitimate hunger. The exploited bodies of
the un- and underemployed “are not the exception, but the rule, and hence are disqualified as morally legitimate” (Ticktin 2006, 4).

The idea of work first welfare has become such a totalizing common sense that it has practically no detractors on the national political stage. When President Obama proposed modest changes to TANF that would allow states more flexibility in designing their workfare programs, the response was vitriolic. High profile Republicans, including then-presidential candidate Mitt Romney, claimed that Obama was attempting to ‘gut welfare reform’ (Rector 2012). The Obama Administration “hotly denied Republicans’ claims and insisted that the president continues to embrace the concept of welfare to work” (Pianin 2012). In this political context, it is not surprising that anti-hunger advocates have not made removing the work first policies attached to food stamps a priority in their lobbying and legislative efforts (Hadlock 2011). As one long time national advocate told me, “we don’t do very well on the work thing”. Very few are willing to challenge the ‘success’ of welfare reform (see for example Berg 2008).

The neoliberal turn is characterized both by revanchist policies, like workfare, that punish the urban poor as a racialized underclass and, particularly since 9/11, aspirational poverty policies that encourage the urban poor to “join cities in their struggles to become more attractive, viable places for urban investment” producing “opportunities for urban belonging and citizenship for the inner-city poor” (Maskovsky and Cunningham 2009, 191). This transition is reflected in New York City’s approach to food stamp administration, which has made receipt of the benefit contingent on work or compliance with a disciplinary workfare regime with very few exceptions. Work requirements construct welfare programs in ways that exclude certain groups. Low wage workers who receive food stamps are good citizens, while those who do not have access to wages are made into a stigmatized other to be disciplined, surveilled and denied basic necessities
like food. This is reflective of a broader shift in citizenship for the urban poor, which is increasingly contingent on proper behavior. Anthropological work in other contexts has found that hunger and food insecurity are often caused, not by lack of local food supplies, but by the lack of personal and household entitlements to the food that exists (Sen 1981; Shipton 1990; Van Esterik 1999). In the US, the entanglement of welfare reforms with the food stamp program represents a diminished entitlement to a minimal, basic diet for all US citizens.

These holes in New York City’s food safety net are directly related to the welfare reforms of the 1990’s, which transformed the food stamp program from a universal program providing nutrition assistance to all poor Americans to one that is increasingly targeted towards the working poor. These holes in the food safety net are not uniform in all states and localities\(^{17}\). However, Congressional Republicans have proposed tightening the work requirements for SNAP in ways that would bring the national program in line with New York City’s approach. Those who are not working are increasingly subject to work requirements that do little to move these unemployed single mothers, non-custodial fathers, and poor single people into jobs, and often exacerbate their abilities to look for work. These policies are particularly cruel toward parents who go to great lengths to shield their children from food hardship, often by skipping meals themselves (Chilton and Rabinowich 2012; Himmelgreen 2001).

Hunger has the potential to shift social relationships, both within households and kin networks and more broadly (Shipton 1990). It is not hard to understand the emerging urban class structure when speaking to low-income Brooklynites. The incredible financial pressures they

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\(^ {17}\) See Appendix B: SNAP Participation Rates by State. States have significant discretion over how they implement the SNAP program for families and individuals who are also receiving cash assistance through TANF. More comparative work between states and localities is necessary to understand the impact of various administrative approaches and hunger.
experience, coupled with a tremendously insecure labor market and a welfare system that provides no refuge creates a situation where super-exploitation is made possible. This is reflected in the lowered labor standards of almost everyone I spoke to who has tried to access help through the welfare system and is also reflected in the long term job prospects for the urban poor. But this transition is no longer discussed in terms of ‘punishing’ the unemployed or even ending ‘dependence’. Instead, welfare has been restructured as a system of incentives, offering poor people ‘help’ in proportion to the degree that they ‘help themselves’.

If work supports like food stamps provide extra resources for some working New Yorkers, work requirements are the sticks that are intended to ‘motivate’, ‘encourage’ and ‘enforce’ the work ethic in unemployed New Yorkers. Welfare policy in NYC has taken a behavioral approach to welfare administration for the unemployed since the Giuliani administration. This approach, which ignores the structural issues of unemployment, under-employment and the incompatibility of low-wage work with the need to provide reproductive care in the home, has become particularly incongruous in the face of mass unemployment caused by a financial collapse originating in over-leveraged Wall Street banks. And yet, cash assistance continues to ensnare the unemployed into a complicated bureaucratic web that exacerbates insecurity and instability, often in profound, Kafkaesque ways. Many of the people I met in the course of my research longed for stability – an apartment, a job, some kind of regular, reliable income. Losing one’s welfare benefits has long been a problem, creating a crisis for families and individuals with no other options, often putting families and individuals at risk of serious hunger and food insecurity.

Families who are excluded from welfare benefits often turn to emergency food providers, like soup kitchens and food pantries, to make ends meet. As the social and economic rights of
citizens who are out of work have been steadily undermined, charity has re-emerged as the ‘proper’ channel for providing necessary resources like food. However, as I show in the next chapter, the growth of these charities are also tied to insecure labor conditions and evolving notions of citizenship.
Chapter 4: Consuming the Surplus: Emergency Food as Political Capital

My initial impression of the North Brooklyn Food Pantry, where I volunteered for two years, was one of barely controlled chaos. I often wondered why we seemed to have more food than we could handle one week, and the next we’d be handing out skimpy bags with barely a complete meal in them. Some weeks we gave out full bags with peanut butter, bread, vegetables, frozen chicken and pasta and the next week we would have cans of gravy, soup, bulk gummy drops that we had to bag and some past-date matzah. Word would get out in the neighborhood on days when we had a better selection and the line would swell. If we ran out of a coveted item, like meat, complaints would ensue for the rest of the day. People talked and word travelled fast. Expectations were raised, and, more often than not, deflated when we ran out of preferred foods before the end of the day. Then suddenly, in the summer of 2011, we had nothing to hand out and my questions about where it all came from came into sharp focus.

Food pantries and soup kitchens are typically thought of as private charities compassionately responding to the needs of the poor, but in reality these institutions are far more complex. As I will show in this chapter, these programs are heavily dependent on state funding and operate as a third tier of the welfare state. They mobilize large numbers of poor people as volunteers to distribute surplus food, transforming both wasted food and people who are typically considered ‘burdens’ on the state into an important new form of political capital. Discourses of care and compassion are central to EFP’s, but, as Miriam Ticktin argues, regimes of care, grounded in the moral imperative to relieve suffering, “ultimately work to displace possibilities for larger forms of collective change, particularly for the most disenfranchised.” She asks, “what does it mean to have care do the work of government?”(Ticktin 2011, 3). I take this question a step further and ask how government shapes the kind of care work that takes place in
soup kitchens and food pantries. I situate emergency food providers within a broader political economy, showing how markets produce need and "an affective surplus" that calls for "emotional responsiveness and inducement to action" (Adams 2012, 211). State funding plays a crucial role in shaping the response to this growing need, effectively generating new forms of free labor for a struggling economy.

No one is required to start a food pantry, but for those who are concerned about issues of hunger, the available funding structures open up certain possibilities and foreclose on other kinds of political imagination. The North Brooklyn Food Pantry was typical in this regard. Pastor Jan started the North Brooklyn Food Pantry at her small church in response to people coming to her door to ask for food. After several of these incidents, she looked into emergency food programs and found that there were none in the immediate neighborhood. She introduced the idea of starting a program to the congregation. They were supportive and volunteers began handing out bags of groceries several weeks later. As demand for the program grew, Pastor Jan sought new funding sources. Through the cultivation of a compassionate response to need, these funding sources transform hunger from a political problem to a set of technical concerns – how to get access to this funding, how to recruit volunteers and how to distribute these resources. The efforts to combat hunger through the proliferation of emergency food providers (EFP) have been impressive, and yet they have also been remarkably ineffective as a long-term solution to hunger, something many pantry directors readily acknowledge.

Tony Butler, the director of the largest food pantry in Brooklyn, talked about the limits of emergency food in a speech at an Annual Food Bank Conference, which gathers together pantry staff and volunteers from all five boroughs:
We can mask the justice issue because we’re caught up with the charity. We mask it by thinking we - us in this room - can solve the hunger issue. We can’t. We are just responding to it. The whole social structure has to respond to this hunger problem.

At another conference of anti-hunger activists, a pantry director wondered “how do we change the whole big picture?” before giving her own resigned response, “We’re going to be doing this forever and its just going to keep growing.” By extending resources, the state shapes the horizons of possibility, foreclosing on other political possibilities for addressing hunger and poverty.

There has been a massive shift in American governance, away from the idea that the state should provide a safety net and towards the idea that the market is the most efficient – and even moral – way to ensure people’s basic livelihoods (Hyatt 2001). When welfare programs are thought to promote dependency, volunteerism becomes a solution to the failures of the market to provide. The idea that volunteer operations should be the solution to the problems of poverty has enormous political appeal. It makes sense with the increasingly hegemonic view that individuals and communities must take responsibility for themselves and that private initiative is always preferable to broad-based government programs. What this view masks, particularly in the case of EFP’s, is the degree to which state funding and state programs structure the voluntary response to hunger and the experience of hunger itself for the most impoverished New Yorkers.

**The Summer of Corn**

For the first eight months that I volunteered at the North Brooklyn Food Pantry, we always had enough food to get through the day. Then, after seven years of operation with a fairly steady supply, there was nothing left. We closed early for several weeks that summer, turning people away who came every week to pick up food. The food we had to give out in the morning was sparse – mostly a few cases of fresh vegetables that came to us through a non-profit
organization and cans of corn. We had more corn than we knew what to do with that summer, more than people wanted and more than we could give away. One volunteer described a typical interaction with a client during those weeks:

Yesterday this lady told me, all I get is corn? I told her, we’re running low and all the Food Bank gave us was these cases and cases of corn. If you don’t want it, give it back to me. And she’s still fussing. And I said, what do you want from me? Something’s better than nothing. (Then the lady complained that) I didn’t get no rice. We don’t have no rice. We gave all the rice out. This is not fair. So I says, well you should get up early in the morning so you can get what you want. She said, ok. I’ll take the bag.

It wasn’t just the North Brooklyn Food pantry. When the truck came with our delivery, all the pallets look like ours – piles of canned corn. Renee, a director from another local pantry told me, “We’ve since had some droughts where it’s like ‘would you like some corn?’ I’m sure you’ve been through that. It was like, man cannot live on corn alone.” Yolanda, the director of a large pantry in Williamsburg reported that,

It came a point that every week you would go into the system it was like 50 cases of corn, but nothing else. 50 cases. We were just bagging corn and we would tell them, this is all we have and we had the HPNAP grant, so I would just order rice to go with their corn. There was nothing else to do. We were giving them like 4 or 5 cans of corn.

Over the next year, as I met with other pantry directors from around Brooklyn and asked them where they got their food from, the conversation inevitably turned to ‘that corn’. On a conference call about federal budget cuts with food pantry directors from across the city, a frantic director from Staten Island came on the line late. She apologized for missing the first few minutes of the call and then asked what was going on. “Did the cuts already happen? Our shelves are bare. All we have is corn.”

Up until this point in my fieldwork, I had been vaguely aware that some of the food we gave out at the North Brooklyn Food Pantry came from the USDA, but I had no real sense of just how important those state resources were. What the crisis of corn made clear was that state
funding structures these institutions in ways that are hidden from the people who rely on them – and even from the ethnographers who study them.

The Growth of EFP’s

Popularly understood as private charities, in reality food pantries are non-profit contractors that distribute surplus foods, both for the state and for private corporations. While food pantries and soup kitchens existed before 1980, they were typically small and received no regular or reliable state funds. A confluence of events in the early 1980’s, including growing media attention around the storage costs for surplus foods like cheese and butter, a deep recession resulting in widespread unemployment, increased demand at soup kitchens and pantries, and national political leadership that called for increased volunteerism and reduced social spending, resulted in the mass distribution of federal surplus commodities through

18 There are two origin stories about modern food banks. The more well-know story, promoted by Feeding America, is that John van Hengel came up with the idea in 1967 in Arizona when a woman told him that she fed her children from soup kitchens and grocery store dumpsters. He came up with the idea of a food bank, where people with too much could deposit their surplus and those with too little could withdraw. The second story is that the Black Panthers developed the practice in Santa Cruz, California. They got expired food from grocery stores and gave it out for free breakfasts and groceries for people. While it is probably the case that the founders of these two programs came up with the idea independently around the same time, what happened to these programs subsequently can tell us a great deal about the politics of distributing surplus food. A change in the tax code in 1967 allowed manufacturers and retailers to be able to claim these donations as tax breaks, opening up the flood gates of donated food. Corporations quickly built relationships with organizations like van Hengel’s food bank, which in turn spawned a national network of food banks. The Black Panther’s programs, however, were viewed as a threat by the likes of J. Edgar Hoover, who called them “the best and most influential activity going for the Black Panther Party” and as such, “the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for” (http://www.organizingupgrade.com/index.php/modules-menu/community-organizing/item/942-honoring-the-44th-anniversary-of-the-black-panthers-free-breakfast-program). Authorities required these Black Panther feeding programs to file with the authorities and to comply with various state regulations, something that was beyond their capacity.
regional food banks (Poppendieck 1998). What was supposed to be a one time distribution of surplus cheese soon took on a political life of its own and in 1983, Congress passed legislation establishing the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). TEFAP provided funds for the distribution of surplus commodities and, importantly, to reimburse local and private agencies for some administrative costs (Fitchen 1988; Poppendieck 1998). Initially designed as a temporary measure, TEFAP was quickly and continually renewed. In 1990 Congress finally dropped the word “temporary” and renamed the program The Emergency Food Assistance Program. This regular infusion of surplus commodities and administrative funding drew ever growing numbers of “community organizations into the food distribution process, and communities without food banks were given a new incentive to develop them.”(Poppendieck 1998, 103)

It was a very effective incentive. In North Brooklyn there was one small program in the area in 1980. Today there are 12, with several of these serving well over 1,000 people a month. In New York City, the Food and Hunger Hotline, which was organized in 1979, identified 30 emergency food providers. By 1987, that number had grown to 487 and by 1991 the tally was 730 (Poppendieck 1998, 8). Today the Food Bank of New York City, which distributes food to local emergency food providers, claims to serve over 1,000 of these institutions and the New York Coalition Against Hunger, an umbrella advocacy organization, puts the number at over 1,100.19 These programs are typically started by and housed in faith-based institutions, senior centers and grassroots community organizations.

Both the number of providers in North Brooklyn and the number of people they serve has been growing, particularly since 2007. When Yolanda, a director at one of the larger local

19 Janet Fitchen’s findings from the early 1980’s confirm this pattern nationally.
pantries, first started working there in 2001, she said it was a lot if they saw 500 people a month. By 2011, this pantry was getting about 2,200 a month and seeing more all the time. At the North Brooklyn Pantry, where I conducted my research, we would regularly see 300 people a week in 2009. By 2012, that number had gone up as high as 800 some weeks. Nationally, Feeding America estimates that 37 million individuals utilized an emergency food provider (EFP) in 2009, a substantial increase over the 25 million estimated to have used one in 2005 (Malbi, et al. 2010). This explosive growth in the number of EFP’s and the number of people served represents what Andrea Muehlebach has called “the opulence of virtue” which “flourishes in proportion to marketization” (Muehlebach 2012, 23). The growth in EFP’s has emerged in direct response to cutbacks to federal entitlements (Dehavenon 1995). But these cuts to federal entitlements are only part of the story. More importantly, federal TEFAP funding has unleashed an unprecedented outpouring of care in the form of grocery bags and hot meals.

Though most food pantries combine private donations with state supplied commodities, these state resources are the backbone of emergency food provision in the US. In New York, federal TEFAP money is supplemented by HPNAP (a state program) and EFAP (local city funding). Renee, the director of a mid-size pantry in North Brooklyn described the growth of their EFP from a small program serving 20 families a month to a mid-sized one serving 850 families a month. “(In 1994) we had this little program, through the New York Community Trust. We hooked up with the Food Bank and then we really started to become a real pantry.”

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20 It is difficult to estimate the number of people who access emergency food because EFP’s are not required to keep detailed records. Feeding America, which is a national umbrella organization that represents Food Banks nationally estimates these numbers by surveying their members. Though exact numbers are difficult to produce, the sheer number of providers and the increased numbers of clients they uniformly report confirm a marked increase in demand.
Becoming a real pantry meant getting access to TEFAP, HPNAP and EFAP funding through the New York City Food Bank, which distributes most state, city and federal surplus and purchased foods. While most pantries do solicit donations of food and funds from non-state sources like private donors and community groups they don’t become ‘real pantries’ until they partner with a food bank and become distributors of federally and state funded foods – essentially until they become contract organizations working with the state to distribute surplus commodities.

In order to get food from the New York City Food Bank, programs have to show that they are self-sustaining for a period of six months. But once they do begin to receive food from the Food Bank, they rarely spend private funds on food purchases. Instead, they typically apply for additional sources of state funding. Stacey McCarthy, who oversees New York State HPNAP funding for several hundred New York City EFP’s described the ways that these various forms of funding interlock.

When I do a site visit, we always ask people what other sources of funding do you have. We all say we’re supplemental. No one is saying we’re going to keep your food program open all year serving people. I can go to a pantry and be like oh, yeah, TEFAP doesn’t have anything but luckily EFAP came yesterday. And all the food will be the EFAP food. So I think they all really work together. The majority of the sites did not use any of their private funds to buy food. The private funding is going to go - the church funding is going to go to keep the lights on. So I think a lot of agencies will not use any private money. They need all of these sources.

Though these funding streams have been fairly secure since the 1980’s, recent calls for budget cuts have put them at risk. Part of this drive toward funding cuts is fueled by the myth that pantries can or should be run solely with food donated from the private sector. A pantry director from Staten Island explained the absurdity of this claim, given her own experience running a large feeding operation.

There’s a belief that there are so many other ways that people get food to people, like private food drives. They are never going to make up for TEFAP with private food drives. They do one out here every year (on Staten Island) and it’s a drop in the bucket.
If we lose 10 million meals, I mean, I don’t know how many million food drives it would take to make that up. We still need help from the federal government, no matter what other people think.

EFP’s also take donations from manufacturers, and for many years these institutions provided a dumping ground for surplus inventory, because donating was less expensive than paying disposal costs and because it was incentivized by tax breaks (Fitchen 1988; Poppendieck 1998). However, these kinds of donations have largely dried up with the kinds of inventory systems that places like Wal-Mart have. There is much less over stock or surplus inventory, as large retailers have changed relationships with suppliers who now produce exactly as much as the retailer needs, when they need it. Ultimately, this means less donated food. In this context, EFP’s are even more dependent on surplus food from the USDA and other state funding streams.

The emergence of this voluntary sector is fundamentally shaped by the state, but in ways that obscure state involvement. This, along with the explosive growth of EFP’s, has significant political and community consequences. As scholars have argued, "The most politically significant consequence of the new contractual relationship between government and non-profits is the redirection of organizational energy from the mobilization of public constituencies to the 'treatment' of clients one by one. In the process, attention shifts to personal rather than political problems"(Crenson and Ginsberg 2002, 223). The existence of state resources shapes the imaginaries of the people in communities and neighborhoods about how hunger could or should be addressed. People who worry about hunger and poverty start food pantries, collect cans, or volunteer. In doing so, they bring needed resources into a community. But they do little to disrupt the power relations that create and maintain poverty.

Unlike federal entitlements, both the food and the funding these organizations receive are inconsistent and irregular. The most common reason pantries turn people away is a lack of food
(Malbi, et al. 2010). During the summer of corn, many pantry directors reported closing early or for several weeks because they had nothing to give out. This particular shortfall was caused by high commodity prices. Since prices were high, farmers were selling their products on the market and the USDA was buying up less surplus as a price support. TEFAP is one of the USDA’s fifteen Food and Nutrition Service programs, which are all funded through the federal Farm Bill. There are two streams of TEFAP funding laid out in the Farm Bill. Mandatory TEFAP funds are a set budget amount that is earmarked for purchasing food. Discretionary TEFAP funds are used to buy up surplus commodities and this funding stream fluctuates depending on the strength of agricultural markets. The discretionary funding, which is basically intended as a market intervention when commodity prices are low, had typically been about half of the TEFAP that came to EFP’s prior to 2011. But as commodity prices rose, and as pressure for austerity and spending restraint took hold in Washington, discretionary purchases of food dropped.

The situation I saw up close in New York was felt at food pantries across the nation. “Recent high food prices and strong agricultural markets required less USDA intervention in the agriculture economy, resulting in a nearly 30% drop in TEFAP commodity purchases in FY2011. This drop reduced the volume of food provided by TEFAP by approximately $173 million at a time when food banks are experiencing sharply increased need due to widespread unemployment and reduced wages. Food banks are struggling to make up the difference, sometimes unable to fill order requests from local agencies.” (Malbi, et al. 2010). At a Food Bank annual conference in 2010, a pantry director had asked, “what happens if you run out of TEFAP?” Jan, the Pastor at the North Brooklyn Food Pantry had blown off this question at the time because she assumed it couldn’t happen. It was unimaginable to her. But by the summer of
2011 she was taking it seriously. There was no TEFAP for several months and none of the other state or city grants had come through.

The growth and institutionalization of EFP’s is part of a significant push towards contracting out social services from direct state provision to non-profit service agencies, a process which began in the 1960’s in the US and more recently in Europe (Crenson and Ginsberg 2002; Muehlebach 2011; Ranci 2001). Emergency food providers, like other non-profits that are contracted to provide social services, “expand the welfare state without expanding the state itself”(Crenson and Ginsberg 2002, 225). As Feeding America boasts, “Food banks combine TEFAP commodities and storage and distribution funding with private donations of food and funds, infrastructure, and manpower to leverage the program far beyond its budgeted amount. In this way, TEFAP and the emergency food system exemplify an optimum model of public-private partnership.” A central component of this optimum model is mobilizing an enormous volunteer labor force that can carry out this work for little or no compensation.

Emergency food providers rely heavily on volunteer labor to distribute these resources. About 68% of food pantries and 42% of soup kitchens in Feeding America’s national network report relying entirely on volunteers and have no paid staff. Feeding America network volunteers provided more than 7 million hours of service in 2009. If these volunteers were paid at the current federal minimum wage of $7.25 per hour, their work would cost more than $50 million in additional wages (Malbi, et al. 2010). When I began volunteering at the North Brooklyn Food Pantry unpaid volunteers carried out almost all of the day-to-day operations. The church diocese paid Pastor Jan and she used some of her time to order food and oversee the food deliveries each week, but no one was paid directly for their work with the hunger programs. Pantries vary widely in the number of paid staff they employ and the larger the pantry is, the
more likely they are to have some paid employees. These staff members can be paid from a
range of sources, including church funding, private donations, grants and state funding. At least
two of the pantries in North Brooklyn received funding from their local City Council member to
pay for a regular staff member and some overhead costs. But even the largest and best-staffed
pantries still rely heavily on volunteers. By involving large numbers of community members in
these local projects to ‘fight hunger’, EFP’s “expand the limits and maximize the powers of city
government by making the people self-governing”(Cruikshank 1999, 9), raising important
questions about who is doing this volunteer work, something I will return to later in the chapter.

Unlike prior expansions of the welfare state in the US, expansions in welfare
provisioning through contracting with non-profit agencies undercuts poor people’s ability to
organize around entitlements as citizens. In this way, the growth of non-profit social service
providers is a key aspect of contemporary urban poverty governance, replacing entitlements
provided by the state with services provided by non-profit agencies. Unlike state provided
welfare benefits, social services that are contracted out provide resources without expanding
rights. As Jeff Maskovsky and Judith Goode have shown, this form of privatization,

removes the poor from a direct relationship with the state, a relationship that historically
has been essential to the expression of collective agency for poor communities. In this
context, the neoliberal celebration of the removal of the state from poor people’s
everyday lives may be seen for what it is: an ideological power play (Maskovsky and
Goode 2001, 9).

Proponents of volunteerism and charity as an appropriate response to social needs often
wax nostalgic for a time when communities cared for their own and citizens were empowered to
help one another – a time before big government robbed Americans of these neighborly tasks. At

21 It is important to note the sheer scale and reach of these organizations, compared to
other welfare programs. The 37 million people who utilized EFP's in 2009 is far greater
than the 4.3 million who relied on TANF, the 8.9 million who relied on SSI, and only slightly
fewer than the 39 million who relied on SNAP that same year.
a recent hearing in Congress, Representative LaMalfa said individuals and churches are better for helping the poor, as that help "comes from the heart, not from a badge or from a mandate" (Hilzik 2013). What the growth of emergency food providers and the crisis of corn shows is that the view of these voluntary institutions as a return to charity as an autonomous realm that exists apart from the state is deeply flawed. In the realm of hunger relief, the state is thoroughly enmeshed in the organization of charity, volunteerism and compassionate labor.

The shift in funding from entitlement programs to outsourced services and public/private partnerships marks a shift in the broader imaginary around social welfare and citizenship. Instead of a broad national collective, responsible for the welfare of poor citizens these state-backed voluntary efforts represent an emerging conception of the social. State funding still plays a role in cultivating affective bonds of care. But these affective bonds are cultivated at the local level, not the national level through broad-based or universal social welfare programs (Muehlebach 2012). State funding streams summon volunteers and voluntary efforts into being, but they are not easily identifiable as state programs. Though EFP’s appear to “come from the heart” and not from “a mandate”, the reality is much more complex.

Anti-hunger advocates involved in emergency food are often intimately aware of this form of soft power, understanding that emergency food can be used as a replacement for or a justification to cut other entitlements for which they have long advocated. At the same time, these same anti-hunger workers find it difficult not to accept the resources being offered and to grow in response to increased hunger in their communities (Poppendieck 1998). The immediate needs of hungry people demand a compassionate response, and anti-hunger advocates who have long been involved in emergency food have been empowered to respond to these needs through the extension of state resources like TEFAP. The result has been the institutionalization of
‘emergency food’ into a regular resource for the urban poor through the cultivation of compassionate labor.

**Hunger and the Limits of Compassionate Labor**

As Andrea Muehlebach argues, “compassionate labor operates not as a mitigating force against, but as a vehicle for the production and maintenance of a new exclusionary order” (Muehlebach 2011). EFP’s are not organized around a right to adequate food, but on the institutionalization of sympathy – the sympathetic response to need. The proper response is gratitude – embodied in food pantry clients’ endless repetition that the volunteers who hand out food “don’t need to be doing this”. However, gratitude and sympathy maintain inequality and do not challenge it. This is the real meaning of the institutionalization of emergency food. The public/private institutional organization – with the state providing funding and resources and pantry volunteers providing the public interface - obscures the state’s role in structuring the charitable response to hunger. Volunteers, by their very nature, deflect blame or claims of citizenship rights away from the state by acting as the public face of emergency food – the blameless volunteer freely giving his or her time to respond to poverty. The haphazard organization of EFP’s, the sometimes arbitrary treatment of clients and the failure to meet people’s needs is excused by the organization of volunteer labor to deliver state purchased commodity goods.

The US has so much over-production and waste that people can access what is unwanted, foods that find no market and agricultural surplus given to food pantries to distribute. “The foodstuffs given out by the government are not exactly scraps from the tables of the affluent, but they are clearly the leftovers from the food production industry. They represent the overproduction that threatens to bring the price received by the producer/processor, the “surplus”
purchased by the federal government to keep it off the market” (Fitchen 1988). People who are fed in this way have little choice over what they can eat. Being fed means eating what is offered and complaining runs the risk of ostracizing volunteers who control who gets what.

The surplus commodities bought by the USDA go to various programs, including school meals and foreign aid. The period of high food prices beginning in 2008, which has been a driver of food riots around the globe, does not only effect less developed nations – though the impacts in poorer countries are certainly more pronounced. High commodity prices mean less food aid, both domestically and internationally. High food prices in the US mean less distribution of surplus commodities and less food for the very poorest Americans, who are most likely to rely heavily, and sometimes exclusively, on food from emergency food providers.

People with extremely meager resources often go to more than one food pantry to get enough food to eat. Typically people who are excluded from welfare protections are the most heavily reliant on food pantries, including immigrants who are excluded from SNAP if they are undocumented or if they are documented but have been in the U.S. for less than five years and the unemployed who are sanctioned off of food stamps. Because most pantries in New York City are getting the majority of their food from the same state funded sources, this means the poorest people are the most hurt by these shortfalls. Ed is a local white man in his mid forties who lives in a nearby SRO. He had worked as a tattoo artist for many years. It was the only job he had ever had and he had made a stable living that way until he was seriously injured in a car accident. His hands shook and he could no longer work. He had been repeatedly turned down for SSI and often panhandled in the neighborhood. We ate dinner together one night at the soup kitchen during the summer of corn and he talked about his experience.

I go to a couple other pantries and try to get stuff. But the food they give us is like yams and corn. It’s the same food at every pantry. Like 6 years ago when I first broke my
neck I was going to pantries and stuff and one place would have some meat, another place would have some vegetables. So you’d hit two or three pantries, you’d have enough for like two or three days. And now it’s like, nobody is donating anything other than corn and yams. How much do they think the poor want to eat corn and yams, you know? I’ll eat a whole can of corn, when I know that’s just not healthy for you. Your body doesn’t digest corn like that, but I’ll eat the whole can because I’m hungry.

Martha, a twenty four year old African American single mother with one child, was extremely reliant on food pantries and soup kitchens. There were four in her neighborhood that she went to regularly. Her family came to New York from Trinidad when she was two years old and, though she grew up in New York, she is undocumented and does not qualify for SNAP. Her immigration status made finding work difficult. She worked as a camp counselor each summer and looked for odd jobs the rest of the year. She had done well in high school and wanted to go to college. But her immigration status also meant she could not qualify for financial aid and there was no way she could afford to pay tuition on her own. Unemployed at the time of our interview in September of 2011, she only had a $200 a month food stamp budget for her child to feed both of them. She made up the difference between this tiny food budget and her household needs by going to pantries throughout the month. She was keenly aware of the shortfalls EFP’s were experiencing that summer.

Right now, it’s really thin because I know that they’re doin’ budget cuts. It just means less in your cupboard. It just means less food. That’s what it means. It means that at some point, you have nothing in your cabinet.

EFP’s represent a third tier of the safety net that has grown rapidly over the past 30 years. With few or no barriers to entry, these institutions provide crucially important resources to impoverished Americans. However, these supports are tenuous at best, failing often because they rely on volunteer labor, inconsistent supply and general disorganization. The first day I volunteered at the food pantry, I marveled at the inefficiency of hand packing bags and running them out the front door. My overall impression was that of a dysfunctional grocery store.
Packing the bags takes several hours of work by a dozen volunteers. Even the most efficient, best run pantries – pantries that have computerized systems that allow clients to pick the foods they want – are not immune to bare shelves and volunteers complain about not having enough food to hand out when state funding is low or the USDA does not buy up sufficient commodities to keep them well stocked.

Gupta suggests that bureaucracies are sites of barely controlled chaos that structure the violence of poverty and render it normal (Gupta 2012). Food pantries and soup kitchens represent an evolving form of welfare state bureaucracy – one that is far more arbitrary and chaotic than the welfare office. These impressive growth of EFP’s give the distinct impression that something is being done about hunger, and in doing so, mask the structural violence of a failed welfare state to provide even basic resources like sufficient food. Far from providing secure access to food, families who rely on these resources never know what they will be able to get in a given day or a given month, and complaints are met with sympathy at best and hostility at worst.

Debates over how food should be distributed at the North Brooklyn Food Pantry were a daily occurrence, and had far more to do with the disposition of the pantry volunteer than with any concrete, transparent rules. The people who volunteered every week were, by and large, poor women with deep ties in the neighborhood and there was an expectation of reciprocity with many of their friends and relatives that came for food. It was difficult for them to resist these expectations because they were deeply embedded in reciprocal relationships that sustained them both socially and financially. Clients generally took a wait and see attitude. Debbie, a 42 year old white woman with a two year old son told me, “Sometimes I can get the bags for the baby

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22 Anthropologists have long noted the importance of reciprocal ties among low-income Americans as a survival strategy. See for example Carol Stack, Ed Liebow, and Ida Susser.
and sometimes I can’t. You know, I’m not picky. If they can do it for the baby, that’s fine. They do it for me and I feed him, so you know.”

Even volunteers without deep ties to the community developed preferential habits as they handed out food. Emily, a young white woman with no community ties who came to help with vegetable distribution one summer described her own favoritism.

When people are more inquisitive, I’m more inclined to give them more. There are times you say no to one person and then you say yes to someone else. If I recognize them as a regular, I’m more inclined to give them more. I do it because it’s a familiar face and I have some degree of rapport with them.

Juan, a director at one of the oldest pantries in the neighborhood expressed a common attitude – that some people need more than others and so people at the pantry tried to ‘take care’ of them, even if it violated the rules. “We want once a month, that’s the rule. But we are very flexible and we try not to show publicly that there are people that they come once a week. You start knowing who really needs that.”

Pantry clients were sensitive to this preferential treatment and often complained. Daniel, a middle-aged African American man who was a weekly client for several months was acutely aware of differences in the way that some clients were treated.

I think that’s kind of unfair. I don’t like to say its favoritism being played there, but I have to call it for what it is. You know, so, its like, if you’re in a position to do that job, then you need to make sure that you are doing it equally. You know what I mean? Like, I’ve seen times when people throw the bags back (because they feel they are getting less than other clients), Like, yo, what is this? And that’s not what a pantry should be. Its equal and its for everybody. Everybody should be getting the same thing.

Other pantry clients used this favoritism to their advantage, establishing relationships with volunteers by offering gifts or small tokens of appreciation. Rarely a week went by without someone bringing a homemade dessert or cups of coffee for the volunteers. Clients with kin ties to the regular volunteers were the hardest to treat equally and they were often given extra food or
more of the preferred foods. The first few weeks that I volunteered I was oblivious to these exchanges. I would often pick up bags of frozen chicken or extra milk and ask why these were tucked under a pew in the sanctuary of the church only to be told by one of the other volunteers that they were for a cousin or a friend who was coming by later.

As Jan Poppendieck points out, “the charitable giver has no responsibility to provide equitably” (Poppendieck 229). Despite federal and state funding of these institutions, no one can demand food from a food pantry. If a person is denied food, there is no recourse – no fair hearing and no accountability. And yet, EFP’s are celebrated as models of efficiency and citizen engagement. But the efficiency they are celebrated for is not the efficiency of ending or preventing hunger. It is the market rational of doing more with less. Success is measured in how many meals or pounds of food were distributed, how many people served. It is at once the ‘opulence of virtue’ – celebrating how much has been accomplished with such meager resources - and the rational calculation of the market, which obscures poverty as a political problem.

EFP’s are similar to development and anti-poverty projects around the world insofar as their "real importance in the end lies in the 'side effects’" (Ferguson 2006, 272). EFP’s may fail to end hunger, but they succeed in mobilizing large numbers of volunteers. It is the importance of this volunteerism to which I now turn.

**From Client to Volunteer**

Volunteers and volunteerism are central to the functioning of EFP’s. Understanding their place in these institutions is crucial to understanding emergency food’s role in contemporary urban poverty governance. Previous expansions of welfare benefits have made the state a target of collective political action for poor people demanding access to more resources (Kornbluh 2007; Nadasen 2004; Piven and Cloward 1979; West 1981). Expansions of the welfare state
through contracting out to non-profit organizations makes these kinds of collective political actions less likely, since the public interface of emergency food providers is not a street level government bureaucrat whose job depends, at least to some degree, on serving clients, but a volunteer. But the emergence of this enormous voluntary sector also has important implications for the volunteers who carry out this work.

I met Fabiola, a forty five year old Puerto Rican woman, at the North Brooklyn Food Pantry, where she had been a volunteer for about a year. The first night I came to help pack bags for the pantry, she was there overseeing a mix of high school students and community residents who were filling bags with rice, an array of microwaveable meals that had been market failures, USDA raisins and dates, and a few random canned goods that came from the Food Bank as donations. She was counting her change to see if she had enough money to take the bus home or if she would have to walk. She lived about two miles away and it was a cold November night. She would be back at the pantry the next morning by 8am, to help distribute the bags that were being packed as we chatted.

She told me that she stops at a nearby convenience store on her way in every Thursday morning to pick up any left over food they have. She said she would do more, but she doesn’t have a car. I marveled at her dedication and she smiled and responded, “its all love.” As we came to be friends over the next two years, my initial impression of Fabiola, as a selfless, dedicated volunteer, gave way to a far more complex picture. What brought Fabiola to the food pantry every week was a complex mix of altruism, need, fear and resilience. This love was complicated.

Fabiola was born and raised in Greenpoint. Married at eighteen, she moved from her parents’ house to her husband’s and after a year, gave birth to her eldest child, a daughter who
was born with a severe physical disability. Fabiola had done small jobs off the books and done seasonal work at local factories, but had never had much steady employment. A few years after the birth of her daughter, she and her husband divorced. She applied for welfare, which at the time did not require mothers of young children to perform work assignments in order to qualify for benefits. Six years later, she had another child. She spent their childhoods caring for them, volunteering in their schools and taking her daughter to her numerous doctor and physical therapy appointments. She lived for a time in public housing in Fort Green, a neighborhood to the South of Greenpoint and Williamsburg. It was difficult for her daughter to climb stairs and she lobbied the housing authority for a more appropriate apartment for her family. “It took me over three years to consistently call the lady – it went from every day to once a week to once a month, but I kept going until I finally got an apartment.” After several years she was finally awarded an apartment on the South Side of Williamsburg, where she still lives.

Fabiola’s daughter, who receives disability insurance and had helped Fabiola pay the rent, got married in 2008 and moved out. Fabiola had spent years and years on and off of welfare, exempted from work requirements because she was caring for her daughter. “I have a handicapped child. She needed me. So I didn’t have to (do work assignments).” In 2004, she was offered a job in the parks department and worked there for several years until her boss was fired and she was let go. She didn’t want to go back on welfare or apply for food stamps, because her daughter was old enough to be independent and, having been in the system for many years, she feared the work requirements. She felt they were degrading and she worried that if the caseworker made a mistake or if Fabiola did not meet all of their requirements, she could lose her housing. “The system has changed so much. I could go back to welfare right now, but if they’re going to put me to work in a place and cleaning up trucks, no, I’m sorry. It’s not that I’m
better than that, it’s just that I can do more.”

She had always done small jobs, taking photos at parties and selling them, planning salsa nights at local clubs and holding raffles. Accustomed to living on a tiny budget, she scraped a living together this way, but by 2009 she was in a desperate situation. She called around to all the food pantries in the area and liked that the North Brooklyn Food Pantry did not ask for any personal information or proof that you were in need. The lack of requirements made sense with Fabiola’s view that,

If I tell you I need food, I need food, and I shouldn’t have to bring to you a list – I might as well go the welfare and be taken care of. Remember in so many other places they need your social security, they need pay stubs, they need people to come in for an interview. It shouldn’t be that way.23

Pastor Jan even told her that she could come and volunteer if she wanted. She came the next day, got some food and spent an hour or two helping out. She started volunteering every week and became an indispensible part of the volunteer operation. Her dedication was motivated by love for her community, and she clearly enjoyed helping out neighbors, friends and family who she had known her whole life with some extra food.

I guess because I was put on this earth to be a volunteer. I’ve been volunteering in my life in so many other aspects, from the public school to this, so what’s a couple of days out of the week for myself and for everybody else. But I look at it more for everybody else.

23 According to the USDA, "the Department makes foods available to States for use in providing nutrition assistance to those in need through TEFAP. In accordance with section 214 of the EFAA, 7 U.S.C. 7515, 60 percent of each State's share of TEFAP foods is based on the number of people with incomes below the poverty level within the State and 40 percent on the number of unemployed persons within the State. State officials are responsible for establishing the network through which the foods will be used by eligible recipient agencies (ERA) in providing nutrition assistance to those in need, and for allocating foods among those ERAs. States have full discretion in determining the amount of foods that will be made available to ERAs for use in preparing meals and/or for distribution to households for home consumption." There is no required or uniform screening process for EFP’s and some have more requirements than others. The USDA distributes food to the states based on a the number of people living in poverty and the unemployment rate, but individual EFP’s all have their own in-take process.
She told older women on the street that they should come get a bag at the pantry and was particularly worried about the homeless men and the families with children who came to get food every week – often sneaking extra milk or bread in their bags.

When I found this place, this was nice, and I passed it on to whoever I could, whoever I knew that needed help as far as food. I know the numbers. I know I added a lot to (the pantry’s) numbers because I definitely told a lot more people to come, even people that work.

But her dedication was also based on need. With almost no income, Fabiola needed the food she took home with her every week. Like many of the other volunteers, coming in to pack bags and hand out groceries also meant they could pick and choose what they needed for their own kitchens. Though this wasn’t her plan, volunteering at the pantry had become Fabiola’s lifeline. “I never thought a year or two years later that this is where I would be. My pay comes in my food and I really am okay.” Fabiola’s dedication, coming in every week, was a response to deep and devastating food insecurity. She quite literally had to work for food, and missing ‘work’ for a week would mean not eating.

Fabiola’s experience of food pantries mirrors the institutionalization of emergency food as a response to an on-going crisis for the urban poor. When I asked her what the neighborhood was like when she was growing up, she reflected,

It was much easier to survive and take care of your family back then than it is now. It’s nearly impossible. We used to see a lot more abandoned buildings before than we do now. The population has definitely increased. And there are wonderful places to live. But they’re too damned expensive. They’re just ridiculous. I was born and raised in this area and I never knew anything about pantries. I went for myself maybe once or twice years ago with a friend of mine, but I never had the necessity to consistently go.

Spurred on by federal funding, emergency food providers began to proliferate in response to increasing poverty and early welfare state retrenchment at the start of the Reagan years (Dehavenon 1985; Poppendieck 1998). While some individuals and families turn to these
resources for a brief time in a moment of hardship, the vast majority are weekly or monthly customers, depending on how often they are allowed to come and get food. Like Fabiola, most clients have come to rely on these resources as a regular supplement to meager incomes and to make up for gaping holes in the social safety net.

Emergency food providers are a means of transforming waste into political capital, and, in doing so, emerge as a key technology of citizenship. Over-production of food by farmers and food processors is transformed from waste into charity when it is distributed through the emergency food system. As people’s economic situations deteriorate, these resources go from being an occasional help to a regular necessity. Along those same lines, Fabiola was able to transform herself from a ‘problem’, as a welfare recipient, to a ‘solution’ as a valued volunteer feeding hungry people. As Andrea Muehlebach has shown, “citizens across the generational spectrum are being summoned into accruing recognition not through waged but through unwaged labor, not through the production and traffic of tangible goods, but through the production of good feeling” (Muehlebach 2011, 61). In the case of EFP’s, this good feeling extends far beyond the immediate interaction between volunteers and clients, which can be quite messy, contentious and ambivalent, to include large and small donors and the corporations that advertise their contributions to the ‘fight against hunger’.

Through this transformation, however, the actual poverty of many of the volunteers becomes invisible. Fabiola’s need is erased by her service. Feeding America calculates the number of volunteer hours that are ‘donated’ each year to EFP’s, but in Fabiola’s case, it is not clear that her work at the pantry should be considered a ‘donation’. Like many of the volunteers at soup kitchens and food pantries, Fabiola’s volunteerism was motivated by more than just a desire to serve. The most dedicated volunteers at the North Brooklyn Food Pantry were those in
the greatest need. There were five core pantry volunteers who came each week. Angela was a single, middle-aged Puerto Rican woman who lived off of her adopted daughters disability allowance, food stamps and a stipend she received as a foster parent. She never missed a week at the pantry and was reprimanded several times for taking too much food home with her at the end of the day. There were also three retirees, older women who received social security and depended heavily on what they could take home from the pantry. And then there was Fabiola, who had virtually no income at all beyond what she could scrape together through her informal work as a party planner.

It was common to meet retired men and women living on fixed incomes or people who were unemployed volunteering at pantries. Javier, the unpaid director of another small pantry in the area described how he was able to staff his organization.

I can’t give stipends or a tip to the person downstairs who is giving the food. He was two years on unemployment, so he was able, for the time he was on unemployment, to help me. And he was getting the money from unemployment and he was helping me volunteer. There’s another lady doing the same thing now. But what is going to happen when the unemployment is over? I don’t know. And then each year it’s a little less support from public funding, less support from church funding.

Though the need that motivates many volunteers to come to the pantry each week is often no different than the need that brings clients, the difference between giving and receiving is no small matter. Stacey McCarthy, who helps oversee HPNAP grants for several hundred pantries in NYC, observed, “I’ve seen it at every pantry. There’s a contentious relationship. It’s like the lucky few who are giving it out. And then you get the lucky volunteers who may have been like people pulled off the line to help out.” It was extremely common among the pantry directors I spoke to (a few of whom are also volunteers who are not paid for their work) to recruit pantry clients as volunteers. At the North Brooklyn Food Pantry, four of the five core volunteers had been regular pantry clients before they were ‘pulled off the line’ and invited in as volunteers.
This dichotomy, between those ‘on the line’ and the lucky few who are allowed to help reflects the broader dichotomy of emergency food. Volunteers are transformed from objects of pity into people who can pity. To go back on the line after being inside is unthinkable. It is a demotion. As Fabiola put it when tensions broke out at the pantry over who was allowed to volunteer and what volunteers were allowed to take home with them, “We’re all here because we need and I’ll fight for my right to be here.”

The privileges of becoming a volunteer, however, are mostly symbolic. The material rewards are limited to being able to pick one’s own food, sometimes taking a little extra of whatever the pantry has to offer, and giving a little extra to friends and relatives. The extension of state funds has created a massive expansion of EFP’s, mobilizing large numbers of volunteers who are paid nothing for their labors. Of course, most people do not volunteer at pantries full time, but those who make up the core of the volunteer effort are quite often women with few economic opportunities.

Emergency food has become a competitive survival niche for the very poor, particularly those few who are invited in ‘off the line’ to become volunteers. Doreen Wohl, founder of the West Side Campaign Against Hunger and an influential anti-hunger advocate in New York City, advocates including clients in the daily tasks of the pantry as a way to “invite them in, make it more personal and give them some ownership”. It was a common practice at the North Brooklyn Food Pantry when there was too much work and too few volunteers to ask the men who came to the soup kitchen on Wednesday night to help pack bags after dinner. Several of these men became semi-regular volunteers and you could track their economic fortunes by whether or not they came in to help. Not seeing them for a few weeks or months meant they had found a job. Seeing them again meant they were out of work.
However, this is a hollow form of empowerment. There are, of course, jobs created by the growth of EFP’s. But these jobs very rarely go to those who actually rely on emergency food. The growth of the welfare state in the past has resulted in the growth of employment. This expansion of the welfare state, through public/private partnerships staffed by volunteers creates very few jobs and, instead, mobilizes large numbers of poor people for very little compensation. 

**Welfare, Work and the Limits of Voluntarism**

The question of employment and compensation is not a minor one in the context of widespread underemployment and a welfare system built around work. There are seemingly no meaningful ways for people with no financial means to resist the dual structures of the exploitative low-wage labor market and the punitive welfare system. Fabiola’s solution to these constraints has been to make herself an indispensible volunteer in a food pantry. For two years, Fabiola had scraped together enough to eat from the pantry, friends and relatives, wondering how long it would be before she wore out her welcome or was no longer needed as a volunteer.

Part of my research was to set up a food stamp outreach program for the North Brooklyn Food Pantry. I became a resource to many of the volunteers and clients as they applied, recertified and handled disputes with the food stamp office. I talked to Fabiola at length about applying for food stamps, but she was hesitant.

Sometimes you’re like is it worth it? Yeah, in the interim – in the long run. I have no source of anything at all. So is it worth it? Yeah, but it’s like one little pebble crumbles. And then it can keep going from there. So sometimes, when you’re in that peaceful place, you don’t wanna disrupt it. Because all it takes is one little thing. And that could just escalate into I don’t know what. I guess that would be my biggest fear. Because back in the day, that’s the way everything is. Everything is linked to HRA and Medicaid and everything. And then, they gotta call housing and this and that. I’m just afraid one thing links to another, links to another. It’s just the previous fear. And I don’t wanna mess up what I have, which is not much. But my home means everything to me. So as long as I can pay my rent and my light – I’m not talking about buying food or buying clothes or going anywhere. My rent and my light is important. The rest will come.
Over the next several months, incidents in the pantry led to increased oversight of who could take home what and one volunteer was finally asked to leave. There was a tacit understanding that volunteers sometimes took a little extra, but there was a concern that it was becoming excessive. Fabiola talked to me for months about applying for food stamps, weighing the pros and cons and worrying about whether it would cause problems with her housing or her healthcare. She finally decided to apply, which we did through the mail. After several years of not being able to go to the grocery store to purchase food, she told me, "I might as well do the food stamps. I want to be able to go to the supermarket and buy something." I saw her at the pantry after she received her benefits. She told me a story about going to the grocery store. She picked out some meat, took it up to the cash register and started crying. The cashier asked, ‘are you ok?’ Fabiola, pretending to wipe tears away as she told me the story, said she replied, “I’m just so happy.”

A month or so later, I came to the pantry and Fabiola pulled me aside with a worried look. She handed me a letter from the welfare office, requiring her to come in for a work assessment. “This is why I didn’t want to do this. I’m not gonna clean up the park,” she whispered so that the other volunteers couldn’t hear. Fabiola saw engaging with the welfare system, whether for food stamps or for cash assistance, as a threat to her incredibly meager, but stable situation. She was willing to suffer serious hardships, including having almost no income and struggling with severe food insecurity, in order to avoid what she saw as a destabilizing and demeaning system of work requirements. At the same time, being able to go to the store and choose her own food literally brought tears to her eyes after two years of eating whatever the food pantry had to offer.

We spent the afternoon debating how to handle the situation. Pastor Jan suggested we
write a letter to HRA explaining that Fabiola was a volunteer and that her work at the pantry could count as her work assignment. As Jan noted, “people who have to do WEP assignments are one of our most reliable forms of labor around here.” Poor people who apply for cash assistance and are subject to work requirements are frequently assigned to do voluntary service at a non-profit like a food pantry. But Fabiola was skeptical. After years of negotiating the system, she was unconvinced that HRA would let her choose her own work assignment. Ultimately Fabiola, who had serious back problems, was able to submit a letter from her doctor saying she was not fit for employment and she was given an exemption from the work requirements. This exemption had an enormous impact on her ability to feed herself, significantly alleviating her experience of hunger and food insecurity.

Fabiola’s experience illuminates something about the kinds of labor regimes that are emerging out of the growth of these charitable, voluntary organizations. The term able-bodied implies that those who are categorized as such have an obligation to use that body to a particular end. If they are poor, that end is determined by state administrators who are tasked with carrying out work first welfare policies. Poor people resist this coercive power by refusing to engage with these state agencies or choosing to engage in particular, controlled ways. Fabiola understood that her body would be targeted and found other ways to make ends meet and avoid the coercive power of the welfare office. She resisted the idea that her body should be or must be put to a

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24 It is difficult to know exactly how many people are given WEP assignments in non-profit organizations. HRA keeps statistics on the number of WEP workers in city agencies. In September of 2013 there were 10,549 participants assigned to WEP according to the Mayor’s Management Report. Of these 5,178 were assigned to a city agency. The other 5,000 were “housed in the MTA and non-profit organizations”. Community Voices Heard, a welfare rights organization, estimates that there are at least 1,000 individuals assigned to non-profits at any time. But as with the number of WEP workers in particular city agencies, these numbers most likely fluctuate over time.
particular kind of use – something she did not want to do and did not see the value in. She was willing to suffer considerable hardships in order to avoid the gaze and power of welfare administrators or employers over her body, time and life. For this, she was judged harshly, both by friends, other pantry volunteers and, occasionally herself. The choice to refuse work or work conditions is increasingly penalized – both through welfare administration and through a labor market where the terms and conditions of employment for middle and low income Americans are increasingly threadbare.

At the same time, the growth of the voluntary sector gave her the opportunity to create a job for herself, one where she could, like many informally employed workers, “determine the schedule, pace, and intensity” of her work (Millar 2008). But, like so many informally employed workers, she worried that she could not represent this labor as a ‘job’ to welfare officials in a way that would exempt her from work requirements.

Susan Hyatt argues that, “neoliberal governance masks the withdrawal of public resources from all communities by making volunteerism an obligation of citizenship for the working and middle classes, while simultaneously diminishing the significance of volunteerism in poor communities toward the end of creating an extremely low-paid workforce” (Hyatt 228). However, as I have shown, contemporary urban governance is characterized by more than just the withdrawal of public resources. New kinds of resources and funding produce novel institutions, like food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens. Hyatt’s argument that voluntarism masks the effects of austerity cannot properly explain the massive growth of EFP’s in the last three decades, particularly since state funding is what brought these institutions into being. In the name of efficiency, new forms of public resources come into being that are socially valued because they can “do more with less” and, in the case of EFP’s, do so by mobilizing hungry
people to do the work of distributing these resources. This arrangement saves the state substantial funds in actually paying people to do this work. Further, it creates value out of both surplus food and surplus labor in the form of good feeling and new forms of public recognition for poor women like Fabiola.

At the same time, food pantries are, quite literally, the embodiment of a failed welfare apparatus and a failed labor market to provide sufficient resources to poor people living in New York. They occupy the negative space of welfare and work – the spaces of human need that are no longer filled by these regulatory institutions. Volunteers, often desperately poor themselves, are the workforce maintaining an enormous network of EFP’s that does more than just distribute meals and groceries for the poor. They produce good feeling. In an era when providing for the poor is no longer understood as a collective social responsibility, but a voluntary choice, ‘giving back’ by volunteering in one’s own community becomes a mode of establishing citizenship and belonging. But as Fabiola’s experience shows, these new forms of recognition are tenuous at best. Volunteerism produces new kinds of value in the form of social solidarity. But, where middle class volunteers really do act freely, poor New Yorkers are often assigned to volunteer as a condition of receiving welfare benefits, often in places they do not choose and with which they do not have personal connections.

This becomes a public expression of who has the right to care for their communities. Struggles over who can volunteer and on what terms reflects the raced and classed struggles of women of color and poor women who have long fought for the right to care for their own children (Colen 1995; Mullings 1995; Mullings 1997). Women like Fabiola have long been engaged in unpaid caring labor. But like the private care of children and families, poor women’s public contributions to their communities are carefully regulated and controlled. Poor women
like Fabiola are celebrated as volunteers only so long as they are ‘giving freely, from the heart’. Once they ask for something in return – food assistance in Fabiola’s case – their need erases their service.

Because Fabiola could not claim an identity as a worker, the identity she was expected to assume as a poor, single woman, both her service and her need were subject to intense scrutiny by the welfare office. She became a burden to the state, despite her volunteerism, when she applied for food stamps. In this way, the growth of EFP’s brings into being new kinds of inequalities. For Fabiola, her chosen role as a volunteer was part of the “scramble for recognition” where “citizens wrangle over the right to work” (Muehlebach 2012, 227), even when this work is unpaid. The kind of public caring labor carried out by volunteers is shot through with new kinds of inequalities, including who is able to take on these socially valued labors and under what conditions. For the poor and unemployed, engaging with the welfare system can transform one’s service into an obligation.

What Fabiola’s experience begins to illuminate are the myriad ways that the growth of pantries and the ways these resources are used by community members are both intricately tied to the labor market and to welfare policy. Emergency Food Providers, structured by state funding but not identifiable as state institutions, are intricately linked to both the market and the state. People come to rely on them to varying degrees dependent on their integration into the labor market and/or the safety net.

The remarkable growth in these institutions – from 30 in 1980 to over a thousand today in New York City – have become an institutionalized form of crisis management. There is a self-perpetuating cycle at the heart of funding for emergency food providers – the intensification of poverty creates more need, which creates more demand. Emergency food providers document
this increasing demand and lobby for more funding. As the need expands, food banks get more efficient at dealing with it. In doing so, they employ more volunteers, often hungry people themselves who may choose or may be obligated by the welfare office to do this work. This cycle, however, does not address the root causes of hunger. In the process, new consumption patterns and new forms of labor emerge. There is a political economy of virtue that poor people, corporations and non-profits all depend on that is comprised of growing need and measurable response and that produces a tremendous amount of “free labor for a struggling economy” (Adams 2012, 211). But the degree to which this labor is freely given is shaped by raced, classed and gendered exclusions built into the waged labor market and the welfare systems.
Chapter 5: Food and the Politics of Reproduction

“It’s at the whim of the grocery store. Whatever’s on sale, that’s what I eat.” - Nelson.

“Only because most of us eat plentifully and frequently and have not known intense hunger may we sometimes too easily forget the astonishing, sometimes terrifying, importance of food and eating. … Being starved by someone else, as it happens still to so many people, is a more dramatic – and demoralizing – way to discover hunger’s terrible power.” (Mintz 1996)

As we have seen, people’s abilities to feed themselves and their families are deeply impacted by welfare policies that incentivize low wage jobs, punish those who do not or cannot find formal employment and expand the reach of public/private partnerships like EFP’s. These policies reinforce a system of stratified reproduction, “by which some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered” (Colen 1995; Ginsburg and Rapp 1995, 3). Specifically, food policy in New York City is structured to empower low-wage workers to reproduce themselves and their families through food assistance, while those without formal employment are disempowered - cut off from the resources needed to feed themselves and their families or left to rely on the insufficient and insecure resources provided by EFP’s.

But food policy does more than just work to create a compliant labor force by controlling access to food. Food and eating are central to social reproduction and as such are rich sites for imagining, creating and contesting possible futures, both in the short and long-term. “By using reproduction as an entry point to the study of social life, we can see how cultures are produced (or contested) as people imagine and enable the creation of the next generation” (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995, 2). How people eat, what they eat, and how they think about eating has important social implications for how they see themselves and how they imagine their futures, particularly in terms of health and well-being. Humans literally make themselves through the food they eat,
reproducing themselves on a daily basis in a range of circumstances that are conditioned by race, class, gender and power. The phrase ‘you are what you eat’ has special meaning when we consider food in the context of stratified reproduction. What people are able to eat – and what they become – is conditioned by welfare policy, charity, access to the labor market, and a consumer food market that is highly segmented in the urban US.

One of the challenges of focusing on reproduction is the tendency to erase men’s involvement in the work of reproduction. Reproduction is often reduced to child bearing and child rearing, labor exclusively or predominantly carried out by women. By looking at the process of reproduction through the politics of food, I hope to broaden our understanding of reproductive labor to incorporate both the work people do to reproduce children and the daily work they do to reproduce themselves. This largely socially unrecognized labor is stratified for both women and men in the contemporary US.

Though often framed as cutbacks or austerity, the restructuring of the welfare state over the past two decades has primarily taken the form of shifting resources, not necessarily cutting them (Ziliak 2011). This restructuring has substantially altered the experience of poverty, making all working class Americans risk-bearing subjects by making aid contingent on securing formal employment, thereby heightening the risks around unemployment. Women who, prior to 1996, had access to cash assistance for themselves and their children in the event of job loss, are now subject to disciplinary work-first welfare policies that mimic and intensify the discipline of the low-wage labor force. The food stamp program operates in a similar vein, acting as an incentive for formally employed Americans to continue working and as a disciplinary apparatus for those who do not have formal employment that they can document for the welfare office. The shift towards a welfare system that primarily enforces work even shapes the voluntary
sector, making it both a competitive survival niche and a site of enforced, uncompensated labor for poor and unemployed New Yorkers.

The regulation of hunger has changed since the contemporary food stamp program was established in the 1960’s and then steadily expanded as part of the War on Poverty. Its establishment as a national entitlement came in response to the ‘discovery’ of hunger in the late 1960’s, when Bobby Kennedy’s poverty tour uncovered visible malnutrition and starvation in the Deep South (Eisinger 1998). As Catherine Fennell points out, the welfare state in the 1960’s was concerned not only with poverty, but with providing poor people some comfort (Fennell 2011), and visible hunger was a visceral discomfort which, in the words of then-Senator George McGovern, “profoundly disturbed the American conscience.” The existence of the Food Stamp pilot program made hunger relief both “thinkable and doable on a large scale” (Fennell 2011). The program was subsequently expanded and the result of these expansions was the virtual elimination of clinical malnutrition and starvation in the US. Food aid was expanded into a universal right for all U.S. citizens, regardless of work status or family structure. Since the 1980’s, however, this entitlement – freedom from hunger – has been slowly transformed into a stratified food safety net that intensifies social risks, particularly for the very poor and the informally employed. Adequate food has been transformed from an entitlement derived through citizenship to one derived through participation in the market.

The use of food aid as both an incentive and a punishment to produce compliant worker-citizens stands in tension to the other uses of food aid – particularly the nutritional goals of the program. It is difficult to overstate just how pervasive the project of raising the quality of the population has become, particularly in the face of what is widely referred to as an ‘obesity epidemic’. Addressing this epidemic has become a pervasive project of raising population
quality, particularly in regard to discourses around food, health, obesity and chronic illness. Mayor Bloomberg has made these signature issues for his administration. Concerns about population quality in New York City justify state interventions that unleash the power of the market to address a range of problems, from race and class-based health disparities to obesity to chronic illness. On the national level, Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move campaign signals similar far reaching concerns with the problem of population quality, a growing anxiety about the ‘obesity epidemic’ and the kind of bodies the contemporary food landscape in the US is producing, with serious implications for the kind of futures we can imagine.

Issues of nutrition, health disparities and access have become central to the politics of food in New York City. The Bloomberg Administration has taken a proactive approach to addressing these issues, championing several innovative projects to address these concerns, including a healthy bodegas initiative to increase the availability of fresh produce and low fat milk in corner stores, a green carts program to place fruit and vegetable vendors in under-served neighborhoods, the health bucks program to give low income New Yorkers more purchasing power at farmers’ markets and the FRESH program, which gives tax breaks to supermarkets that locate stores in under-served neighborhoods. All of these efforts are aimed at increasing the choices available to people living in under-served communities – neighborhoods with limited access to healthy food choices. His administration has also pioneered a particularly aggressive public health campaign linking sugary beverages with obesity and type two diabetes aimed at influencing consumer choices. These efforts are all constrained by a market-based

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approach that seeks to address obesity and health disparities by increasing or influencing consumer choices. Green carts, healthy bodegas, and large super markets are all aimed at giving underserved consumers more ‘healthy’ products to choose from and public health interventions are aimed at encouraging healthier choices.

Figure 2. An Advertisement produced by the New York City Department of Health
Sid Mintz, writing about American eating habits, points out that, “the extent of an individual’s ability to control and manage and discipline the body is considered a reflection on individual self-control” (Mintz 1996, 6). Self-control and self-discipline are important ideals in American society. It is precisely the ability to self-govern that is thought to be lacking on the part of the poor. The idea of self-control has long animated poverty governance in the US and is at the heart of the welfare restructuring that has taken place over the past several decades (Katz 1986). Welfare programs have been radically reformed to instill self-control, particularly for poor women and men who are unemployed.

These two goals – self regulation in terms of managing one’s health through ‘smart’ food choices and self-regulation through accepting ‘personal responsibility’ for one’s own poverty and submitting either to low-wage employment or workfare assignments - are in tension with one another. Managing one’s health by making ‘smart food choices’ is incredibly difficult in situations of poverty. These two approaches to population politics – creating a compliant workforce through punitive welfare policy and creating a healthy citizenry through enabling healthy consumer food choices expose the tensions in the broader politics of reproduction. Accepting personal responsibility and engaging in low-wage labor makes self-regulation through healthy eating exceedingly difficult.

I worked in a neighborhood that was not, by any means, a food desert. There were several large grocery stores and at least half a dozen green grocers selling fresh fruit and vegetables. However, the availability of food is not the same as the accessibility of fresh, healthy food. In a review of the literature on food deserts, researchers concluded that “increasing access to healthy and nutritious foods does not necessarily increase consumption, especially for
low-income households” (Walker, et al. 2010). The complaint I heard most often from families in North Brooklyn with very small food budgets was that the stores in the neighborhood were too expensive. Healthy food was locally available, but it was not always accessible. The constraints on a person’s ability to consume are not only shaped by the geography of consumer outlets, but by a range of factors, including people’s access to work, wages, and welfare benefits. Though the Bloomberg administration sees health policy as one of its primary legacies, many of the Bloomberg administration’s welfare and food stamp policies actively create food poverty for unemployed New Yorkers. Restricting unemployed people’s access to food stamp benefits as a punishment meant to push people into the labor market enforces poor eating habits that may well result in the kind of long-term health problems the Bloomberg administration has tried to address.

For the people I met who could combine wages and welfare benefits, food stamps played an important role in easing the hardships of low-wage insecure labor. Food stamps freed up cash for housing and other expenses and enabled them to care for their families and themselves in ways that they felt were appropriate. Being able to exercise choice was central to the maintenance of family relationships where parents felt they could provide for their children and make healthy choices about food. The idea of choice is increasingly the narrow terrain upon which urban food politics are based. The idea of choice constrains our idea of food politics to a narrow market-centered perspective. Choice focuses our gaze on the market transaction of buying or choosing foods, with little attention on the socially unrecognized forms of labor involved in the production, procurement, preparation, consumption and disposal of food. These forms of socially unrecognized labor involved with everyday food practices help us see just how
narrow the politics of choice can be for thinking about food policy and just how hollow the rights associated with market citizenship have become.

The Thrifty Food Plan

Assumptions about how the poor should shop and eat are built in to the food stamp program— they should budget carefully, eat frugally and spend considerable time preparing food. That is, they should eat differently than other Americans and if they do not, then this represents a personal failure (Fitchen 1988). Food stamps are based on the thrifty food plan, which embeds certain cultural assumptions about the poor and how they should eat into its design. The USDA has four food plans that the agency uses to make recommendations about food budgets for a range of circumstances – the thrifty food plan, the low-cost food plan, the moderate cost plan and the liberal plan. The thrifty food plan is the least expensive and “serves as a national standard for a nutritious diet at a minimal cost and is used as the basis for maximum food stamp allotments” (USDA 2007). It is devised by nutritionists who look at spending patterns, recommended daily allowances of all nutrients and the average price of grocery items to come up with a recommended grocery basket that comes close to meeting nutritional needs on a minimal budget. The plan presumes a considerable departure from standard American eating patterns as well as considerable skill in budgeting, cooking and knowledge about food. The other plans are used for various purposes. For example, the Department of Defense uses the liberal food plan to determine the Basic Allowance Subsistence rates for service members and states use these plans to set guidelines for foster care and child support payments.

Recent studies have questioned the adequacy of the Thrifty Food Plan, noting that “the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), with its strong reliance on preparation of meals from basic ingredients, does not account for time constraints faced by most households at all income levels, particularly
those with a single working head of household, which necessitate purchasing value-added or prepared foods with a higher cost” (IOM and NRC 2013). There is considerable evidence that in practice, the thrifty food plan is inadequate to meet most families’ food needs. Studies have found that “about 80 percent of all benefits are used within the first 2 weeks of issuance, and more than 91 percent of all benefits are used by the 21st day. Evidence suggests the caloric intake of SNAP recipients declines 10 to 15 percent at the end of the month, and admissions to hospitals for hypoglycemia increase significantly among food insecure diabetics” (IOM and NRC 2013, 48).

Food Stamps are designed as a supplement either to low wages or welfare benefits. Currently, SNAP benefits are the only income for approximately 6 million households in the US (Edelman 2012). Families who do receive cash welfare are not much better off. Welfare benefits have steadily lost value over the past thirty years, meaning that families on cash assistance typically receive the maximum allotment of food stamps and have very little cash to supplement these benefits. Those without wages have to make do on budgets that are purposefully designed to be insufficient and to enforce a particular kind of consumption – thrifty consumption -that is dependent on extensive knowledge about nutrition and skill in budgeting, cooking, and storing food.

Intensifying Labor and the Work of Poverty

The men and women I interviewed who did not have a supplement to their food stamp budgets or did not have access to food stamps at all compensated by intensifying their labor in a range of ways. Intensifying one’s labor is a common strategy for dealing with food insecurity(Preibisch, et al. 2002), both in rural contexts and in urban contexts where families compensate for diminished resources by making efforts to stretch their cash. These include
travelling long distances to shop, careful calculation in the grocery store, and maintaining relationships that they can draw on in times of need.

Martha, an African American single mother who was born in Trinidad has had trouble finding work that is flexible enough for her to care for her child, who has special needs. She is undocumented, and though she was unemployed when we met, she does not qualify for food stamps or cash assistance. She and her son live off of his small disability allowance, which pays for their rent and utilities in public housing, and his food stamp budget of 200 dollars a month. This small budget doesn’t cover all of their food expenses, so she also relies on several food pantries and soup kitchens. I met her in the public library one afternoon where she was reading cookbooks. She said she liked to cook and try new recipes. Cooking and trying new recipes took an incredible amount of planning on her part. “You get a few ingredients this month and a few next month and then you can make the dish.” She thought very carefully about her food purchases, sometimes acquiring ingredients over the course of several months. These mental calculations were necessary both for new recipes and for everyday staples. She described a typical shopping experience.

You spend a lot a time thinking, especially when you go in the produce aisle. Produce can be very expensive. Because you say, ok, you have one apple. They give you one pound at $1.79. Okay, if I do the one pound at $1.79 I have to look at the size of the apples. If I do the yellow, yellow are smaller but still expensive. If I do red, if I do loose, if I do bag – bag, I get about 12 at $2.99. That’s better than loose. So it’s like ok, fine, I will do the bag. It’s like science. Mad science! I gotta be a whiz when I go in there.

These complicated calculations are part of the everyday work of poverty and are actually built in to the design of the food stamp program. Advocates and politicians who hope to shed light on the inadequacy of SNAP benefits participate in what’s called the “Food Stamp Challenge”, where they eat on a SNAP budget for a week and document their experience. The
accounts these participants give after taking the challenge typically focus on the challenge of budgeting in the grocery store.

But these careful calculations go beyond the grocery aisle for women like Martha, who also rely on family to sustain themselves. She described the reciprocal forms of help between her and her family members.

When I see family or friends – sometimes they’re like I’m so hungry. So I’m like, okay, what do you want? But I make sure whatever I give, I make sure my house is always well kept before I do anything. You’re able to help sometimes too, definitely. Because you understand how it is to struggle. Sometimes you get a little bit of help. But it’s not the kind of help that you might look for. Sometimes, what I do is, I will not let them know that my cupboards might be empty. So if they invite me, we’ll go over to have somethin’ to eat. And by the time we eat, we’ll have something to come back home to. But as for like askin’ for money, not all the time because they’re struggling too. So, you know, that’s something I won’t ask for.

Managing these reciprocal relationships is a form of unwaged affective labor that, as anthropologists have long shown, are crucial survival mechanisms both among poor people in the urban US (Stack 1974) and in a range of social and economic contexts historically.

Stretching a food stamp budget in the absence of other income or when a household member is sanctioned and the food stamp budget is cut requires ingenuity about how to shop and where to shop. People often travel in order to save on food purchases. Jimmy, a white, middle-aged man, would walk from Greenpoint to a less expensive grocery store in Downtown Brooklyn to buy food for his son.

If we go to C Town (a local Greenpoint store), you get two cans of corn for $1.99. If you go to Pathmark, you get two for $1.00. The kid loves the corn. Got to take the hike. It’s cheaper, but it’s heavier, and it’s a hike, you know what I mean? You save about $20.00 to $30.00, but it’s a hike.

It takes him about 45 minutes to walk there and 45 to walk back. Taking the subway wasn’t an option because, as he said, “I ain’t got $3.00 to $5.00 to go there and back.” Jimmy spent about half of his food stamps every month on food for his son and only had about a
hundred dollars a month in benefits to feed himself. He ran out of food every month, even though he regularly supplemented by going to soup kitchens and food pantries. “I know a guy who lends me money every now and then. If I borrow $5.00, I got to pay him back $10.00, so I try not to do that. But when you’re hungry, you got to do it. But I try not to.” Saving five dollars by walking to the grocery store instead of taking the train meant having money for a meal later in the month. It was the difference between having money to eat one more day and starving or taking on a burdensome debt.

Adwa, a forty-year-old single mother of two who immigrated from Gabon, usually takes the train from Brooklyn to Harlem to do her shopping.

When I go to Harlem the food is less expensive. I don't know why they do that. But when I do go to Key Food or Associated or C-town (local stores), the food is expensive. I sacrificed the energy and the body strength to go to Harlem and shop. I take my backpack and put food in my bag and bring it here.

Adwa’s husband had left her and her two children and she had applied for public assistance. She had been receiving the full food stamp amount of $526 for a family of three, but she was sanctioned for missing an appointment and her food stamp budget was cut to $325. She travelled to buy food in order to save a few dollars to stretch this tiny food budget as far as possible. However, because food stamp allotments are based on the thrifty food plan, which provides only a minimal diet, it is not possible to make up the difference between a budget for two people and a budget for three. Travelling to Harlem saved a few dollars and allowed her to buy a little more food, but she still had to rely on soup kitchens and food pantries, something she did not like to do. The trip from her house to Harlem took about an hour on the train and, as she says, doing so came at the expense of energy and time – precisely the two things modern, industrially produced foods are designed to save.
As Mintz points out, there is little basis for thinking about an American cuisine, but that does not mean that we cannot talk about common American eating habits. “In all of the processes connected with American eating, the element of time is extremely relevant, yet barely noticed. When Americans speak of ‘convenience’ in regard to food, they also mean time” (Mintz 1996, 121). The Thrifty Food plan presumes that poor families will spend more time shopping for food, buying the least expensive and most filling items in the grocery store, and preparing it at home. People whose access to food stamp benefits is reduced in any way – whether through sanctions for failure to comply with work rules, exclusion because of immigration status, or because they use benefits to contribute to households where they don’t live, means having to spend more time to manage on an insufficient budget.

In addition to travelling to grocery stores to stretch inadequate food stamp budgets, people also travel to go to soup kitchens and food pantries. Like many soup kitchens, the North Brooklyn Food Pantry only served dinner one night a week. The pantry gave out food weekly, but this was never enough for a full week. People might walk to another pantry in another neighborhood if they don’t have money for the train, but not everyone saw this as an option.

Vincent, a tall, lanky middle-aged white man, was a regular at the North Brooklyn Food Pantry and came to dinner every Wednesday. He had worked as a truck driver for years. His last job had cut his hours back over the course of several months until they finally let him go. He was not able to find work and lost his apartment. He would eat at least three heaping plates of food at dinner each week. With no food stamps and no income for many weeks, Vincent was totally reliant on emergency food and the little bit of help he could get from family and friends. Though there are over a thousand emergency food providers in New York City, people tend to rely on the one’s in their neighborhood because they can’t afford to travel on the subway or the
bus. As Vincent explained, “New York City's pretty much like, you know they've got all these organizations, these food banks, City Harvest, blah blah, this and that. You know, what's the deal? I know you have to go certain places. I know that, but sometimes you can't do it.” Even when travel is possible, eating at emergency food providers is far from convenient.

If I have a Metro card I'll go way out to Manhattan somewhere because you guys feed on a Wednesday and it's Friday now and I'm starving and I go to the Bowery Mission where they got a meal there. You know? And it's taking me four hours through that whole process because I love God and I love church and I'll go to the service, but the whole process is taking me four hours just to eat.

These various forms of intensifying labor – either through careful budgeting, travelling long distances, or managing reciprocal relationships are not socially recognized labor. Like most of the labor involved in social reproduction, these efforts are simply not counted and are part of the work of poverty – those socially unrecognized forms of labor and knowledge that people use to survive.

**Hunger and Housing**

The politics of choice fail to account for poor people’s relationship to the built environment as well the socially unrecognized labor involved in cooking and eating. The lack of access to food is quite often accompanied by a lack of access to cooking facilities. I was continually struck by the importance of housing and the ways that it structured my informants’ abilities to feed themselves. One of the assumptions of the thrifty food plan on which SNAP benefits are based is that recipients will be able to cook and store food. Food pantries often give out basic staples, like rice and pasta that must be cooked. Having access to kitchen facilities made an enormous difference in the degree to which people experienced hunger and food insecurity. People with regular, reliable housing can eat better especially if they have decent cooking facilities. The poorest New Yorkers do not.
I met David, an African American man in his early 50’s, at the North Brooklyn Food Pantry. He was one of several dozen men who lived in a Single Room Occupancy (SRO) building a few blocks away, many of whom were regulars at the soup kitchen and the food pantry. The building he lived in was owned by a notorious slumlord. The men who lived in his buildings complained endlessly about the conditions there and they were engaged in a prolonged housing court battle with him. One of these complaints caught the attention of the local City Council member, who took a tour of the building and was shocked by the conditions. By definition, SRO’s do not have cooking facilities. Rent in these buildings ranged from $225, the maximum housing allowance HRA would pay for a single person, for men who were doubled up two to a room to $600 for men who had their own room. Bathrooms were shared, sometimes by as many as 20 men. Though the living conditions were poor, many of the people I met in these buildings were happy to have a roof over their heads and grateful to be off of the street and out of the shelter system.

Even so, cooking and eating remained a serious challenge for these men who were living in sub-standard housing. David had been living in his SRO for several years and had found work on and off as a gypsy cab driver, but the onset of the recession meant there was very little work. He applied for public assistance and scrapped metal. He found eating well to be an impossibility in his situation.

26 The owner of his building, Jay Duetchmen, was being investigated at the time of my research for a scam that required building residents to attend a designated drug treatment program whether or not they had a drug problem. Several of the men I interviewed and befriended who lived in this building were forced to attend drug treatment in order to keep their housing, despite no substance abuse problems. This was a common problem in so-called three quarter houses across NYC. See for example: Rodriguez, Cindy 2010 Drug Rehab for Housing: Alleged Scheme Targets City’s Most Vulnerable. WNYC, December 15, 2010.
I know you’ve got to eat vegetables and a balanced meal and all that. And I’ve tried to get back to it. But once I get working, then I can buy what I like to eat. Because when you’re in a situation where you don’t have a kitchen, things that you probably could do becomes more expensive.

Cooking facilities in these buildings consisted of two microwaves to be shared by all 100 residents in the building and two shared refrigerators that no one used because food was often stolen from them. Daniel, an African American man who lived in one of these buildings for six months after he lost his job as a cook described the basic conundrum of trying to cook in this situation.

So if you are the type of person who is going to be like leery about eating so much microwavable foods and things of that nature, um, if you don’t want that then you are stuck with getting fast food and, you know, so what do you do? Either you do it or you go hungry. So you are sort of like in a damned if you do, damned if you don’t situation. So, I’ve cooked many a meal in the microwave. You know, didn’t go to bed hungry. Which is the most important thing, didn’t go to bed hungry. So, it’s a major sacrifice, in my personal opinion, it’s a major sacrifice.

Many of the men living there would put food that needed to be refrigerated out on the window ledge instead of in the refrigerator because it was less likely to be stolen. Lewis, a thirty three year old white man explained,

When it was cold out, we could go out and buy, like, a half a gallon of milk, yogurt, and all that and put it outside the window. Now, you can't do that (because it was too warm outside). And they won't allow us to have a small refrigerator in the room. If you put the food in the refrigerator in the house, people take it. So you're kind of - for instance, last week, I went upstate, and I worked for two days, so I had some money. And in four days, I bought half a gallon of milk four times because it either went bad or somebody took it. So it was crazy, buying all that milk when one half-gallon would have lasted me the whole week.

The week before I interviewed Lewis, which was in March, we had had an unseasonably warm day where the temperature went up to 60 degrees. All the food on his windowsill had gone bad, which is why he started using the refrigerator again, costing him quite a bit of money that he did not have to spare.
Not having a refrigerator also meant that people had to buy perishable foods in small amounts, every day. This made it harder to budget, both because it was hard to keep track and because small amounts are generally more expensive than buying in bulk. Daniel explained the difficulty of budgeting under these circumstances,

We have no where to put cold food, so unless its canned or something like that you have nowhere to put it. That’s the worst thing. Its like if you want to get some kind of meat or something, you have to go buy it every day. So if you’re not paying attention to it and know exactly what you’re buying you can run out of money real fast. And then you’re like what do I do now?

These problems with cooking and eating are as widespread as the problems of homelessness and sub-standard housing in New York. Though circumstances vary and precise numbers are not available, we can estimate that the problem affects a substantial number of city residents. There are currently 55,000 New Yorkers in shelters or on the street each night, the highest number on record since the Great Depression (Elliott and Ruiz 2014). There are 300 buildings characterized as ‘three-quarter’ houses, some of which house 200 people or more, and often do not have cooking facilities (Arden 2012). There are also about 40,000 SRO’s and a steadily increasing number of New Yorkers are doubled up in apartments with kin or friends where they may or may not be able to use the cooking facilities. Doubling up has seen a substantial increase from 173,305 in 2008 to 192,286 in 2011 (Survey 2011). Sometimes people doubled up with family or friends, but it was also common to meet men and women who rented a room in an apartment for 100-200 dollars a week. Though some of these people had access to kitchen facilities in these situations, many did not.

It was not uncommon for the people I met to link their housing situations with their ability to eat well. Debbie, a middle aged Puerto Rican woman was living at the YMCA in a room with no kitchen. She was single and received disability and food stamps. We talked at
length about the difficulties she experienced eating well. When I asked her what would help her be able to eat better, she replied

What would help is affordable housing. When I’m talking about affordable housing, it’s not the kind of housing they have now. Or more of what they have now, because there’s too much a need and too few apartments. That is what would help me. Definitely, that’s the first thing, affordable housing. When I first got the room, when I was looking for the room and the first time, the rents were $400.00. Then I looked two or three months later, they went up to $500.00. Then when I got my place, they were all $550.00. Guess now? Now everything is $600.00, $650.00 and up. And again, I only have $761.00 (per month in disability). So if I pay $600.00 or $650.00, how much do I have left to pay my phone bill, live on, and my storage bill? So affordable housing.

High rents and the availability of food are linked in a myriad of contradictory ways. At the city level, the Bloomberg administration has taken a fairly aggressive approach to the problem of food deserts. These are neighborhoods where there are few or no supermarkets that sell fresh produce and other healthy foods. These neighborhoods also have higher than average rates of diabetes and obesity. In the name of addressing these health concerns, the Bloomberg administration has expanded consumer options at the neighborhood level, including encouraging supermarkets, greencarts and farmers markets to open in under-served neighborhoods. But these efforts can also contribute to rising rents by making neighborhoods more attractive for gentrification and high-end urban development. Food justice projects, like environmental justice campaigns, have to navigate the tricky space between demanding resources and remediation for historically underserved communities and unintentionally opening these communities up to redevelopment efforts that exacerbate gentrification and displacement (Checker 2011). One anti-poverty activist referred to the placing of new grocery stores in under-served areas as “a tease and a Trojan horse for accelerated gentrification and the displacement of the most vulnerable New Yorkers” (Harper 2009).
There is a temporal dimension to hunger. It can’t be delayed or put off – not for very long. And yet, the fulfillment of immediate needs may undercut long-term health. The approach to public health advocated by the Bloomberg administration requires long-term planning and an orientation to the future that is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve with limited resources. The idea that individuals should take responsibility for managing their health through ‘smart’ food choices in order to avoid long-term, chronic health problems is a luxury to which many of my informants did not have access. Though they may have been aware of the relationship between eating habits and health, the immediate demands of the body take precedence over fears about the future. This can cause a tremendous amount of additional anxiety. People know they need to care for themselves and are knowledgeable about the dietary practices that are necessary to maintain long-term health. But without adequate resources, this knowledge only creates anxiety. The current emphasis on nutrition education amounts to a cruel joke in the absence of real resources and can be experienced as disempowering.

Anthropologists have shown how groups of people use the cultural tools available to them in order to mitigate both the physical and emotional impact of hunger. These tools may be ritual practices around spirit possession that permit men to eat unlimited quantities (Shack 1997) or reliance on medications to dull the pain of hunger and to manage the physical ravages of malnutrition (Scheper-Hughes 1992). In the urban US, pervasive cultural logics around work, welfare, and deservingness create hunger. People cope with food shortages in a range of ways, reproducing themselves with the cultural tools available to them. One of these is cheap food.

The cheapest foods in the supermarket are the most heavily subsidized. In the US, corn, wheat, rice, soy and dairy are all heavily subsidized, with feed grains – primarily corn –
accounting for the largest percentage of subsidy payments. As Michael Pollan has written, corn, in all its manifestations, has become the cheapest thing to feed animals, in the form of feed, people, in the form of processed foods, and cars, in the form of ethanol, because it is so heavily subsidized (Pollan 2006). The food stamp program is designed in such a way to make these cheap foods the only foods available, particularly to families and individuals who do not also have access to other income. On top of that, welfare policy is designed to cut the food stamp budgets for failure to comply with work rules, making reliance on the cheapest ‘poverty foods’ even more likely. These ‘bottom of the pyramid’ foods (Errington, et al. 2012) are then doubly subsidized, once in the form of direct subsidies to the farmers who grow them and once again through the structure of the food stamp program, which essentially forces poor consumers to rely on these products.27

Martha, the young mother I met in the library reading recipes, had a young son with special needs and required a special diet. She was intimately aware of the relationship between eating and health, but financial constraints made it impossible for her to consistently act on this knowledge.

Sometimes I’ll have to go for maybe the fattiest of the processed stuff because sometimes that’s cheaper than the healthier foods. Like you would get, what’s a good example? Sometimes we get those fruit snacks or those sweet pastries. Sometimes they’ll be the cheapest. Sometimes you can get bacon at a cheap price or you could get cold cuts at a cheap price. You just get the sugary cereal sometimes. Now, I noticed they have dollar-pack. So if my budget is low, you would go for the dollar-pack. And I noticed they have a lot of stuff now that’s a dollar-pack that I wouldn’t otherwise buy. But to be able to like…we need somethin’ to eat.

These cheap, processed foods that could be characterized as contemporary ‘proletarian hunger killers’(Mintz 1995) are inexpensive, easy to make, sometimes filling and almost never

27 Thanks to Nancy Romer of the Brooklyn Food Coalition for pointing this out to me.
nutritious. Foods like Ramen noodles which came to the US in 1970 represent what C. K Prahalad has called “the fortune at the bottom of the pyramid”, where profits can be made by tapping into the vast market of people living on two dollars a day or less. Proponents of this ‘bottom of the pyramid’ approach to marketing argue that by tailoring goods to this group, good can be done by providing cheap consumer goods. As Errington, et al argue, this is a thoroughly neoliberal view in which profit making and market expansion are presumed to bring social development in their wake (Errington, et al. 2012).

One of the common tropes of the very poorest people I met were the references to ‘poverty foods’ – foods that people rely on because they are so cheap. Top among these were instant noodles. Instant noodles were often brought up as a food of last resort – when all the bread and peanut butter and jelly were gone. “Instant noodles become a measure of life’s difficulties and a map of how people deal with these difficulties” (Errington, et al. 2013, 66). People often had a nagging awareness of how many packs they had and how quickly these would be gone. Tyrone was a middle aged African American man who had lost his job as a welfare administrator in New Jersey and had moved to New York to find housing in a local SRO. His mother had passed away and he had no other family or friends he could ask for help. He had opened a public assistance case, but he hadn’t yet learned how to budget. Realizing that he had spent most of his food stamp benefits for the month and still had a week and a half before he would have any more, he found the cheapest food available to buy with his dwindling funds.

You got three or four packs of Oodles of Noodles in your bag in the room in a roll. And my food stamps don’t come until the 11th; do you think I have anxiety? Yes, I do, yes. It’s petrifying right now, you know. It’s – I have never really been without food. Maybe food might’ve got low at my mom’s when I was just staying recently. But food - always didn’t worry about a meal. But when I started this week and my card was at zero and I think it was last week I bought the four or five packs - I didn’t really know how I was gonna eat.
Nelson, a Puerto Rican man who was a regular at the soup kitchen for a year or so was often without benefits because of problems with his public assistance case. He was sanctioned twice that year for failure to comply and was cut off from food stamps for a total of six months in that period. He made a little money by finding things on the street and selling them. He had worked in restaurants when he first came to the US and had eaten well then. When I met him, he was frequently hungry. He described disciplining himself to eat as little as possible of the cheapest foods he could find in order to have something every day.

Sometimes I have like six cans of spaghetti or beef a roni, but its one per day. I can’t do two, no matter how hungry I get. I’m supposed to have a special diet. White meat and no preservatives, no added colors, no fat for the liver. All that. But it’s so expensive. Before it was the food for poor people, now it’s the food for rich people. Years ago in Puerto Rico, the vegetables and the seafood, that was the food for the poor people and here in Manhattan, that’s the food for the rich. They eat seafood and vegetables. I can’t bring that into my head (worry about health). When I’m hungry I need to eat whatever thing.

Eating in ways that they knew were unhealthy and would contribute to poor health was a fact of many people’s lives – particularly those who relied heavily on emergency food, as Martha, Tyrone and Nelson did. The correlation between poverty and obesity and other health problems is often attributed to lack of education or poor eating habits. But people were both aware and anxious about their lack of choice. Their inability to act on this knowledge is an important form of stratified reproduction. Though some scholars have begun to question the simple correlation between eating habits, obesity and health (Guthman 2011), what is clear is that healthy eating is an important site of identity construction, one to which poor people have differing degrees of access. As Guthman points out, one of the solutions to the crisis of falling profits at the end of the 20th century was the creation of new commodities and new forms of product differentiation. Widespread popular concerns about food, health and consumption have been a boon to a food industry that regularly turns out new products finely tuned to the desires of
an increasingly health conscious public (Levenstein 1988). Consumption of these products has become “one of the key sites of ethical self-formation” (Guthman 2008). Though anxieties about food and health are widespread, not everyone has an equal ability to act on these concerns.

The work involved in feeding oneself is necessary and universal, though not socially recognized as labor. However, reframing eating as socially necessary labor helps us see how class and poverty impact people’s ability to carry out this work. Given the constraints of the food available to many poor people, short-term hunger wins out over long-term health concerns.

People’s access to food is heavily shaped by broader food politics, including how food is subsidized, marketed and disposed of through pantries. Pantries, as much as poor consumers, are provisioned at the whim of the food industry and the needs of the agricultural market. Katherine, a regular volunteer at the pantry described her dissatisfaction with the food we would hand out.

I think we should make the bags more nourishing. Give them something that they can make. I want to take all that candy and dump it in the garbage. It’s nothing but sugar. I mean, we had like 30 boxes of candy. We could have had tuna, peanut butter and jelly. That’s nourishing. They need nourishing foods. Like the fresh carrots, string beans, a piece of meat. Just one balanced diet.

There is a conflict between food pantries as places that can dispose of surplus food and places that can feed the hungry. The win-win scenario upon which food banks were founded, linking food producers and retailers who have a surplus of food they can’t sell with consumers who don’t have enough, begins to look more ambivalent from the perspective of long-term health and well-being (Gany, et al. 2012). Pantries have long been criticized for giving out food that is not nutritious and for being, in the words of one advocate, “a dumping ground” for commodity foods and food processors. Though some efforts have been made to improve the quality of food, these are partial at best. People eat what pantries have to offer because, as Martha points out they ‘need something to eat’. Concerns about the health effects of these foods, which many clients
worried about, were impossible to address because, as the saying goes, beggars can’t be choosers. The act of choosing was a right reserved for people with access to cash, as volunteers at the North Brooklyn food pantry never failed to remind clients who complained about what they received.

Many Americans have anxiety about where their food is coming from, how it was grown and if it is safe. Americans worry endlessly about pesticides, additives, salt, fat, sugar, whether foods are organic, fattening, or fresh. As Suzanne Friedberg points out, just because people are poor does not mean that they don’t also have anxiety about food safety and health (Friedberg 2005). Their ability to do something about this anxiety, however, is seriously constrained by their lack of resources. At the supermarket, people on extremely tight budgets found they were unable to act on these widely held concerns around food safety and health. As Nelson told me, “it’s at the whim of the grocery store. Whatever’s on sale, that’s what I eat.”

Sometimes even the cheapest foods are not available to people who have no work and no welfare benefits. In these cases it is extremely difficult for people to mobilize cultural tools to secure food and they can be incredibly creative in doing so. People’s options for meeting their basic needs are increasingly circumscribed by a punitive welfare system and an insecure, low-wage labor market. Vincent had been looking for work as a truck driver for several months with no luck at the height of the recession, when unemployment was at 10% in New York City. Unable to feed himself, he considered going into a detox program, even though he did not have a drug or alcohol problem.

You know, I have Medicaid so sometimes I'm thinking about, you know, let me go to a crisis center for three days where they will feed me. Three meals a day. That's messed up, though, that I would think that way. You know, knowing that you could get food if you just check in somewhere.

For Vincent, unemployment and poverty are a crisis, but not a socially recognized one. Lying
about having a drug habit felt like his only option to qualify for care. The real crisis he was experiencing at the time of our interview was the unmarked one, the everyday crises of poverty, unemployment and hunger. Without a job, without benefits, and even without transportation to find an EFP outside the neighborhood, he had no means to acquire food. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes has written, “A hungry body exists as a portent critique of the society in which it exists. A sick body implicates no one” (Scheper-Hughes 1992). Vincent, wracked by hunger and unable to find a job, looked for ways to make his hunger legible to a welfare system built around work. Presenting himself as sick instead of as hungry was an option of last resort, one that he considered in order to get his basic needs met.

It was not uncommon for poor people to repurpose state programs in order to meet their basic needs. In the absence of cash assistance or wages, people would sometimes sell their food stamps to get access to cash and then rely on food pantries for the remainder of the month. The going rate in North Brooklyn was seventy cents on the dollar, meaning storeowners would cash in 100 dollars worth of food stamps and give 70 dollars in return. David, a regular at the soup kitchen, described his rationale for accepting such an obviously bad deal.

People need money for bullshit, like to get metrocards and stuff like that, so they do it. I’ve done it because I needed metrocards. Or I’ve needed stuff to get by. I’ve needed…you can’t buy shampoo and you can’t buy all that stuff on food stamps. I’ve had to do it just to get by on that stuff. That’s pretty much why. But unfortunately a lot of it is drugs, but there is a lot of people who do it because of the other stuff you can’t get with the food stamps. Its crazy because if you wanted to go and buy 200 dollars worth of candy bars, you could, but you can’t put a 1.50 thing of shampoo on your card.

There’s been an inordinate amount of attention on waste, fraud and abuse in welfare programs. These concerns have been raised recently in the debates over SNAP reauthorization, despite remarkably low fraud and error rates (GAO 2010). Welfare abuse is quite frequent, but welfare recipients are typically not the beneficiaries of this fraud. In the case of selling food stamps,
storeowners are able to make a hefty profit off of poor people’s need for cash. People accept a bad deal to fill short-term needs, making trade-offs between one kind of hardship – not having money for basic necessities like metro-cards or soap – and another kind of hardship – not having SNAP benefits to buy food.

**Healthy Eating and the Politics of Choice**

We can’t even begin to think about the panic around obesity, health and poverty that far too often blames the ill health of the poor on their poor food choices without putting it in the context of an rapidly changing food landscape marked by inequality in the US. The proliferation of concerns around food have produced an extreme market segmentation, resulting in a dizzying array of healthy, natural, organic and fortified foods (Belasco 2007; Levenstein 1988). These consumer products have been matched by the endlessly more refined, rare, labor intensive and expensive food ‘experiences’ available to the upper classes (Roseberry 1996). These food practices shape the conversation about food choice and the eating habits of the poor, holding them up to ever more impossible standards without increasing people’s material conditions in ways that would allow them to make different choices. Conversations about food and poverty invariably cast the poor as objects of wonder and pity for the well-fed, either as miseducated eaters (and there is a small army of nutrition education experts and social scientists who lend credence to this view) or as passive victims of poverty who require help. This help almost always comes from a compassionate middle and upper class who drop off a few cans for the local can drive or contribute a few dollars or hours of volunteer work to a local food pantry. This view does little to help us understand the important role hunger plays in structuring the bottom of the pyramid. The urban poor are both an important market for cheap, processed food and an important source of cheap, highly exploitable labor.
Cheap, industrially produced food is a response to hunger that comes with its own costs, producing unanticipated outcomes like widespread obesity and chronic illness. The homogenization of the American diet in the post-war period was made possible by new industrial techniques for mass-producing heavily processed foods that were advertised as time and labor saving. As the health implications of this mass-produced diet became clear, food processors responded by marketing health-conscious products to newly anxious consumers. In recent years, social movements for food justice have struggled with concerns of co-optation by the food industry, which has consistently demonstrated its willingness and ability to respond to consumer concerns about food and health through expanding market choices and capitalizing on previously alternative food production processes (Belasco 2007; Belasco and Scranton 2002; Guthman 2004).

The people I met over the course of my research shared the widespread anxieties about food and health that have garnered so much public attention in the past few years. The ‘good food’ movement has made these concerns national topics. In New York City, legislation aimed at increasing consumer outlets has codified these concerns into a legislative agenda aimed at increasing consumer choice. But in the absence of real resources these efforts remain disconnected from the real constraints that prevent poor New Yorkers from eating well.

And yet, many of my informants clung to the idea of choice, not the idea of health, as their central concern in being able to eat well. My informants repeatedly described eating well in terms of choice and abundance. “Open the refrigerator up and have an option and actually be confused on what you want to eat, rather than knowing what you're eating.” “Eating well means having food when you want to eat. Never having to go without food when you are ready to eat.” “just going into the fridge and getting what I wanted” “Just having a nice lunch, making big
spreads, having choices.” People’s access to choice – as much as to food itself – was shaped by paternal, work-first food and welfare policies. Citizens ‘right to choose’ was fundamentally experienced through market transactions. People who did not meet the obligation of citizenship – exchanging work for wages – had little choice about what or even if they could eat.

Hunger and eating are biological facts, but they are also rich sites of meaning making. The meanings that we attribute to food – the way it is produced, distributed, procured, prepared and consumed – are socially and historically contingent. Food procurement in the contemporary urban US reflects the contemporary fragmentation of the food market. Food processors churn out hundreds of new products every year (Nestle 2002). Their approach is based on the understanding that “we are in an age of multi-dimensional marketing: a division of food shoppers into various segments and sub-segments” (Levenstein 1993, 251). The homogenous food market of the Fordist era has fractured, with an ever expanding array of choices for upper-income consumers (Roseberry 1996). Choice is often offered as a solution to widespread public health problems, particularly those related to food and eating. What I have tried to show in this chapter are the ways in which choice becomes an inoperable solution in the context of intense market segmentation so long as there is still money to be made ‘at the bottom of the pyramid’. Poor New Yorkers are reluctant consumers of poverty foods and skeptical consumers of food distributed by food pantries. But in both of these roles, they play an important part in the broader political economy of food in the US.

The idea of reproduction is centrally important to social theory because it allows people to imagine possible futures and transformations (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995). This is particularly important in the area of hunger and food insecurity because it extends our understanding of reproduction past demographic facts of birth rates, and allows us to consider what kind of human
beings we are making. It is also here, in the politics of reproduction, that we can identify the political tensions that shape contemporary food policy. On the one hand, withholding food has become a key punishment in attempts to enforce participation in the low wage labor market. On the other hand, disrupting poor people’s access to food and minimizing food budgets create situations where poor people are forced to rely on the cheapest, least nutritious foods.

Public health projections show that the current generation of children may have a shorter life span than their parents because of the early onset of health effects related to diet, which are far more prevalent in low income populations. The demands of the labor market, for cheap, exploitable labor have come into conflict with social reproduction. Imaginaries of unhealthy, encumbered and unproductive bodies in the future become the target of health policies, at the same time that welfare policies, which regulate the labor force, contribute to the conditions producing these unproductive and encumbered bodies. Health disparities have become a strong rallying point for food activism and critiques of the current food system and are often framed in terms of future productivity and drains on health care systems. This temporal disconnect gets to the heart of the contradictions in contemporary food policy. The urban poor provide a source of cheap, exploitable labor, a market for the consumption of low end products, and act as consumers of food surpluses derived from overproduction.

These uses of the poor are in direct conflict. Poor people play a key market role as consumers of cheap foods and as a means to dispose of surplus food and over-production. The food stamp market is one of the fastest growing – rising from 20 billion to 80 billion in the past ten years. These benefits are based on an inadequate food plan that is designed to limit poor people’s choices. Companies depend on poor consumers to maintain their bottom lines – regardless of the health effects of cheap food. But this consumer role is implicated in the
production of unproductive, wasteful bodies that become drains on society as disabled, non-workers (O'Donnell 2011). It is a tremendous paradox that the poorest Americans are both the heaviest and the hungriest.

At the same time, poor people’s presumed inability to self-regulate as participants in the labor force, requiring intensive intervention on the part of welfare officials who can wield food aid as a key punishment in creating a compliant workforce, create situations in which self-regulating one’s health becomes impossible. There is considerable hand wringing about the poor, hunger and poverty in the US. Hunger is seen as a failure, a moral outrage and an incomprehensible fact in a country with so much food. However, very little is asked about the social uses of hunger and who benefits from them. Poverty and hunger are social facts that benefit some social actors at the expense of others. But these social uses, when analyzed through the lens of social reproduction, are in conflict, producing considerable hardship for the poor who are the target of so much concern.

One response to these contradictions has been the quest to transform food aid programs into nutrition programs. Though there has been little policy change in this regard, there is mounting pressure to restrict the kinds of foods poor Americans can buy with their SNAP benefits. The Bloomberg Administration was a trailblazer in this regard, requesting a waiver from the USDA to prevent food stamp recipients from using their benefits to buy soda. The waiver was denied, but the issue is far from settled. Other states have also requested waivers and new programs for incentivizing healthy eating through the SNAP program have been proposed.

These efforts represent a scientific, rational, technocratic fix to overlapping health crises. Restricting what poor people can buy with SNAP benefits and incentivizing healthy choices has been framed as an efficient, measurable intervention with the potential to lower future health
costs and limit obesity as a drag on the economy. As Julie Guthman argues, “obesity discourse, in that way, has contributed to what might be called a neoliberal biopolitics that couples control and deservingness and deems the improperly embodied subject as a problem for the broader social body” (Guthman 2009, 1126). Obesity and ill-health are not framed as an individual’s problem but as a social problem requiring social interventions. If poor individuals cannot manage their own individual choices, then social policy is redesigned to manage those choices for them.

This approach recognizes that cheap food as a solution to hunger and poverty produces new externalities in the form of obesity, ill health, lost productivity and high medical costs. These externalities are interpreted as a problem for society as a whole, imagined through the collective frame of the market. The proposed solution to these externalities, however, is to further regulate and incentivize ‘proper’ market behavior, requiring or encouraging poor consumers to make ‘better’ choices. The incredibly thin politics of choice obscures the broader social forces that structure poor people’s choices in the first place – forcing them to eat ‘at the whim of the grocery store.’

People need to eat, but their ability to do so is heavily impacted by public policy in the broader context of stagnating wages, fragmented, post-fordist food markets, insecure labor and downward mobility. As Julie Guthman points out, it is important to ask what forces have come together to produce cheap food but also what forces have come together to produce the need for it (Guthman 2011). Questions of poverty, lack of resources and social protections, and dependence on a labor market that does not provide full employment may very well be what produces the need for cheap food. But, in an era of free market fundamentalism, policies that address these issues are political non-staters. Instead, regulating individual choice has emerged
as a technocratic solution to the public health outcomes produced by the current food system. In
a food system organized primarily around the profit motive and consumer choice, food politics
are reduced to either restricting or expanding those choices. The idea of choice, however, is a
fiction for the very poorest who lack the means to exercise their right to choose in the first place.
Chapter 6: Consuming Poverty

Despite the moral dictum that “the poor will always be with you”, poverty is in fact highly contextual and culturally specific. Hunger, as an embodied experience of poverty, takes on many meanings and uses across cultures and across time. This dissertation asks what gives rise to hunger in the contemporary urban US, with the understanding that hunger is in no way inevitable, but contingent on a range of social arrangements that are continually reproduced through everyday institutions, including the welfare office, food pantries, the labor market and the broader economy that structures urban class relations in highly raced and gendered ways.

Food is a powerful expression of social rank. Control of who eats, what they eat, how that food is procured and in what social context is profoundly shaped by public policy and the distribution of power (Appadurai 1981; Dehavenon 1995; Fitchen 1988; Freidberg 2007; Goody 1982; Lindenbaum 1986; Mennell 1987).

Americans often express dismay and even moral outrage at hunger in the US, asking how there can be hunger in the face of such plenty. There is an obvious over-abundance in a nation where we literally throw away thirty to forty percent of our food every day (EPA 2013). It is not unusual to hear policy makers and pundits express skepticism about reports of hunger (Himmelgreen and Nancy 2010; Nestle and Guttmacher 1992). The ‘obesity epidemic’ in the US has further marginalized concerns about hunger, particularly because obesity is more prevalent among low-income Americans, adding to the illusion that no one is starving in America.

Hunger in the U.S. is difficult to fathom because of an often unspoken assumption that hunger is caused by food shortages – insufficient supply at the regional or national level. Anthropologists and others have demonstrated that hunger is not only – or even primarily - the
result of this type of food shortage (Davis 2000; DeRose, et al. 1998; Sen 1981). Hunger can also result from food poverty, where households do not have adequate resources to access the food supplies that exist. Even when households may have sufficient food, hunger can result from inequalities within the household, or, at the individual level, from health conditions that make it impossible for people to properly metabolize the food they eat (DeRose, et al. 1998). As we have seen, food poverty in North Brooklyn – the inability of some households to access sufficient food - is intricately bound up with welfare reforms, the labor market, the growth of the non-profit response to hunger and a food system organized around profit maximization. Ultimately, understanding hunger in the U.S. means understanding how the distribution of power effects the distribution of food.

Food poverty at the household level is directly caused by welfare reform policies that withhold food stamp benefits through bureaucratic error, work requirements, diversionary tactics and sanctions for failure to comply. Even the power to define what constitutes a household can have a serious impact on hunger and food insecurity. Welfare administrators and policy makers have designed welfare programs in ways that exclude many kinship and care obligations between people who do not reside together (Stack 1974), making it particularly difficult for non-custodial parents to provide care – and food - for their children.

Ethnographic work on hunger and food insecurity has uncovered a range of typical responses to food shortages in a range of contexts, including intensification of labor, cutting family or reciprocal ties, re-investing in affective ties, prostitution or engagement in other informal labor arrangements, selling of durable or productive household goods and food substitution (Brett 2010; Dehavenon 1985; Githinji 2009; Messer and Shipton 2002; Pottier 1999; Preibisch, et al. 2002; Shipton 1990; Weismantel 1988). Though much of this work has
focused on rural areas and developing nations, these responses are not dissimilar to how residents of North Brooklyn cope with food insecurity. In rural contexts, intensification of labor often means farming marginal land or combining wage work with food production (Preibisch, et al. 2002). In the context of the urban US, it means intensifying job searches, walking miles in search of a job or sending out hundreds of resumes and job applications. It also, quite often, means making work for oneself through odd jobs and informal work arrangements, or taking on multiple jobs, creating work for oneself as a volunteer, or selling household goods. Individuals faced with hunger in North Brooklyn often re-established family ties, by doubling up in apartments and sharing resources, or cut off friends and family who they no longer had the means to help. Food substitution, typically framed as lack of choice in the US, was common and, as my informants often pointed out, had significant health impacts including, paradoxically, weight gain.

People often respond to food shortages by substituting higher status foods with lower status foods. In the context of the US, this often means seeking out food from charitable organizations like food pantries and soup kitchens. As hunger is increasingly identified as the problem facing poor people, instead of a dysfunctional welfare system or an exploitative labor market, the solution becomes providing more food – often through non-profit organizations like the North Brooklyn Food Pantry or the dozen other emergency food providers that have come into existence in North Brooklyn since the early 1980’s. As we have seen, people in North Brooklyn turned toward these resources in response to a welfare system that regularly withholds food aid from unemployed New Yorkers, often regardless of whether or not they are willing to comply with workfare assignments. Caught in a web of bureaucratic rules and requirements,
these households and individuals commonly experience food poverty and adopt a range of common strategies in order to access more food.

At the same time, food stamp applicants who could easily demonstrate that they work, by producing pay stubs or other formal documents, were able to establish food stamp cases much more easily. This group – the ‘working poor’ – is encouraged to get the ‘work supports’ public officials feel they deserve. Policy makers have made a concerted effort to de-stigmatize public benefits for this group, emphasizing the nutritional goals of the program and employing the language of work support and public health. This represents an entrenched form of what Peck and Tickell have termed ‘roll-out’ neoliberalism, where state resources are actively used to move people into the labor market (Peck and Tickell 2002).

Neoliberalism has been described as a long-term response on the part of the capitalist class to declining profits beginning in the 1970’s (Harvey 2005). This response has often taken the form of attacks against working people, undermining their power in the market, driving down wages, and creating instability and insecurity in their livelihoods. Welfare retrenchment and restructuring have been a crucial front in this assault on working people (Collins 2008; Peck 2001; Piven 2001). But welfare retrenchment is merely one side of the neoliberal coin. The other side is the development and deployment of state resources in new, productive ways that actively encourage or compel new kinds of market participation and behaviors. Increasingly, welfare benefits are being restructured as incentives that subsidize participation in the low-wage labor force.

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28 Taking away social protections and making employment increasingly insecure has created a labor force that is less likely to demand a greater share of profits and productivity gains. Alan Greenspan famously admitted this when he testified to congress that the strong economic growth in the late 1990’s was due to “growing worker insecurity.”
It takes cultural and political work to establish hegemony. The Washington Consensus mantra that the market is the always the best way to provide for people’s basic needs is a failing project. The reality of low-wage labor is at odds with the rhetoric of welfare reform, which was centered on ideas of independence, self-sufficiency and personal responsibility. What has emerged is a re-calibration of the language around welfare programs. Self-sufficiency is redefined as a person’s ability to combine wages with ‘the work supports that they deserve’.

Food stamps have long been available to working families who met the income threshold to qualify for benefits, but it is only in the last decade that these families and individuals have become the majority of food stamp recipients, both in New York City and nationally (Klerman, et al. 2009). This is both because the poorest households are less likely to receive aid (see Chapter 3) and because those households that earn low wages, putting them at 100 – 150% of the poverty line – are far more likely to receive aid today (Todd et al 2010). Food stamp policy, things like longer periods between income certification, which had to be done once a month in the 1980’s, but has been extended to every six months for households with earned income in most states, including New York, have been shown to play a significant role in increasing the

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\[\text{29 See Todd, et al 2010 for a discussion of the national trends. They conclude, “between 1990 and 2004, the share of children receiving food stamp benefits declined, most notably among children in the poorest households (income below 50 percent of the Federal poverty line). The share of children receiving benefits from the school meals programs and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) rose, mainly among children in low-income households with income above the Federal poverty line. Overall, the share of children in households that received benefits from AFDC/TANF or food assistance programs grew from 35 percent to 52 percent. However, the net result of these changes is that average total inflation-adjusted household benefits from all programs examined declined. The decline was largest among children in the poorest households” In Community Board One, the area that encompasses Greenpoint and Williamsburg, Cash Assistance cases dropped from 13,597 to 5,506 between 2000 and 2010. However, the percentage of the population receiving some public benefits increased from 32.9% to 43.9% over the same period, largely due to increases in Medicaid. (source NYC Department of City Planning)}\]
number of working poor receiving these benefits (Klerman, et al. 2009). There has been a concerted policy effort to make the food stamp program more accessible for working families and individuals, particularly in New York City under the Bloomberg administration, and these efforts have produced the intended results, higher food stamp participation among people earning low wages.

This recalibration of the welfare state is part of a broader cultural shift, where everyone is now expected to work for wages, including mothers of young children, and to be “self-sufficient” (Morgen, et al. 2010). However, the mismatch between the rhetoric of self-sufficiency, defined as reliance on the market for wages, and the reality of the urban labor market, has led policy makers to expand the definition of self-sufficiency to include state supplied work supports. This shift has had profound implications both for welfare administration and for the everyday lives of poor and working class New Yorkers.

Scholars of the welfare state have looked at the various ways that welfare regimes become unsettled and redefined (Clarke 2004; Petryna 2004). The parameters of a post-1996 welfare regime are coming into view, with the diminished role of cash assistance and the expansion of in-kind work supports, supplied by state agencies to those who have formal employment. The contemporary welfare regime no longer exists to protect workers from the vagaries of the market, but, instead, subsidizes their participation in it at the increasingly poor terms employers offer their employees. This new urban welfare regime fits neatly into a neoliberal view that sees the state’s role as a promoter and protector of profits for the ‘productive class’. Far from the ideal of the minimal, laissez faire state, this represents a transformation of the activist state in ways that directly buttress the interests of capital. The new welfare regime,
offering minimal ‘work supports’, has hardened attachments to work, exerting disciplinary pressures despite the liberalization of programs like SNAP\textsuperscript{30}.

Analyzing hunger as an outcome of power relationships helps us understand the common political factors that create food poverty across wealthy and poor nations. Hunger may be clinically more or less severe among different populations, and may manifest in a range of ways – including insufficient calories, protein deficiencies, sub-clinical malnutrition or obesity. However, the social and political underpinnings and ideologies that produce hunger may very well be the same. Analysis along these lines requires both an understanding of what constitutes hunger in a given social context and what causes it. The previous chapters attempted to understand the cultural assumptions about work, deservingness, welfare, charity, consumption and poverty that have shaped the current food safety net in the US. I have traced the experience of hunger and food insecurity by those who rely on these food programs in the context of a highly segmented consumer food market. In describing the experience of food insecurity, I hoped to shed some light on the politics of hunger in the US. The food safety net in the U.S. is large, complex and has grown rapidly over the past decade. But, the current approach to hunger based on work-first welfare, the low cost of food and the distribution of surplus production through private charities produces an incredibly fragile food safety net for poor New Yorkers at the household level.

\textsuperscript{30} This arrangement is not dissimilar to the Speenhamland system that Karl Polyani describes in The Great Transformation, in which a subsidy was given to workers based on the price of bread. Polanyi argues that this subsidy ultimately depressed wages as employers did not have to pay a fair wage to keep their employees alive. Similarly, SNAP benefits tied to work allow contemporary employers to pay below subsistence wages. My own argument supports Piven and Cloward’s (1987) analysis that it was not the availability of aid that produced poverty and immiseration, but the availability of aid that was tied to work, making the poor reliant on employers for both their wages and their wage supplements and dampening their ability to resist poor labor conditions.
The New Politics of Poverty

Scholars of the welfare state have long argued that, “the balance of class power is fundamentally altered when workers enjoy social rights, for the social wage lessens the worker’s dependence on the market and employers” (Esping-Andersen 1990, 11). Welfare protections raise a host of political and economic questions about the relationship between the role of the state and the inequalities produced by capitalism. I have argued that the minimal, residual social wage provided to the non-elderly poor in the U.S. has been transformed so that it actually increases dependence on the market and employers in new ways. Markets and employers are becoming the gatekeepers of both literal wages and the social wage in the US. One of the most remarkable ways this plays out are the concerted efforts on the part of elites to ‘de-stigmatize’ food stamps. In New York City, efforts to increase the food stamp rolls stem directly from Mayor Bloomberg’s attitude that, “If you’re working, I want to help you” (DeParle and Gebeloff 2010). In the fifteen years after the passage of the 1996 welfare reforms, this attitude has become a new kind of political common sense, both in New York City and nationally.

In 1992 Lawrence Mead published a book titled “The New Politics of Poverty: The Non-Working Poor in America” in which he argued that the ‘working poor are considerably outnumbered by the non-working” and that “the leading domestic issue has changed from how to raise wages and benefits for working people to how to turn more poor people into workers.” He writes that “to Americans, employment is the great emblem of deservingness” (Mead 1992). His proposed solution to the problem of the non-working poor was to reform welfare programs so that they actively moved people into the labor market – to turn more people into workers.

Mead’s analysis proved prescient. Welfare reforms in 1996 took up the issue of how to turn more poor people into workers and institutionalized two basic approaches. The first was to
make welfare programs more punitive by developing a whole range of requirements to qualify for welfare benefits and a whole range of punishments for any failure to fulfill these new requirements. Punitive changes to cash assistance like workfare programs, sanctions for failure to comply with work rules, and time limits have received a great deal of attention in the literature on welfare and in the social sciences more generally.

As Fording, Soss and Schram argue, the second approach to using welfare programs to make more people into workers, which has received less attention, is the restructuring of the welfare state to incentivize work (Soss, et al. 2011). Though their focus is primarily on the TANF program, programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit and, importantly for my argument in this book, the SNAP program are much more far-reaching incentives. By breaking away from a primary focus on the TANF program, my analysis clarifies how these attempts to incentivize work operate outside the confines of an increasingly punitive (and small) cash welfare system for parents and their children.

Means-tested supplements to low wages have expanded rapidly, particularly among the so-called working poor – people who work for low wages and still qualify for a whole range of welfare benefits, including medical care, food subsidies (food stamps, free school lunch, WIC and commodity foods), tax credits and child care subsidies. Where anti-poverty policy was once targeted towards people who were left out of the labor market – the disabled, the elderly, the temporarily unemployed and mothers caring for young children – today they are targeted towards those who are working. These subsidies to low-wage workers have been the main terrain of anti-poverty policy since the passage of welfare reform in 1996. This approach to poverty relief, through the tax code and through income supplements, is part of a larger trend in
redistributive policy that, as Suzanne Mettler has argued, represents a ‘hidden welfare state’ that has played an essential hand in redistributing wealth upwards (Mettler 2007).

While Mettler has demonstrated the importance of hidden tax expenditures in benefitting wealthy and middle income Americans at the expense of the poor, recent research also shows that even among the officially poor or near-poor, welfare policy increasingly benefits Americans who are slightly better-off – Mead’s ‘working poor’ – while the very poorest Americans have less and less access to aid of any kind (Ben-Shalom, et al. 2011; Edelman 2012; Shaefer and Edin 2012). As Ziliak demonstrates, “perhaps surprisingly, the post-tax and in-kind transfer safety net actually exacerbates inequality among the poor” (Ziliak 2011). Means-tested programs, which in the late 1960’s came close to creating parity between welfare benefits and low-wage work (Soss, et al. 2011), now exacerbate inequality between the working poor and those without formal employment. That is, welfare programs have been re-calibrated to boost the incomes of families at or near the poverty line more than they benefit those who, because they have very little or no income, fall far below it.

Welfare policy contributes to the intensification of poverty and the growing need of those who find themselves outside of the formal workforce. These needs are being met by non-profit, charitable organizations that do the work of the welfare state. But unlike broad-based anti-poverty policies, which expand the economic rights associated with citizenship, this growing charitable response, fueled by state funds, further limits the kind of citizenship claims the very poor are able to make. This represents a significant shift in urban poverty governance, one that has been taking shape in the post-welfare reform era through small adjustments in policy and practice and that has profound effects on the lived experience of poverty in the urban US today.
Marx’s famous dictum, that people make their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing, applies equally to economic elites as they attempt to restructure the world in their own interests. The embedded liberalism of the welfare state in the U.S. – however meager – is the context out of which the neoliberal response to falling profits has taken shape. Programs that once provided a clear set of social and economic rights have been restructured and repurposed. Liberal welfare programs continue to be large and interventionist. But they are being restructured to intervene in the market in ways that create inequality and undermine the power of labor to resist exploitative work conditions – not in ways that provide a social wage that allow labor to resist exploitation. The United States, with its long-standing emphasis on market-conforming welfare policy and reliance on private agents of provision (Hacker 2002), has been the predictable epicenter of a global turn toward neoliberal poverty governance that is taking different forms in different polities (Schram, et al. 2009). In the face of a substantial decline in working class power, the contemporary welfare state in the U.S. has taken on both authoritarian and conservative characteristics. Those actions of the state are “now to cultivate the ground of optimum capitalist activity” (Smith 2011, 6).

**Selective Hegemony and the Politics of Consumption**

The Bloomberg Administration’s approach to food aid is an example of what Gavin Smith calls ‘selective hegemony’. He argues that selective hegemony, “restricts the field of negotiable politics to selected participants, so there is a sphere of action beyond such politics where no such negotiation is possible” (Smith 2011, 5). I inhabited this sphere of negotiable politics and tested its limits as an advocate for food stamp recipients in their dealings with the welfare office. While broad, far-reaching channels existed for negotiating on behalf of non-cash assistance clients who had regular employment, my attempts to assist informally employed or
unemployed community residents often felt like a time consuming exercise in futility. Those without access to benefits were left to rely on a charitable food system where no channels of negotiation exist.

Smith argues that selective hegemony emerges from a fundamental shift in the economy, in which, “financial capital asserted its logic over that of industrial capital and the institutions into which it had become embedded” (Smith 2011, 2). These institutions include the Keynesian welfare state, through which workers, women, and racial minorities struggled to secure a set of social and economic rights associated with citizenship. In the past, changes in technology and production shifted labor needs, dislocating large numbers of people from established social worlds (Gordon, et al. 1982; Gutman 1977; Thompson 1971). These dislocations have profoundly shaped welfare state policies in various historical moments (Piven and Cloward 1987).

Today we are witnessing a similar upheaval, but one in which displaced labor has been only partially reallocated into lower wage, insecure jobs. The expansion of the global industrial labor force has reduced U.S. capital’s reliance on a highly productive domestic labor force. In place of industrial production, the U.S. economy has come to be dominated by a financial sector that primarily coordinates the flow of global capital and an expanding service sector (Gordon and Sassen 1992; Sassen 1991). The kinds of workers that are necessary to maintain profits and the kinds of consumption required of them have changed. As Smith suggests, the problem and the response are qualitatively different. It is not surprising, then, that we are seeing a concomitant shift in the way welfare protections are organized.

The idea of the nation state as a broad social collective responsible for the well being of its citizens has been under attack for several decades in the U.S. In place of the bounded nation
state with a clearly defined citizenry endowed with social, civil and political rights, the market has come to define the limits of the social. One’s place in the body politic is contingent on one’s place in the market. Those who find themselves outside the market – as non-workers and (for the poor) non-consumers - exist beyond the realm of deservingness and are subject to all manner of coercive and punitive measures to move them back into the market. This differs from the ‘principle of less eligibility’ that has long characterized the residual, stigmatized welfare state in the U.S. (Esping-Andersen 1990; Piven and Cloward 1993). Welfare benefits are being transformed into incentives for those who participate in the formal labor market, fueling intense competition for the insufficient jobs that exist. In doing so, welfare programs like SNAP contribute to higher productivity and higher profits financed by taxpayers. The structure of welfare benefits is producing a situation in which low wage employers can pay workers below subsistence wages because state subsidies ensure that they can still survive. At the same time, those who are left out of the labor force are subject to cutbacks, program restrictions, coercion and hunger.

Food aid further delimits this selective hegemony insofar as it is aimed at improving the health and vitality of the low wage labor force. As David Harvey points out, “sickness is defined under capitalism broadly as inability to work “(Harvey 2000, 106). Obesity and chronic health conditions have become a central concern for the public and for policy makers precisely because these diet-related health conditions are perceived as a threat to future productivity, fiscal health and long-term capital accumulation. The workforce is central to long term capital accumulation in both the work place and in the sphere of consumption. This leads us to ask, what kind of worker is being produced in the post-industrial U.S.? How is policy being used to shape new kinds of consumption that can contribute to long-term accumulation? These questions are far
from settled, as the current debates over food policy in the U.S. demonstrate.

The politics around food aid are hotly contested. As the most recent Farm Bill negotiations from 2012 to 2014 have made clear, it has become painfully difficult to achieve consensus around who should have access to food aid and under what conditions. This legislation, which funds both the SNAP program and the TEFAP program, as well as a myriad of food, nutrition and farm policies, is renewed every five years. It has been passed as a relatively uncontested bi-partisan bill since the New Deal (Sheingate 2001). This bi-partisan consensus completely broke down in the most recent Farm Bill negotiations. Funding, work requirements, benefit levels and nutritional goals of the SNAP program were the biggest roadblocks to passing a bill. I take these heated debates as a sign that food policy is one area where the needs of capital, workers, and those left out of the labor force are being worked out through the highly contested politics of food aid. Central to these political battles have been the overlapping and contradictory meanings of work, welfare, consumption and health.

Neoliberalism has been characterized as a political project in which, “the ethic of privatized responsibility casts the individual, not the collective nation or community, as wholly morally responsible for their economic success of failure” (Nouvet 2014). Though poor and working people are asked to take on greater responsibility for their basic needs, this does not lessen their responsibility for the fiscal health of cities and for the vitality of the market through their productivity and their consumption choices. Each individual is responsible for the collective health of the economy and their value as a citizen is judged through their contributions as a worker and as a consumer. It is in this context that the contradictory, deeply contested politics around food aid begin to make sense, in particular the tension between food aid as a welfare program and food aid as a public health intervention. Food is necessary to produce, maintain and
control a labor force (Berlin and Morgan 1993; Goody 1997; Mintz 1995). At the same time, food, as a commodity, is central to the development of large-scale markets. What people eat is important for them as individuals, for the formation of communities and identities, for health and well-being and for the broader development of markets. Food is a primary substance through which we realize our future and ourselves.

Under capitalism, that future depends on continual growth, future productivity and the expansion of markets. Planning for the future means creating the conditions for future growth and accumulation in the present. In this temporal orientation toward the future, food, health and productivity have become imbricated in a host of contradictory ways. Future health and productivity are contingent on today’s consumption choices. Obesity has emerged as a future risk that must be avoided. It is a physical marker that many presume correlates with poor health and a failure to contribute productively – particularly in the future. Obesity has become the mark of a citizen who consumes but does not contribute. That obesity rates are higher among the poor only confirms the suspicion that those who are overweight consume without giving anything back to the broader collective as it delimited by the market.

The Contested Politics of Food Aid

It is in this context that poor people’s consumption choices have become an object of political debate. Current debates center on the kind of aid that should be given, to whom, and under what conditions. Proposals have spanned a broad spectrum, from imposing new restrictions on food aid and block granting the SNAP program to raising benefit levels and undoing the work restrictions for able-bodied adults. Much of this debate reflects Piven and Cloward’s insight that, “A great expansion of relief constitutes a ‘crisis’ and pressure mounts to reorganize the system in the name of reform” (Piven and Cloward 1993, 343). Recent attempts
to scale back SNAP benefits may very well mark a response to the crisis of benefit expansion. After over a decade of steady growth in the food stamp rolls, the most recent Farm Bill negotiations cut nine billion dollars from the program and a smaller increase in benefit levels was allowed to expire, effectively cutting benefits for all recipients in November of 2013. These cuts are significant, but so was the agonizingly long process to get consensus on a final Farm Bill. It was a process that dragged out over two years and exposed many of the tensions and underlying political logics behind contemporary food aid policy.

Perhaps the clearest articulation around food policy has come from the far right. Tea Party affiliated Republicans in the House have pushed for large cuts to food aid and more punitive and restrictive measures, including tightening work requirements nationally and drug testing SNAP recipients. Control of basic necessities becomes a way to control a laboring population and withholding food or the means to acquire food becomes a way of forcing bodies into productive activities. For these far right policy makers, food should be withheld unless an individual is participating in the labor force. These proposals mobilize many of the same racist tropes that policy makers and pundits deployed to build support for welfare reform in the mid-1990’s (Hancock 2004; Haney-Lopez 2014; Neubuck and Cazenave 2001). These coded racial appeals about dependency, laziness and criminality – and now poor people’s irresponsibility for their own health - have proven effective in mobilizing some support for deep cuts to food aid, particularly among conservative whites.

Race and racism have long operated in the U.S. as a social and ideological means to create distinctions within the working class, dividing workers into groups who had access to the social wage and groups who did not (Fox 2012; Katzenelson 2005; Piven and Cloward 1993). Immigration status continues to provide a legal avenue for producing a highly exploitable pool of
low wage labor. But in the wake of the Civil Rights struggles, which dismantled Jim Crow and ended legal discrimination, racial exclusions have taken on new forms. In the post-Civil rights era, the expansion of prisons, policing and punitive welfare regimes have become the coded racial ways that exclusionary racial regimes have been maintained (Alexander 2010; Haney-Lopez 2014). The view that food aid must be made more restrictive is a direct extension of the racist attacks on cash assistance in the 1990’s. But unlike the political climate of the mid-1990’s, this view has not gained broad-based support either amongst policy makers or the public. The food stamp program remains enormously popular and most Americans oppose large cuts to the program (Delaney and Swanson 2013). 31

The second policy approach I’d like to draw out here can be seen in some of the proposals put forth to expand food aid and to transform it into a nutrition program by incentivizing the purchase of fresh fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods. This approach is grounded in Keynesian ideas of a longer-term investment in human capital. Proposals to increase food stamp benefit amounts and to incentivize the purchase of fruits and vegetables with SNAP benefits in the recent farm bill negotiations represent an approach to food aid that differs from the punitive approach. Transforming the SNAP program into a nutrition program becomes a way of investing in future workers and reducing future healthcare costs. Food stamp recipients and the poor are evaluated by their future contributions to the market, to profits and economic growth. Their consumption is viewed as a social investment that contributes to the long-term health of the economy. At the national level, the ‘working poor’ have become a socially

31 According to the USDA, 43% of SNAP participants are white, 33% are African-American, 19% are Hispanic, 2% are Asian, and 2% are Native American. Approximately 15% of the total U.S. population currently receives SNAP. Though politicians on the right have attempted to use anti-black racism to build support for cuts to the program, the image of hunger and SNAP use remains relatively free from the kind of racialized stereotyping that fueled welfare restructuring in the 1990’s.
recognized group and a central object of political negotiations. Subsidizing the low wages this
group earns and incentivizing healthy food choices is a populist response to falling wages and
downward mobility as employers abandon their obligations to provide their employees with
living wages and adequate benefits. So long as expansions in food aid primarily benefit workers
who have access to formal employment, this approach does little to alter the power relations that
currently structure the welfare state and the food safety net in the U.S.

No conclusive approach to food policy emerged in the Farm Bill negotiations. But
looking closely at how the Bloomberg administration has navigated these tensions, extending
benefits to some groups while maintaining a hard line on punitive and exclusionary policies for
the unemployed, can help us see how these various tendencies are playing out on the ground.
This is an inherently contradictory approach that is both expansive and restrictive and ultimately
incapable of resolving the tensions produced by market capitalism. Debates over food aid are far
from settled. Paying close attention to the ways that food aid is being negotiated and deployed
sheds light on the “new antagonisms and struggles that are developing over the defense of the
welfare state in the West, the programmatic exclusion of large groups of people from economic
activity and political participation, and ecological fears” (Douzinas and Zizek 2010).

At the national level these struggles continue to be framed in terms of the economy. ‘The
economy’ – a bland and neutral term that denotes a thing – has replaced capitalism – a term that
implies a process and is still capable of conjuring up its other. When capitalism as a system that
produces winners and losers is replaced by “the economy”, then there is nothing left to do but
manage it as best we can. Poverty, hunger and ill-health becomes facts that are being addressed
through the expansion of food aid - but questions about what causes poverty and inequality are
ignored. Welfare programs are being redesigned to serve the ‘economy’- to produce an urban
poor that can contribute to the market. The welfare state is being restructured to continually nudge the poor back to the market, in both subtle and not so subtle ways. When markets produce externalities – like an obesity epidemic – the solution becomes to literally open up new markets for the urban poor by expanding consumer choice. While focusing on choice provides undeniable improvements in under-served neighborhoods, it does little to ameliorate or even address the underlying problem of poverty and lack of resources at the household level that do so much to contribute to ill-health in the first place.

**Food Justice and the Politics of the Possible**

Stuart Hall has argued that, “hegemony has constantly to be worked on, maintained, renewed, revised. Excluded social forces, whose consent has not been won, whose interests have not been taken into account, form the basis of counter-movements, resistance, alternative strategies and visions … and the struggle over a hegemonic system starts anew” (Hall 2011). Just as the kings of England once justified their rule and power by the divine right bestowed upon them by God, elites today justify their rule and power through the divine right of markets. This represents a cosmology that explains and justifies (even valorizes) inequality. Thinking about the welfare state, food and hunger demands that we look for alternative cosmologies in formation that can counter deeply held cultural beliefs about ownership and control of resources, including food, housing and the city itself.

The US food movement has done part of the work of delegitimating market ideology – the belief that markets rationally allocate resources to produce the most good for the most people – by calling the environmental and health effects of the industrial food system into question (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Patel 2008). Food justice activists go further by pointing out that these health and environmental effects disproportionately impact poor communities of color and
are linked to a legacy of racism and dispossession in the U.S. Social justice activists committed to realizing racial, gender and economic justice in the food movement struggle with the limits of market-based and philanthropic approaches (Alkon and Mares 2012). The main terrain of food justice work has been at the local level, expanding urban agriculture, community gardens, and farmers markets in poor urban communities. These local level projects expand individual consumer choices and opportunities for self-provisioning, but food justice activists struggle to offer a transformative vision (Gimenez and Shattuck 2011). These efforts run the risk of reinforcing market ideologies by providing ethical, healthy and sustainable products to those who can afford to pay. Connecting these local level projects to a broad-based politics that addresses ‘neoliberalism writ large’ remains a vexing problem for U.S. based food activists committed to principles of food justice and food sovereignty (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Alkon and Mares 2012; Cardwell 2006; Gimenez and Shattuck 2011).

The hard work that food justice activists have done has been successful in naming food inequality as a problem, one that contributes to profound health disparities along lines of race and class. However, when these hard won successes are addressed through expanding amenities – like grocery stores and greencarts – they do little to address the underlying problems of poverty. Expanding consumer choice fails to challenge a food system that produces unhealthy food and unhealthy jobs for the poor while catering to the ‘ethical hedonism’ of upper class consumers (Patel 2009). As we have seen, the Bloomberg Administration’s approach addresses the issues of health disparities, obesity and chronic illness by claiming that the urban poor are not integrated well enough into the market. They do not have access to the same consumer choices as others or they are not working (and therefore earning) enough. Food aid policies that push poor people into the labor market and expand consumer choice have become an insufficient
technocratic and managerial fix for pressing public health problems.

Poor urban consumers will continue to be caught by the trap of cheap food as long as they are forced to eat ‘at the whim of the grocery store’. Food justice activists, with a critique of the food system’s impact on the health and well-being of poor communities of color, already implicitly offer a critique of cheap food. These embodied forms of discrimination can and should give rise to new kinds of claims on the state.

Re-valuing food is central to the work of realizing food justice. In the U.S. this revaluing has taken place primarily through the market, as food producers introduce new products that address the health, environmental and even ethical concerns of consumers (Guthman 2004; Levenstein 1988; Lyon and Moberg 2010). These forms of ‘added-value’ production sidestep the political questions of poverty, health and even environmental degradation, which continues apace so long as the vast majority are forced into reliance on the cheapest foods – those that are most damaging to health, to the workers who produce them, to the environment and to global peasants who are displaced when they cannot compete with these industrially produced foods (Edelman 1999; Friedman 1990; Weismantel 1988). When food aid is made contingent on work it contributes to the extreme commodification of both labor and food as life force (McMichael 2000).

I want to suggest a different approach, asking in what ways markets have failed and to question if there are solutions that exist outside (or even in opposition to) markets. Instead of intensively pushing for the commodification of labor, housing and food as a solution to social problems, what happens if we take steps to decommodify these fundamental human needs? How can we restructure welfare programs so that they decommodify food and labor? That is, how do we design policies in ways that protect people from the vicissitudes and failures of the market?
This was the original intent of the expansion of the food stamp program in the 1970’s. It was designed to ensure universal access to food, a basic necessity for life, regardless of employment status. There has long been a sense that we can solve the problem of hunger in America if only we had the political will to do so. Because food is so abundant, it should be an easy problem to fix. What this view overlooks are the deeply embedded political and economic forces that structure hunger, both in the U.S. and globally. Undoing hunger means more than just providing people with sufficient food. It also requires a redistribution of power and productive resources.

Concerns around food and health, rooted in a critique of the destructive nature of a profit-driven food system that harms both the environment and human bodies, have emerged as a powerful counter-imaginary to the all-encompassing power of the market. As Polyani argued, a market economy, if left to evolve according to its own laws would create great and permanent evils because of the fictitious commodification of land, labor and money. This is what he calls the satanic mill that destroys society, dislocates human beings, and breaks human and cultural bonds. Counter-movements in the expansion of markets, including laws regulating labor, trade unions, and political counter movements can prevent these evils (Polyani 1944).

There is a growing awareness of the destructive powers of unrestrained capital accumulation, including climate change, environmental degradation and the impact of a profit-driven food system on health. These environmental limits to capitalism produce another collective imaginary – the global environment upon which we are all dependent. This global imaginary exists in tension with the hegemonic view of the market as that which binds humanity into a collective. As James Ferguson suggests, paying attention to the neoliberal arts of government can open up hopeful avenues for political organizing (Ferguson 2009). Understanding the growth of food programs, as a governing tool, reveals entry points for
political intervention. The growing food safety net does not solve the hunger problem. It manages it because hunger – or the threat of hunger - remains a powerful tool for controlling poor populations. But growing concerns about the limits of the current food system, particularly the degree to which a food system organized around profit produces ill health and disease, suggest new foundations for welfare protections and programs.

The outcomes around food aid are in no way determined. What happens over the next several years may determine whether or not the politics around food aid can contribute to Polyani’s ‘double movement’ or if these programs will be brought closer into line with the dictates of work first welfare programs in ways that further commodify poor people as workers and undermine working class power to resist exploitation. Eliminating work requirements and restoring the program as a universal entitlement would be a good first step to ensuring that eating is not contingent on selling one’s labor in the market.

Welfare protections in the U.S. grew out of a particular historical conjuncture, one that coincided with the emergence of Keynesian economics, which asserted a measurable, knowable and governable national economy. What’s different about the welfare state now is that it is regulating an entirely different labor force – a global labor force, not a domestic one – and under a different kind of capitalism – finance capitalism, not industrial capitalism. In the popular press, defenders of the program consistently claim that food stamps is a program that is working as it should – expanding in a period of economic turmoil and contracting when the economy improves. This temporal horizon, where the welfare state smoothes out economic boom and bust cycles, imagines a stable, steady economic growth. But there are problems with this conception of growth, both in the near term and in the long term. These have to do with both the economic and environmental limits to capitalism.
The ecological limits of carbon capitalism are being reached and, as Guthman suggests, these limits are being reached in people’s bodies and their capacity to absorb both a surplus and all the externalities associated with unregulated industrial agriculture (Guthman 2011; Guthman and DuPuis 2006). This manifests as obesity and, more importantly, disease. Consumers, confronted with a food system that produces ill health, are increasingly urged to make better choices and exert self-discipline in order to avoid these unregulated externalities. However, the image of the self-actualizing, empowered consumer citizen is coming up against the limits of below subsistence wages. The obesity epidemic is producing new, widespread concerns over the future of the American labor force – imagined as literally weighed down by a surfeit of encumbered, inefficient bodies. These two political imaginaries – the utopian and the dystopian are colliding in new and unexpected ways around ideas of food aid that are playing out in new food policy formations.

How is poverty being imagined and experienced today? On the one hand, there are long-standing, deeply embedded ideas about poverty and work that are animating food stamp policy and welfare policy more generally. These neoliberal moves towards privatization and marketization shift resources towards poor people who earn wages and away from those who are left out of the labor force. This shift has an impact on how hunger manifests and is experienced by the urban poor. On the other hand, new discourses about health and well-being have emerged. Food is at the center of this new imaginary, positing both that people need to take responsibility for their health through smart food choices (a thoroughly individualizing move that deflects attention away from an unregulated food system that produces ill-health and polluted environments) and that their ability to make these choices is a right that should be available to everyone. Public health concerns are producing new sets of actors and agents who are concerned
with both poverty and health. These competing concerns – punitive, neoliberal urban poverty
governance and new sets of actors advocating around the right to health collide in a host of
contradictory and messy ways around food and food policy. Competing urban imaginaries –
including an emerging eco-modernism focused on health equality and sustainability and a deeply
ingrained punitive approach to urban poverty governance have produced a complicated and
expansive food safety net. The politics of food in the US are hotly contested and the tension
between these two tendencies has produced an unstable stalemate, with widespread hunger
hanging in the balance. The authoritarian right wing has proposed making food policy more
restrictive and bringing it further in line with welfare reforms that marginalize and punish the
poor, tendencies that are already well established in New York City. At the same time, public
health officials and anti-hunger organizations have successfully held off many of these efforts by
tapping into a broadly circulating understanding of food, health and access that both
individualizes the problem of health and food and opens up rights based claims to social supports
that allow poor people to make the same ‘healthy choices’ as people with more means.

Neoliberalism, some have argued, has entered its ‘zombie phase’ (Peck, et al. 2009).
With no coherent alternatives, projects of privatization and marketization proceed out of a kind
of sheer inertia. The financial meltdown exposed the limits of neoliberalism as a governing
strategy, but in the absence of a competing or compelling vision, the crisis has become the
justification for more of the same bad medicine - more calls for austerity, more policing, and
more work-enforcement even in the absence of a labor market that can reasonably sustain
workers at a subsistence level (Hall, et al. 2013). Food policy, so deeply contested, can help
illuminate both the sclerotic neoliberal response to poverty and the emergent politics around
health, justice and environmental equity that in some ways reproduce neoliberal subjectivities
and in other ways open up new avenues for collective demands around a more just and equitable food system. Whether activists and other social actors are able to capitalize on these political openings remains to be seen.

Appendix B: A Note on the History and Definition of the Welfare State in the U.S.

Defining Welfare and the Welfare State

Throughout this dissertation I use the term welfare to refer to means-tested assistance programs that provide income support to the poor and unemployed. This usage is somewhat different than the way the term was used by my informants, who defined ‘welfare’ narrowly as cash assistance (TANF and, in New York State, the Safety Net program which provides cash assistance to unemployed single adults who do not qualify for TANF). The term ‘welfare’ was sometimes used to refer to food stamp benefits as well, but not always. Social insurance programs, like unemployment insurance, were never referred to as welfare, but by the name of the program in question (i.e. ‘unemployment’, ‘social security’ or ‘disability’). In the US, the term ‘welfare’ has become nearly synonymous with a single program – the TANF program. I use the term a bit more broadly to include all means-tested benefits, including TANF, SNAP, Medicaid and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

Academics and policy makers, on the other hand, use the term ‘welfare state’ to connote a much broader range of programs. Defining the welfare state in the US is difficult because welfare protections have developed historically in a fairly piecemeal fashion. For the purposes of this dissertation I follow Piven and Cloward’s use of the term ‘welfare state’ in the narrow sense of “government programs providing income support to groups deemed to be at risk in the market (such as the aged), or programs that protect people against specified contingencies, such as unemployment or sickness or marital breakdown” (Piven and Cloward 1987, 5). This use of the welfare state, then, includes both means-tested programs and social insurance programs that are tied to employment (Social Security benefits, Unemployment Insurance, Workers Compensation and Disability Insurance) or old age (Medicare). Additionally, I also include
government funded food and nutrition programs in this broad umbrella of the welfare state, including The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), SNAP, school breakfast and lunch, the Women Infant and Children program (WIC), and several smaller nutrition programs all of which are administered by the USDA and funded by the Farm Bill and protect against hunger. Other scholars use the term ‘welfare state’ much more broadly (cf. Katz 2001).

**Historical Development(s) of the US Welfare State**

The welfare state, broadly speaking, is a collection of programs designed to provide economic security in the face of unemployment, hunger, illness and old age. Debates over who should receive assistance, what kind and under what circumstances have shaped the U.S. welfare state since its inception. As numerous scholars have shown, the origins of the welfare state and welfare protections lie in the development of industrial capitalism and the widespread dependence of large numbers of people on waged work to provide for their basic subsistence (Esping-Andersen 1990; Marshall 1992 (1950); Polyani 1944). Reliance on waged work, as opposed to reliance on small scale agriculture or other subsistence strategies, makes workers extremely vulnerable to market upheavals (Piven and Cloward 1987). It should come as no surprise, then, that the development of welfare state programs in the US is tied to periods of economic crisis. The following is a brief description of the development of various welfare state programs to help situate the broader arguments in this dissertation regarding food aid, welfare programs and the political economy of the contemporary US.

Prior to the Great Depression, there were no federal welfare state programs. Poor relief was a local affair, and the minimal assistance offered to the poor was handled by either local governments or charities (Katz 1986). Devastating poverty and widespread social unrest during the Great Depression led to the institution of the first federal welfare state programs as part of President Roosevelt’s sweeping New Deal reforms (Piven and Cloward 1979). The Social
Security Act was passed in 1935. This legislation established the basic architecture of the U.S. welfare state, which was divided into social insurance programs, means-tested programs and work relief programs. Employer opposition to these reforms was fierce and limited the scope of these programs. Southern Democrats helped to weaken these protections by excluding domestic workers and agricultural laborers, most of whom were African Americans, from eligibility in the Social Security program. Further, Southern Democrats insisted on local administration of federal mother’s pensions (ADC). Despite federal funding, local administration meant that ADC could be calibrated carefully to meet the needs of the local labor markets, which meant excluding African American women who often worked as domestic or agricultural laborers (Fox 2012; Katzenelson 2005; Quadagno 1996). By tying social insurance programs, like unemployment and Social Security, to work, these programs also preserved the gendered division of labor. Women were largely relegated to the more stigmatized means tested programs, while men – especially white men – who had access to non-agricultural waged work benefited from the less stigmatized social insurance programs (Abromovitz 1996).

Federal food and nutrition programs also date from this period, but their origins differ somewhat from the programs established by the 1935 Social Security Act. During the Great Depression, the federal government was buying up surplus commodities to support an ailing agricultural economy. Much of this food was destroyed, lest putting it on the market depress prices further for struggling farmers. The destruction of food by the government in the face of mass hunger was met with dismay and outrage and political pressure built to distribute it to poor, hungry families. The result was the creation of the Food Stamp program in 1939 (Poppendieck 1986). The original Food Stamp program differed considerably from today’s SNAP program. Recipients were required to purchase stamps that they could use to buy only surplus commodities
for far below the market price. This program was discontinued during World War II, when demand for food rose and agricultural markets rebounded.

The second major expansion of welfare state programs came in the 1960’s. The Medicaid and Medicare programs were established in 1965 through amendments to the Social Security Act as part of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. Medicare provides health care to all citizens over the age of 65 and Medicaid provides health care to citizens of any age who meet the income test. In addition, Congress passed the Food Stamp Act of 1964 that re-established the Food Stamp program as a permanent federal assistance program, though at the time it only reached certain targeted geographical areas of the US. The Food Stamp program was gradually expanded nationally, until it was made universally available to all US citizens in 1974. The number of Americans receiving Food Stamps rose precipitously, from half a million in 1965 to fifteen million by 1974 (Eisinger 1998). The Earned Income Tax Credit was established as a modest wage supplement in 1975. This growth in the welfare state and the expansion of welfare rolls more generally came in response to widespread political unrest. Activists in the Civil Rights movement fought for an end to segregation and for full participation in political, social and economic life. This included full access to welfare protections. The National Welfare Rights Organization pushed to expand the welfare rolls and to end discriminatory welfare administration policies (Kornbluh 2007; Nadasen 2004; West 1981). The result was a profound rise in the ADC rolls over the course of the 1960’s, particularly among African Americans and other previously excluded racial minorities (Piven and Cloward 1993).

Policy makers, particularly on the right, began to identify this growth in the welfare rolls as a crisis. Systematic efforts to scale back and restructure a whole range of welfare state programs took on national prominence with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Attempts to
cut or restructure many of these programs, especially social security and Medicare, have been
difficult to achieve. The exception has been the AFDC (later TANF) program that was the
subject of the 1996 welfare reform act. This legislation essentially dismantled AFDC as a federal
entitlement. TANF, the block granted program that replaced AFDC, required that recipients find
work or participate in workfare assignments as a condition of receiving aid. Congress also
instituted a strict five-year lifetime limit on receiving cash assistance. These changes largely
impacted poor women and their children and have been analyzed and written about extensively.

Less prominent has been the gradual expansion of means tested income supports like the
Earned Income Tax Credit that are tied to employment. In 2007, the EITC benefitted 22 million
families and cost more than 43 billion dollar due to changes to the program in 1986, 1990, 1993
and 2001 (Eissa and Hoynes 2008). This growth in federal wage subsidies has taken place side
by side with the gradual destruction of federal entitlements to cash assistance for poor families.
This transition, from welfare entitlements to welfare as work supports in the post-welfare reform
era, serves as the starting point for my arguments about food aid and the changing nature of the
welfare state in the U.S.
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