



## The Hidden Epidemic of Teen Food Insecurity

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## An Invisible Crisis: Food Insecurity on College Campuses

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## Coming Home: A Community-Based Approach to Housing for Returning Citizens

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## ABOUT THE HATFIELD PRIZE

The Hatfield Prize (formerly the Shared Justice Student-Faculty Research Prize) is awarded annually to three student-faculty pairs from Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU) schools. Recipients conduct research on social policies that impact vulnerable children, families, and communities, and explore the impact of these policies in their local communities. This semester-long research project culminates in three policy reports that make recommendations for both government and civil society institutions in contributing to policies that promote flourishing communities. The Hatfield Prize is named in honor of the late Senator Mark O. Hatfield, who served as a United States senator from Oregon for three decades, and was known for his principled Christian faith and for his commitment to working across difference to find common ground.

## ABOUT SHARED JUSTICE

Shared Justice, the Center for Public Justice's initiative for 20- and 30-somethings, exists to equip the next generation of leaders with a hopeful vision and framework for Christian engagement in public life. Through its online publication, SharedJustice.org, CPJ has published hundreds of articles written by college students and young adults committed to pursuing justice for their neighbors through political engagement. Shared Justice also offers a variety of programs and resources, including The Hatfield Prize, books and resources such as *Unleashing Opportunity: Why Escaping Poverty Requires a Shared Vision of Justice*, and campus speaking engagements. Visit [www.sharedjustice.org](http://www.sharedjustice.org) to learn more.

## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC JUSTICE

The Center for Public Justice (CPJ) is an independent, nonpartisan organization devoted to policy research and civic education. Working outside the familiar categories of right and left, conservative and liberal, we seek to help citizens and public officeholders respond to God's call to do justice. Our mission is to equip citizens, develop leaders, and shape policy in pursuit of our purpose to serve God, advance justice, and transform public life. Visit [www.cpjustice.org](http://www.cpjustice.org) to learn more.



THE CENTER FOR  
PUBLIC JUSTICE

# FOREWORD

I am delighted to share the 2019 Hatfield Prize reports. In an era dominated by sound bites, tweets, and deep polarization, these reports offer something refreshing. Addressing some of today's most complex social policies head on, the reports offer readers a principled, hopeful vision for how our society can address these challenges and promote flourishing for all.

Core to the mission of the Center for Public Justice (CPJ) is the formation of Christian young adults towards a more engaged and just civic presence. For the last seven years, Shared Justice, CPJ's initiative for 20- and 30-somethings, has equipped the next generation of leaders with a hopeful vision and framework for Christian engagement in public life.

This year's Hatfield Prize was awarded to three student-faculty pairs from Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU) institutions to conduct research on the social safety net and policies that impact vulnerable populations and communities. Now in its second year, The Hatfield Prize (previously called the Student-Faculty Research Prize) honors the legacy of the late Senator Mark O. Hatfield, who served as a United States senator from Oregon for three decades. Hatfield was known for his principled Christian faith and for his commitment to working across difference to find common ground.

The reports make an enduring, normative case for why the social safety net ought to exist, considering the proper role of government, as well as the unique roles and responsibilities of diverse civil society institutions, including faith-based organizations, churches, families and businesses. Each report is divided into three sections — Discover, Frame, and Engage — that are designed to provide a framework for understanding each issue within a federal, state and local context.

- **Discover** introduces readers to a specific issue in the United States and examines a related federal social safety net program responding to it. Both the positive contributions of the safety net program and the unique challenges and barriers that many face in accessing and participating in it are also highlighted.
- **Frame** articulates the normative Christian principles which support the social safety net and considers the unique responsibilities and contributions of government and civil society institutions. This section offers practical applications and recommendations for the ways in which government and civil society can promote flourishing.
- **Engage** brings Discover and Frame to life, telling the stories of impacted individuals and the communities in which they live. This section features original reporting by the student-faculty pairs in Waco, Texas; Abilene, Texas; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Together, the 2019 Hatfield Prize reports make a vital and timely contribution to policy conversations around food insecurity, housing, and the role of both government and civil society in serving vulnerable populations. Woven throughout each report is a compelling and hopeful vision, rooted in the Christian faith, for how we can promote flourishing for all of our neighbors. The Hatfield Prize reports can be accessed online at [www.sharedjustice.org/hatfieldprize2019](http://www.sharedjustice.org/hatfieldprize2019).

With thanks,



**Katie Thompson**  
Program Director, Shared Justice  
Center for Public Justice

# THE HIDDEN EPIDEMIC OF TEEN FOOD INSECURITY

By Ana O'Quin & Dr. Stephanie  
Clintonia Boddie

## DISCOVER

Mia is 16 years old, the oldest of four siblings, and lives in a loving but financially burdened household. She attends a nearby public high school, is on the basketball team, and works part-time at McDonalds. Mia's mother, the primary caregiver in her house, works two jobs to try to keep food on the table for Mia and her siblings. Mia's mother receives \$465 a month in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, however the benefits are not sufficient to keep each family member fed throughout the month.<sup>1</sup> Some nights Mia tells her mother she's not hungry because she knows that the pantry will be empty by the end of the month if she chooses to eat.

This fictional account is representative of the experience of millions of young people in the United States. For many teenagers, like Mia, food insecurity is an ever-present reality.<sup>2</sup> Food insecurity, as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), is a condition that is identified by disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake due to limited access to food.<sup>3</sup> While hunger is distinct from food insecurity because it describes a physiological condition, it will be used interchangeably with food insecurity throughout this report. Another important dimension of food insecurity is the difference between nutritious and non-nutritious foods. Although teens are also impacted by the interaction between food insecurity and

nutritious foods, this report will primarily focus on the amount, not type or quality, of food.<sup>4</sup>

In the United States, teenagers, defined as youth between the ages of 13 and 18, are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity.<sup>5</sup> In fiscal year 2017, some 40 million people lived in food-insecure households, 12.5 million of whom were children below the age of 18.<sup>6</sup> Households with teenagers experience higher rates of food insecurity than do households with only younger children.<sup>7</sup> An estimated 10 percent of teenage girls and 14 percent of boys aged 12-18 report not having enough to eat.<sup>8</sup> When hungry, it is difficult, if not impossible, for teens to thrive in school, extracurricular activities, and relationships with family and friends. These areas of development are foundational to physical, social, and emotional health and when absent can be detrimental to teens' opportunities later in life.<sup>9</sup>

### *Why are Teens Food-Insecure?*

While there are a variety of factors that contribute to teen food insecurity, the primary reason is an inability to afford the basic expense of food. In 2015, the prevalence of very low food security among children was three times higher among poor households compared to all households.<sup>10</sup> As the parent of any teenager knows, as children grow they consume more food. The calorie intake of male adolescents, for example, rises significantly between the ages of 14 and 17.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, teens experience strong social stigma related to food insecurity and feel hesitant to either talk about their hunger or receive food assistance in their communities. Many choose to go without food to avoid setting themselves apart from their peers.

This can prevent teens from reaching out to institutions in their communities that may offer help.<sup>12</sup>

For some teenagers, hunger may reflect an attempt to shoulder household responsibility for younger siblings. Teens often feel the need to forgo or share their meals with younger siblings or other important people in their lives. Some teens may even feel more concern for their parents' hunger than their own. Many may decide to work to fill the food gap, yet those who seek employment to address food insecurity are often met with barriers. Researchers have expressed concern about the long-term decline in teen labor force participation and employment.<sup>13</sup> The employment rate for teens has dropped from 53 percent in 1994 to 35.7 percent in 2018.<sup>14</sup> Other factors that contribute to rising teen food insecurity include teen homelessness, difficulty for teens in identifying community resources, and limited meal programs during the summer.

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### **When hungry, it is difficult, if not impossible, for teens to thrive in school, extracurricular activities, and relationships with family and friends.**

It is important to note racial disparities in food insecurity rates, as well as differences across geographic regions. African American households are more than twice as likely to be food insecure compared to white households.<sup>15</sup> One in four African American teens are food insecure.<sup>16</sup> The national average in 2017 for food insecurity was 12.3 percent, yet 22.5 percent of African American households and 18.5 percent of Hispanic households were food insecure.<sup>17</sup>

The disproportionately high representation of minority workers in the low-wage workforce, the racial wealth gap, and other factors contribute to the racial inequality of hunger. Disparities continue in terms of the geographic makeup of food insecurity. Rural counties make up 63 percent of all U.S. counties but represent 79 percent of counties with the highest rates of food insecurity. The highest rates of food insecurity are in the South, with New Mexico, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas making up the top five food-insecure states, as of 2017.<sup>18</sup>

Teen food insecurity can have detrimental short and long-term effects on teens themselves as well as society as a whole. A study of 20 focus groups in 10 communities across the United States conducted by the Urban Institute and Feeding America found that teens engage in risky behaviors for access to consistent meals. Teens in all 10 of the communities talked about peers or acquaintances selling their bodies for food, especially in high-poverty communities.<sup>19</sup> Most often, sexual exploitation meant transactional dating of much older adults. Other teens, mostly males, in all but two of the communities discussed partaking in criminal behavior such as shoplifting, stealing items, or selling drugs in order to afford food.<sup>20</sup> Kristin Mmari, a Johns Hopkins public health scholar, and her multidisciplinary team found similar findings in their study with youth in six neighborhoods in Baltimore city.<sup>21</sup> Males exposed to persistent food insecurity, in one study conducted between 1999 and 2007, had a 96 percent higher misconduct rate compared to males who were raised in consistently food secure households.<sup>22</sup> In some communities, teens even discussed skipping school or purposefully failing classes to ensure regular meals. In these scenarios, teens would open up more time to work or

be placed in summer school where meals are served. Although it is difficult to isolate risky behaviors from other contributing factors, these trends should raise red flags for communities with teens experiencing food insecurity.

While early childhood is an important window for brain development, critical development also occurs during teen years.<sup>23</sup> Biologically, our gut is the “the key to our brain”, capable of altering the brain’s ability to process information and generate and regulate behavior.<sup>24</sup> At school, students who are food-insecure are at a higher risk of falling behind academically than their food-secure peers.<sup>25</sup> Hungry teens also have lower math scores, and are more likely to repeat a grade, come to school late, or miss school entirely.<sup>26</sup> When students are provided breakfast at school, academic achievement rises.<sup>27</sup>

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## **If we are to move towards a more just, equitable, and healthy society, addressing teen food insecurity must be a top priority.**

Not only do students fall behind in school when hungry, but there is also a substantial body of research that links food insecurity and poor child health. Child food insecurity can contribute to a multitude of health problems, including asthma, more frequent colds, iron deficiency, anemia, and general lower physical functioning.<sup>28</sup> Food insecurity, which can lead to a low-nutrition diet for children, is also linked to high rates of obesity.<sup>29</sup> Household food insecurity has further been linked to parent-reported mental health problems for male and

female teens, including suicidal thoughts.<sup>30</sup> Researchers are continuing to explore the intersection of food insecurity with criminal behavior,<sup>31</sup> racial disparities,<sup>32</sup> and health costs to society.<sup>33</sup> If we are to move towards a more just, equitable, and healthy society, addressing teen food insecurity must be a top priority.

Although teens acutely experience food insecurity and its consequences, there is still a sufficient gap in research regarding this population. Most research has focused on all children under the age of 18, instead of focusing specifically on the population of teens age 13 to 18. The USDA reports children in households as one unit, and does not differentiate by age.<sup>34</sup> Researchers have begun to label teen food insecurity as a “hidden epidemic” and emphasize the need for further research.<sup>35</sup>

### *SNAP’s Role in Addressing Teen Food Insecurity*

In order to address this hidden epidemic and the individual and societal consequences of teen hunger, a strong and innovative social safety net must exist. The social safety net is a network of government programs, nonprofit and faith-based organizations, congregations, and businesses that aid the most vulnerable in society by meeting their basic needs.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the government’s largest program addressing hunger and is a pillar of the social safety net. Administered by the Food and Nutrition Service, an agency of the USDA, SNAP provides low-income individuals and families with nutrition assistance. The goal of SNAP is not to keep individuals and families dependent on benefits, but instead to support them in

achieving self-sufficiency.<sup>36</sup> Although most teens below the age of 18 are not directly eligible for SNAP benefits, they rely on the benefits that their caregivers receive and should be included in policy conversations concerning SNAP. Sixty-eight percent of SNAP recipients were families with children in 2017,<sup>37</sup> and in a typical month, SNAP supports one in four children in the U.S.<sup>38</sup> Nearly half of SNAP recipients are children.<sup>39</sup>

SNAP benefits are distributed through Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT), which functions as a debit card that can be used in 263,100 authorized locations nationwide.<sup>40</sup> This includes stores ranging from Dollar General and convenience stores to Target and large supermarkets.<sup>41</sup> Eighty percent of SNAP benefits are redeemed at large supermarkets. Every federal fiscal year, SNAP deductions, maximum allotments, and income eligibility standards are adjusted.

Maximum allotments are based on the Thrifty Food Plan, a model budget of affordable and nutritious foods for a family of four. Maximum benefits for families of different sizes are determined by a formula in which smaller households get slightly more per person, and larger households slightly less.<sup>42</sup> A household is expected to spend 30 percent of their net income on food, and this amount is subtracted from the maximum benefit to determine the benefit allotment.<sup>43</sup> Households can subtract deductions, such as money spent for child care, from their gross income to create a new net income, which can lead to larger benefit sizes.<sup>44</sup> EBT cards can be used to buy edible items such as bread, meats, and fruits and vegetables. To be eligible for SNAP, a household must have a gross monthly income at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line, must have a net income at or below the poverty line after deductions, and must have assets that fall

below a certain threshold.<sup>45</sup>

States have a significant amount of discretion in administering SNAP, especially as it relates to eligibility requirements. Although this discretion may not impact teens directly, it can significantly impact the parents of teens who are already struggling to provide for their households. Recently, some states have proposed stricter work requirements and drug tests for applicants, for example. States can also receive waivers for work requirements for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs). States are only eligible to offer these waivers under two conditions — the state must both have an employment rate above 10 percent or have a demonstrable lack of “sufficient jobs”.<sup>46</sup> The second requirement is only met if a state has an unemployment rate that is above 20 percent of the national average unemployment rate. As of January of 2019, 36 states received partial waivers for the ABAWD work requirements and seven states have full state-wide waivers.<sup>47</sup>

### *Looking Ahead*

SNAP has recently been at the center of policy conversations due to proposed regulations by the USDA under the Trump administration to more strictly enforce work requirements. The proposed rule would implement stricter requirements, including increasing unemployment rate eligibility requirements to six percent for two years, and limiting state waiver time limits to one year, instead of two years. Additionally, states would no longer be able to grant waivers to large geographic areas and would have limits placed on carry-over exemptions.<sup>48</sup> The proposal is part of a broader effort to tighten work requirements on recipients of government aid.<sup>49</sup> Under the new proposal, more than 750,000 people could lose access to food stamps. Thousands

of comments have been submitted to the USDA; many of which oppose the changes and the ways it could hurt families and by association, teens.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the estimated 65 billion dollars the federal government spent on SNAP benefits in 2018, teens still persistently experience food insecurity.<sup>51</sup> The failure of SNAP to fully address teen hunger is twofold. First, households are not receiving enough benefits to support a healthy diet for teens. A recent analysis by the Urban Institute shows that SNAP does not cover the cost of meals for low-income individuals and families in 99 percent of U.S. counties.<sup>52</sup> Second, many eligible households are not using SNAP benefits due to barriers to access such as stigma around applying for and using SNAP, confusion about eligibility, difficulty in navigating complex paperwork, and transportation access to offices that administer benefits. Two groups that experience low participation rates are senior citizens and working families, many of whom have teens living with them in their households.<sup>53</sup> Although SNAP participation rates are rising due to state-level efforts to eliminate barriers to access, in 2016, 25 percent of eligible low-income and working families were not accessing SNAP benefits.<sup>54</sup>

However, the burden of responsibility for this hidden epidemic is not placed solely on the shoulders of the government but must be shared with civil society. This requires a careful analysis of the role of government and SNAP as a temporary support, as well as the complementary roles of congregations, nonprofit and faith-based organizations, schools, businesses, and families in ensuring that all teens can flourish and achieve their full potential. Essential to this work are the voices of teens themselves. Teens' voices are often ignored, leading to the creation of

solutions that do not meet their immediate needs.<sup>55</sup> Teens also feel significant stigma around receiving food assistance, and often feel hesitant to receive or look for help that is available, particularly in schools. A strong and robust social safety net, inclusive of both government and civil society institutions, is needed to comprehensively address food insecurity.

## FRAME

**I**n our conversations surrounding food insecurity, SNAP policy, and opportunities for civil society institutions to contribute to the mosaic that is the social safety net, it is important to ask ourselves — why does this matter?

As Christians, our faith calls us to both recognize, in gratitude, God's own provision of food in our own lives, and to fulfill our responsibility to feed the hungry.<sup>56</sup> As theologian Norman Wirzba writes in his book *Food and Faith*, "Food is a gift of God given to all creatures for the purposes of life's nurture, sharing and celebration."<sup>57</sup> Jesus, in His ministry, placed an emphasis on food. He used it to meet the physical needs of people and as an opportunity to reveal His glory. When Jesus fed the five thousand, as described in all the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), "all ate and were satisfied", yet there was still an overflow of provision.<sup>58</sup> The role God calls us to is to loose the chains of injustice, to set the oppressed free, and to feed the hungry.<sup>59</sup>

In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI emphasized that in the Lord's prayer we do not ask for "my" bread but we pray "give us today our daily bread".<sup>60</sup> He acknowledged the intertwined, relational element of human

life; that as people of God we must prioritize communion and fellowship by eliminating hunger in our communities.<sup>61</sup> It is not only the Christian faith that addresses hunger, the Quran is filled with commands to feed the hungry as an act of righteousness and worship.<sup>62</sup> Hinduism places an emphasis on food in religious functions and on prasada (food offered to God).<sup>63</sup> As Wirzba writes, “Religious traditions often have some really valuable things to say, not just about the value and sanctity of life, but also as a way of thinking about what life is for, or more directly what eating is for.”<sup>64</sup>

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## **One of the government’s primary responsibilities is providing the necessary funding and infrastructure for SNAP.**

When individuals and institutions respond to the call to reduce teen food insecurity, fueled by faith or other motivating factors, society as a whole will benefit.

### *Government’s Unique Contribution*

The government serves as the foundation of the social safety net and has a responsibility to uphold the common good of society and promote flourishing through its policies and programs. It is unmatched in its ability to provide nutrition assistance at the scale and consistency that is needed to adequately meet the need of food-insecure individuals. Through SNAP, the government has the opportunity to provide millions of families in need of temporary assistance consistent and reliable access to food.

One of the government’s primary

responsibilities is providing the necessary funding and infrastructure for SNAP. In fiscal year 2016, \$71 billion — only two percent of the federal budget — was designated for SNAP. In 2018, it was estimated that SNAP funding decreased to \$65 billion.<sup>65</sup> The future of SNAP is even more concerning, with the Trump administration’s proposed 2020 budget threatening to cut SNAP benefits by nearly \$17.4 billion.<sup>66</sup> These budget cuts are detrimental to teen food security in the United States. Decreased funding not only hurts teens who are dependent on their SNAP household benefits for their daily dietary needs, but also cuts funding to important programs such as SNAP-Ed and SNAP E&T. These programs help adults and teens learn how to budget, shop for, and prepare healthy meals, as well as move towards self-sufficiency, which is the primary aim of SNAP.<sup>67</sup>

These cuts undermine the health of both food-insecure teens and their families, as well as the economy as a whole. It is estimated that an increase of \$1 billion in SNAP benefits boosts the Gross Domestic Product by \$1.79 billion and generates 8,900-17,000 jobs.<sup>68</sup> When the government invests money in SNAP, individuals and families purchase food from farmers, retailers, and food distributors, which in turn supports employees working at those institutions. Invested money directly boosts local economies, which boosts the federal economy as a whole.<sup>69</sup> SNAP participation also helps individual households, and the children living in them, improve their financial well-being. One study estimated it reduces the risk of falling behind on utility bills by 15 percent.<sup>70</sup> Access to food stamps increased high school graduation rates by more than 18 percent and improved educational outcomes among children ages 6 to 18.<sup>71</sup> Children who receive SNAP benefits do better in school, have improved health,

have a reduced risk of obesity, and are in households being lifted out of poverty.<sup>72</sup>

While maintaining adequate funding is the first step to ensuring that SNAP is meeting the needs of families, SNAP should also be strengthened to better respond to the unique needs of teenagers and their families. First, the Thrifty Food Plan should be reevaluated. This plan determines the benefit sizes for SNAP recipients and is based on the cost of a “market basket” for an average family of four.<sup>73</sup> This “market basket” reflects what the USDA considers the price of food for different ages and genders based on dietary needs, consumption patterns, and the prices of food.<sup>74</sup> The plan was last revisited in 2006, and new analysis shines light on its inability to accurately capture food prices and consumption patterns.<sup>75</sup> The plan has not been revisited in 13 years, and should be reevaluated to address factors such as geographic variation in food costs.

Reducing the speed at which a family’s benefits are reduced once they are no longer eligible for SNAP could support families whose income hovers just over the eligibility line.<sup>76</sup> A multitude of other factors contribute to whether a family’s benefit amount is sufficient for them to eat an adequate amount of nutritious food in a month. These include time to prepare food, household cultural influences, prices of food, access to transportation, geographic location, and purchasing patterns.<sup>77</sup> Oftentimes, benefits are not sufficient to support a healthy diet for families of lower-income with teens.<sup>78</sup> By both re-evaluating the Thrifty Food Plan and reducing the speed at which families benefits are reduced, the gap between realistic food prices and SNAP benefits could be filled.

One major barrier for teens specifically is a

lack of awareness regarding SNAP eligibility. Vulnerable youth, particularly teens who are homeless, are often unaware of their eligibility.

Youth who are homeless, including unaccompanied homeless youth, are able to apply for SNAP benefits individually.<sup>79</sup> In one study conducted in eight Midwestern cities, of 428 homeless teens aged 16 to 19, one-third of the teens had experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days.<sup>80</sup> Despite this, staff at SNAP offices, Health and Human Services offices, or nonprofits that administer SNAP benefits may lack training and awareness of SNAP eligibility for homeless and unaccompanied youth.<sup>81</sup> The federal government, therefore, should prioritize increased educational SNAP (SNAP-ED) programs and education and training programs (SNAP E&T).

Lastly, the government should continue to expand the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, particularly Summer Food programs. The government’s National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs have played a central and irreplaceable role in addressing teen hunger. Twenty-two million children and teens are recipients of free or reduced-priced meals through the National School Lunch program alone.<sup>82</sup> In 2016, three quarters of the five billion lunches served in school cafeterias were at free or reduced price.<sup>83</sup> The Summer Food Service program also provides snacks and meals to students during the summer, yet it reaches far fewer children than the school year programs. Only 1 in 6 students that participate in food assistance during the year — around 3.8 million children — participate in summer meal programs.<sup>84</sup> Expanding these programs, and setting a clear goal of offering three meals at free or reduced price for every school district has the potential to greatly

reduce teen food insecurity.<sup>85</sup>

The implementation of successfully tested pilot programs that aim to reduce childhood hunger have the potential to improve participation in summer meal programs. These programs would fill the gap for teens that rely on food from school during the year, as many do. With funding from the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, one pilot program, Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children, modeled EBT cards used in SNAP programs for children, including teens, receiving summer meals. Sixteen sites across the United States from 2011 to 2014 tested the model. Evaluation of the program found that the approach was feasible and reduced the prevalence of low food security among children by one-third.<sup>86</sup>

### *Civil Society's Unique Contributions*

While the government has a clear responsibility to promote policies aimed at ending teen food insecurity, it is not a task meant only for government. Instead, the government has a responsibility to also create space for civil society institutions to provide personalized, culturally responsive, and holistic services for teens experiencing food insecurity. Nonprofit and faith-based organizations, church congregations, schools, and businesses each have unique responsibilities and contributions to make.<sup>87</sup>

In order to strengthen the social safety net for teens, teens must be brought to the center of community conversations and initiatives to reduce hunger. When teens are regarded as experts, they become empowered to support their own communities and peers through addressing hunger. In Portland, Oregon, one neighborhood created a Youth Community Advisory Board in which teens distribute fresh organic food from the Oregon Food

Bank to residents of New Columbia. Now in the second phase of the project, teens are training a group of volunteers in a 15-week empowerment program to join what they call the Harvest Share program.<sup>88</sup> Instead of seeing families and teens experiencing food insecurity solely as burdens, society must instead view them as key players in finding solutions.

Schools and nonprofits must be intentional about acknowledging the stigma that teens feel around hunger, and should work to decrease stigma through innovative programs. As discussed earlier, teens actively try to hide the fact that they are experiencing hunger.<sup>89</sup> Schools, as primary educational institutions, have a central role to play in addressing this aspect of food insecurity. Teens spend most of their days at school, and schools that address food insecurity creatively and effectively have the potential to see their students thrive, not only academically, but socially as well.<sup>90</sup> Schools can decrease stigma by implementing programs such as in-school pantries, by integrating meals and/or food assistance into already existing after-school programs and by strengthening collaborations with other institutions, such as food banks and farms, within their communities.<sup>91</sup>

Congregations and faith-based organizations, which can be referred to as the sacred sector, are uniquely situated to increase strategic collaborations in communities. Bread for the World, a Christian organization, recognizes this potential and partners with congregations and denominational networks to activate faith communities to be engaged in the issue of hunger. With their support, Christians across the country become informed about the issues and connect with members of Congress to help build the “political will to end hunger.”<sup>92</sup> In Baltimore,

Maryland, the Black Church Food Security Network leverages their faith-based networks to address food insecurity, particularly among minority groups, by connecting “black farmers with black churches to help combat the issues of food insecurity”.<sup>93</sup>

For-profit businesses can work towards the triple bottom line: profiting beyond their own pockets to serve the greater social needs within their communities.<sup>94</sup> For example, the Double Up program allow SNAP recipients to use EBT cards to buy fresh fruit and vegetables at stores or farmers’ markets. SNAP recipients earn one dollar of Double Up Food bucks for every dollar spent on fresh produce, which can then be used to buy more produce at the same retailer in the future. The program encourages participants to buy nutritious food, supports local farmers, and helps SNAP dollars stay within the local economy. The program now has more than 760 sites in more than 20 states across the nation and through its strategic partnerships has helped more than 300,000 low-income families access fresh fruits and vegetables.<sup>95</sup> In Central Florida, businesses such as Capital Grille and the Olive Garden donate surplus food to Second Harvest Food Bank, a program that delivers 6,500 meals a day to 118 sites where children can receive hot meals during the summers.<sup>96</sup> Programs like the Second Harvest, in which surplus food is donated to community-based organizations, have immense potential to benefit both businesses and individuals and families who face food insecurity.

Teen food insecurity, although a large and complex issue, can be eliminated if individuals and institutions in society choose to respond with innovation and consistency. Our faith calls us to feed the hungry and care for the vulnerable, and in doing so our neighborhoods will be transformed. When

teens are fed, they flourish as our future leaders — in schools, on college campuses, in workplaces, in religious institutions, and in families.

## ENGAGE

Tamiya, Juliana, Trisha, Cara, and Kristen\* sit around a table laughing and cracking jokes as they eat pizza. They talk about recent school news, the track meet, and the dreaded research papers awaiting them. But when the focus group begins, the mood quickly shifts as the teens recount their own struggles with food insecurity and other hardships in their lives. The group is meeting to talk about teen food insecurity and their experiences with hunger, as well as their ideas to combat it. Three of the teenage girls go to a public high school in the area that will be referred to as City High School A and the other three go to a public charter school that will be referred to as City High School B.

“With all the criticism, and the bullying and stuff, people don’t want to tell their story,” Juliana, a student at City High School A, said. She is referring to the way that students gossip about each other, even about things they cannot control, such as hunger and food insecurity.

But, for an hour on a Wednesday night, these teens have an opportunity to share their stories and showcase the resilience that has brought them through their hardships. Kristen, a student at City High School B, tells of the weighty responsibility she shoulders to help feed herself, her mother, her sister, and her two nephews.

“It’s kind of hard because like, I know I’m

young, and my momma didn't want me to get a job, but it's really helping out," she said. "Because basically, my check is paying for the food we're going to eat...the tips I made today are what we ate off of."

The other teens chime in, adding that there is a "certain age" when children start helping their parents, particularly their mothers, with household responsibilities. When asked what age that is, the answer is shocking — only 12.

For these teens, food insecurity and its detrimental effects on the community is more than a statistic. It is a daily struggle and they are intimately aware of its burdens. They tell of feeling pressured to steal baby food from hospitals when their siblings were born, of living off of rice and ketchup sandwiches, of helping a parent budget for food to buy with an EBT card and paychecks, and of the best food pantries in town to fill their food gap at the end of the month. Most have a home-cooked meal only once or twice a week. All talk of the headaches and fatigue they experience when their food insecurity leads to hunger. They even share tips on handling the hunger pangs — such as drinking water whenever they feel hungry.

The five teens share not only about the quantity of the food they eat, but also about its quality. Juliana comments, "It's brought up every time I go to the doctor's office. Because I weigh more than I'm supposed to. And then they ask the same questions about 'what food do you eat?' but at the same time, they don't understand the flip side of that." Juliana feels frustration that doctors' offices, and occasionally community groups, do not understand the kinds of foods most available to her at home and school. Trisha adds, "It's like we're bound to be obese." They share about their desire to eat well, but also about the limited access and options to nutritious food they face.

The teens are sharing about an important aspect of food insecurity, one that points not only to affordability and quality of food, but access to that food. All but one of the students live in areas that are classified as "food deserts."<sup>97</sup> Food deserts are areas in which the residents, including teens, have little to no access to a supermarket or large grocery store, which are a primary source of affordable and nutritious food.<sup>98</sup> The cost of staple foods at convenience stores is higher, sometimes as much as 50 percent, than the supermarkets.<sup>99</sup> Yet, due to barriers such as transportation and limited time, many households rely on the nearest convenience stores for their food.<sup>100</sup>

The experience of these teens reflects what food insecurity in the United States often looks like.

"Food insecurity in our country doesn't usually look like malnutrition or famine," Craig Nash, Regional Manager for Child Hunger Outreach at the Texas Hunger Initiative, said. Texas Hunger Initiative conducts research through Baylor University to determine the effectiveness of anti-hunger programs and to increase collaboration within communities.

"More often than not it is an overabundance of cheap, toxic food, and a scarcity of healthy food that conditions communities in unhealthy ways," he said.

#### *SNAP and Food Insecurity in Waco, Texas*

Tamiya, Juliana, Trisha, Cara, and Kristen live and attend school in the small city of Waco, Texas, home to new flourishing franchises and major universities including Baylor University, Texas State Technical College, and McLennan Community College.

Yet despite the influx of tourism, new business development, and the presence of anchor institutions like universities, this city of 131,996 people still has a poverty rate of 26.8 percent as of 2017,<sup>101</sup> significantly higher than the national average of 12.3 percent.<sup>102</sup> Over four million people in the state of Texas experience food insecurity, and 13 percent of the population, around 3,921,000 residents, were recipients of SNAP benefits in 2017.<sup>103</sup> In McLennan County specifically, where the teens interviewed live, 18.9 percent of individuals are food-insecure, higher than the Texas average of 15.4 percent.<sup>104</sup>

At City School A, where three of the young women attend, almost 72 percent of the students were considered “economically disadvantaged” by the school district in the 2016-2017 school year, meaning that a majority of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch.<sup>105</sup> The other two young women attend City School B, a public charter school with over half of the student body living in low-income households. All of the teens share households with siblings, ranging from only one sibling to eight. Three of the teens either consistently work or look for work at local restaurants and movie theatres.

Cara, Kristen, and Trisha are African American. Tamiya is Hispanic and was adopted into an African American household. Their experiences with food insecurity reflect the reality that hunger disproportionately affects minorities and further amplifies the need for food insecurity to be considered as a matter of racial justice. As mentioned previously, the national food insecurity rates for African American households and Hispanic households in 2017 were 22.5 percent and 18.5 percent respectively; much higher than the national average of 12.3 percent.<sup>106</sup>

All but one of the teens in the focus group are recipients of SNAP benefits and speak about their EBT cards openly. When the monthly allotment is transmitted onto their family’s EBT cards, the teens share about immediately using them to buy groceries, often on the same day that they receive the benefits. The quick turnaround from receiving the benefits and using them to buy food showcases how heavily their families rely on SNAP benefits. When asked how long the food purchased with their EBT card last, Tamiya jokes, “Oh, like a day.”<sup>107</sup> Unanimously, the group shares that food bought from their cards lasts, at maximum, two weeks. Most stated that the food lasts a week.

A common thread emerges from the stories of these teens and the words of community leaders such as McLennan County Commissioner Patricia Miller — individuals, including food-insecure teens and local business owners, heavily rely on SNAP benefits. Miller believes government should do more.<sup>108</sup> Maintaining and even increasing benefits would be a significant resource for families and the local economies. Cutting benefit sizes could be detrimental to Waco families and teens. As Jeremy Everett, Executive Director of Texas Hunger Initiative, writes in his book *I Was Hungry: Cultivating Common Ground to End an American Crisis*, “SNAP is an investment in impoverished families, most of whom are working and contributing to the economy but are underemployed.”<sup>109</sup> He views SNAP as “a brilliantly designed program” that should be kept strong, and in which barriers to access should be decreased.<sup>110</sup> SNAP plays an essential role in the community and complements the work of local organizations addressing hunger, many of which are struggling to meet the large need in their local communities.

*Collective Solutions Across Waco*

Civil society institutions throughout Waco take the crisis of food insecurity, specifically teen food insecurity, seriously. Although there are opportunities for growth, other institutions in Waco can look to the initiatives highlighted in this report to support Waco teens.

“We owe it to our fellow humans to give them more options, better solutions, and better access,” Cheryl Pooler, Lecturer at Baylor’s Diana R. Garland School of Social Work and homeless youth advocate, said. “It’s unacceptable. We should not be okay with this situation. None of us.”<sup>111</sup>

Pooler explained that one of teens’ greatest challenges is moving from eligibility to access of federal benefits. She believes that teens must be “physically connected to the resource.”<sup>112</sup>

One program working to physically connect teens to SNAP is Caritas of Waco’s HELPINGS (“Healthy Food for Healthy Families”) SNAP Outreach program. Caritas is a local nonprofit, founded in 1967, that provides emergency services and case management to individuals and families in the Waco community.<sup>113</sup> In 2005, HELPINGS was created under Caritas and has also been under the leadership of the McLennan County Hunger Coalition. Five years ago, a partnership was created between Caritas and Waco Independent School District (ISD) Homeless Outreach Services. Waco ISD was the first school district to implement it within the State of Texas. Through the partnership, unaccompanied teens do not have to leave school and travel to a separate location to attend a 25-minute meeting to apply for SNAP benefits. They instead meet with representatives at the school to apply. In the past five years alone, over 350 McLennan

County high school students that are low-income or homeless were able to obtain SNAP benefits through the program.<sup>114</sup> For many teens, being physically connected to someone willing to help walk them through the process is essential to accessing benefits.

Esther Morales, SNAP Program Director at Caritas and Vice Chair of the McLennan County Hunger Coalition, sees food as an empowerment tool. “By having this [program] available to our students, [they] are able to concentrate on their education and receive more than just a diploma or degree,” she said. “It allows them to speak and share their testimonies with others in the same position, and not to be ashamed to reach out and get help.”<sup>115</sup>

This is key to supporting food-insecure teens — listening to the voices of teens themselves. Teens can become active leaders in existing anti-hunger programs in Waco. Dr. Gaynor Yancey, professor of social work, Master Teacher and director of the Center for Church and Community Impact at Baylor’s Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, has devoted much of her life to combating food insecurity and has witnessed the ways “Waco, children and teens, can suffer, and do suffer, in silence.”<sup>116</sup>

Yancey has created emergency food distribution programs through churches, served as the executive director of an urban food bank, and recently conducted research about food insecurity in Waco using asset mapping. She points out that there should be “teen representation on any committee or board that addresses food insecurity, gardening, or good nutrition.”<sup>117</sup> Teen Leadership Waco, a Greater Waco Chamber of Commerce program, is already working to empower youth and could be a launching board for addressing food insecurity through

teens in Waco.<sup>118</sup>

Teens like Tamiya, Juliana, Trisha, Cara, and Kristen offer innovative solutions to end teen hunger. In our conversations, the teens brainstormed solutions such as increasing mentorship in schools to break cycles of poverty, encouraging teens to join after school programs where food is provided, and encouraging restaurants and businesses to donate excess food to local pantries or shelters. As Waco works to end teen food insecurity, the voices of teens like these young women must be heard. Without their input in planning and evaluating food programs, barriers to access will remain and program success will be limited at the expense of teens.

Schools in Waco are taking steps to identify and reduce the kind of stigma that teens feel around receiving food assistance. Decreasing this stigma is critical to eliminating food insecurity. As of 2018, all students within Waco ISD began to receive free breakfast and lunch.<sup>119</sup> Three of the seven school districts in Waco, including Waco ISD, where three of the teens from the focus group attend, are schools eligible for Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), meaning that children attending these schools can receive free meals without signing up for a separate program.<sup>120</sup> The provision lasts for five years and is a cost-effective model for low-income schools. The program reduces the stigma that children and their families feel when signing up for free meals and is an important step to eliminating teen food insecurity for low-income schools.<sup>121</sup> Juliana, one member of the focus group, shared that her mother was relieved when \$40 of debt from her school meals was cleared once her school became eligible.

Although students at schools eligible for CEP

receive breakfast and lunch at school, these may be the only meals they eat each day. Over the weekends, particularly at the end of the month, youth may scramble to put together meals. Programs such as the Pack of Hope, a nonprofit in Waco, are working to fill this gap by discreetly giving students backpacks at school filled with nutritious food for Friday through Sunday.<sup>122</sup> As the teens in the focus group pointed out, after-school programs offer food to their students. Increasing teen participation in these programs can further contribute to eliminating teen food insecurity.

Local businesses and nonprofit organizations are also working to combat food insecurity in Waco through strategic collaboration with other institutions. Lula Jane's, started by Dr. Nancy Grayson, aims not only to engage in excellent business practices, but to support the local Waco community. In her research, Grayson found that meals could become "a communal gathering" where people come together "from different communities and break down barriers on a relational level."<sup>123</sup> Her goal is to make everyone who steps into her bakery feel valued and to build up the Waco community. She and her husband feel passionate about taking care of issues "in our own backyard."<sup>124</sup> Grayson is also working towards opening a healthy food market that would provide nutritious food in a community categorized as a food desert in East Waco.<sup>125</sup>

Mission Waco, a faith-based nonprofit, is another example of the ways religious institutions can play a role in community development and collaboration. In 2016, Mission Waco launched Jubilee Food Market, a nonprofit grocery store, and a year later Urban Reap, a solar powered aquaponics greenhouse and community garden. These programs were a financial risk for Mission Waco but one worth taking to increase

access to healthier and more affordable food compared to the processed foods currently offered in neighborhood convenience stores. They provide stock shares to the community and Oasis loyalty cards to shoppers to support the growth of social innovation, all the while providing for the local community.

“I see lots of kids in the market... it’s a joy to watch families get food now,” Dr. Jimmy Dorrell, President and Co-Founder of Mission Waco, said.<sup>126</sup>

Although strategic gaps still exist, Texas Hunger Initiative’s Jeremy Everett is hopeful.

“What makes me optimistic about Waco is that people know each other literally from the farm level all the way to the service provider level,” he said. “Because of the networks here, I’m optimistic that we can do some very strategic things together and people seem very receptive to it.”<sup>127</sup>

To expose and address the hidden epidemic of teen hunger, a strong and robust safety net is needed. SNAP must be well-funded, and meet the dietary needs of low-income families. Barriers to access to SNAP must be removed, and federal lunch and breakfast programs, particularly during the summer, should be expanded. Schools must also address stigma attached to these programs, and strategic collaboration across sectors through churches and businesses must take place. At every stage of the effort to combat teen food insecurity, it is essential that teens are represented and at the table. The collective effort it will take to address teen food insecurity is fully worthwhile, especially for teens like Kristen, Tamiya, Juliana, Trisha, and Cara. With this effort, teens can thrive as full, contributing, and vital members of our families, schools, churches, workforce,

and world.

*\*Names have been changed to ensure privacy.*

*This research plan was reviewed by Baylor University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and conducted from February 5, 2019 to June 10, 2019 using the following mixed-methods: 1) interviews with five key informants, 2) Photovoice – a qualitative tool that uses photography – and one focus group with five female teens from a local high school, and 3) One brief, nine-item electronic survey completed by 19 community leaders ranging from executive directors of anti-hunger programs to those that work directly with teens in afterschool programs.*

# AN INVISIBLE CRISIS: FOOD INSECURITY ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

*By Shannon Que & Dr. Stephen Baldrige*

## DISCOVER

While many college students are busy juggling the demands of their studies and extracurricular activities, thousands of students are also dealing with an often invisible struggle: food insecurity. Although the stereotype of a “starving college student” is pervasive and often made in jest, the issue of food insecurity among college students is very real.

Food insecurity affects students enrolled at all types of higher education institutions, from community colleges to four-year universities. Approximately one-quarter of students at four-year colleges are food-insecure.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, approximately 56 percent of students at community colleges reported being food insecure.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this report, a college student is defined as an individual enrolled in a two or four-year higher education institution, in pursuit of a certificate, associate, or bachelor’s degree. Food security, as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), is “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” When food-insecure, an individual cannot depend on consistent and reliable access to nutritious foods. The USDA cites four categories of food security: high food security, marginal food security, low food security, and very low food security. Low food security indicates “reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet”, while

“disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake” are indicators of very low food security.<sup>3</sup>

Although the terms hunger and food insecurity are often used interchangeably, it is worth noting their distinctions. Food insecurity is a social and economic condition that measures a lack of access to food, while hunger is a physiological condition that often occurs as a result of food insecurity.

In 2017, 11.8 percent of all U.S. households, or approximately 15 million people, experienced food insecurity.<sup>4</sup> Households with incomes near or below the federal poverty line, households headed by single-parent women or single-parent men, women and men living alone, and Black and Hispanic-headed households have higher rates of food insecurity than the national average.<sup>5</sup>

The demographic characteristics of college students have evolved over the last few decades, as more students who meet the criteria associated with food-insecure households are attending college. Today, nearly 75 percent of students are nontraditional, meaning that they meet at least one of the following criteria: attend college part-time, are financially independent, provide for dependents, are a single parent, or participate in a federal or state funded work-study program.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, a traditional college student is “generally considered to be someone who is enrolled in college full-time immediately after graduating from high school, is financially dependent on his or her parents, and either does not work during the school year or works part time.”<sup>7</sup>

This is important to note because nontraditional students are also more likely to come from low-income households.

According to a report by the Government Accountability Office citing National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data, “The percentage of all undergraduates who had a household income at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line increased from 28 percent in 1996 to 39 percent in 2016.”<sup>8</sup> During that period, the percentage of students who received Pell Grants increased as well. Pell Grants are federal grants aimed at assisting undergraduate students with significant financial needs. According to NPSAS data, nearly 40 percent of college students received a Pell Grant in 2016 compared to 23 percent in 1999.<sup>9</sup>

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## **Approximately one-quarter of students at four-year colleges are food-insecure.**

Pell Grants and other forms of federal student aid have made college more accessible to nontraditional students. In 2017-2018, 32 percent of all undergraduate students were Pell Grant recipients.<sup>10</sup> Historically Pell Grants were able to cover half of the cost of in-state tuition, fees, and room and board at a two-year college and 39 percent of similar fees at a four-year college. Today, due to rising tuition and associated costs, a Pell Grant only covers 37 percent of the same fees of a two-year college and 19 percent of a four-year college.<sup>11</sup> As a result, Pell Grant recipients are also more likely than non-recipients to have to take out student loans and incur student loan debt.<sup>12</sup>

High tuition payments coupled with accumulating debt often makes it difficult for low-income students to meet basic needs. Research shows that low-income students, students of color, students with dependents, and first-generation students

have an increased risk of experiencing food insecurity.<sup>13</sup> When students are experiencing financial strain, food is often considered to be the most flexible expenditure.<sup>14</sup> This results in eating inexpensive food of low nutritional value or skipping meals entirely. A student experiencing food insecurity often struggles to meet other basic needs, like housing.<sup>15</sup>

While there are many reasons why a student may be food-insecure, there are four primary risk factors associated with food insecurity among low-income students, as identified by the Government Accountability Office. Having a low income, being a first-generation student, receiving SNAP benefits, and being a single parent are all indicators that a student is or will likely experience food insecurity. Students at community colleges and vocational and technical schools are more likely to meet the risk factor criteria than students at four-year colleges.<sup>16</sup>

### *The Impact of Food Insecurity on Students*

Food insecurity does not just result in hunger. Instead, its consequences are detrimental to both the student and his or her opportunity later in life, as well as to broader society. For many students, attending college, perhaps as the first person in their family to do so, opens the door to opportunity for educational attainment, future employment, and robust social networks. Yet when students are experiencing financial strain from college tuition while attempting to secure basic necessities such as food, the likelihood of completing college decreases.<sup>17</sup> This can have both immediate and generational impacts on a student’s ability to thrive and become upwardly mobile.

The more immediate effects of food insecurity are well documented. Perhaps most obvious, food-insecure students often have difficulty

focusing in class and on assignments, which can lead to a lower GPA and in some instances can lead to students dropping out.<sup>18</sup> Research has demonstrated that food insecurity also has negative social and psychological effects. For college students, food functions as an “invisible privilege that provide[s] entry into social interactions for those who could afford it.”<sup>19</sup> An inability to participate in social engagements can lead to social isolation.

Nontraditional students also work while in school at a higher rate than traditional students in order to meet basic needs. In 2016, according to the Government Accountability Office’s report, 64 percent of college students worked part time and a quarter worked full-time. Of the population working, 19 percent have a child.<sup>20</sup> Working part or full-time often prolongs a student’s start date and anticipated graduation date, and research shows that students who work more than 15 hours a week or postpone their anticipated graduation date by reducing college course loads per term are less likely to complete their degree.<sup>21</sup>

For a food-insecure college student, the effects of an inadequate diet and persistent anxiety related to unreliable and inconsistent access to healthy food are not isolated to the time during which a student is enrolled. Instead, there are ripple effects for the student and society.

Food insecurity has long-term negative effects on physical and mental health. While it may not always be the main determinant of negative health, it consistently serves as the catalyst for triggering a host of chronic diseases and conditions.<sup>22</sup> Those with low food security are also more likely to be in the highest percentile of obesity categories and are more likely to experience diabetes,

hypertension, and lung diseases, especially among minority populations.<sup>23</sup>

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### **Research shows that low-income students, students of color, students with dependents, and first-generation students have an increased risk of experiencing food insecurity.**

It is reported that “By 2020, 65 percent of all jobs in the economy will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school.” Therefore, the effects of an incomplete postsecondary education can be detrimental to the individual, their community, and the economy.<sup>24</sup> A complete postsecondary education can enable graduates to enter a higher paying entry-level job, negotiate a better salary, and have a higher earning potential in any chosen field.<sup>25</sup>

A study focusing on the connection between food insecurity and college student performance conducted by the University of Massachusetts Boston found that 25 percent of students dropped a class due to food insecurity.<sup>26</sup> Dropping one or multiple classes can be a costly effect of food insecurity as students may be unable to afford to take the class again. This may delay a student’s anticipated graduation date and reflect poorly on their academic transcript, hindering employment opportunities. Additionally, any delays on a graduation date may result in a student being unable to pay for another semester of housing and related living expenses in addition to course fees. As noted earlier, delayed graduation or failure to graduate can limit a college student’s opportunities later in life.

It should be celebrated that more students of diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds are attending college at higher rates than ever before. While private and federal financial aid programs like the Pell Grant have made college more accessible, colleges, universities, and government must prioritize college completion – in other words, it's critical that students not only get into college, but that they earn a degree. Food insecurity, paired with other barriers, significantly contributes to lower college completion rates. Low-income students are more likely to drop out of college due to limited financial resources, particularly expenses related to housing, transportation, and food.<sup>27</sup> Without adequate supports in place for students experiencing food insecurity, it is likely that students will continue to struggle in class, have strained relationships, and experience negative physical and mental effects, all of which can contribute to a student's decision to drop out.

### *The Role of the Social Safety Net*

Our society has recognized the value of a college degree. Yet the playing field remains largely uneven as many first-generation, low-income students are attending college but facing a number of barriers limiting their ability to thrive in an educational setting. To ensure that all students have the opportunity and supports necessary to complete their degree, a strong and robust social safety net is needed.

The social safety net is comprised of both government programs as well as civil society institutions — higher education institutions, faith-based organizations, and houses of worship — that together are able to provide consistent, reliable, and holistic support during an individual or family's time of need. The government's primary mechanism

for addressing food insecurity is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).<sup>28</sup> Originally known as the Food Stamp Program, SNAP was established in 1964 and has continued to be the largest program combating domestic food insecurity within the social safety net. SNAP is administered by the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (USDA-FNS).<sup>29</sup> SNAP serves approximately 42 million Americans and, according to the FNS, "offers nutrition assistance to millions of eligible, low-income individuals and families and provides economic benefits to communities." While overseen at the federal level, states are responsible for administering SNAP and determining eligibility requirements and benefit allotments.

To be eligible for SNAP, a household must have an income at or below 130 percent of the poverty line and meet other requirements that can vary by state. College students that meet certain requirements are also eligible for SNAP benefits. Students who attend college at least half-time are not eligible for SNAP benefits, as it is presumed that they are receiving financial support from family to attend college. There are, however, exemptions for half- to full-time students who can demonstrate need for SNAP assistance. For example, half- to full-time students who have children under certain ages and lack child care, work a minimum of 20 hours per week, receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits or any work-study funds, are unable to work, or are enrolled in approved employment programs are eligible for SNAP.<sup>30</sup>

Students who are enrolled less than half-time do not face the same student-restrictions that apply to half- to full-time students and are eligible to receive SNAP if they meet income

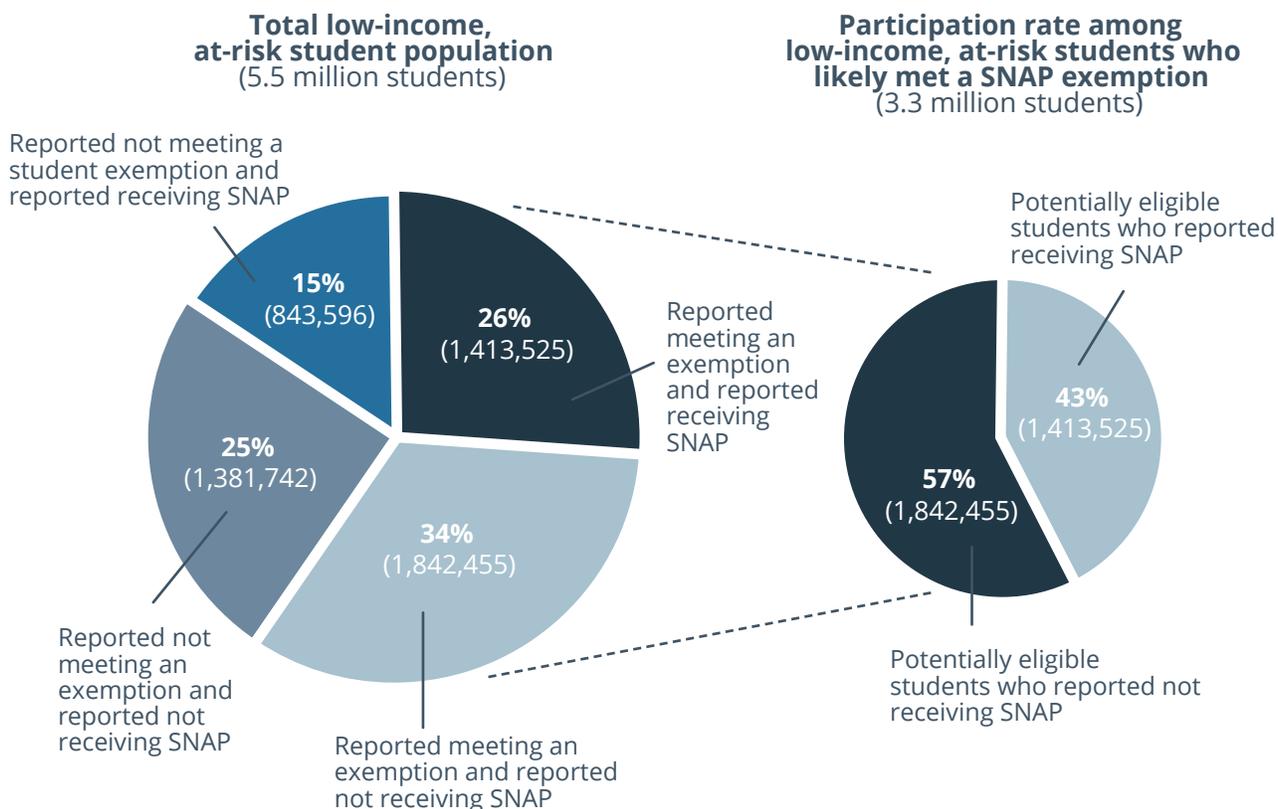
and asset requirements. Federal financial aid, including Pell Grants, do not count towards a student’s income. If a student lives on their own or with roommates, their parents’ income is not counted, and students are able to independently apply for SNAP. Roommates that purchase and prepare at least half of their meals together are eligible to apply as a SNAP household. Students that live with their parents and are under 21 are only eligible for SNAP as part of their parents’ household, however students that are over 21 and purchase and prepare at least half of their own meals are eligible as an independent household.<sup>31</sup>

SNAP benefits are distributed monthly through an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) account and associated card, which functions like a debit card.<sup>32</sup> Benefits can be utilized at authorized locations for

the purchase of food, excluding hot and/or prepared foods, alcohol, or tobacco products.<sup>33</sup> Congress reauthorizes SNAP every five years as part of the Farm Bill and each reauthorization presents Congress with the opportunity to adjust SNAP benefit allotments, eligibility requirements, and restrictions.<sup>34</sup>

*Low Take-Up Rates*

While some students are eligible for SNAP, the take-up rate, or rate at which students who are eligible to receive the benefit actually do, is low. In 2016, of the 3.3 million students identified as eligible for SNAP, 57 percent did not receive the benefit. In other words, 1.8 million students did not access available federal aid to meet their basic needs.<sup>35</sup>



Source: GAO analysis of 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data. | GAO-19-95

According to a United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) study entitled, “Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Programs,” students are not accessing benefits in part due to a lack of information. Different eligibility requirements between federal, state, and county levels can cause confusion for students, college officials, and SNAP administrators. College officials agree that the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) must clarify information regarding eligibility requirements and make it easily accessible to both students and college officials.<sup>36</sup> Intimidation and an unclear enrollment process are also reported as other reasons for low take-up rates. Until FNS clarifies eligibility requirements, higher education administrators will remain largely unaware of the need to make such resources easily accessible and officials will continue to feel unqualified to refer students to resources such as SNAP.

The stigma of receiving services has also been reported as another major barrier that has prevented eligible students from accessing SNAP benefits. There is still a negative perception associated with accepting help to meet basic needs.<sup>37</sup> The lack of clarity contributes to the negative stigma of accessing benefits, as this remains a largely undiscussed resource for students.

### *A Way Forward*

Food insecurity amongst college students is a multi-faceted issue that permeates every aspect of the college experience. There are adjustments that can be made to the SNAP program, which will be discussed in the next section, to increase take-up rates, reduce stigma, and ensure that students have consistent access to food. Adequately

addressing food insecurity on college campuses necessitates more than just a strong SNAP program. Vital to ensuring students have what they need to succeed — which includes adequate and nutritious food — is a robust civil society. Higher education institutions, churches, nonprofits, and businesses — working both independently and in collaboration with the government — are necessary to address food insecurity on college campuses and to create an environment in which all students are able to thrive.<sup>38</sup>

## FRAME

Finding a healthy balance between school work, socializing, and sleep is part of the college experience. Navigating the reality of food insecurity should not be part of the experience, but for too many students it is. Food insecurity impedes learning. When a student is preoccupied with the anxiety of not knowing where his or her next meal will come from or the ache in their stomachs due to another skipped meal, the ability to focus on academic studies rapidly decreases. While this is an immediate effect, the impact of food insecurity follows students far beyond their time on campus.

This presents society, and particularly Christians, with an opportunity and a responsibility to respond. Our society has placed great emphasis on the importance of a college degree, and it has impacts on employment, economic mobility, and a host of other outcomes. Yet when two students who have been accepted to college with the same SAT scores, grades, and extracurricular activities take different paths — one graduating and one dropping out — we must look closer. Too often food insecurity is

one of the key factors that contributes to a student's inability to complete college. As a result, the graduation gap — the difference in college completion between low-income students and middle- and upper-income peers — widens. As a college degree continues to become the norm and not the exception for a wide range of professions, the graduation gap only contributes to broader trends of income inequality and lack of opportunity for low-income individuals and families to become upwardly mobile. This is detrimental not just to those individuals and families, but to society as a whole. College students are full of potential and God-given dignity and it is crucial that they are holistically supported throughout their education so that they are able to graduate and continue to flourish.

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## **The impact of food insecurity follows students far beyond their time on campus.**

Eliminating food insecurity on college campuses is achievable. However, it will take collective effort by citizens, government, and civil society institutions. The following section will outline various institutional responsibilities and offer recommendations for strengthening each institution's response to food insecurity on college campuses.

### *Strengthening SNAP for Students*

Government has a responsibility to promote the well-being of its citizens through policies and practices that uphold the common good. Our country has rightly recognized that this responsibility includes a governmental response to domestic food insecurity. There are a variety of mechanisms through which the government currently addresses food insecurity, the largest of which is the

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

While the government can and should work to address the structural conditions that contribute to food insecurity, it must also respond to the reality of food insecurity in the here and now. According to the Center for Public Justice's Guideline on Welfare, "It is legitimate and at times necessary for the government to provide financial assistance to persons and families unable to earn sufficient income on their own."<sup>39</sup>

A government program like SNAP is effective because it targets food insecurity in a consistent and reliable way. Whether in an urban or rural environment, qualified individuals and families can depend upon SNAP benefits during a time of need. At a federal, state, and local level, funding, personnel, and benefit allotments are reliable.

However, college students, a critical population experiencing food insecurity, are too often overlooked. It is important that government prioritizes the unique needs of today's college students and tailors SNAP to be more effective in targeting food insecurity on college campuses. It is important that government prioritizes the unique needs of today's college students and tailors the SNAP program to be more effective in targeting food insecurity on college campuses.

Increasing awareness and expanding SNAP eligibility to meet the current demands of college students is imperative to supporting physical, mental, and economic health of the next generation.

College students and college administrators cite a lack of clarity regarding eligibility requirements. To respond, local SNAP offices should increase partnerships with

colleges and universities.<sup>40</sup> Partnerships between the two entities can increase student participation in SNAP, as college officials would be better equipped to refer students to SNAP and assist them in applying. Local SNAP agencies can increase awareness of student eligibility by holding trainings and seminars for administrative officials and providing clearly outlined resources directly to colleges.<sup>41</sup> Local SNAP offices, in coordination with colleges and universities, can also designate a representative to spend time on campuses to meet with students and administrators to answer questions about eligibility and the application process.<sup>42</sup> Such representatives would not necessarily need to be affiliated with a particular college or have a permanent office on a higher education campus. However, it would be beneficial for representatives to make themselves available on campuses as students who are experiencing food insecurity are likely experiencing other barriers such as a lack of transportation.<sup>43</sup>

Expanding SNAP eligibility to include, for example, college enrollment in the accepted work eligibility requirements would allow for more students in need to participate in the program. Some have also proposed aligning financial aid eligibility with SNAP eligibility.<sup>44</sup> Aligning federal financial aid and eligibility would address eligibility confusion amongst students and administration, as the government would assume greater responsibility in identifying student need. For example, when a student applies for financial aid, questions that indicate food insecurity and eligibility for SNAP would be incorporated in the process. This would flag the student as an eligible recipient for SNAP, rather than the student or administrative official needing to seek resources independently.

Clarifying and expanding college programs that qualify under SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) is another way that government can better address the basic needs of college students. SNAP E&T assists participants in gaining “skills, training, or work experience to increase their ability to obtain regular employment that leads to economic self-sufficiency.”<sup>45</sup> Most, if not all college courses, especially those at technical or two-year higher education institutions, should qualify as SNAP E&T eligible programs. SNAP E&T services are offered by the states and state partners such as colleges and have the responsibility of selecting one or more of the USDA approved SNAP E&T activities. Two of the activities states are able to select include: “Educational Programs” and “Vocational Programs.”<sup>46</sup> SNAP E&T indicates the federal government’s attempt to be cognizant of food insecurity on college campuses by providing a unique way for students to receive benefits. While this is an impactful step on a federal level, there is still more to be done. As almost 40 percent of students at technical colleges or two-year higher education institutions experience food insecurity, expansion of such qualifications can increase accessibility to SNAP for students in need and reduce food insecurity on college campuses.<sup>47</sup>

A SNAP program that better addresses the needs of food-insecure college students will help to ensure that all students are able to earn a degree and meet their full potential. However, government must also recognize that it is not the institution best equipped to provide the personal and holistic services that food-insecure college students need in order to succeed. Civil society institutions embedded in communities are often best equipped to recognize the nuances of a population through an understanding of cultural context and other unique needs.<sup>48</sup>

In some cases, government may partner with civil society institutions through direct and indirect funding. At the same time, government has a responsibility to allow civil society institutions, including higher education institutions, nonprofit and faith-based organizations, businesses, and churches to make their distinct contributions.

### *An On-Campus Response*

Higher education institutions themselves are crucial actors in addressing food insecurity on college campuses. Faculty, staff, and administrators have the unique opportunity to interact with students on campus and can recognize the academic effects of food insecurity. Even so, faculty and staff can benefit from receiving formal training for identifying signs of food insecurity amongst their students. In addition to training, implementing official administrative services aimed at addressing food insecurity can contribute to positive systemic change. Such services may include a screening system to identify students who may be at an increased risk of experiencing food insecurity and best practices resources for faculty and staff that become aware of a student experiencing food insecurity.

Systemic methods of addressing food insecurity would also decrease individual staff and faculty members' responsibility for caring for student needs and increase the administrations' responsibility. Placing responsibility on the administration can lead to greater uniformity when addressing the needs of students and increases the resources available to assist students on a campus-wide basis. Increasing awareness of food insecurity and SNAP eligibility is also beneficial in combating negative stigmas regarding the social safety net, as students would need to self-identify less frequently as

food-insecure while simultaneously working toward normalizing the topic of conversation in classrooms and on campus.

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## **It is important that government prioritizes the unique needs of today's college students and tailors SNAP to be more effective in targeting food insecurity on college campuses.**

Some colleges and universities have responded to food insecurity with on-campus food pantries. At on-campus food pantries, students select the food they need at no cost. According to the College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA), in 2012, only 15 higher education institutions were registered as having a food bank or pantry. In 2018, 650 member institutions reported having an on-campus food pantry.<sup>49</sup> On-campus pantries are often operated by volunteers or a small staff, and while their services are vital and they address immediate needs, they do not offer a long-term solution to food insecurity.<sup>50</sup>

As food insecurity becomes more prevalent on college campuses, some higher education institutions have sought to work in collaboration with local SNAP offices. To combat the negative stigmas that surround receiving SNAP benefits, it is necessary that eligibility requirements are clear.<sup>51</sup> Portland State University, for example, has a webpage that outlines the eligibility requirements of SNAP for students and recognizes that the additional costs of being a college student can make eating regularly difficult.<sup>52</sup> In addition to standard facts about SNAP like how and where to apply and how to use EBT cards, the university also addresses the social stigma.

The webpage states that “SNAP is not a charity,” and that “SNAP is designed to help people stay healthy during difficult times.”<sup>53</sup>

In addition to initiatives that assist students in applying for SNAP benefits, college campuses can also directly interact with SNAP on campus. At Oregon State University, the campus grocery store accepts EBT cards.<sup>54</sup> Accepting SNAP benefits on college campuses is more sustainable than on-campus food pantries as maintaining funding and a consistent volunteer base are not concerns. For retailers to accept EBT, owners must create a USDA account and apply with required documents.<sup>55</sup> Owners must maintain store eligibility by meeting two criteria. Criterion A requires that the store provide staple foods such as vegetables, fruit, dairy, meat, bread, and cereal. Criterion B requires that stores successfully sell those staple foods and that at least half of all total gross retail sales be from staple foods.<sup>56</sup>

While the requirements for adhering to USDA standards for retailers accepting SNAP may be a barrier for some colleges, the benefits are numerous. Ensuring that all students, not just those experiencing food insecurity, have fresh and nutritious food accessible to them should be a priority of all colleges.

#### *A Community Response to Food Insecurity on Campus*

Businesses, nonprofits and faith-based organizations, and churches can design specific ways to address food insecurity within a community.

The USDA’s Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Grant (FINI) seeks to support programs that encourage the purchase of nutritious food.<sup>57</sup> FINI is a joint project between FNS and USDA’s National Institute

of Food and Agriculture that specifically provides funding for initiatives that promote the purchase of fruits and vegetables among low-income individuals and households. FINI supports three tiers of projects: one-year pilot projects, multi-year community-based projects, and multi-year large-scale projects.<sup>58</sup> In addition to incentivizing innovative solutions for making healthy options more accessible, FINI also boosts local economies by localizing solutions and partnering with businesses.

In Brookline, Massachusetts, the Brookline farmers’ market accepts EBT cards and has implemented a SNAP EBT match program. The match program allows shoppers who participate in SNAP to qualify for a dollar-for-dollar match while shopping for produce for up to \$20.<sup>59</sup> The farmers’ market is situated within two miles of 13 higher education institutions, including a community college, and is accessible to students.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, students are unable to access fresh produce from the Brookline farmers’ market year-round as it is only open from June to November.

Swipe Out Hunger (SOH) is one example of an innovative nonprofit organization addressing campus food insecurity. What began as a college project in 2010 amongst friends has grown into a nationwide initiative. Through SOH, students can donate leftover meal swipes to their on-campus dining service, which are pooled and distributed to students experiencing food insecurity.

In 2018, SOH released their first impact report, comprised of 800 respondents from both private and public university students. The report found that 64 percent of students reported being able to stay in school partly due to an increase in access to food.<sup>61</sup> SOH also encourages participation in SNAP. SOH

offers training for student advocates and campus administrators to develop SNAP outreach and student enrollment. SOH is a promising example of how nonprofits can complement the work of government to address food insecurity.

The call to feed the hungry and the importance of meals is emphasized throughout Scripture. Historically the Church has been a central actor in feeding the hungry, and it should continue to work to address food insecurity in the community.

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## **The coordination of government and civil society institutions is essential for effectively addressing food insecurity.**

Churches often host free weekly meals in an effort to engage the college student population, especially those within their congregation. Some churches recognize the need for food among college students and utilize the time to address the needs of college students as well as fellowship with them.

Acknowledging that a weekly meal is only one manner of addressing food insecurity, some churches operate food pantries. These food pantries can assist individuals more consistently than a once-a-week meal. Churches can also collaborate with other churches or faith-based organizations to address the needs of the community. While some churches may collaborate to support a community food pantry, this is not a long-term solution. Therefore, churches can provide training for staff and ministry teams, particularly those that work with students, regarding the signs of food insecurity and

how to connect students with available resources. As is common with other sectors of civil society, education for staff regarding signs of food insecurity and information about local SNAP resources would be beneficial.

Helping college students meet the basic need for food is a task that no one sector can do alone. The coordination of government and civil society institutions is essential to effectively addressing food insecurity. Furthermore, the intersection of such sectors, particularly between higher education institutions and government, is one that should continue to be explored. Supporting the basic needs of students has benefits that extend beyond the classroom and contributes to the flourishing of individuals and society.

## **ENGAGE**

**I**magine a 21-year-old student named Laura who is studying to become a nurse. Despite having attended an underfunded high school, she graduated at the top of her class and received a scholarship to attend college. Laura grew up in a multigenerational home of immigrants with very limited income and receives no financial support from her family. Now in her first semester of college, she works 25 hours a week at the mall to pay for rent, books, supplies for her courses, and food. Even with her scholarship, Laura rarely has enough money after paying bills to eat three meals a day. As the first in her immediate family to attend college, Laura does not want to ask her family for financial help and is rarely able to visit home. Although there are food pantries and churches around town that offer free meals on certain days of the week, she is unable to attend most of the time due to lacking reliable transportation

and her work schedule. Between classes, work, and other school responsibilities, she struggles to obtain the amount of sleep and the grades she needs, and is in danger of losing her scholarship. Laura has a professor that is aware of her situation and brings her food when she can, but due to embarrassment, Laura is hesitant to ask for help when she needs it.

Though a fictional account, Laura's story is representative of the experience of many college students across the United States, including a growing number of the nearly 9,000 students studying in Abilene, Texas.

Situated in a largely agricultural pocket of West Texas, Abilene has a population of 122,000 and spans just 105 square miles.<sup>62</sup> Abilene is a college town, with five higher education institutions within its city limits. These include Abilene Christian University (ACU), a private Church of Christ university; Hardin-Simmons University (HSU), a private Baptist university; McMurry University, a private Methodist university; Cisco College, a community college; and Texas State Technical College (TSTC), a two-year technical state college.

Like so many other campuses throughout the country, food insecurity is often an invisible issue at these colleges and universities. In Texas, 14 percent of households are considered food insecure, higher than the national average of 12.7 percent.<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, residents of Abilene, including college students, are no exception.

In March 2019, of the 18,517 individuals eligible for SNAP in Taylor County, in which Abilene is situated, approximately 67 percent did not receive benefits.<sup>64</sup> Of that number, 7,857 eligible recipients were between the ages of 15-59 years old. With a large number

of traditional and nontraditional college students in such a small area, the needs of Abilene are complex and constantly evolving.

#### *Food Insecurity on College Campuses in Abilene, Texas*

"The biggest issue is that food insecurity is present but no one knows how big or just how prevalent it actually is," Alex Bisson, a graduate student researching food insecurity on Hardin-Simmons University's campus, said.

In a survey sent to all students and faculty (approximately 2,000 individuals), Bisson found that 37 percent of the 66 respondents reported not having enough food for themselves for 24 hours and 43 percent stated that they knew someone who had run out of food.<sup>65</sup>

Bisson explained that despite individuals experiencing food insecurity or knowing someone who has, the issue continues to be unheard of by many. "Sixty percent of respondents stated that food insecurity was not an issue to any extent and some expressed concerns of abusing the system if assistance in the form of a food bank were implemented," she said.

Two miles from HSU's campus is Abilene Christian University (ACU), another private four-year higher education institution. According to Tamara Long, Dean of Admissions, in the fall of 2018, 29.3 percent of students received Pell Grants. Just under the national average of 32 percent, ACU Pell Grant recipients are more likely to take out loans than non-recipients and are more likely to struggle meeting basic needs.<sup>66</sup>

Lauren Boyles, Assistant Director of Student Advocacy at ACU, assists students who

are in the midst of financial, emotional, or spiritual distress. Boyles works within the Student Opportunities, Advocacy, and Resources (SOAR) program, which refers students to on-campus resources and/or off-campus resources as needed, including food assistance. “We need more education about SNAP,” said Boyle, who has referred students to apply for SNAP benefits in the past.

Boyles said that she is aware that referring students to apply for SNAP can be beneficial, yet she expressed concern about not being well-versed in SNAP eligibility requirements, and she is not alone. Like many administrative officials, knowing whether to refer students to SNAP can be difficult to discern due to confusion around eligibility.<sup>67</sup> According to Boyles and Grant Greenwood, Director of Admissions and Recruiting at Howard Simmons University, many colleges and universities, including those in Abilene, lack data on food-insecure students and therefore are unable to adequately meet their needs.

While higher education institutions often have an on-campus student success center, such as ACU’s SOAR program, another institution in Abilene goes beyond this. The student body at Cisco College is primarily comprised of commuter students and offers associate degrees, certificate programs, and dual degree programs. According to Martha Montgomery, Director of Development, a realization that students were sleeping in their cars, falling asleep in class, and attending events that offered free food at high rates led to the creation of Food for Thought, Cisco’s on-campus food pantry. Food for Thought opened in 2012 after a concerned counselor proposed the idea and since then has been assisting students “fill the gap when emergencies occur.”<sup>68</sup>

According to Montgomery, many students are reluctant to admit that they need assistance because of the associated stigma. Montgomery estimates that 20 to 30 percent of the student body experiences food insecurity but said that there is not an official count due to students underreporting and no system for measuring food insecurity on campus. To address this, the food pantry hosts a campus-wide “popcorn day” two to three times a semester to familiarize students with its services and offer tours of the pantry.

Although it’s small and only offers nonperishable items and toiletries, the food pantry serves nearly 20 student households per week. According to Montgomery, this includes a high volume of commuter and nontraditional students that have families and are primary caregivers. In addition to the food pantry, Montgomery notes that Cisco now offers fliers and informational brochures about SNAP to students.

While the food pantry is open year-round, with the exception of holiday breaks, Montgomery notes that there are significant concerns regarding the sustainability of the project.

“I do think about what my retirement will mean,” Montgomery said. “Who will continue to care for the food pantry or dedicate time to do something like this?”

Food for Thought is currently funded by the college itself and through donations of members of the community, and there is a continued need for volunteers, food to stock the pantry, and an overall commitment to ending food insecurity among their students.

### *A Community Response*

Programs like SOAR and Food for Thought meet an important need for students, but it is clear that they may not be sustainable or able to meet the scope of need on college campuses. This illustrates the importance of a program like SNAP, which provides consistent and reliable access to food.

The local Texas Health and Human Services (HHS) office, which administers SNAP in Taylor County, did not respond to a request for an interview, but it is important that higher education institutions and the local HHS office seek opportunities to collaborate and strengthen the community's response to the needs of its college students.

In addition to colleges and universities, there is a robust network of churches and nonprofit organizations in Abilene. There are over 1,000 nonprofit organizations in Abilene. By contrast, nearby Midland, Texas, which has a slightly larger population, has 61 registered nonprofit organizations.<sup>69</sup> With such a significant presence in the community, nonprofit organizations are critical to the work of addressing food insecurity in Abilene.

The Food Bank of West Central Texas (FBWCT) describes itself as the “community’s number one safety net for hungry people.”<sup>70</sup> FBWCT is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit and is active in 13 counties, including Taylor County in which Abilene is situated, where it distributes food to over 150 partner agencies, which include local public schools and church food pantries.<sup>71</sup>

Despite distributing to over 150 partners, FBWCT acknowledges that there are unreached and overlooked residents in need. Summer Menchaca, a full-time, grant funded SNAP liaison for FBWCT, works to connect

eligible recipients with SNAP. “Everything here is completely mobile,” she said, motioning to her desk. “I can go anywhere people may need me to be, including college campuses.” Just from the resources in her small black bag, Menchaca is able to assist individuals in applying for SNAP and other safety net programs free of cost. Despite this, she said that she has not yet visited any of the five higher education institutions in Abilene.

“This may be due to some colleges and universities believing that their campuses are self-sustaining,” Ronnie Kid, CEO of FBWCT, said. Patrick Dembach, Director of Operations, added, “[Many higher education institutions] do not feel the need to look outside for assistance and, therefore, do not know what all is available in the community.”

While running a food pantry on campus is one manner of addressing the immediate needs of the students, it can also be a location where students feel the most conscious of their situation. One civil society institution that can discreetly address the needs of food-insecure students in Abilene is the Church. Churches are a powerful agent of change within many communities. In Abilene alone, there are approximately 50 churches.<sup>72</sup> Of the 50 churches in Abilene, eight operate a food pantry. Like on-campus pantries, however, churches often struggle with sustainability and may not be trained to connect patrons with other available resources like SNAP.

In addition to food pantries, many churches are also seeking alternative ways to address food insecurity through weekly meals. Several churches, including Southern Hills Church of Christ, Pioneer Drive Baptist Church, and University Church of Christ (UCC) offer free weekly meals to the community, including college students.

Sitting in the warm church kitchen, Lydia Zuñiga, the Director of the Wednesday Night Supper at University Church of Christ, said, “[The weekly supper] started around 10 years ago because many students do not have family here and UCC wanted to offer a hot dinner and help them feel at home.” Scheduling the weekly meals around ACU’s academic calendar, students continue to play a large role in the weekly meals. Of the nearly 200 individuals who receive a free, hot meal, approximately 50 are students.

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**The next generation of leaders is on college campuses, and as a society, it is our collective responsibility to ensure that food insecurity is not a barrier to college completion.**

College student participation has increased over the years, yet Zuñiga remains firm in her stance that the meal will continue to remain free of charge for students despite any fiscal strain that this may sometimes cause. Zuñiga and the church recognize that college students are vulnerable in many ways due to financial, time, and transportation restrictions as well as being away from family.

“We know that many students do not have family here,” Zuñiga said. “We want to offer a hot dinner and help all students feel at home and taken care of.”

The fictional account of Laura told earlier illustrates the experience of many college students in Abilene and throughout the country. But Laura’s story does not need to be one which ends with her struggling through her degree, and possibly failing

to complete college. It is possible to end food insecurity on college campuses. It is important for colleges and universities to raise awareness about food insecurity and to make information about resources on and off campus easily accessible for students. Through the important and distinct contributions of government as well as the nonprofits, churches, and businesses embedded in the community, food insecurity can be eliminated. The next generation of leaders is on college campuses, and as a society, it is our collective responsibility to ensure that food insecurity is not a barrier to college completion. When students succeed and are holistically supported, our communities will flourish.

# COMING HOME: A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO HOUSING FOR RETURNING CITIZENS

By Abigail Stevens &  
Dr. Christa Lee-Chuvala

## DISCOVER

“Coming home” means something different to everyone, but for the nine million men and women who will be released this year from prison, returning “home” may not mean a warm welcome or even a physical house.

In the United States, when one person is incarcerated, it affects the whole community. Families are pulled apart as mothers or fathers disappear, workplaces are drained of their talent, school funding is depleted, and homes are foreclosed or left vacant. When citizens finally “come home,” they often find themselves homeless, unemployed, socially disconnected, under-resourced, and struggling to cope with the transition.<sup>1</sup> During this challenging time of adjustment, supportive, affordable, and stable housing can help to establish a sense of normalcy in the lives of returning citizens.

Housing is an essential component to successful reentry.<sup>2</sup> While coming home from prison can be a difficult transition anywhere in the world, it is particularly challenging in the United States. The United States holds 25 percent of the world’s incarcerated population, though it only comprises roughly four percent of the global population.<sup>3</sup> While this may seem to suggest increasing levels of

crime, the national crime rate, particularly violent crime, has decreased. Racial minorities, sexual minorities, and low-income individuals are overrepresented in the prison population which consequently affects the long-term economic, civic, and social health of these individuals and communities.

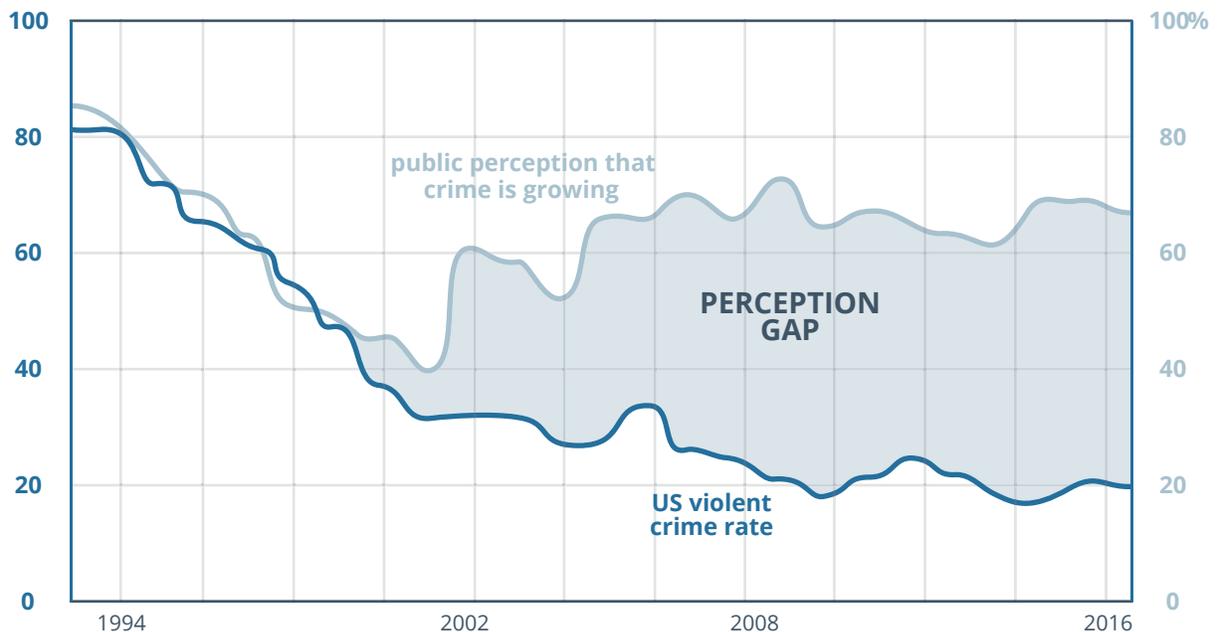
Incarceration places a tremendous strain on the economy and communities in the United States, with \$182 billion invested annually into correctional facilities. With the added costs of court fees, costs borne by families, and lost wages, the aggregate annual cost of mass incarceration is estimated at over \$1 trillion.<sup>4</sup> Despite this significant investment, data shows that the recidivism rate, or the rate at which returning citizens reoffend and return to prison, is still very high. Upon release, 36.8 percent of returning citizens are rearrested within the first six months of civilian life, 56.7 percent within the first year, and 76.6 percent within the first five years of their release.<sup>5</sup>

While the crime rate has been decreasing since 1993,<sup>6</sup> the rate of incarceration and reincarceration of Americans is still the highest in the world.<sup>7</sup> Mass incarceration is harming entire communities, and the high recidivism rate is a symptom of a reentry system – comprised of government and civil society – that fails to address the holistic and varied needs of this population upon release.

In America, all sentences are like life sentences, as adult convictions leave the individual with a permanent criminal record.<sup>8</sup> Returning citizens must disclose themselves as persons with a criminal record on applications for housing, employment, volunteering, and social activities. While in the past background checks only revealed criminal offenses dating back seven years, since the Patriot Act of 2001, they now

### Americans' concern over crime has grown even as the violent crime rate has fallen precipitously

National violent crime rate and percentage of survey respondents who said that crime has increased locally over the past year



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Gallup | Jacob Turcotte/Staff

disclose lifelong criminal histories.<sup>9</sup> Long after returning citizens have served their time, paid their debt to society, and come home, their criminal records perpetuate the negative effects of incarceration.

Returning citizens and their families are often a financially vulnerable population. Often with limited resources before incarceration, upon release returning citizens may find themselves in dire situations with gaps in employment histories, unsteady income, and poor credit. Many returning citizens are in debt, paying restitution, and unemployed upon release, making it difficult to meet financial eligibility requirements set by landlords. During these first few years after release, anywhere from 10 to 20 percent of returning citizens will be homeless at a time, while many others will face substantial obstacles as they try to secure suitable housing arrangements and make payments.<sup>10</sup> Those who are unable to obtain housing

upon release are 11 times more likely to be reincarcerated,<sup>11</sup> contributing to the already high recidivism rate of 76.6 percent for returning citizens who are rearrested within the first five years post-incarceration.<sup>12</sup>

While there are many factors that contribute to successful reentry, supportive housing is particularly important. It provides a stable environment for returning citizens to seek employment, receive the help they need, and reunite with their families and communities during the first few years of reentry when they are most at risk of recidivating.

#### *Public Housing and the Social Safety Net*

Financial instability, combined with a criminal record, often inhibits returning citizens from participating in the housing market. Returning citizens may not have a family to return to, may not be credit-worthy for a mortgage, or may not have enough

income to afford rent in the private market. If a returning citizen has gaps in employment history and a criminal record, this often leads them to experience discrimination or be priced out of the private housing market.

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### **Returning citizens with limited financial resources make up a critical population of Americans who are in need of housing assistance.**

Upon their release, returning citizens must quickly adjust from a highly structured lifestyle behind bars to the rapidly changing outside world. They may be resented by their families, ostracized by their faith communities and former workplaces, questioned by their neighbors, and treated with prejudice by landlords and employers. Each of these challenges create obstacles to securing stable housing and together point to a need for housing assistance programs that can facilitate the reentry process.

Returning citizens with limited financial resources make up a critical population of Americans who are in need of housing assistance. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides housing assistance to five million Americans annually through public housing, Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV), subsidies for future homeowners, and emergency housing assistance grants for individuals and families in crisis.<sup>13</sup> Of the housing programs that HUD provides, public housing is one of the primary forms of temporary housing services with the potential to support low-income returning citizens as they transition into civilian life. HUD provides 1.3 million households with federally-owned public

housing apartments and houses that are specifically leased to low-income renters. The federal government acts as the landlord, and tenants pay a reduced rental rate that can range from zero to 30 percent of their adjusted gross income.<sup>14</sup> Tenants can receive housing as long as they continue to meet eligibility requirements. In cases of mental illness and disability, public housing can also function as a long-term housing arrangement.

Most public housing units are owned by a local Public Housing Authority (PHA) that manages the housing units. However, some cities also have non-PHA public housing units, known as Alternatively Managed Entities (AME). These units are funded by HUD but owned and managed by a private sector organization or company.<sup>15</sup> AMEs operate under very similar guidelines and regulations as PHA housing units; however, they have separate waitlists for incoming applications, can more easily terminate a lease, and have slightly more autonomy because they are not operated by the government.<sup>16</sup>

Eligibility for public housing is based on the gross income of a household, the citizenship status of the applicant, and whether the applicant qualifies as elderly, a person with a disability, or as part of a family.<sup>17</sup> Applicants must make 80 percent or less of the local median income level to be considered low-income tenants and less than 50 percent of the local median income level to be considered very-low-income tenants.<sup>18</sup> Median income levels vary significantly because they are based on the income level of a particular geographical area within a city. Within a larger city there can be several different median incomes that are set based on different locations. The local PHA conducts a background check on qualified applicants to verify the applicant will be a

good tenant, and according to HUD, “will deny admission to any applicant whose habits and practices may be expected to have a detrimental effect on other tenants or on the project’s environment.”<sup>19</sup> PHAs make home visits to the applicant’s place of residence before approving applications and are given significant discretionary power to determine eligibility based on local PHA indicators.

Both the specific eligibility restrictions and the public housing application process vary on a state-by-state, city-by-city, and case-by-case basis.<sup>20</sup> Some states and cities have centralized intake systems to process all housing assistance applications together in a single location, while others have designated websites and scattered offices that process particular kinds of applications.

#### *Barriers to Public Housing for Returning Citizens*

Not surprisingly, many returning citizens are not considered to be “good tenants” because of their criminal records and are subsequently denied access to public housing.<sup>21</sup> While PHAs can use their discretion to approve or deny housing assistance to applicants with a record, there are several felonies that can permanently disqualify a returning citizen. If applicants are registered sex offenders or have been convicted of selling, producing, or using methamphetamine near public housing facilities, they are automatically disqualified for all public housing facilities in the U.S.<sup>22</sup> Beyond these two disqualifications, each PHA sets its own regulations and restrictions, many of which deny housing to many men and women with a criminal record and prevent them from living with their families that already live in public housing.<sup>23</sup>

When returning citizens are approved for public housing, their approval is conditional.

The PHA has the right to deny housing and evict the entire household if one family member engages in illegal drug-related activity, provides misleading information on their housing application, disrupts the peace of the housing arrangement, or violates probation or parole. If a tenant is suspected of engaging in one of the preceding violations, proof of guilt is not required for PHA to start the eviction process.<sup>24</sup> While public housing does provide shelter for the family, the risk of eviction may threaten the family’s sense of stability and security.

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### **If the waitlist is long or closed, public housing is likely not an option for returning citizens with immediate housing needs.**

Despite these barriers, public housing can help returning citizens reintegrate into society because it provides affordable shelter and does not require individuals to search for housing arrangements or interact with potentially discriminatory landlords. However, because public housing is very limited, with a national median waitlist of 9 to 19 months, any kind of criminal record greatly decreases the applicant’s chance of securing public housing.<sup>25</sup> If a returning citizen has been recently released, other applicants with a clean record will likely be preferred. If the waitlist is long or closed, public housing is likely not an option for returning citizens with immediate housing needs.<sup>26</sup>

Even if returning citizens manage to secure public housing, they have little control over the location and quality of housing they will receive. Public housing units are often located in areas with high rates of crime

and poverty.<sup>27</sup> An environment with limited opportunity for upward mobility can make it difficult for returning citizens to develop positive connections and employment in the community.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, simply increasing the number of public housing units and decreasing eligibility requirements without addressing the community environment surrounding many public housing developments does not sufficiently address the housing needs of returning citizens.

### *Looking Ahead: The First Step Act's Impact*

In December 2018, the First Step Act was signed into law, representing a meaningful bipartisan effort at criminal justice reform.<sup>29</sup> The First Step Act is designed to improve the living conditions of federal prisoners by prompting federal prisons to place incarcerated individuals closer to their family members, eliminate the use of restraints on incarcerated pregnant women, increase de-escalation training for correctional officers, and increase the “good time” credits available for an incarcerated person’s good behavior.<sup>30</sup> This means the 181,000 men and women in federal prison may have the opportunity to return to their communities sooner than anticipated.<sup>31</sup>

Although the First Step Act brings exciting news to many families with incarcerated loved ones, even financially stable returning citizens may struggle to find suitable housing and employment without sufficient preparation. This will make housing assistance an essential resource for returning citizens who may have nowhere to go and are most vulnerable during the first several years after release.

Improving housing opportunities for returning citizens, and thereby strengthening communities, supporting families, and

reducing recidivism, must be an integrated and coordinated process. HUD and the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) must work together to address the population of returning citizens that bounce between being housed by correctional facilities and public housing facilities.

Returning citizens need a significant support system upon release that extends beyond the basic shelter that public housing provides.<sup>32</sup> As more men and women prepare to return to their communities, and as public housing waitlists remain long or closed, it is critical that both HUD and BOP act to develop integrated housing strategies, in collaboration with civil society, to serve this population.<sup>33</sup>

## FRAME

A home is essential to personal well-being, stable employment, and the ability to establish positive relationships in a community. For returning citizens, access to safe and stable housing is one of the building blocks of successful reentry, and positive relationships within a neighborhood or community further strengthen the reentry process. However, when returning citizens must worry about securing basic shelter and spend copious amounts of time and energy finding landlords in the private market who will rent to someone with a criminal record, it can be difficult to focus on adjusting to their new lives, reestablishing family and community connections, and searching for employment. Supporting returning citizens with their housing needs during this critical transition will help reduce the recidivism rate and give them the opportunity to reestablish their lives in a community.

David Garlock, an advocate for criminal justice reform who was formerly incarcerated himself, stresses the importance of this kind of support for returning citizens. After he was released from prison, Garlock was fortunate to have a network of supportive community members who aided his transition.

“It was a seasonal group of people that poured into me and wanted to see me succeed,” Garlock said. “It’s like the African proverb: ‘it takes a village to raise a child’... it takes a village for a returning citizen to be successful.”

Community is an integral part of the formation and restoration of a person.<sup>34</sup> Communities are extraordinarily intricate, comprised of many different civil society institutions, including the families that form individuals, businesses that employ them, neighborhoods that welcome them, organizations that serve them, and houses of worship that edify them.

Humans, as beings created in the image of a triune God, are inherently valuable, social beings that are made to live in loving relationships with each other.<sup>35</sup> Loving God, neighbor, and self, then, becomes the basis for which humans are to live in community and understand human flourishing. Christians are called to love their neighbor, not because their neighbor is particularly deserving, but because the image of God is in their neighbor. This extends to every person — those with a criminal record and those without. The affirmation of the human dignity of the neighbor is actualized within community.

These neighbor relationships are interconnected. When one person is impacted by crime or incarceration, the whole community is impacted.

“People tend to think that the only person doing time is the person incarcerated. But the family is doing time too,” Garlock said. “Victims don’t get any healing without restorative justice. It’s about wholeness and healing for everyone.”<sup>36</sup>

While the government has a legitimate responsibility to serve and protect, which sometimes requires retributive justice, it also has the responsibility to contribute to the flourishing of individuals and communities in a positive, but limited way.<sup>37</sup> This contribution should include direct social services like public housing that government can effectively provide on a large-scale to men and women who need the additional investment to flourish. Civil society institutions like the Church, nonprofits, and the family are often better equipped to facilitate individual restoration and community development for returning citizens, and, thus, government must also recognize their distinct contribution.

Recognizing the dignity of returning citizens throughout their reintegration into society requires strengthening reentry systems so that returning citizens experience a seamless transition from incarcerated life to civilian life. The transition, especially during the first few years, is naturally difficult, so returning citizens need to know they are coming home to a loving community where basic needs like housing can be met. Unfortunately, returning citizens often find that the punishment they experienced during incarceration does not end when they leave prison.

For many low-income returning citizens, renting or purchasing a home in the private market is not an option upon release due to the financial setbacks caused by incarceration, and the unwillingness of many landlords to rent to a returning citizen. Yet

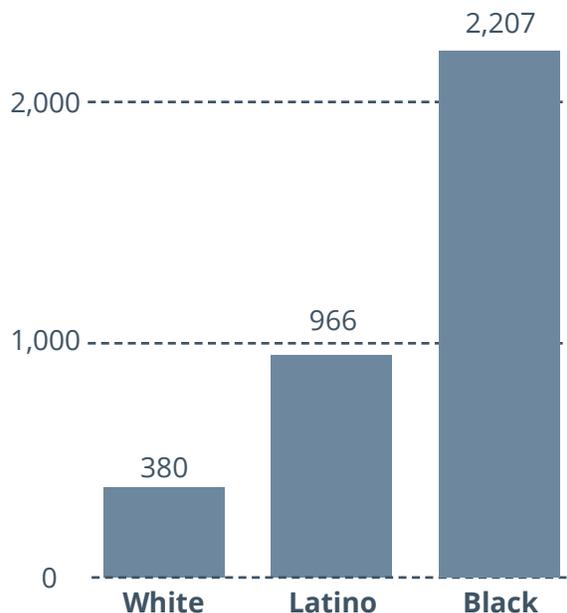
many men and women returning home also face barriers to securing public housing. HUD's public housing program is not only limited in the number of units available, but it also has restrictions that often hinder returning citizens from accessing its units.

### *A New Vision: Recommendations for HUD*

The United States government has the funding, breadth, and scale to provide substantive support for returning citizens and for the organizations that serve them. Through public housing, government provides direct housing services to individuals who cannot afford to rent or purchase a home in the private market. Government also supports civil society institutions that serve this vulnerable population through government grants and contracts. Especially in communities where civil society organizations serving returning citizens are underrepresented, underfunded, or where minority populations are overlooked, federally-funded public housing programs can ensure that returning citizens have access to stable housing in their time of need.

Because the strengths and needs of every community are different, it is important that Public Housing Authority guidelines, which govern public housing policy on both a national and local level, are tailored to respond to the unique needs of diverse communities. However, there are certain policy changes HUD can implement at the federal level to support the restoration and reintegration of returning citizens, protect them from discrimination, and uphold their human dignity. In these instances, it may be appropriate for HUD to provide stricter guidance to local PHAs to ensure that returning citizens are receiving equitable and dignifying treatment.

**United States incarceration rates by race and ethnicity, 2010**  
(number of people incarcerated per 100,000 people in that group)



Source: Calculated by the Prison Policy initiative from Bureau of Justice Statistics, Correctional Population in the U.S. 2010 & U.S. Census 2010 Summary File 1.

*1. PHAs should not use a record of arrest to determine housing eligibility, deny housing access, or evict tenants.*

HUD must be careful to monitor seemingly neutral policies and practices that could be racially and socioeconomically discriminatory. It is critical that PHA eligibility restrictions are based on legitimate concerns for safety that are communicated transparently and supported by data instead of assumptions. Roughly one-third of Americans have a criminal record, with people of color disproportionately represented.<sup>38</sup> More than 75 percent of these records, however, are from arrests and not convictions.<sup>39</sup> When PHAs have policies or practices that deny housing access to people with any kind of record, or evict current tenants because of an arrest, this can actually discriminate against minority populations.<sup>40</sup>

In 2016, HUD released a new guideline for PHAs that prohibits them from solely using a record of arrest to determine housing eligibility.<sup>41</sup> While this is an important step, histories of arrest are still used as supplemental information to determine eligibility, even though an arrest does not indicate guilt.<sup>42</sup> If the tenant has a criminal record and is arrested while residing in public housing, this can permanently disqualify the tenant from receiving public housing, even if there was no conviction. If the arrested individual is residing with family, the family can be evicted as well.<sup>43</sup>

*2. HUD should ease general eligibility requirements that restrict returning citizens from returning to their families in public housing.*

While HUD has relatively few eligibility restrictions for returning citizens on a federal level, individual PHAs can have quite extensive eligibility requirements that prevent many returning citizens from living with their families in public housing. Since the majority of returning citizens have a non-violent criminal record, less restrictive eligibility requirements from PHAs would open up additional opportunities and increase access to stable housing.<sup>44</sup>

In 2013, for example, HUD advised New York City's PHA to loosen its public housing restrictions for individuals with criminal records. Before the city started its pilot program, family members living in public housing units were unable to be reunited with their returning loved ones due to harsh stipulations that prevented the cohabitation of public housing recipients and their returning family members.<sup>45</sup> Some returning citizens that resided in public housing units before their incarceration found themselves homeless and socially isolated upon release.

The pilot program was successful, and after two years, only one of the 84 participants was convicted of a new crime.

The success of this program was not solely due to the reduced eligibility restrictions but was also linked to the cross-sector collaboration between reentry organizations and corrections officers that were part of the program. Tenants were connected to social services, counseling, and other community development programs that helped support their reintegration process.

*3. Local PHAs that deny services to particular groups on the basis of their offenses should create an alternative housing plan that addresses these populations.*

In addition to denying public housing to registered sex offenders and those involved in the production of methamphetamines, each local and state PHA has its own set of rules that can deny housing access to larger segments of the returning population.<sup>46</sup> While it is reasonable to deny public housing to individuals convicted of serious crimes for safety concerns, these individuals will still need housing upon release. HUD needs to consider alternative forms of housing assistance to improve the likelihood of successful reintegration and reduce the probability of recidivism. These alternatives could be generated in collaboration with local and national nonprofit organizations focused on specific populations of returning citizens. New Person Ministries, located in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is an example of a nonprofit that provides housing, professional development, and spiritual counseling to returning citizens convicted of serious crimes that disqualify them from receiving housing from HUD.<sup>47</sup>

*4. HUD should develop a housing assistance*

*program that specifically addresses the needs of men and women with a criminal record in cities with large populations of returning citizens and high rates of recidivism.*

Given the unique housing barriers that returning citizens face, HUD should develop a program that specifically works with returning citizens, the Bureau of Prisons, and the civil society institutions that serve them to reduce recidivism and improve the reintegration process as they transition to the private housing market. In cities with high rates of incarceration and a closed public housing waitlist, PHAs must make an intentional commitment to address the needs of returning citizens when they are most at risk of recidivating. This may require close collaboration with the Bureau of Prisons, housing market, and civil society institutions that have experience working with individuals with a record.

HUD can use its network of connections and funding to partner with relevant social services and community organizations to make sure that the needs of low-income returning citizens are met in a holistic manner. While some PHAs have implemented successful pilot programs that work specifically with returning citizens to provide them with either public housing or Housing Choice Vouchers, the breadth of the programs is generally small, and HUD has not implemented any sort of nationwide initiative to scale them.<sup>48</sup>

#### *Connecting PHAs with Civil Society for Alternative Housing Options*

The rich diversity of American communities often makes standardized reintegration procedures ineffective because they do not address the particular needs of a community.

While government fulfills a critical role in the provision of public housing, it must also recognize that civil society, comprised of institutions like faith-based and nonprofit organizations, churches, and businesses, is often best equipped to care for the particularized needs of returning citizens and their families. While public housing serves an important function, it lacks the individualized, holistic services like drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, job training and networking workshops, parenting classes, and mental health and counseling services that civil society institutions can provide.

Civil society institutions can partner with HUD to offer wraparound services to returning citizens receiving public housing. They can then provide HUD with important insight from a community perspective to strategically serve returning citizens as they transition from public housing to more permanent forms of housing, and likewise HUD can coordinate civil society efforts and offer the funding and connections to scale their services.

The foster model for public housing and reintegration is a compelling example of how civil society and public housing can work together to adapt to the rapidly changing social landscape of America. The foster model capitalizes on the assets of the community while addressing the immediate need for housing that returning citizens have. Within this model, parole and probation offices contract with homeowners in a community to sublet their living space to returning citizens as they are released from incarceration. This would function as public housing provided by individual households sponsored and supervised by HUD and the Bureau of Prisons.

In the same way that United States orphan-care evolved from massive group-home orphanages to the family-based foster care system, halfway houses and reentry services would move away from group homes with supervising correctional officers toward family-based housing arrangements to give returning citizens the strong sense of community, stability, and relationship necessary to reintegrate.<sup>49</sup> Parole officers would take on the role of a case worker to supervise the returning citizens and ensure that homeowners have the necessary training and supports. Qualified homeowners would receive funds from the facilitating program for hosting a returning citizen and would work closely with the probation officer.

Aspects of the foster model have been implemented in the Norwegian prison system and are being tested in several cities throughout the United States, including in Chester County, Pennsylvania.<sup>50</sup> In cities like Philadelphia, where the public housing waitlist is closed, HUD has begun implementing alternative housing strategies to house low-income tenants through scattered-site programs and Alternatively Managed Entities (AMEs).<sup>51</sup> The foster model could offer a promising solution to the problem of affordable and supportive housing access for returning citizens.

Of course, adopting this innovative model comes with the risk that returning citizens will reoffend while staying with a host. However, Prison Governor Tom Eberhardt, who oversees the Bastoy Norwegian prison's community-based prison model, said the model has been extraordinarily successful in Norway, which now has the lowest rate of recidivism in the world. "There were instances where prisoners committed crime while on home leave, but so few of them," Eberhardt said. "You can't construct

a whole justice system around one or two exceptions."<sup>52</sup>

### *The Role of Landlords in Reentry*

Landlords have a unique opportunity to promote the healthy reintegration of returning citizens simply by renting to them. Public housing is not designed to provide permanent housing for returning citizens; however, people with a record seeking to transition from subsidized housing to housing in the private sector often struggle to find a landlord who will rent to them.<sup>53</sup> The Federal Fair Housing Act prevents landlords from denying housing to all applicants with any kind of criminal record because it disproportionately affects racial minorities.<sup>54</sup> However, landlords can still ask applicants about their criminal record and deny eligibility because of their specific record.

While the Federal Fair Housing Act is an important step in the right direction, many landlords are still hesitant to rent to people with a record.<sup>55</sup> Landlords need training and education to better understand the importance of housing for returning citizens and their communities. In Philadelphia, HUD has partnered with landlords throughout the city to encourage and provide support for those willing to rent to returning citizens and their families. Though many landlords want to minimize their risk by renting to tenants with a clean record, many offenses do not relate to housing, and returning citizens who have had a clean record for seven years are only slightly more likely to commit a new crime than those who do not have a criminal record.<sup>56</sup> By providing fair access to housing, landlords can promote the well-being of the returning citizens and the community.

### *The Role of the Church in Reentry*

The Church has a unique calling to serve the vulnerable. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, Christians are called to serve the poor, the oppressed, and the incarcerated. Many churches have robust programs that travel to local prisons to share the gospel, however, once an incarcerated person comes home to a community, there are often few resources made available to them by the local church. The work of reconciliation and redemption are core to the Christian faith, and the Church has a responsibility to minister to returning citizens and their families.

Dominique Gilliard, Director of Racial Righteousness and Reconciliation for the Love Mercy Do Justice initiative of the Evangelical Covenant Church, proposed in his book, *Rethinking Incarceration*, that prison reform must happen first within the community. When asked what the Church or a nonprofit could do to reverse mass-incarceration, he said “proximity — we have to become proximate to suffering.”<sup>57</sup>

Jon Kelly, who was formerly incarcerated and is now the lead pastor at Chicago West Bible Church, is a compelling example of how church communities can be a transformative power for returning citizens. Kelly’s church takes a four-step approach that encourages its congregation members to get to know returning citizens in their community, including identifying where the closest prisons are located, how many returning citizens come home annually, how old they are, what their needs are, and which churches already provide them with resources and welcome them into their community. Kelly makes it clear that Chicago West Bible Church is decidedly not another social service agency; it is a ministry of transformation

that addresses whole persons and whole communities. With this understanding, congregation members are to invest deeply into the lives of a few returning citizens by sharing meals together, assisting in finding employment, providing housing with a spare bedroom, or providing child care.

Rev. Dr. Harold Dean Trulear, Founder and National Director of Healing Communities USA, echoed Kelly’s sentiments.

“We don’t want churches to start new nonprofits; we want them to create a culture that celebrates people when they come home,” Trulear said.

Healing Communities, a faith-based organization with chapters throughout the country, equips churches with resources, training, and technical assistance to serve as “Stations of Hope” for individuals and families in their congregation impacted by incarceration.

This process is humanizing for the returning citizen and provides the community with an intimate opportunity for reconciliation. In some churches, connecting with returning citizens is part of a formalized ministry, but in many cases, extending hospitality to returning citizens is an informal expectation practiced by congregation members.

Given the diversity of our communities and the complex challenges that returning citizens face, solutions to housing for returning citizens must be especially innovative. Solutions must be community-based as civil society and government learn to respond to the particular strengths and needs of a community. Strategic partnerships between government, local churches, faith-based organizations, nonprofit organizations, and businesses can contribute to restoring dignity

to returning citizens, reducing recidivism, and creating healthier communities.

## ENGAGE

**R**ev. Dr. Chris Kimmenez has lived and worked in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for over 25 years. He is the senior pastor at Recovery Christian Center and is an advocate for criminal justice reform.

“I pastor a church, I’m working on my second doctorate, I’m a licensed psychologist...and my house can’t be in my name,” he said.

Kimmenez spent time in prison over 25 years ago and has a criminal record which makes qualifying for a home mortgage with reasonable interest rates exceptionally difficult.

“Even though I had a better credit rating than my wife, the bank wanted the loan to be three points above prime,” Kimmenez said. “So the mortgage had to be in her name, not because of credit, but because of my criminal record.”

Even with his accomplishments, connections, education, and clean record since release, Kimmenez still experiences challenges in the housing market. Despite research showing that returning citizens who have been without a new criminal conviction for seven years are only slightly more likely to reoffend than someone without a record, returning citizens in Philadelphia continue to face barriers to stable housing.<sup>58</sup>

“For renting, if it’s your criminal history on the application, you probably won’t be considered,” Kimmenez said. “Or, you’ll be renting in poor neighborhoods, and that can have impacts on your probation because your

parole officer tells you where you have to live, and maybe the only available neighborhoods with landlords who will rent to you are somewhere that your parole officer doesn’t let you live.”

Kimmenez’s story sheds light on the often impossible renting situations that returning citizens face because of their criminal records.

“When it comes to housing, you’re paying for your crime for the rest of your life,” Kimmenez said.

### *Housing and Poverty in Philadelphia*

The city of Philadelphia, with its history and culture dating back to before the Revolutionary War, is home to 1.6 million residents. Today, the state of Pennsylvania has the eighth largest incarcerated population in the country,<sup>59</sup> and about 25,000 Philadelphians are released from jail and prison each year.<sup>60</sup> Philadelphia has twice the national average rate of poverty with over a quarter of the city’s population living below the poverty line, making it the poorest large city in the United States.<sup>61</sup> The Philadelphia Housing Authority, which oversees housing for low-income residents, runs the fourth largest program in the United States. The Philadelphia Housing Authority owns 14,000 affordable housing units and serves 80,000 Philadelphia residents.<sup>62</sup>

Philadelphia’s high poverty rate coupled with an incarcerated population that is 23 percent higher than the national average creates a huge demand for housing assistance that the PHA struggles to meet.<sup>63</sup> The public housing waitlist for eligible applicants in need of housing assistance has been closed since April of 2013. With over 104,000 applicants, the Philadelphia PHA has notified those on

the waitlist that it may be as long as 13 years before their applications can be processed.<sup>64</sup>

In an attempt to be more equitable to all applicants, the Philadelphia PHA now uses a centralized application process which estimates the vulnerability of each public housing applicant with a number and then assigns them to a spot on the waitlist accordingly.<sup>65</sup> This approach is an attempt to prioritize the most vulnerable members of society while ensuring that applicants do not have access to expedited processing because of their social connections. Unfortunately, adjusting to the new centralized system has slowed down the application approval process in Philadelphia and the PHA has not published any information about the date it anticipates reopening the public housing waitlist.

Since applicants have been unable to apply for public housing for more than five years, the local PHA has resorted to alternative forms of housing assistance. This process has opened up some unique and innovative housing opportunities that were previously unavailable for low-income residents.

Alternatively Managed Entities (AME) are one of the primary alternative forms of public housing that has been offered by HUD in Philadelphia since the public housing waitlist was closed.<sup>66</sup> AMEs are privately owned and managed public housing units that are contractually partnered with the Philadelphia PHA to offer housing to low-income tenants. Every AME development has its own waitlist but operates under virtually the same guidelines and restrictions as does PHA-public housing, making it a key resource for low-income individuals and families since 2013. Given the significant drawbacks of the current public housing options in Philadelphia, including insufficient

housing units and long waitlists, alternative housing options could provide hope for many returning citizens in need of housing. However, because of the great demand for housing assistance, even the waitlists for AMEs range from seven to 10 years.

#### *Public Housing for Returning Citizens in Philadelphia*

Beyond the few federal restrictions that disqualify people with a record from accessing subsidized housing, the Public Housing Authority of Philadelphia has six pages of additional restrictions that further prevent returning citizens from qualifying for housing units.<sup>67</sup> There are 37 different kinds of offenses that disqualify returning citizens from accessing housing, ranging from homicide and fraud to forgery and disorderly conduct.<sup>68</sup> Each offense prohibits returning citizens from accessing subsidized housing for a period of time ranging anywhere from three years to 20 years to a lifetime ban, depending on the kind of offense.<sup>69</sup> If a member of a family residing in public housing has been convicted of any of the listed offenses, the individual must be removed from the household or the entire family will be evicted. These restrictions make housing assistance inaccessible for many low-income returning citizens and their family members who are seeking a home.

In recent years, Pennsylvania has taken steps to improve returning citizens' access to housing and employment by allowing non-violent misdemeanor records to be expunged after 10 years.<sup>70</sup> While this is an important step toward improving reentry systems, it does not address the public housing crisis for returning citizens in Philadelphia. With a closed waitlist for public housing and a long waitlist for AMEs, low-income individuals and families without a criminal record are

struggling to obtain affordable housing. For returning citizens, a criminal record is an additional barrier to housing that makes it next to impossible to secure public housing.

While there are policy adjustments that HUD can implement on a federal level to expand public housing access for returning citizens, the housing predicament in Philadelphia is particularly challenging. Even if the restrictions set by the Philadelphia PHA are eased to remove some of the barriers keeping returning citizens from qualifying for public housing, the closed waitlist would still prevent returning citizens from accessing housing assistance.<sup>71</sup>

Over the past few years, Nia Kaudo, Capacity Building Coordinator at the Philadelphia Reentry Coalition, has been collecting information on public housing and alternative housing options to help returning citizens navigate the housing application process.

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## **There is a need in Philadelphia for creative, alternative housing solutions developed and run in collaboration with civil society.**

“[Housing] gaps really have to do with availability. In Philadelphia particularly, public housing is really difficult to be admitted to,” Kaudo said. “We’ve had to direct people to PHA, but it’s not really an available resource.”

Since the Philadelphia PHA is already one of the largest housing assistance programs in the nation, and the need for housing assistance caused by the rate of poverty is

so high, simply increasing PHA’s funding may not be feasible. There is a need in Philadelphia for creative, alternative housing solutions developed and run in collaboration with civil society that extend beyond the current assortment of AMEs.

In 2017, the Philadelphia Housing Authority board, as well as 11 other housing authorities from other cities, began a pilot program for low-income returning citizens called the Second Chance Initiative which provides Second Chance Housing Choice Vouchers to 10 returning citizens who can use these vouchers to pay for housing in the private housing market for two consecutive years.<sup>72</sup> Voucher recipients must meet standard eligibility requirements and cannot have been convicted of one of the 37 kinds of disqualifying offenses set by the Philadelphia Housing Authority.<sup>73</sup> In addition, they must be employed and be participants in good standing with both the Federal Supervision to Aid Reentry (STAR) program and the Mayor’s Office of Re-Integration Services (RISE) program. The RISE program works in Philadelphia to coordinate reintegration services to support returning citizens and their families. Returning citizens work closely with social workers from STAR who meet biweekly to provide counseling, encouragement, and monitoring during the probation or parole period. The STAR program works with the Federal Probation and Parole Office, giving returning citizens access to helpful social resources like job training and counseling and the opportunity to reduce their parole period by one year if they participate in the program.<sup>74</sup>

The Second Chance Housing Choice Voucher has proven to be successful for the 10 individuals who were able to access it, and the Philadelphia Housing Authority has a goal of enrolling 10 more returning citizens in

the program in the next year. In an interview with Nichole Tillman, spokeswoman for the Philadelphia Housing Authority, Tillman said that stable housing, in conjunction with supportive social services and a close partnership with parole and probation officers, has been essential to the program's success.

The program is an innovative step towards reintegrating returning citizens back into Philadelphia. However, the scope of the program is very limited, and the plans for expanding the program will ultimately serve a mere 20 of the 25,000 men and women who are returning to Philadelphia each year.<sup>75</sup> Although the Second Chance Initiative is small, it shows the potential that government and civil society have to reduce recidivism and promote the flourishing of returning citizens.<sup>76</sup>

### *The Diverse Tapestry of Civil Society*

Philadelphia is home to a robust network of civil society institutions that are also working to respond holistically to the needs of returning citizens.

The Philadelphia Reentry Coalition (PRC) was established in 2015 to improve collaboration, facilitate communication, and build capacity among the many different civil society institutions in Philadelphia that serve returning citizens. PRC partners with 110 organizations and hosts workshops to help coordinate and maximize their efforts. In 2015, they released a five-year strategic plan entitled "Home for Good" which was designed to reduce recidivism in Philadelphia by 25 percent by the end of 2020.<sup>77</sup> PRC recognizes that this goal is ambitious, which is why it is working collaboratively with local businesses, nonprofit organizations, local government, HUD, halfway houses, the

BOP, and other social service organizations. PRC has produced the first comprehensive resource in Philadelphia that consolidates information from different housing options and social services for returning citizens into one accessible document.

"Home for Good" employs a five-step strategic process that begins with connection to community stakeholders to leverage the partnerships for the collective good of all participants in the coalition. The strategic plan stresses the importance of community engagement with government and educating and empowering civil society institutions to better serve returning citizens. Because "the Coalition cannot make change in a vacuum," multi-sectoral efforts are needed from organizations that work specifically with returning citizens as well as organizations and companies that are not specifically tailored to serve that population.<sup>78</sup>

PRC prepares informational resources to help returning citizens navigate their different housing options and gives annual awards to celebrate successful returning citizens and the organizations that have served them.<sup>79</sup> This work to improve information accessibility increases the reach of small organizations that would not otherwise have the funding or publicity channels.

Redemption Housing, Inc. is an example of an innovative, faith-based organization that is beginning to address this housing gap for returning citizens in Philadelphia. Redemption Housing was founded by Dr. Lori Banfield and Nick Lordi in 2015 to be "a spiritual community seeking to address the cycle of recidivism through holistic programming and healthy relationships, bringing God's healing and restoration to those affected by incarceration." Their Locust House, located in the heart of Philadelphia,

is designed to be a permanent home for returning citizens after they have been released for a few years. While Redemption Housing provides housing for men who have been incarcerated in the past five years, it is distinct from halfway housing. Banfield described it as “more like a village than an apartment building. At least, that’s the vision we’re trying to create.” The housing units are funded by local partnering churches to subsidize the rent for low-income returning citizens who must have a job and participate in a reentry program to qualify for housing.

“Our values are Christian values,” Banfield said. “We believe in walking with ‘the least of these’ as Jesus did with us. The modern day ‘least of these’ — the modern-day leper, is those coming out of prison.”

The Locust House is small, serving only a few returning citizens for the past couple of years. Banfield says Redemption Housing is intentionally “taking things slow because we don’t want to risk becoming so much about the properties that we forget about the people.” Instead of providing case management for hundreds of returning citizens, Redemption Housing is committed to personally mentoring the few tenants they have to make sure the model is sustainable. They hope to expand and open the Barnabas House to provide housing and programming to returning citizens as soon as they are released from incarceration but are still waiting for additional resources and personnel.

Banfield stressed the importance of housing and the great need for more organizations committed to serving returning citizens. Before finishing her interview, Banfield prayed for this research, thankful to hear one more voice added to the conversation around reentry systems in Philadelphia. Redemption

Housing is one example of the many inspiring civil society organizations that are serving returning citizens in Philadelphia in a personalized and holistic fashion. However, the scope of their reach as an institution is limited, and without financial support from HUD or the Bureau of Prisons, growth comes slowly.

Another aspect of reentry that is at the heart of both recidivism and public housing is economic stability. While reentry programs and subsidized housing can meet some of the immediate needs of returning citizens, a job provides the financial stability needed to obtain long term housing. Meaningful employment can serve us much more than a source of income.

Tess Hart, co-founder of Triple Bottom Line Brewery, believes that employment can be an agent of transformation in the lives of the employees and the communities that benefit from their services. Her brewery, which opened in June 2019, is designed to provide meaningful employment to employees, including returning citizens, who typically face employment barriers, while changing the public perception of these populations.

“When people begin to see these people tell their stories and succeed in life, they will start to view them differently,” Hart said.

Changing the public perception of returning citizens is absolutely essential for communal reintegration and reconciliation, and Hart believes her brewery will give communities and returning citizens the opportunity to view each other in a different light.

Hart said she has always known that she wanted to contribute to something bigger than herself. She recalls that serving communities was part of her family

upbringing and an expectation that was passed on from her parents. Hart has spent time making connections with local neighbors, schools, and social service organizations, including Redemption Housing and the Philadelphia Reentry Coalition. Triple Bottom Line Brewery, alongside dozens of other social enterprises in Philadelphia, is trying something new, knowing that the pursuit of social transformation is well worth the risk.

### *The Role of the Sacred Sector in Philadelphia*

Houses of worship and faith-based organizations are essential to redefining what flourishing means for a people group that has often been underserved and forgotten. Rev. Dr. Harold Dean Trulear, Founder and National Director of Healing Communities USA, is one of those people who is advocating for returning citizens and redefining what it means to successfully reintegrate.

“While not going back to jail or prison is good, it is a low expectation. The real issue is how well you are doing when you get home. How’s your attitude? Are you making progress connecting or reconnecting with your kids? Are you building healthy relationships instead of playing people? How are you doing on your career plans? Education? And who is there helping you, supporting you, encouraging you in the process of becoming productive? Those are high goals to shoot for. Staying out is not enough. It’s a minimal goal. It’s a low expectation,” said Trulear.<sup>80</sup>

Healing Communities is redefining what it means to set a “high bar” for the quality of life that returning citizens and their families can have. Founded in Philadelphia, Healing Communities trains and supports houses of worship all across the country to be Stations

of Hope for the returning citizens in their congregations and communities. Their mission is simple: “building relationships of healing, redemption and reconciliation in families and communities impacted by crime and mass incarceration.”<sup>81</sup>

Healing Communities does this through its Station of Hope chapters in various houses of worship that provide those affected by incarceration with spiritual guidance, an affirming community, and by connecting them with social services and resources like housing and employment whenever possible. In each city, one of the Stations of Hope oversees the other Stations of Hope and works to promote collaboration between the houses of worship to maximize their collective social impact.<sup>82</sup>

While many churches already have prison ministries that reach out to people who are incarcerated, Healing Communities emphasizes the importance of walking with those affected by incarceration who are already in the particular congregation or community.

“Rather than having churches minister to jails in other congregates, we encourage people to start with their [own] people,” Pastor Denise Strothers, Healing Communities coordinator for the Washington, D.C. Chapter, said. “Most pastors are shocked to find out that they have people sitting there [in church] and never knew that their member was in jail.”

Once returning citizens are known, churches are encouraged to support their members in whatever ways they can. While they do not practice an official foster model, Stations of Hope often operate informally as congregation members are mobilized to support returning citizens by donating materials to their families, employing a

returning citizen, and even offering housing.

“If someone is coming out [of prison] and needs somewhere to live, we can check with the congregation to see if someone is willing to offer a room or someone knows someone who can connect them,” Strothers said. “It’s unofficial, but whatever is needed, they give.”

This informal system that each Station of Hope employs allows congregations to respond quickly to the particular needs of returning citizens that are not being met by formal services.

### *The Future of Community and Reentry*

No civil society institution alone has the breadth, funding, and ability to scale that government does; likewise government alone is not equipped to meet the complex, personal, and holistic needs of this population. Therefore, it is important for both government and civil society institutions to seek out opportunities for partnership. Because Philadelphia’s public housing program is currently unable to respond to the needs of returning citizens in the city, HUD can work creatively and collaboratively to provide programming that specifically addresses the housing needs of returning citizens. This may require HUD to establish a new program or expand its current Second Chance Initiative in Philadelphia, informed by best practices in civil society institutions, to address the unique housing challenges faced by returning citizens and their families.

Organizations like Healing Communities and the Philadelphia Reentry Coalition are making significant strides in reframing the conversation surrounding returning citizens in Philadelphia. However, while each civil society institution has added an important service to the reentry landscape in

Philadelphia, their reach is limited. Returning citizens are often invisible populations to social services and faith communities alike; and civil society institutions that do recognize this critical population are often lacking the resources needed to provide support in all of the complex ways that returning citizens need.

Philadelphia must take seriously the challenges that returning citizens are facing and pursue just solutions as a community. Citizens, government, and civil society have a shared opportunity and responsibility to promote the reintegration, reconciliation, and revitalization of communities to ensure that, upon release, every returning citizen can truly *come home*.

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## THE HIDDEN EPIDEMIC OF TEEN FOOD INSECURITY

**Ana O'Quin** is a senior social work major with a poverty and social justice minor at Baylor University. She completed her research for The Hatfield Prize during her junior year. O'Quin loves being invested in the Waco community through mentoring in Young Life, volunteering with an anti-trafficking organization, and working at a local coffee shop. She grew up overseas in Indonesia and loves to jump on a plane and travel at every chance that she gets.

**Dr. Stephanie Clintonia Boddie** joined the Baylor University faculty in 2017 as an assistant professor of Church and Community Ministries with affiliations at the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, the George W. Truett Theological Seminary, and the School of Education. Boddie is also a non-resident senior fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society and an alumni fellow at the Robert A. Fox Leadership Program. She is a faculty associate at Pitt-Assisted Communities and Schools at University of Pittsburgh and the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis as well, as a co-convener of the Transatlantic Roundtable on Religion and Race.

## AN INVISIBLE CRISIS: FOOD INSECURITY ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

**Shannon Que** graduated from Abilene Christian University (ACU) in 2019 with a degree in social work and minors in Bible, missions, and ministry, global studies, and public administration. She completed her research for The Hatfield Prize during her senior year, and is now pursuing a Master's of Social Work at Abilene Christian University. As an undergraduate, Que served as the president of ACU's Social Work Student Association, was a Jack Pope Fellow, and was a member of the Student Panel of Undergraduate Research.

**Dr. Stephen Baldrige** received his bachelor's in social work from Lubbock Christian University, and his Master's and Ph.D. in social work from the University of Texas at Arlington. The majority of his practice career was spent in public schools working in special education and behavior modification. Since joining the faculty at Abilene Christian University in 2009, his research has focused on childhood behavior, teaching pedagogy, nutrition and food justice, and homelessness. He currently serves as the BSSW Program Director and the Assistant Dean of the College of Education and Human Services at ACU.

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**Abigail Stevens** graduated from Eastern University with a degree in economic development in 2019. She completed her research for The Hatfield Prize during her senior year. As an undergraduate, Stevens' served as the student president of the Templeton Honors College and was a research assistant for a book on interfaith friendship between Christians and Muslims. She grew up in Bend, Oregon, and her passion for social and economic justice has brought her to some unique communities that have greatly shaped her education. During her time at Eastern, Abigail became fluent in Spanish and lived and worked in three different states and four different countries. Most memorably, she worked as the executive assistant for A Breeze of Hope Foundation in Bolivia, served as a missionary for six months in South America, and lived with a family in South Philadelphia.

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# ENDNOTES

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By Ana O'Quin & Dr. Stephanie Clintonia Boddie

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# COMING HOME: A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO HOUSING FOR RETURNING CITIZENS

By Abigail Stevens & Dr. Christa Lee-Chuvala

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