



7-24-2013

# Milking the System: Do Poor People Deserve Fresh Food?

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Meisenheimer, Melanie M., "Milking the System: Do Poor People Deserve Fresh Food?" (2013). *SURGE*. 101.  
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# Milking the System: Do Poor People Deserve Fresh Food?

## **Abstract**

*Poor Americans are all lazy, selfish people who must first prove their worth as human beings if they want to be able to feed their children.*

It sounds harsh, stereotypical, and judgmental when you put it like that, and few people would feel comfortable saying that exact phrase. However, it's a perception of poverty in America that I've found still has a strong grip on our way of thinking. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, poverty, food, food policy, food gap, food insecurity, food stamps, welfare

## **Disciplines**

Civic and Community Engagement | Community-Based Research | Food Science | Inequality and Stratification | Politics and Social Change | Public Economics | Service Learning | Social Policy | Social Welfare | Social Work

## **Comments**

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I will assume that he does not know that nearly half of all [Americans who rely on SNAP benefits](#) (from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; the current version of what many people know as 'food stamps') are under the age of 18 and that 76 percent of all households receiving SNAP benefits include a child, an elderly person, or a disabled person. I will assume that he does not know that SNAP benefits provide a family of four making \$1,150 a month (approximately the federal minimum wage) with a whopping \$2.69 per person per day and that he has never tried to feed himself a well-rounded diet that costs only [\\$0.90 per meal](#). Furthermore, I will assume that he does not know that 'the hungry' in America don't just sit on their couches all day feeling hungry. He must not know that 41 percent of households receiving SNAP benefits are partially or fully employed.

These must be the reasons why he expects children, the elderly, disabled people, and working parents to go pick their own food and stop being so entitled.

He also must be unaware that [45 percent of Americans who are food insecure don't even qualify for SNAP benefits](#). They are hungry but not hungry enough, according to government guidelines. They are working hard to provide for their families, but are unable to make ends meet. They fall into what we often call [the 'food gap'](#).

It's obvious that America has a problem, but it's neither laziness nor entitlement. Chalking up the struggles of poor and hungry Americans to inherent laziness and a sense of entitlement is a worn-out crutch that we have been using for centuries. Once we throw the crutch away, however, it's hard to make the case that wanting to provide a nutritious diet (including fruits and vegetables) for your family is the result of a sense of entitlement run amok. If we allow ourselves to become a country that considers fruits and vegetables to be a luxury that one has to earn access to, the current obesity, heart disease, and diabetes epidemics that are disproportionately impacting poor Americans will only get worse and worse.

Instead of asking why poor and hungry Americans aren't doing more to earn what little help they do receive, why don't we ask how so many people can go hungry in a country as wealthy as the United States? How can it be that someone can work full-time in America – the Land of Opportunity – and yet still go hungry? Why do we allow corporations to pay their workers wages so low that we know they will have to rely on government benefits in order to survive? Instead of getting angry at poor Americans for receiving benefits, why don't we get angry at the structural inequalities that make it necessary for them to receive benefits? [McDonalds can't even figure out how its employees survive on minimum wage](#), yet it's acceptable to stereotype these very same hard-working individuals as lazy and entitled for accepting help from groups like The Gleaning Project.

We can do better. We can start looking at why people are hungry instead of judging for them for being hungry. It's still considered a radical idea (sadly, in my opinion) but we can consider making corporations like McDonalds or Walmart pay their workers a livable wage so we no longer need to pay out so much money in SNAP benefits, thereby [subsidizing corporate profit margins with taxpayer dollars](#). Hunger and other problems related to the food system are complex and multi-faceted, but until we move our discussion about food insecurity away from shallow stereotypes and toward thoughtful analysis, nothing is going to change. We can keep judging and verbally degrading hungry families, but they are not going to simply disappear within the current economic structure. While we wait for the discussion about food insecurity to be elevated from the muck of stereotypes and prejudices, food pantries and The Gleaning Project will continue to scramble to fill the need, but I sincerely hope that one day neither will be necessary.

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