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Worst Time Being Poor? The Hunger Problem in U.S. During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Worst Time Being Poor? The Hunger Problem in U.S. During COVID-19 Pandemic

School of Professional Studies, Clark University:

MPA 3999: Capstone Project

By

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ABSTRACT

Food insecurity is deeply rooted in American society during and before the COVID-19 pandemic. Food Insecurity usually associates with economic indicators, such as unemployment rate, income level, etc. Currently, there are two main tools to fight the war of hunger. The first one is the government food assistance programs. And the second one is food pantries from the private sectors of the community. Both tools are facing numerous challenges due to COVID-19. The purpose of this article is to provide rational reasons to persuade the government to enhance the benefits of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and use administrative tools to help the local food pantries. The previous study suggested increasing SNAP benefits would indirectly reinforce the economy because it stimulates business transactions and creates more job opportunities. The SNAP has strict eligibility criteria relatively, especially after Trump Administration announced they would continuously cut the funds. In this case, local food pantries would complement the SNAP because it offers food for whoever came to their doors. During the pandemic, the government is facing climbing food insecurity over the county. Then strengthen the SNAP program and enhancing the food pantry system would contribute to the mitigation of the hunger problem.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Food Insecurity in the U.S.

Despite being the wealthiest country in the world, in 2019, for every thousand citizens who lived in the United States, approximately 111 people experienced food insecurity (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019). A household is defined as "food insecure" if they had difficulty providing food for every family member. Food security impacts seniors, adults, and especially children. In 2018, 13.9% of all households with children in the United States were food insecure (USDA, 2019). Both nationally and locally, food insecurity, which is associated with numerous adverse health effects, including obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular risk factors (Seligman, Laraia & Kushel, 2010) disproportionately affects minorities, specifically Latino/Hispanic households and Black/African American households (Fuller-Thompson & Redmond, 2008). Additionally, recent immigrants—who cannot receive government food assistance benefits—are at an increased risk of experiencing food insecurity (Jongsung & Tebaldi, 2011).

At the local level, COVID-19 and its corresponding economic impact have compounded problems that households face in obtaining adequate and healthy food. For example, food insecurity was a significant problem that impacted local communities in Worcester even prior to the pandemic, especially in areas that are both low-income and racially diverse. COVID-19 and its economic fallout has increased the number of needy food households, exacerbated existing barriers, and created new barriers to accessing food assistance. One community informant at a local food pantry—South Worcester

Neighborhood Center—noted that the number of families the pantry serves weekly had more than tripled in the early of 2020, from 500 to 1600.

1.2 Food Assistance Programs in the U.S.

The first food assistance program in America was the Food Stamp Program of 1939 and the pilot programs of the early 1960s. The plans were aiming to relocate the food surpluses with the existing needs of the poor during the Great Depression. "With the program, people could purchase orange stamps for \$1 each, up to an amount approximately equal to their normal monthly food expenditure. For every orange stamp they purchased, they received a blue stamp worth 50 cents. The orange stamps could be used to buy any food, while the blue stamps were for foods, USDA deemed surplus" (Caswell and Yaktine, 2013). Later on, after John F. Kennedy was elected, he fulfilled his promise of expanding the food distribution programs (Executive order 10914, 1961). Those pilot programs continue to grow during the presidency of Lyndon Johnson. He substituted food coupons with blue and orange stamps. However, at this time, people still expected to pay for the coupons (Caswell and Yaktine, 2013).

After a series of legislative changes to the food assistance programs, the modern version endowed states the control on the eligibility of the program because of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act. The Act also limited eligibility for legal noncitizen residents, non-disabled adults without dependents (*Background material and data on the programs within the jurisdiction of the Committee on ways and means*, 2004). Nowadays, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known as the former Food Stamp, provided food assistance to over 46 million Americans at the cost of more than \$75 billion in the Fiscal Year 2012 (Mabli, Ohls, Dragoset, Castner, and Santos, 2013).

From history, SNAP, along with other food assistance programs, is the most remarkable tool in the "War of Hunger." People with food security are categorized as "a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preference for an active and healthy life" (Barrett, 2010). This social welfare is saving people from starving. The number of recipients consistently dropped from a peak of 47 million people in F.Y. 2013 to the bottom 36 million people in F.Y. 2019 (Picchi, 2020). The falling number of SNAP recipients is likely due partially to the improvement of the national economy (Keith-Jennings & Rosenbaum, 2019). Logically, When the economy is booming, the average income is also likely to increase. People have more money for food, and they are able to find a job easily since every business is expanding.

After the outbreak of COVID-19 in late March 2020, 6.6 million workers file for unemployment (Al Jazeera, 2020). The unemployment rate is directly associated with the income of a household. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing policy and Stay-at-home order ceased the majority of job opportunities. People who just lost their job hardly find another job successfully. A journalist from CBS wrote:

"Payrolls fell by 20.5 million last month, leaving 23 million unemployed, the Labor Department said Friday. Another 6.6 million Americans left the workforce altogether, meaning they were neither employed nor looking for work. The nation's unemployment rate more than tripled, soaring to 14.7% from 4.4% in March — the highest since the Great Depression (Ivanova, 2020)."

Under the circumstances, the Trump administration still wants to cut food assistance programs. When they were initially pushing forward the new policy that curbs

access to food assistance programs, a judge blocked the rule and "Noting that food benefits are critical given that a global pandemic poses widespread health risk" (Picchi, 2020). More specifically, the Trump administration wanted to cut out benefits for non-disabled adults who do not have dependents (Schnell and Hughes, 2019). The alteration of the food assistance program sounds dramatically familiar with the 1996 Welfare Reform Act. The only difference was the country is facing a widespread virus now, whereas the world was terrified by the Mad Cow Disease in 1996.

However, the president-elect Joe Biden has a significantly different opinion on issues related to food insecurity and poverty. Biden wants to boost both Social Security and Supplemental Security Income to help people who have little or no income. He also mentioned raising the U.S. Minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$15 (Lubrano, 2020).

1.3 Research Goal and Thesis

This paper will focus on supporting food assistance programs. For low-income families, food assistance programs, such as SNAP, EBT, etc., are the necessary food resources to avoid hunger. The U.S. government has plenty of food assistance programs targeting the students and people who do not have the ability to make sufficient income. During the pandemic economic shutdown, those people need the program more than ever. At this challenging time, the Trump administration proposed to cut funding for SNAP and EBT. It would result in a stricter requirement of applying for food assistance programs (Schnell and Hughes, 2019). This paper aimed to study the possible feasible solutions to hunger in the U.S. during the pandemic. Numerous previous studies have made it clear that the government should increase the funding to welfare program to help the low-income family and stimulate the economy.

The author made two significant assumptions regarding governmental decisions on dealing with food insecurity:

- The government should increase the funds to food supply programs (SNAP, EBT, etc.). It will create jobs for those who are recently unemployed due to pandemics, provide low price food or additional food resource for low-income families.
- The government should release more grant funds to the local food pantry. A previous study shows we do not have a food shortage, but we have a severe problem with the distribution of the food. Moreover, food pantries are the primary food source for those who have difficulty accessing food and does not qualified for governmental food assistance programs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Assumption one: The government should increase the funds to food supply programs.

Despite the severe impacts of COVID-19, the government should continuously increase the fund of the social welfare program. Even without the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem of food insecurity has triggered many scholars to find a solution. SNAP, the most extensive nutrition program designed for solving food insecurity, has many supporters. Some scholars argued that the SNAP program not only becoming an important food source for low-income families, it also is a positive reinforcement to the economy.

"A \$1 billion increase in SNAP spending results in a boost to the gross domestic product of \$1.5 billion and helps support more than 13,000 jobs, according to a July study from the USDA (Picchi, 2020)".

Indeed, the SNAP program stimulates the economy because it increases the purchasing of food and creates a positive economic cycle between customers and business owners. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic devastation forced more people to lean toward food insecurity. Therefore, if the government remains at the same level of funding or even cut the funds, the program couldn't afford to provide benefits for an increasing number of applicants. To better combats food insecurity during the pandemic, the government must enhance the program to increase the value of services provided, increase the number of individuals eligible for the program, and incorporate social distancing into the administration of SNAP (Swinburne, 2020). In this challenging time, people are forced to stay at home to maintain social distancing. For SNAP recipients, increasing the value of benefits would help them get more food for the family.

As mentioned before, Food insecurity can also be chronic, meaning the household is consistently food insecure, or transitory if a household is temporarily or seasonally food insecure (Jones, Ngure, Pelto, & Young 2013). And expand the program's eligibility would help more people to receive the benefits. With the high unemployment rate, the government should consider the situation of newly unemployed people as well. The enhanced SNAP program would help them buy food when they spend time looking for new jobs.

The governmental fund significantly limited the eligibility of the program. To ensure the SNAP benefits are available to those to need it, more funds means the program would have less intensive eligibility criteria. Rosenbaum, Dean, and Neuberger (2020) argued the policymakers should raise the SNAP benefits to help poor people to fight hunger during the pandemic. Additionally, the SNAP benefits are the fastest, most effective economic stimulus forms because they swiftly increase the money in the market. In this case, the previous study suggested the government should adjust the SNAP program. Firstly, they should suspend the three-month time limit on SNAP benefits receipt that adults aged 18-50 aren't employed and aren't raising minor children until the economy has recovered. Secondly, they should suspend implementing several administration regulations to take away food assistance from 4 million low-income individuals. Lastly, they should supplement state funding for SNAP administration (Rosenbaum, Dean, & Neuberger, 2020).

In another previous study, Chad Stone (2020) argued the government should utilize the fiscal tool to fight the economic recession during the pandemic. The author compared the current situation with the Great Recession. In the Great Recession,

President Obama and Congress initiated the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in February 2009. The ARRA sophisticatedly aimed to produce the economic stimulus that would generate results as quickly as possible. It included investments and spending in the fiscal plan on high "bang-for-the-buck" items. SNAP benefits were on the list. What was the result of ARRA?

Figure 1. *The ARRA's Impact on GDP between 2008 and 2012*

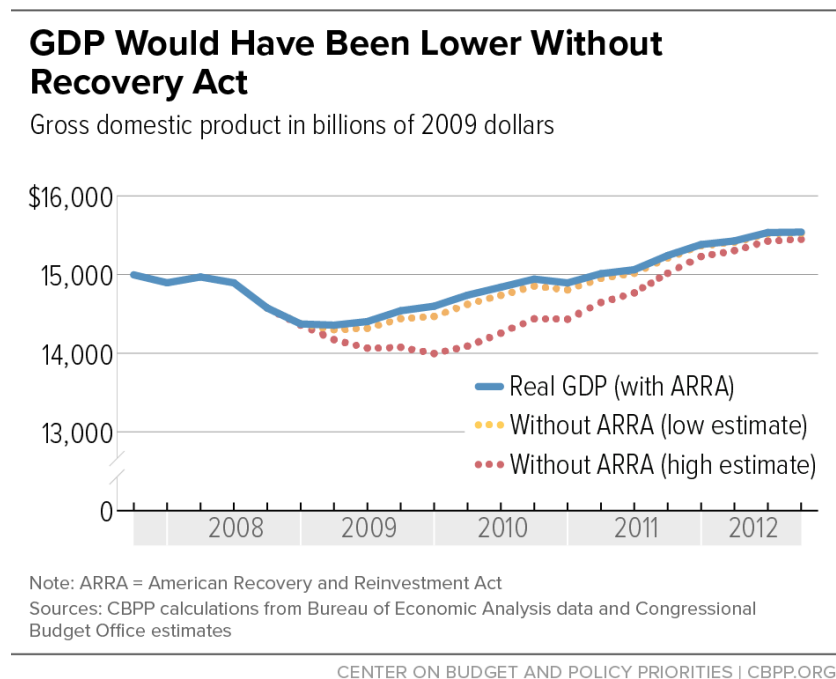
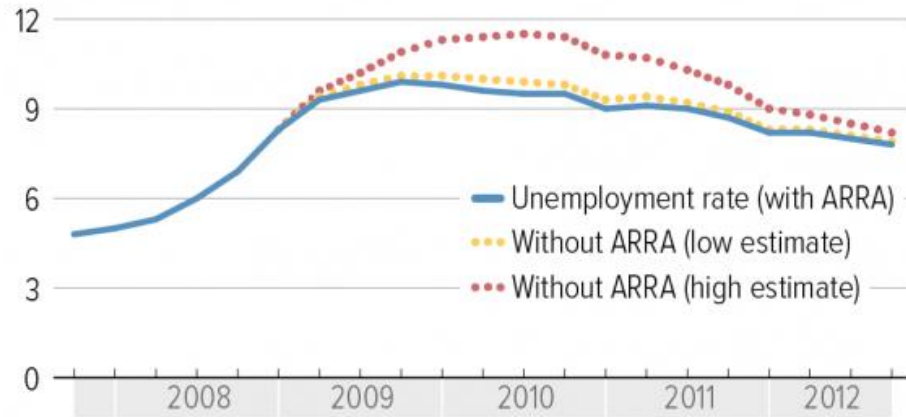


Figure 1 revealed the influence of the ARRA on GDP. The GDP level will be lower if the ARRA has never occurred. Stone (2020) also mentioned the ARRA had a great effect on the unemployment rate as well. From Figure 2 below, it was clear the unemployment rate was 0.1 to 0.4 percentage points lower than the estimate of the absence of the ARRA.

Figure 2 *The ARRA's Impact on Unemployment Rate between 2008 and 2012*

Unemployment Would Have Been Higher Without Recovery Act

Unemployment rate



Sources: CBPP calculations from Bureau of Labor Statistics data and Congressional Budget Office estimates

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To sum up, the SNAP program is a critical food resource for people with low income or no income during the pandemic when the unemployment rate is climbing. It is also a significant and fast-rewarding economic stimulus to help economic recovery. Therefore, the government should increase the funding to the SNAP and other similar programs to enhance the benefits and maximize the positive results.

2.2 Assumption Two: The government should release more grant funds to the local food pantry.

Food pantries are other tools to combat food insecurity from the private sectors of the community. It became a vital source of assistance against food insecurity in the 1980s when the Reagan Administration slashed funding to social services and established new entry barriers for public food assistance programs (Daponte and Bade 2006). Food pantries, which were initially intended to be only for temporary emergency usage, have become an important way for food-insecure households to meet their basic nutritional

needs. Food pantries provide vital services for food-insecure households, and the financial value of food banks can surpass \$2,000 per year for a family. Despite the importance of food pantries to food-insecure households, pantries are underutilized. The majority of households experiencing food insecurity did not use food pantries—one nationwide study from 2006 stated that only 21% of food-insecure households used a food pantry (Nord, Andrews & Carlson, 2006). Moreover, households with low food security were more likely to ask for help from friends or family rather than utilize a pantry (Nord, Andrews & Carlson, 2006). Despite their obvious financial benefits to households and individuals, food pantries are underutilized by those experiencing food insecurity.

For the SNAP and other governmental programs, some people are not eligible regardless of how small their income status and realistic situation. For example, many college students, some immigrants with lawful immigration status, and immigrants with undocumented status are ineligible for such programs. It is because the government programs aimed to provide benefits for the citizens who are qualified. The administration of the programs will conduct a series of investigations on the applicants' conditions, which often have complicated paperwork and eligibility requirements that limit usage. Even with the increased funding to the programs, the eligibility criteria cannot cover the whole community.

On the other hand, the food pantry does not have strict eligibility criteria. Some of the food pantries only ask for photo identification to file the document of users. In this case, food pantries have higher accessibility comparing with SNAP. Even though food

pantries provide food to the local community, there are two types of barriers to accessing food assistance:

Concrete Barriers. This type of barrier encapsulates strains like blocked information of food pantries, lack of transportation, and inconvenient hours. Information barriers, meaning the potential user of food pantry has a lack of knowledge about the local food pantries, is one of the biggest challenges that prevent people with food insecurity from accessing the food pantry. In one previous quantitative study, among 216 low-income individuals who need food in eastern Alabama, 67% of non-users stated that they were not aware of the local food bank (Duffy et al., 2002). Another previous study in the Kensington neighborhood in Philadelphia indicated the majority of the interviewees (N=20) were not aware of the local food pantries (Kissane, 2003). In both studies, information about the food pantries primarily transfers between friends and community members.

In general, food pantries collect food from food banks and other donations. They have to pack the food into boxes and wait for people to come to pick it up. The process takes time, and the majority of food is not easy to conserve. Food pantries usually have fixed open hours each week. In a previous study of food pantries in New York City, more than 50 percent of food pantries identified by researchers were available less than 3 hours a week. Researchers also found discrepancies in the published times given by food pantries and the actual operation hours in 55 percent of cases (Gordon, Kaestner, Korenman, & Abner., 2012). Besides, food pantries are usually located in rural areas since they need a large space to store food. Then, transportation is another obstacle for

people who don't have a vehicle. They might have to carry the box and walk to their homes. It could significantly impact the accessibility of the food pantry.

Culture Barriers. It refers to social stigma, the environment of food pantries, and the cultural perception that potentially contributes to the non-usage of food pantries. Unlike governmental food assistance programs, food pantries do not have a universal standard. It means different food pantries might value other things. Fong, Wright, and Wimer (2016), in the interviews with 53 low-income non-users in San Francisco, suggest that each user understands these barriers—such as location, long lines, and even their level of need—differently. Users of food pantries are concerned about the waiting time, quality, and types of foods. The food pantries, due to their lack of funds, do not differentiate the food boxes. Everyone, regardless of their allergy history and religion, was offered the same package of food.

I think the government provides more grants and funds specifically for the food pantries until the end of the pandemic or recovery of the economy. With a substantial funding level, food pantries could hire more people to help sort the donation from other nonprofit organizations. And the food pantries could adjust their open hour for the local users. They could also afford transportation to deliver the food package during the pandemic. The social distancing policy is another obstacle for users to go to the food pantry. If the pantry has a delivery service, it would be easy for the users.

Moreover, it is noted that food pantries are only food assistance support for undocumented immigrants and other people who are not eligible for governmental programs. Funding the food pantries would significantly complete the food assistance

program for everyone. Food insecurity is indeed a national issue. SNAP and food pantry complement each other in offering support for everyone who lives in the U.S.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Alternatives to SNAP

The burden of obesity and related disease would negatively influence the health of people. For the poor families with limited incomes, they have to rely on food assistance programs to obtain food. One previous study suggested the SNAP participation positively correlated with food insecurity and obesity in rural areas of America (Dewitt et al., 2020). Dewitt et al (2020), in their conclusion, assumed SNAP alone is not sufficient to reduce food insecurity in the rural areas. The study also found out that the existing food system is heavily reliant on local food pantries. It is because food pantries have higher accessibility than SNAP. One of the advantages of SNAP is people are more familiar with the SNAP. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program–Education (SNAP-Ed) is the nutrition promotion component of SNAP that would assist low-income people in improving their dietary intake. In a previous study, Rivera, Maulding, and Eicher-Miller (2019) found out the SNAP-Ed has a positive and meaningful impact on participants' diet quality, nutrition-related behaviors, and other healthy diets.

In 2019, The Trump Administration proposed to cut the found to SNAP continuously. When they were initially pushing forward the new policy that curbs access to food assistance programs, a judge blocked the rule and "Noting that food benefits are critical given that a global pandemic poses widespread health risk" (Picchi, 2020). More specifically, the Trump administration wanted to cut out benefits for non-disabled adults who do not have dependents (Schnell and Hughes, 2019). The alteration of the food assistance program sounds dramatically familiar with the 1996 Welfare Reform Act. The

only difference was the country is facing a widespread virus now, whereas the world was terrified by the Mad Cow Disease in 1996.

Supporters of this policy argued that the new eligibility criteria were "motivating people who can work to get a job and support themselves." They also said the food assistance had become "a way of life," whereas it is supposed to be "a necessary help to get through a difficult time (Schnell and Hughes, 2019)". The situation is not that simple. Poor people, especially homeless people, don't have the strength to find a job. They need time to locate shelters, restore foods without a refrigerator, and look after relatives. If they got cut off from the food assistance programs, they would have to visit the local food pantry more than ever. Simultaneously, local food pantries also have to prepare for the challenge of foreseeable increasing demand.

To eliminate food insecurity, the government needs to find a solution to poverty first. The video, "Social Entrepreneur Mechai Viravaidya," introduced a series of social issues in rural areas of Thailand. Mechai Viravaidya and his family is a social entrepreneur dedicated to solving those problems through the bottom-up reformation. Thailand has a severe poverty problem in rural areas, even though it is considered a less developed country. Medchai wanted to develop a sustainable solution to solve the issues. He introduced Intensive agriculture to the local farms, help local people build factories to create more job opportunities, and also enhance the local education by building bamboo schools. In school, students are not only learning knowledge but also involved in the local community since they were teaching younger students in other schools. Viravaidya argued it is crucial to learn how to give when you are young, and then it will become

natural to contribute to the community. From the story of Viravaidya, the key to solving poverty is the transformation of their thinking pattern.

Similarly, if the government targeted food insecurity, then it is essential to enhance education on nutrition programs. SNAP and food pantries are only helping them by giving them food. So, the government must recover the economy to create more job opportunities for people who lost their jobs during the pandemic. As mentioned before, the increasing fund to SNAP and other programs would achieve such goals.

3.2 Limitations on Food Pantries

Kissane (2003) demonstrated the effect of social stigma on pantry usage. The women in the qualitative study expressed their discomfort towards using nonprofit food assistance, which many perceived as even more stigmatizing than government programs. The EBT and SNAP were due both to the more overt method of usage, as well as a belief that while government programs were 'entitlement,' private food assistance was 'charity' (Kissane, 2003). Even though food pantries are more accessible than SNAP, it has a significant limitation on capacity, meaning how many users one food pantry could serve. To create more grants for the food pantries nationally would increase the economic burden for the government.

Moreover, it is hard for the government to establish universal regulations for food pantries since the food pantry varies in different locations. The food pantries usually are part of the local community's service. Churches, nonprofits organizations, and even minority communities may have subsidiary food pantries. For example, the Worcester County Food Bank (WCFB) is the primary food bank for Worcester and the county at large. As of 2010, the WCFB and its subsidiary food pantries in Worcester County

provide emergency food to approximately 86,600 different people per year, 39% of whom are children. 77% of users at the WCFB are estimated to be food insecure by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) standards (Feeding America, 2010). Due to food pantries belong to different organizations, it is hard to create regulations to standardize the food pantries as a whole. Therefore, some may argue it would increase both the economic burden and administrative burdens to fund the food pantries by creating more grant opportunities. It is because it is difficult for the government to monitor the grants. To address such an issue, I think the government could selectively increase grants opportunity in a particular area that has higher food insecurity and low SNAP participants. Generally, the places that satisfied the two criteria above consist of a large percentage of undocumented immigrants and households that have low-income or no income. Enhancing service equality and capacity of the food pantries in this area would help those people in need. The government could consider it as a social investment to maintain the basic requirements for people that are excluded from governmental programs.

One previous study argued the augmented food pantry service is effectively changed food security status for adults (Ridberg, Smith, Levi, Waxman, & Seligman, 2020). In this study (Ridberg, Smith, Levi, Waxman, & Seligman, 2020), participants were racially diverse since there was 51% Latino/Hispanic and 33% African American. The researchers of the study mentioned a considerable proportion of their participants were not eligible for the governmental programs.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 Summary of the Assumptions

Overall, if the government could enhance the SNAP benefits for eligible citizens and selectively create more grants opportunities for small food pantries, there will be a projected decrease in food insecurity because everyone, including undocumented immigrants, would have access to food assistance service. The current social food assistance program system is not good enough to deal with climbing food insecurity in society (Schnell & Hughes, 2019). During the pandemic, economic devastation has significantly impacted people who have low-income or no income. Social distancing policy restrained many work opportunities for those people as well. Under these circumstances, the government should enhance the SNAP benefits and expand its eligibility criteria. Besides SNAP, the food pantries provide service to people that are not eligible for the SNAP program. By strengthening both SNAP and food pantries, the overall people would have access to food assistance.

4.2 Limitations

This study does have several limitations, chiefly the time of the research was only 14 weeks. If the researcher has more time, there will be more evidence to support the two assumptions. Based on previous studies, there were substantial shreds of evidence to support the two hypotheses. Moreover, the uncontrollable COVID-19 situation generates several uncertainties in the current situation. If the pandemic ends sooner than expected, it is still meaningful to continuously enhance the food assistance programs, including the food pantries.

Another critical limitation of this study is that the government might have other concerns about the increasing funds to SNAP programs. With the limited income, the growing fund for food assistance programs would decrease funds for other programs, like national defense, education, etc. It is undoubtedly a hard decision to make because the nation has other problems waiting to be fixed.

4.3 Suggestions for Future Study

For future studies, especially the Biden administration, it is essential to investigate the economic impact of food pantries and SNAP. At this time, there is no direct evidence to show that increasing SNAP benefits would stimulate the local economy during the pandemic. As well as the food pantries, there was no evidence to show causality to the economy. In the future, the researcher is looking forward to seeing more studies on a similar topic, which would influence the government decisions on increasing the funds for food assistance programs and help the local food pantries to serve more people who are not eligible for governmental food assistance programs.

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