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Summer 1991 No. 666

## Trends and Traditions in the American Diet: Implications for Agriculture

Jean Kinsey

"We are what we eat." We are thin or fat, healthy or ill, chic or dowdy. Food is a source of life and a source of pleasure. Our traditional definitions of food are being challenged by new technologies, new information and new lifestyles. Today, food not only nourishes the body, it "serves as a high-touch counterpart to a high-tech society."

Food and agricultural production is increasingly consumer-driven. In recent years, rapid changes have occurred in the way food is produced, processed, prepared, presented and eaten. The lion's share of the economic activity in the food and fiber system has been shifting towards the retail end of the food chain. The emphasis is on marketing to consumers who want meals ready to eat, not food to cook. In 1975 the value added by the retail end of the food chain was less than three times the value added by farming. In 1988 the value added by the retail end had grown to more than five times the value added by farming. Over \$308 billion of value was added to the domestic economy by food retailers, eating establishments and transporters in 1988.

Consumer demand for variety and convenience in food shopping and preparation and for ready-to-eat food

has resulted in a smaller share of the food dollar going for basic farm commodities. In 1988 this farm share was 30 percent for food purchased for home consumption and 16 percent for food eaten away from home.

Food eaten away from home accounts for more than 40 percent of consumer food expenditures. This doesn't even include the rapid increase in take-out-to-eat (TOTE) food, the fastest growing part of retail food

The two articles in this issue of the *Minnesota Agricultural Economist* focus on important changes in the structure of the U.S. food market and on the special food problems of the poor. They draw heavily on a new book, *Food Trends and the Changing Consumer*, authored by Professors Senauer, Asp and Kinsey. Information on the book and its content is provided on the last page of this publication.

sales. Increased popularity in TOTE food is attributed to time pressures faced by dual-earner families, the large number of single-person households and a general decline in cooking skills. Another reason for the increase is the relatively low percentage of income needed to purchase food by most American households. Figure 1 shows that the top 60 percent of households, in terms of income, spent between 15 and 8 percent of their income for food in 1987. However, the poorest 20

(Continued on page 2)

## Food Problems of the Poor

Benjamin Senauer

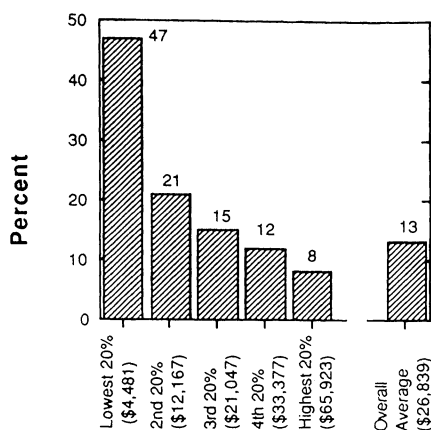
Many food consumers are willing and able to pay a premium for quality, variety and convenience. However, many individuals and families face the problem of just getting enough to eat. The need for food assistance, especially for participation in the Food Stamp Program, has risen substantially during the recent recession.

"Hunger in America," shown on public television in December 1989,

chronicled the lives of four families. One of the families was the Spences, a Minneapolis family that lost their home when Mr. Spence became unemployed. At the time the program was filmed they were relying on welfare payments and food stamps. One of their young sons admitted to feelings of sadness at sometimes having to go to school hungry.

(Continued on page 5)

**Figure 1. Percent of Income Spent for Food (U.S., Household Quintiles, 1987)**



(Pretax average income in each quintile)

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, BLS, Consumer Expenditure Survey, 1989. Report No. 757.

percent still spend almost half of their meager incomes for food. Their special problems and programs are discussed in the companion article in this issue of the MAE.

Few if any of the foods eaten in 1909 have disappeared from our diets, but there has been a major change in the way these foods are presented and selected. When nearly all food was produced and prepared at home and just obtaining enough food was a major concern, food was believed to be good for you, by definition. Now that a variety of foods are available and affordable and obesity is a major health problem, some foods and food characteristics have taken on negative connotations. Today, avoiding the negative characteristics of food influences consumers' food decisions as much as nutrition. In addition, safety concerns have led consumers to be ever more cautious about eating foods that may make them ill.

Suggestions that it is possible to gain control over chronic diseases and morbidity through careful food selection have captured the imaginations of consumers and these views have received some support from a flood of research reports documenting connections between diet and health. Nutritional guidelines by various organizations such as the National

Research Council, the American Heart Association and the United States Department of Agriculture all recommend cutting fat to 30 percent or less of total calories and restricting saturated fat to less than 10 percent. Most of these organizations recommend reducing cholesterol intake to 300 mg per day or less. They recommend that consumption of complex carbohydrates found in fruits, vegetables and whole grains be increased to 50 percent of total calories and that consumption of refined sugar and sodium (salt) be decreased.

Though there are mixed messages from consumers and from the Center for Disease Control about the degree of change, diets generally seem to be moving in the direction of the dietary recommendations. Americans now consume about 36 percent of their calories in the form of fat, down from 41 percent in 1977-78. Women and children were consuming about 100 calories less per day in 1985 than in 1977 but adult men were consuming in excess of 100 calories more per day. About a third of Americans report trying to lose weight but about one fourth are still more than 20 percent overweight. Between one-third and one-half of surveyed adults say they try to avoid eating too much fat and cholesterol and the average serum cholesterol reading for adults has fallen to below 200. Collectively, these changes in attitudes and eating habits impact on the types of foods demanded in the market.

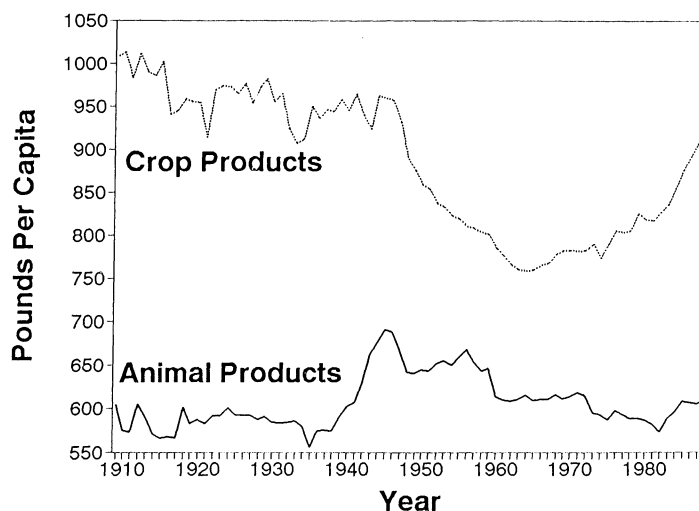
## Long Term Food Trends

There are several examples of long term substitutions of one food for another by American consumers, often in the direction of lower fat foods. For example, poultry and fish are being substituted for red meat, vegetable oils for animal fats, processed fruit juices for fresh fruits, processed for fresh potatoes, non-caloric for caloric sweeteners, lowfat for highfat milk, and soft drinks for most other beverages. Even though rising incomes typically result in substitution of animal for cereal and vegetable-based foods, affluent countries like the United States have reached a saturation level in animal products and have begun to increase the proportion of cereal products consumed. Figure 2 shows the long run decline in the consumption of cereal products with a recent increase compared to animal products that leveled off or declined after about 1960.

The fall in crop product consumption since the 1940s is due mostly to a decline in flour and cereal products and fresh fruits. Recent increases in cereals and grains is attributed to the consumption of more pasta and to a 44 percent increase in breakfast cereals between 1967 and 1987.

The increase in poultry (80 percent of which is chicken), the rise and fall of beef and the long-run stability of pork consumption can be readily

**Figure 2. Total Crop and Animal Products Per Capita Consumption (U.S., 1910-1990)**



observed in Figure 3. By 1989, poultry consumption per person surpassed beef by 16 pounds and pork by 22 pounds. Measures are in retail weight for red meat and ready-to-cook weight for poultry. However it is measured, poultry consumption is expected to continue upward at the expense of red meats.

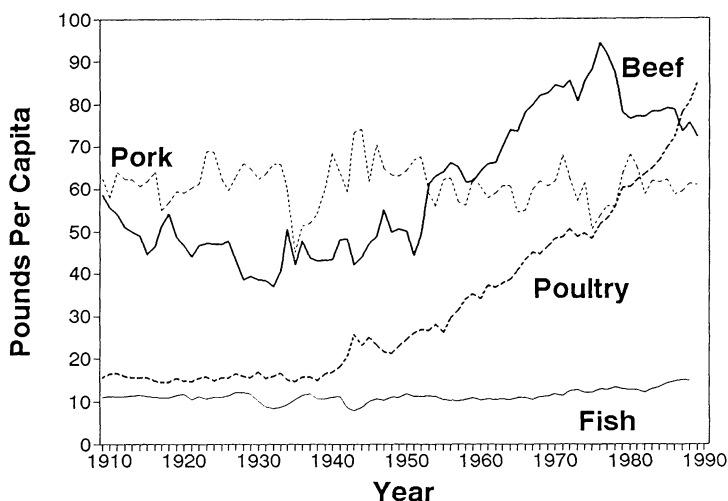
Relative prices of various animal products have a strong influence on the relative amounts consumed but, with affluence, consumers respond less to retail food prices and food demand becomes more sensitive to demographic factors and health concerns. For example, the consumption of fish increased 42 percent between 1967 and 1988 while its price increased 418 percent, more than twice as much as the increase in the price of red meat and almost three times as much as the increase in the price of poultry. This indicates a shift in consumers' preferences. Likewise, egg consumption declined in the face of almost flat egg prices.

Total fluid milk consumption fell over 100 pounds per person between 1950 and 1987, and by that time, lowfat milk consumption exceeded whole milk. The drop in fluid milk consumption would have been substantially greater had it not been for a recent increase in breakfast cereal consumption. Declines in the demand for fluid milk may be partially attributed to consumers' concern for the high fat and calorie content of whole milk, but also to the decreased number of children in the population.

Americans have steadily increased their overall consumption of fats and oils, while substituting vegetable for animal fat. Figure 4 shows that vegetable oils overtook animal fats in 1954 and have climbed at a rate of 3.5 percent per year since, pushing up total fat consumption by 1.2 percent per year. For every one pound decline in animal fat consumption since 1950, there was a 2.8 pound increase in the consumption of vegetable oils. Soybean oil has the largest share of the vegetable oil market (70 percent), with corn oil next at 7.7 percent.

Even though fruit consumption has increased since 1970, Americans consumed much more fresh fruit prior to 1950 than since. This can be explained partly by the demise of home grown and home processed fruit during

**Figure 3. Per Capita Meat, Poultry and Fish Consumption (U.S., 1910-1990)**



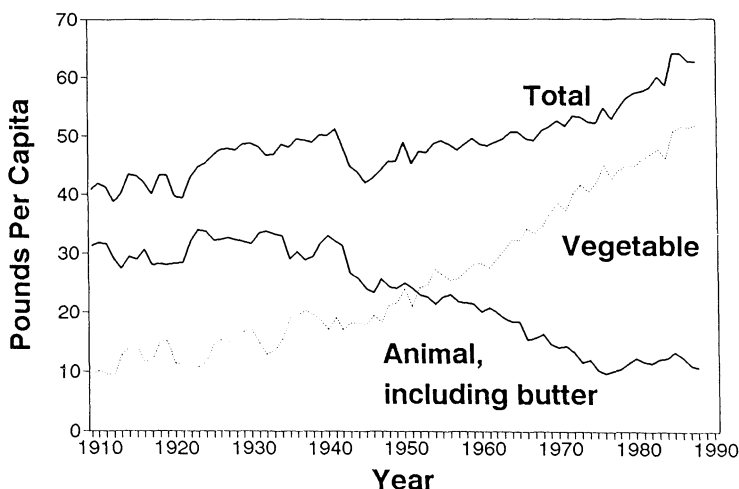
the first half of the century. Fruit juices, 79 percent of which was orange juice, comprised 42 percent of all fruit consumption (by weight) in 1981, an increase from 12 percent in 1950. In terms of fresh fruit consumption, apples, bananas and oranges still dominate.

Vegetables have increased in American diets. There has been a 42 percent increase in the consumption of fresh vegetables since 1970, including a 400 percent increase in broccoli consumption and a 257 percent increase in cauliflower consumption. As with fruits, the most common reasons for

increasing fresh vegetable consumption are health and nutritional concerns as well as an improved supply.

Americans like their sweets. The increase in all types of sweeteners is phenomenal, up 25 percent between 1966 and 1987 to 152 pounds per capita per year. Since 1987 corn sweeteners have surpassed refined sugar while non-caloric sweeteners grew to 13 percent of sweetener consumption. The rise in total sweeteners is connected to the rise in the consumption of soft drinks, most of which are now sweetened with either corn or a non-caloric sweetener.

**Figure 4. Per Capita Fats and Oils Consumption (U.S., 1910-1990)**



# Demographics Predict Food Trends

Demographic, cultural and economic diversity are increasing in the United States. There are more and more people with different ethnic backgrounds, lifestyles and tastes than ever before. According to Tim Hammonds and Judith Kozacik, Senior Vice President and Vice President for Research at the Food Marketing Institute, "Tastes and preferences for food products are rooted in the fundamental forces of demographics and lifestyles. They move slowly and powerfully."

**Household composition** is the foundation of demographic trends. Its major components are household size, age distribution and marital status. The general trend in American households has been towards smaller, older households with fewer married couples and fewer children. The percent of families that were married couples with children declined from 50 percent to 38 percent between 1970 and 1987. The percent of households that looked like the traditional stereotype—married couple with two or more children under age 18 and a wife not in the labor force—dropped from 23 percent in 1955 to 7 percent by 1987.

More than half of all U.S. households had only one or two members in 1990. Smaller household size increases per capita food expenditure, since economies of scale cannot be realized in food purchasing and preparation. Smaller households increase the demand for food eaten away from home, TOTE food, conveniently prepared food and food that can be purchased in small portions. Single persons spend up to 50 percent of their food budget on food away from home.

The greatest change in the **labor force** over the past two decades has been an increase in the percent of married women working outside the home. The labor force participation rates of men and women are converging. Almost 70 percent of married women in prime childbearing years (age 20-44) were in the labor force in 1988. In spite of their maternal roles, over half of mothers with children under age 6, and over 70 percent of

those with children between the ages of 6 and 17 were in the labor force in 1988.

As labor participation has increased, one of the primary ways of cutting household work has been to spend less time in the kitchen. Microwave ovens have helped, as have convenience foods, TOTE food, fast food and home delivered food. Since 86 percent of employed women still do most of the cooking and 91 percent do most of the shopping, they are looking for ways to feed themselves and their families quickly. Most spend less than a half hour preparing an evening meal; 20 percent spend less than 15 minutes.

The population is growing more slowly and it is aging. Both imply a decrease in the growth of aggregate food demand. An average **population growth** rate of 1.3 percent per year led the total population to increase 80 percent over the 30 years prior to 1980. It is expected to increase by only 15 percent in the 30 years following 1980.

Growth rates in the U.S. are quite uneven across ethnic groups with non-Hispanic whites increasing at a current rate of 0.5 percent compared to 2.7 percent for Hispanics and 1.5 percent for blacks. Population growth has traditionally depended upon fertility, but future population growth in the U.S. will depend mainly on further declining mortality, continued immigration and the fertility of non-white women. The demand for specific foods will depend less on population growth and more on the diversity of consumers' preferences. **Ethnic diversity** increases the diversity of foods demanded and supplied and creates market niches that can be quite profitable for astute marketers.

The baby boom and increased life expectancies have created a growing population of **elderly** people. For example, less than 12 percent survived to age 80 in 1900, while 50 percent are expected to do so by 2000. The baby boomers will swell the ranks of the elderly and the retired after 2010 pushing the median age to over 40 by 2030. Aging affects food demand because caloric needs decline and nutritional needs change as people grow older.

There is a popular perception that real **household incomes** in the United States are not growing, that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, that the large middle class mass market is diminishing, and that an underclass of permanently unemployed persons has developed. Considerable evidence supports this perception. Aggregate income statistics such as per capita personal disposal income, median family income and individual wage earnings reveal much the same picture—rising incomes until about 1973, and basically stagnation thereafter. In terms of income distribution, the poorest 20 percent of households received 6 percent of all household income in 1969, a year in which the richest 20 percent received 41 percent. By 1989, the richest 20 percent of households received 47 percent of aggregate household income and the poorest 20 percent of households received 4 percent. More families are entering both the low and high income brackets, that is, those below \$10,000 and over \$50,000 per year.

## Implications for Agriculture

Farming and eating bracket the two ends of the food and agricultural system which produces, transports, stores and prepares basic agricultural commodities for human consumption. In this increasingly consumer-oriented system, successful marketing depends on understanding the ultimate consumer, domestic or foreign. The major attributes that domestic consumers are looking for in food products are quality, taste, convenience, nutrition, wholesomeness, safety and value. Agricultural producers need to help processors, distributors and retailers meet the diverse demands of consumers for high-quality food products.

To meet the needs of consumers, distributors and processors are more likely to buy commodities raised to meet certain specifications. More production will be done under contract. Farmers in the future will probably be giving up some of their independence in exchange for more security. They will need to shift from raising what grows best or is the most lucrative under a government program to what sells best.

With more diverse tastes and preferences, mass marketing of generic foods is becoming passé. Opportunities for increased profits lie in micro-markets with different products. Only a few examples are the branding and labeling of fresh produce, production technologies that ensure chemical-free

produce, or animal products from animals raised with tender loving care. Foods that are low in fat, high in taste and convenient will be the most likely to succeed in the current era of consumer preferences. The challenge is to listen, hear, believe and do.

alcohol," according to a U.S. Public Health Service report.

Even during the late 1980s, when the U.S. economy enjoyed one of its longest periods of prosperity in history, the proportion of the population living in poverty remained distressingly high. In 1988 almost 32 million Americans, 13.1 percent of the population, were living below the poverty line.

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# Food Problems of the Poor

*(Continued from page 1)*

## Hunger and Poverty

The Physicians Task Force on Hunger in America concluded in 1985 that "hunger in America is a national health epidemic." They found that "hunger is now more widespread and serious than any time in the last ten to fifteen years" and "perhaps never in the past half century has hunger in this nation spread so quickly." The Physicians Task Force estimated some 20 million Americans, 12 million children and 8 million adults, were affected by hunger.

Hunger, however, can be an ambiguous term. Those who claim its widespread existence often define the term differently than those who minimize the problem. The President's Task Force on Food Assistance suggested two basic definitions. Medically, hunger is defined as "a weakened, disordered condition brought about by prolonged lack of food." This clinical definition relates to extended nutritional deprivation and the resulting physiological effects. This definition implies malnutrition (under-nourishment). On the other hand, in common usage, hunger may simply mean "the inability, even occasionally, to obtain adequate food and nourishment."

The President's Task Force found that, with hunger defined clinically, there was "no evidence that widespread undernutrition is a major health problem in the United States," except perhaps among the homeless. The task force did conclude that there was evidence of hunger in the sense that some people have difficulty obtaining

food, but found that it was "impossible to estimate the extent of that hunger." They felt they could not document the extent to which hunger was caused by income limitations.

However, when the term is given its more common usage it is evident that the problem is widespread. Many low-income individuals and families lack a sense of "food security." In other words, they have difficulty in obtaining food in either sufficient quantity or necessary quality.

Poor families spend their food budgets quite wisely in most cases. The evidence suggests lower-income households are more efficient food shoppers and do obtain more nutrients per dollar's worth of food than those with higher incomes. According to data from the 1977-78 Nationwide Food Consumption Survey, households with incomes below \$5,000 obtained 1,280 calories, 45 grams of protein, and 470 milligrams (mg) of calcium per dollar's worth of food used at home, compared to 1,140 calories, 41 grams of protein, and 440 mg. of calcium for households with incomes of \$20,000 and above.

There is a strong association between hunger and poverty. The lack of food security and inadequate diets among the poor is primarily the direct result of their poverty. There may also be indirect connections between poverty and hunger as "part of a complex of problems, including a lack of information, physical and mental illness, and addiction to drugs and

Primarily because of increased Social Security payments, the rate of poverty has sharply declined among senior citizens. In 1970, 24.6 percent of persons age 65 and over were officially poor. By 1987, this figure had fallen to 12.2 percent, lower than the rate of 13.4 percent for the overall population. Senior citizens are now proportionately less poor than the rest of the population.

However, the poverty rate among children (those under age 18) reached 20.0 percent in 1987, up from 14.9 percent in 1970. And even more shocking, nearly half of all black children—45.1 percent—were living in poverty. The figure for children in Hispanic families was 39.3 percent.

For many people, poverty is temporary. For others it is a persistent, chronic condition. Based on an analysis of data which traced the economic circumstances of the same families over many years, University of Michigan researchers found that one out of four Americans lived below the poverty line at some point in the 1970s. However, less than 10 percent of those falling into poverty were persistently poor during eight or more of the ten years and more than half were poor for two years or less. Many people slip into poverty as the result of the economic adversity which may accompany a divorce or the loss of a job, for example. In most cases, they manage to climb back out of poverty in a fairly short time.

In contrast, the persistently poor have limited job opportunities and become heavily dependent on welfare. This group has been referred to as the "underclass." They are isolated from mainstream society and basic economic opportunities. Recent studies have found the problem of persistent poverty growing worse in the U.S. Over one-fifth of blacks living in big

cities were living in poverty for the entire ten years from 1974 to 1983.

## Government Food Programs

The origin of federal food assistance programs can be traced back to farm support laws enacted during the Depression of the 1930s. Though the legislation was designed more to dispose of agricultural surpluses than to meet the food and nutrition needs of people, the food distribution to the poor was a welcome help to most of the recipients. A food stamp program and a school lunch program were initiated in 1939 and a school milk program in 1940. Many of these programs were curtailed or reduced during World War II. The initial food stamp program, for example, was discontinued in 1943.

The commitment to funding food and nutrition assistance was greatly expanded in the 1970s in response to concerns of widespread hunger in the U.S. In addition, the primary emphasis shifted from disposing of surplus agricultural commodities to assisting low-income people with their food needs. The federal government's expenditures on food assistance programs rose from \$1.1 billion in 1969 to \$11.2 billion in fiscal year 1979 (FY 79), largely due to a substantial expansion in the coverage of the Food Stamp Program.

In the 1980s, during the Reagan Administration, with a tax cut and greatly expanded expenditures on national defense, there was significant pressure to reduce, or at least hold down, spending on domestic programs. The federal government's spending on food assistance programs, in current dollars, continued to grow during the 1980s anyway, increasing from \$14.2 billion in FY 80 to \$21.2 billion in FY 88. However, government expenditures for food stamps in FY 82 were reduced by 12 percent and for child nutrition programs by 24 percent below the levels they would have reached without budget reduction measures enacted in 1981. Furthermore, between FY 83 and 88, although spending on food programs rose 9.9 percent, the Consumer Price Index increased 18.4 percent. Therefore, in real terms or constant dollars, expendi-

tures for food assistance fell by fully 8.5 percent.

Federal expenditures and the average monthly participation in FY 88, if available, are given in table 1 for the various food assistance programs. Food stamps were the largest program by a substantial margin, with federal outlays of over \$12 billion and an average of almost 19 million recipients. The Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) has been one of the few programs to expand significantly in recent years and now accounts for the third largest allocation of food assistance dollars. In 1982, food stamps were replaced with a nutrition assistance block grant in Puerto Rico. Over half of the island's population participates. Monthly participation averaged 1.4 million in FY 88.

The next five programs listed in table 1 are child nutrition programs which operate through our nation's schools and child care centers. The National School Lunch Program had the second highest expenditures. More than 24 million children participated on average, with slightly less than half receiving free or reduced price meals. The Child Care Food Program provides cash and commodity assistance to child care centers and to family day care homes. The School Breakfast, Summer Food Service, and Special Milk programs are additional child nutrition programs which operate through the schools.

The last five programs involve the distribution of commodities. The Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program provides surplus agricultural commodities to needy persons. The Charitable Institutions Program provides surplus commodities to charitable organizations that serve meals to the needy. The Commodity Supplemental Food Program operated through 18 state agencies and one Indian tribal organization in FY 88 and served the elderly, women, infants and children. The Needy Family Program now operates only on Indian reservations and on our Pacific Island territories, which prefer food commodities to food stamps. The Nutrition Program for the Elderly provides cash and commodities to senior citizen centers that provide meals, and to the Meals-On-Wheels program for the home-bound.

Several federal programs that provide food assistance, but which are not run through the Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, are not listed in table 1. The Expanded Food and Nutrition Program operates through the Agricultural Extension Service. The program educates low-income families on efficient food purchasing and preparation and on nutritional needs. The Community Food and Nutrition Program assists local and state governments in coordinating private and public food assistance. The Emergency Food and Shelter Program provides federal funds to assist the homeless. An estimated 46 percent of the funds are used to provide meals.

## Private Food Programs

During the 1980s there was a sharp increase in the number of people seeking food assistance from private, non-governmental organizations. The two basic forms of private assistance are "food shelves," which provide basic grocery products free to needy families, and feeding facilities or "soup kitchens" which serve free meals to the destitute. The 303 food shelves which operated in Minnesota, for example, filled over 1.2 million requests in 1987, representing an increase of about 600 percent since 1982. Furthermore, it has been said that there are now more soup kitchens in the U.S. serving more meals to more people, than at any time since the Depression of the 1930s. The number of providers of free meals in New York City jumped from 30 in 1981 to 500 in 1987.

Food shelves are run by churches, social service agencies or free standing organizations. Their budgets are usually small and they heavily depend on volunteers for labor, and on donated food and money. They typically provide clients with a supply of groceries designed to last their families three to seven days. Eligibility is determined by each food shelf, but usually no needy family is turned away. Normally clients must live within a given geographic area. In some cases, increased demand has forced food shelves to impose greater limitations on their use. For example, a family that was able to use the food shelves one time per month may now be limited to four or six times per year.



**Table 1. Government food assistance programs: federal cost and participation—fiscal year 1988**

Programs	Federal Government Costs (Millions)	Participation* (Thousands)
Food Stamps	\$12,341 <sup>b</sup>	18,700
WIC	1,801	3,593
Nutrition Assistance Block Grant	879	1,430
Puerto Rico		
Child Nutrition Programs:		
National School Lunch	2,920	24,200 <sup>c</sup>
Child Care Food	618	1,251
School Breakfast	484	3,690 <sup>d</sup>
Summer Food Service	136	1,577 <sup>e</sup>
Special Milk	19	na <sup>f</sup>
Commodity Distribution Programs:		
Temporary Emergency Food Assistance	633	na
Charitable Institutions	154	na
Commodity Supplemental Food	62	213
Needy Family	62	137
Nutrition Program for the Elderly	150	na
Total	21,211 <sup>g</sup>	

a. Average monthly participation unless otherwise indicated.

b. Includes state administrative matching funds and other program costs.

c. 9.8 million free, 1.6 million reduced price, and 12.8 million paid.

d. 3.03 million free, 180,000 reduced price, and 470,000 paid.

e. Participation in July.

f. Not available.

g. Not all programs are shown, so categories do not add up to the total.

Source: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, February 1989.

A survey of food shelf users in Minnesota found that 63 percent were families that had children under 18 years of age, and a quarter of them had jobs. More than half were not receiving food stamps and the most common reason given was the belief that they were not eligible. However, income data suggested that many of them were eligible. Demand on food shelves is particularly heavy towards the end of the month, when many food stamp recipients have exhausted their resources.

Food banks act as warehouses, collecting and distributing food to affiliated food shelves. A major function of the food banks is to solicit donations of food products from major food manufacturing and distribution companies. Second Harvest, with headquarters in Chicago, is a national network of food banks. In 1985, it distributed 152.2 million pounds of food donated by 256 food companies to 205 member food banks throughout the U.S.

The feeding programs which provide free meals often serve as a last resort for those who have fallen through the social welfare "safety net." The population served by these free-meal providers contain a high proportion of homeless people. Many of these soup kitchens try to help their users with additional needs, such as finding housing and clothing and, in some cases, child abuse and alcoholism problems. Most soup kitchens operate on a shoe string. Much of the work is performed by volunteers.

These private initiatives can be viewed with two perspectives. One is as a healthy indicator of the ability of private charity and volunteerism to reduce overdependence on government welfare programs. The other views them as an indication of the large number of poor and hungry and the serious inadequacy of the government's safety net. There are limits to the role that can be played by the private programs. What they can do best is fill gaps left by the government programs, responding to emergency needs and special local requirements.

## Conclusions

Americans have mixed feelings about government welfare programs, including food programs. These feelings are particularly strong regarding food stamps. Many find their cost objectionable and incidents of fraud and misuse prompt outrage. However, Americans are also a charitable, compassionate people, and if the situation of specific individuals were described, such as the Spences at the beginning of this article, most people would likely favor helping them. A political consensus has emerged, however, that social welfare programs should contain strong work incentives and job training support. This consensus reflects the widespread belief that able-bodied adults should work to support themselves.

Support for government programs involving food assistance reflects the belief that certain types of consumption—those related to nutrition, health and education—are more meritorious than other types of consumption. Society is more concerned about inequality in the distribution of such merit goods than the distribution of income. Food consumption patterns, unlike consumption patterns for most goods, have an ethical dimension because of the close connection with basic nutrition and health. Access to adequate food may be thought of as a fundamental right, since a lack of food is, in the extreme, to be deprived of life.

The economists' concept of human capital offers another perspective on food assistance. The productivity of our economy depends on the skills and knowledge of the work force. As Theodore W. Schultz, a recipient of the Nobel Prize in economics, noted, "Much of what we call consumption constitutes investment in human capital," especially expenditures on education, health and nutrition. The human capital argument is particularly strong for children. A child's nutritional status can affect his or her physical and mental development and educational achievement. If our nation is to have a highly productive labor force that can compete in the world economy of the 21st Century, it must invest in the education, health and nutrition of today's children.



The articles by Jean Kinsey and Ben Senauer in this issue of the *Minnesota Agricultural Economist* draw on their new book, *Food Trends and the Changing Consumer*, written with Elaine Asp, an associate professor in the Food Science and Nutrition department. The eleven chapters in the book are:

1. Introduction: Major Trends in a Consumer-Driven Food System
2. Trends and Traditions in the American Diet
3. Demographic Trends Foretell Food Trends
4. Disparate Lifestyles
5. Economics: Insightful and not so Arcane
6. The Food Consumer: New Economic Perspectives
7. Data: Where We Get the Facts
8. Older Americans and Their Food Habits
9. The Forgotten Poor and Their Food Problems
10. Food Safety: A Growing Concern
11. The Food Industry: An Overview and Implications of Current Consumer Trends.

*Food Trends and the Changing Consumer* is available from Eagan Press, 3340 Pilot Knob Road, St. Paul, MN 55121-2097. Telephone (612) 454-7250.



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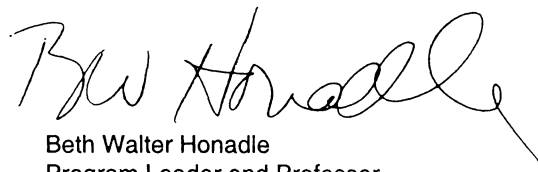
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Program Leader and Professor  
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