

— conversations on —
FOOD JUSTICE

A series hosted by
Share Our Strength and Food & Society at the Aspen Institute

SUMMARY TO ACTION REPORT
SESSION #10

SESSION DESCRIPTION

On March 8th, 2022 Share Our Strength, in collaboration with Food & Society at the Aspen Institute, hosted the latest edition of the **Conversations on Food Justice** Series “Race, Poverty, and the Barriers to Accessing Social Benefit Programs” featuring speakers, Parker Gilkesson, Yolanda Gordon, Gabriel Sanchez and moderated by Alexis Fernández García. The panel discussed the history of social welfare programs in the United States and explored how institutionalized racism and stereotyping of marginalized communities have shaped public policy and economic opportunity for communities of color. The conversation also explored how better investments in our social and economic opportunity programs can advance racial justice and create thriving, equitable communities.

FEATURED PANELISTS

Parker Gilkesson

Senior Policy Analyst, [Center for Law and Social Policy, Inc.](#)



Parker Gilkesson is a senior policy analyst with CLASP’s Income and Work Supports team. She specializes in work support programs for people with low incomes and focuses on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Parker is a subject matter expert in social policy, benefit eligibility, human services delivery, racial equity, community partnership, and state and local policy regarding SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Medicaid. She has been quoted in TIME Magazine, New York Times, National Public Radio, The Hill, and many more.

Yolanda Gordon

Manager of Expansion and Advocacy, [RESULTS Educational Fund](#)



Yolanda M. Gordon is the mother of three children. Yolanda started her advocacy journey in the disability advocacy arena after her younger children were diagnosed on the Autism Spectrum. She learned how to advocate for her children’s educational needs. Yolanda is a former safety net program recipient. She currently works at RESULTS Educational Fund as the Manager of Expansion and Advocacy. Her role includes being the coordinator for the RESULTS Organizing and Advocacy Fellowship which teaches young leaders, ages 20-35, how to speak to their members of Congress about ending poverty, making tax credits permanent, investment in global education, global nutrition, and affordable housing. She is also a leader with her work on anti-oppression, intersectionality, and poverty, and its effects on individuals and families. She has used her experience to lobby Congressional leaders of South Carolina on the needs of families in the state to ensure that their voices are heard. Yolanda is a Moth Trained storyteller, TEDx speaker, and has spoken at many conferences from Missouri State University to George Washington University. She currently lives in Fort Mill, South Carolina.

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Gabriel R. Sanchez

Professor, [University of New Mexico](#)



Gabriel R. Sanchez, Ph.D., is a David M. Rubenstein Fellow in Governance Studies at The Brookings Institution. He also serves as a Professor of Political Science and the Founding Rober Wood Johnson Foundation Endowed Chair in Health Policy at the University of New Mexico. Dr. Sanchez is also the director of the UNM Center for Social Policy, and a founding member of the UNM Native American Budget and Policy Institute. Sanchez is also a Principal at Latino Decisions, the nation's leading survey firm focused on the Latino electorate. A leading expert on Latino and New Mexico politics and policy, he regularly provides commentary to several state, national, and international media outlets including the New York Times, CNN, Los

Angeles Times, and The Economist. Professor Sanchez is a nationally recognized expert in survey research and the utilization of rigorous research to inform public policy decisions at the federal, state, and local levels. Dr. Sanchez is leading several research projects focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the Latino and Native American communities, including multiple surveys of parents aimed at understanding how the pandemic is impacting their financial security, including food insecurity. Sanchez has published more than sixty scholarly articles, chapters, and books focused on minority public opinion, electoral behavior, and racial and ethnic politics in the United States. He is the co-author of the recent book [Latinos and the 2016 Election: Latino Resistance and the Election of Donald Trump](#), and co-author of the leading textbook of Latino politics (with John A. Garcia) [Latino Politics in America: Community, Culture, and Interests](#).

Alexis Fernández García

Executive Director & Co-Founder, [Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, Inc](#)



Alexis Fernández García is Senior Director of Social Safety Net and is responsible for leading Code for America's social safety net portfolio. Previously, Alexis was the CalFresh and Nutrition Branch Chief at the California Department of Social Services where she was responsible for the largest SNAP program in the country and led several initiatives to improve program access, streamline benefit delivery, expand work opportunities, and increase CalFresh participation. She received her Master of Social Work with an emphasis on management and planning from UC Berkeley and a BA in Ethnic Studies from UC San Diego.

SUMMARY AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

The United States social safety net program is a set of various government programs that helps Americans experiencing economic hardships. Some of these programs include Social Security Income (SSI), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the earned income tax credit (EITC), Medicaid, and the Special Supplemental Food Programs for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The concept of the social safety net program started in the early 1980s to support the “truly needy”¹. Although, some of the larger social safety net programs were a result of the New

¹ Burt, M., Pindus, N., & Capizzano, J. (2000). (rep.). *The Social Safety Net at the Beginning of Federal Welfare Reform: Organization of and Access to Social Services for Low-Income Families*. Retrieved 2022, from <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/43746/309309-occa34.pdf>.

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Deal's Social Security Act¹. Then, in the 1960s major programs including Medicare, Medicaid, and SSI were added as safety net programs¹. In the late 1970s, came the addition of Food Stamps, currently known as SNAP. These programs benefit millions of Americans. As of 2019, one in five people were served by at least one safety net program, which is about 59 million people per month². A large portion of those receiving assistance is children. Twenty-four million children receive assistance from at least one of the programs, that is about 32% of the population under 18 years old². Assistance for these programs varies greatly by state, as they get their own rules on administration.

Studies show that social safety net programs help reduce poverty for Americans. Research conducted by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that “Between 1970 and 2017 the poverty rate fell for all groups, but it fell even more for Black and Latino people: by 27 and 24 percentage points, respectively, compared to 8 percentage points for white non-Latino people...”³. Although for Black and Latino people, poverty rates are still higher than the white poverty rate³. Disparities can be a result of states having autonomy over the programs, resulting in unequal distribution of the program's resources. An analysis done by the Center for American Progress found that when comparing state-level policy choices, regions with higher populations of color have weaker safety net programs and anti-poverty policies⁴. Another analysis from the Urban Institute found that TANF funds were more restrictive in states with a higher Black population. States with a whiter population, Vermont and Oregon, were more generous with TANF, than states with a higher Black population, Louisiana and Arkansas. Vermont gives TANF to 78 families for every 100 families in poverty, while in contrast, Louisiana gives those benefits to 4 families for every 100 living in poverty⁵.

Social safety net programs are rooted in racial bias. As far back as the Social Security Act of 1935 many Black Americans could not benefit from this program due to discrimination in employment. Then during the Reagan campaign, the term “[welfare queen](#)” was coined, a racist and exaggerated story of a woman abusing the welfare system. This fabricated narrative painted an inaccurate depiction of welfare recipients. While some folks believe that there is rampant abuse of the system, instances of that happen very infrequently. Panelist Gabriel Sanchez explained, that 68% of social safety net recipients use the funds for clothes, food, and gas, and another 1/3 use it to pay overdue bills. Access to aid has changed throughout the years, but some states have put restrictions on the accessibility of these programs through having work requirements, drug testing, or other limits and caps. Policies like these are rooted in oppression, reinforcing misconceptions about those that receive public benefits, must so-called earn it first. Panelist Parker Gilkesson discussed, “we have racialized systems of forced labor. This goes all the way back to slavery and how that paved the way to work requirements by popularizing stereotypes about Black people particularly to justify forced labor... This created a narrative that people experiencing poverty, particularly Black people, needed to

² Minton, S., & Giannarelli, L. (2019). (rep.). *Five Things You May Not Know about the US Social Safety Net*. Retrieved 2022, from https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99674/five_things_you_may_not_know_about_the_us_social_safety_net_1.pdf.

³ Trisi, D., & Saenz, M. (2021). (rep.). *Economic Security Programs Reduce Overall Poverty, Racial and Ethnic Inequities*. Retrieved 2022, from <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/economic-security-programs-reduce-overall-poverty-racial-and-ethnic>.

⁴ Cawthorne Gaines, A., Hardy, B., & Schweitzer, J. (2021, November 5). *How weak safety net policies exacerbate regional and racial inequality*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved 2022, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/weak-safety-net-policies-exacerbate-regional-racial-inequality/>

⁵ Semuels, A. (2017, June 6). *States with large black populations are stingier with government benefits*. The Atlantic. Retrieved 2022, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/06/race-safety-net-welfare/529203/>

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be forced to work. Despite the reality that African Americans were more consistently a part of the nation's working-class over a more extended period than any other social, ethnic, or racial group. These untrue stereotypes... have continued to be pervasive and set the tone for even harmful myths that contributed to the deliberate exclusion of Black people from the New Deal era policies, which have created the modern benefits programs today.” We need to start considering how these counterproductive policies deter ownership and economic mobility.

To reference Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, one’s physiological needs of food, water, shelter, clothing, etc. need to be satisfied first to make progress towards self-actualization. Having access to these basic needs and resources is a fundamental right. Panelist Yolanda Gordon reinforces this sentiment explaining, “we need to shift the narrative to talk about basic needs. I can’t fit the four walls- food, housing, utilities, and water.” Systemic racism and the challenges of people accessing benefits, such as concerns around immigration, or a lack of a streamlined way of enrolling in benefits, deters people from receiving the support, only perpetuating poverty. COVID-19 has been a time of rapid innovation in the social safety net program. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provided economic relief to millions of families. While these acts were not perfect, they did aid families and exposed the lack of social support in the US. We need to continue to advocate for these support systems, so we do not unlearn the need to modernize.

RESOURCES

Article: [States With Large Black Populations Are Stingier With Government Benefits](#)



Research suggests that states with homogenous populations are more willing to spend on the safety net than those with higher shares of minorities.

Report: [SNAP “Program Integrity”. How Racialized Fraud Provisions Criminalize Hunger](#)



In, “SNAP Program Integrity: How Racialized Fraud Provisions Criminalize Hunger,” CLASP takes on the racialized history behind SNAP fraud, details the significant damage caused by efforts to “rein in” this perceived problem, and offers policy recommendations for reversing the harm.

Article: [How Weak Safety Net Policies Exacerbate Regional and Racial Inequality](#)



While all low-income individuals and families, particularly those of color, struggle to avoid falling into poverty, some receive less support solely because of where they live.

Report: [Economic Security Programs Reduce Overall Poverty, Racial and Ethnic Inequalities](#)



Our success as a nation depends on whether all people, regardless of race or ethnicity, have the opportunity to thrive. Economic security programs such as Social Security, food assistance, tax credits, and housing assistance can help provide opportunity by ameliorating short-term poverty and hardship and, by doing so, improving children’s long-term outcomes. Over the last half-century, these assistance programs have reduced poverty for millions of people — including children, who are highly susceptible to poverty’s ill effects.

Article: [TANF Policies Reflect Racist Legacy of Cash Assistance](#)



Economic security programs can help families meet basic needs and improve their lives, but design features influenced by anti-Black racism and sexism have created an inadequate system of support that particularly harms Black families and other families of color. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the nation’s primary program for providing cash

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assistance to families with children when parents are out of work or have very low income, is perhaps the clearest example of a program whose history is steeped in racist ideas and policies that particularly strip Black women of their dignity.

Report: [Protecting Immigrant Families- Analysis & Research](#)



This series of documents provides updates on Public Charge, immigrant eligibility for federal programs during COVID, and the latest research, reports, and studies that show how public charge policy harms immigrant families and workers, public health, and our economy.

CALL TO ACTION LIST

People often ask, what is the next step? If there is a right way to take the step, or if there is a formula. There is not, but we can all do something. Individual actions suggested by the panelists include the following:

- Be comfortable with being uncomfortable. Understand the structural racism in our systems and our need for intentionality.
- Put the people first! Use a Human-Centered Design approach to tackle the challenges with accessing the social safety net system.
- Put pressure on local officials. Recognize that the COVID safety net programs have been working. Hold elected officials accountable for upholding those systems in place.

We hope you will continue the conversations in your organizations and your community! Please do not hesitate to let us know how you are keeping the conversations going or if you have thoughts or topics you would like to hear in the future. Reach out to us at foodjustice@strength.org Learn more about the initiative at <https://www.shareourstrength.org/foodjustice>.



Share Our Strength is ending hunger and poverty – in the United States and abroad. Through proven, effective campaigns like No Kid Hungry and Cooking Matters, we connect people who care to ideas that work.

<https://www.shareourstrength.org>



Food & Society at the Aspen Institute brings together public health leaders, policymakers, researchers, farmers, chefs, food makers, and entrepreneurs to find practical solutions to food system challenges and inequities. The common goal is to help people of all income levels eat better and more healthful diets—and to enjoy them bite by bite.

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/food-and-society-program/>