

## On the Edge of Poverty, at the Center of a Debate on Food Stamps



By SHERYL GAY STOLBERG

DYERSBURG, Tenn. — As a self-described “true Southern man” — and reluctant recipient of food stamps — Dustin Rigsby, a struggling mechanic, hunts deer, doves and squirrels to help feed his family. He shops for grocery bargains, cooks budget-stretching stews and limits himself to one meal a day.

Tarnisha Adams, who left her job skinning hogs at a slaughterhouse when she became ill with cancer, gets \$352 a month in food stamps for herself and three college-age sons. She buys discount meat and canned vegetables, cheaper than fresh. Like Mr. Rigsby, she eats once a day — “if I eat,” she said.

When Congress officially returns to Washington next week, the diets of families like the Rigsbys and the Adamses will be caught up in a debate over deficit reduction. Republicans, alarmed by a rise in food stamp enrollment, are pushing to revamp and scale down the program. Democrats are resisting the cuts.

No matter what Congress decides, benefits will be reduced in November, when a provision in the 2009 stimulus bill expires.

Yet as lawmakers cast the fight in terms of spending, nonpartisan budget analysts and hunger relief advocates warn of a spike in “food insecurity” among Americans who, as Mr. Rigsby said recently, “look like we are fine,” but live on the edge of poverty, skipping meals and rationing food.

Surrounded by corn and soybean farms — including one owned by the local Republican congressman, Representative Stephen Fincher — Dyersburg, about 75 miles north of Memphis, provides an eye-opening view into Washington’s food stamp debate. Mr. Fincher, who was elected in 2010 on a Tea Party wave and collected nearly \$3.5 million in farm subsidies from the government from 1999 to 2012, recently voted for a farm bill that omitted food stamps.

“The role of citizens, of Christianity, of humanity, is to take care of each other, not for Washington to steal from those in the country and give to others in the country,” Mr. Fincher, whose office did not respond to interview requests, said after his vote in May. In response to a Democrat who invoked the Bible during the food stamp debate in Congress, Mr. Fincher cited his own biblical phrase. “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat,” he said.

On Wednesday, the Department of Agriculture released a 2012 survey showing that nearly 49 million Americans were living in “food insecure” households — meaning, in the bureaucratic language of the agency, that some family members lacked “consistent access throughout the year to adequate food.” In short, many Americans went hungry. The agency found the figures essentially unchanged since the economic downturn began in 2008, but substantially higher than during the previous decade.

Experts say the problem is particularly acute in rural regions like Dyersburg, a city of 17,000 on the banks of the Forked Deer River in West Tennessee. More than half the counties with the highest concentration of food insecurity are rural, according to an analysis by Feeding America, the nation’s largest network of food banks. In Dyer County, it found, 19.4 percent of residents were “food insecure” in 2011, compared with 16.4 percent nationwide.

Over all, nearly 48 million Americans now receive food stamps, an \$80 billion-a-year program that is increasingly the target of conservatives. Robert Rector, a scholar at the conservative Heritage Foundation, argues that the food stamp program should be overhauled so that benefits are tied to work, much as welfare was revamped under President Bill Clinton. He advocates mandatory drug testing for food stamp recipients — a position that draws support from Mr. Rigsby, who dreams of becoming a game warden and said it irritated him to see people “mooch off the system.”

But when benefits drop in November, the Rigsbys, who say they receive about \$350 a month, can expect \$29 less.

“People have a lot of misimpressions about hunger in America,” said Maura Daly, a Feeding America spokeswoman. “People think it’s associated with homelessness when, in fact, it is working poor families, it’s kids, it’s the disabled.” Hunger is often invisible, she said, and in rural areas it is even more so.

Hunger was easy to see on a recent morning in Dyersburg. Hundreds of people, many of them food stamp recipients, lined up at the county fairgrounds for boxes of free food — 21,000 pounds of meat, potatoes, grains and produce — that had been trucked in from a food bank in Memphis. About 80 volunteers set up an assembly line in a warehouse to distribute the food.

More than 700 families get help each month from the charitable program, Feed the Need, which was founded in 2009 by Mark Oakes, the chairman of the local Salvation Army, after a string of nearby factories closed.

“We couldn’t absorb the work force back into our community,” Mr. Oakes said, “and people were hungry.”

Among the first in line at the fairgrounds was Kathy Baucom, 61, a former welder disabled by lupus. She lives alone in a trailer, hunts deer — “last year I bagged seven,” she said — and makes burgers, roasts and jerky out of venison. Her food stamp benefits of \$125 a month were recently reduced to \$117.

“I don’t buy milk because it’s so expensive,” she said. “I don’t buy cheese.”

Officially called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, food stamps have long been a cornerstone of the federal safety net. Benefits, adjusted for income, are loaded monthly onto a government-issued debit card. Recipients say the money typically lasts a little more than two weeks.

“We don’t splurge,” Ms. Adams said, “and it doesn’t last.”

She shops at Save-A-Lot and cooks frequently with pasta, because it is filling. One recent evening, she baked a tray of mostaccioli, an Italian pasta, with meat and cheese. Hoping it would last for two meals, she had none herself.

“You hate to tell your child, ‘You can’t eat this, you have to save it for another day,’ ” she said.

For the Rigsbys, both 20, the priority is three meals a day for their son, Drake, who is 1. Some months they run out of milk. Mr. Rigsby, who is out of work with a knee injury, recently sold his truck for cash; his wife, Christina, works part time as a clerk at J. C. Penney. On the refrigerator in their sparsely furnished apartment is a calendar marked with the date — the 6th — that their card is refreshed. “FOOD!” it declares.

“When we got married, we told each other that we want to be able to sit down at the table and eat as a family,” Mrs. Rigsby said. “But we don’t really get to do that.”

In Washington, House Republicans propose cutting \$40 billion more in food stamps over the next 10 years by imposing work requirements and eliminating waivers for some able-bodied adults. The cuts would push four million to six million low-income people, including millions of “very low-income unemployed parents” who want to work but cannot find jobs, off the rolls, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a left-leaning research organization.

Even if approved in the House, the cuts would face strong opposition from Democrats in the Senate. But the arguments of Mr. Rector, the Heritage Foundation scholar, are gaining traction with conservatives on Capitol Hill. “I think food stamps have in the Republican mind become the symbol of an out-of-control, means-tested welfare state,” Mr. Rector said.

Here in Tennessee, Mr. Fincher embraces that view. “We have to remember there is not a big printing press in Washington that continually prints money over and over,” he said in May.

Mr. Rigsby said his family would find a way to make do. “The way I was raised,” he said, “it’s, ‘Be thankful for what you’ve got.’ We’re not the worst case out there. But somebody else? How is this going to affect them?”

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