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Greg Kaufmann on the Truth About American Poverty

Greg Kaufmann, poverty correspondent for *The Nation*, says the poor in America are stereotyped and demonized in an effort to justify huge cuts in food stamps and other crucial programs for low-income Americans.

“People are working and they’re not getting paid enough to feed their families, pay their utilities, pay for their housing, pay for the healthcare... if you’re not paying people enough to pay for the basics, they’re going to need help getting food,” Kaufmann tells Bill. “There are a lot of corporations that want to be involved in the fight against hunger. The best thing they can do is get on board for fair wages.”

BILL MOYERS: Food stamps were at the core of the monster farm bill that went down to defeat in the House of Representatives last week. That bill would have cut food stamps by some \$20 billion over 10 years, but that was too little for House Republicans and too much for House Democrats, although Senate Democrats had already agreed to cuts of more than \$4 billion.

Here to talk about food stamps and the farm bill is a journalist whose beat is hunger, politics, and policy. Greg Kaufmann is poverty correspondent for “The Nation” magazine and a contributor to our website, BillMoyers.com. He’s also an advisor to the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, founded by journalist Barbara Ehrenreich and the Institute for Policy Studies. Greg Kaufman, welcome.

Web Link: <http://billmoyers.com/segment/greg-kaufmann-on-the-truth-about-american-poverty/>

GREG KAUFMANN: Great to be with you, Bill.

BILL MOYERS: There are almost 48 million people using food stamps a day, and over recent years that’s a 70 percent increase. What does your own reporting tell you about why?

GREG KAUFMANN: Well, the biggest reason, I think, is the proliferation of low-wage work. People are working and they’re not getting paid enough to feed their families, pay their utilities and pay for their

housing, pay for the healthcare. We had 28 percent of workers in 2011 made wages that were less than the poverty line. Poverty wages.

Fifty percent of the jobs in this country make less than \$34,000 a year. Twenty-five percent make less than the poverty line for a family of four, which is \$23,000 a year. So, if you're not paying people enough to pay for the basics, they're going to need help getting food.

And food stamps expanded because we went through the greatest the worst recession since the Great Depression. And it did what it's supposed to do. And now, you know, mostly Republicans are saying, "Why are there so many people on food stamps?" You know, they're claiming the recession's over, but we know that most people on food stamps are, if they're getting work, it's low-wage work that doesn't pay enough to pay for food.

BILL MOYERS: The farm bill that failed in Congress last week would've spent \$743.9 billion on food stamps and nutrition over the next ten years. Republicans wanted to cut that by some \$20 billion over the same period, ten years. Given that we're spending \$75 to \$78 billion a year now on food stamps, do they have a case?

GREG KAUFMANN: Well, look, do they make a point that we're spending too much? I mean, if they're comfortable saying two million people should be thrown off food stamps, 200,000 low-income children should not have access to meals, to their meals in school. Hey, they can make that argument all they want. I think it's out of sync with the values of this country.

BILL MOYERS: Here is what Representative Steve King of Iowa said in the debate on the floor at the time the farm bill was up for consideration. Quote, "When we see the expansion of the dependency class in America, and you add this to the 79 other means-tested welfare programs that we have in the United States, each time you add another brick to that wall it's a barrier to people that might go out and succeed." What does your own reporting find?

GREG KAUFMANN: Boy, I wish he would take a look at this great study done just in November of 2012, that was released. Dr. Hilary Hoynes at the University of California Davis and her colleagues looked at this issue of self-reliance and food stamps.

They looked at the rollout of food stamps county by county and adults who were born between 1956 and '81 who were born in disadvantaged families defined as parents not having a high school diploma. And they looked at those people in their adult outcomes who had had access to food stamps when they were young or even in utero.

And they found that the adults, all the adults had significant reductions in metabolic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure. And even more remarkable to me was women in particular had higher earnings, higher income, higher education attainment and less reliance on welfare assistance in general.

All these years these guys have been saying it's promoting dependence, and it's been building self-reliance. I wish that the congressman from Iowa would take a look at that study.

BILL MOYERS: You watched the debate over the farm bill. You followed it very closely. What did you-- summarize it for me. What was going on there?

GREG KAUFMANN: You know, with some exceptions of people who are committed to telling the truth, we heard that this was about the deficit. But food stamps, over the next ten years, are projected to be one 1.7 percent of federal spending according to the Congressional Budget Office. We heard this was about fraud, but less than one cent on the dollar of food stamp spending is lost to fraud, less than one cent on the dollar.

And we heard fraud from the chairwoman Senator Stabenow, Democratic chairwoman of the Senate Agriculture Committee. We heard a lot about this was, you know, rural districts versus urban districts and welfare on the back of farmers. But you know what? The truth is Food Research and Action Center has shown that the percentage of households in rural districts participating in food stamps is the same as the percentage of households in urban districts.

So my big takeaway is that if we don't insist on a fact-based discussion, these are the kinds of absurdities that we're going to hear. And we're going to get bad bills. You mentioned the House bill, but even the Democratic bill started with \$4 billion in cuts. Senator Gillibrand had a good amendment, restoring those cuts which she would pay for by reducing the profit that the government guarantees to crop insurance companies. They guarantee a 14 percent profit. She said, "Let's do 12 percent and not do the food stamp cuts." Makes sense. Was trounced by Democrats who didn't want to stand up to the chairwoman and maybe lose their projects in the final farm bill.

BILL MOYERS: And they weren't eager to stand up to agribusiness, either, were they? The big factory farms? Weren't there still a lot of subsidies in that bill for big farms?

GREG KAUFMANN: Yeah, what we saw in A Place at the Table in terms of the agribusiness subsidies was consistent in this farm bill, too. And if you look at the donations and I think some other reporters have done this and I know the Environment Working Group has worked on this if you look at the political contributions in the House ag committees to both Democrats and Republicans, and those businesses are giving big bucks to those campaigns.

BILL MOYERS: What's the one most important thing you'd like for us to know about the issue as it plays out in Congress? What's going on up there when they're debating the farm bill and food stamps?

GREG KAUFMANN: Well, they're catering to the most powerful interests, just like seems like with pretty much all legislation. You mentioned the agribusiness interests, the crop insurance interests. We aren't talking about hunger and what does it mean in this country to commit to ending hunger.

BILL MOYERS: Why did you take this beat on as a commitment?

GREG KAUFMANN: Well, on a personal level, I think I had worked for a Boys and Girls Club in Ohio for a few years and got to know so many of the families there didn't know what to expect. But all the things I've been describing about how hard people work, I mean, that was the first thing that hit me, how hard they work two jobs, how they hard they work to arrange child care, how hard they work to get their kids

to a safe place. And I got tired of sort of annual articles on poverty -- not at "The Nation," "The Nation" has always been committed to covering it.

But when the new poverty statistics would come out, you'd see screaming headlines, "Record Poverty," oh my god, poverty, poverty. Very few of the articles actually interviewed people who were in poverty. You know, the fact that over one in three Americans, over 100 million Americans are living at just twice the poverty level, so just—

BILL MOYERS: Which is about what?

GREG KAUFMANN: Less than \$36,000 for a family of three. That's crazy. I mean, because we have poverty defined at, you know, at such a low level, \$18,000 for a family of three. But really, if you think about poverty as access to the basics that we, that everybody needs food, housing, healthcare, a decent job, you know, education, you know, we know it takes a lot more than that.

BILL MOYERS: What's your own sense of why this is the case, this vast inequality in a country as rich as ours? I mean, what does this say to you, the richest 400 people on the "Forbes" list made more from the stock market gains last year than the total amount of the food, housing and education budgets combined. I mean, the Walmart corporation made \$17 billion last year, \$17 billion.

GREG KAUFMANN: Right.

BILL MOYERS: Paying its workers so little, they have to use government programs to get by. In other words taxpayers are subsidizing Walmart's--

GREG KAUFMANN: Right.

BILL MOYERS: --low-income jobs.

GREG KAUFMANN: Yeah. I mean, I think not having organized labor plays a huge role in that, the declining unionization rate. I think, yeah, I mean, Walmart's a great example. Paying employees, helping them sign up for food stamps. I mean, I'm glad that people can get food stamps but, like, why not just pay a wage? I mean, there are a lot of corporations that are, you know, want to be involved in the fight against hunger. And the best thing they can do is get on board for fair wages.

So, yeah, I think there has been turning away from real people and what they're experiencing in this country. That's why I was so disappointed as crazy as the House farm bill was, the fact that the Democrats started with a \$4.1 billion cut almost made me angrier, because they're supposed to be the party that's in touch with people's real experiences.

BILL MOYERS: What do you mean?

GREG KAUFMANN: Well, like, why aren't they talking about that food stamps create nine dollars of economic activity for every five dollars in spending? Why aren't they talking about what Dr. Chilton talks about, the benefits socially, emotionally, cognitively, physically that's documented for children, and we care so much about children and what that means for their future opportunities. I mean, the Democrats

are supposed to be connected to the experiences of ordinary Americans. And when you start with this defensive wimpy posture of, "Oh, okay, we'll cut this much," instead of fighting for what you believe in, we're in trouble.

BILL MOYERS: Our viewers, what would you like them to know about what you know about hunger in America?

GREG KAUFMANN: I would like them to know that there are great groups that they can get involved with who are trying to work on this. Witnesses to Hunger, Share our Strength is doing good stuff with communities to get school breakfast programs expanded, New York City Coalition Against Hunger, who, you know, Joel Berg was saying we need to do town halls. We've got to pressure all these congressmen to do town halls in every district to make it more visible.

Food Research and Action Center did a great lobbying day involving more people in the community. So, there are groups to get involved with that are really committed to using science and evidence to inform our policy and to pressure the candidates and make this issue more visible.

BILL MOYERS: We will link our viewers and readers on our website, BillMoyers.com, to those groups. And we will follow your work in "The Nation" and online. Greg Kaufmann, thank you very much for being with me.
