

MEETING THE FOOD STAMP CHALLENGE

Members of the House "Hunger Caucus" are attempting to eat for a week on a budget of \$3.50 per day, which is the amount they say is allocated to the average food stamp recipient. The conclusion of this exercise is preordained - each participant will solemnly express his or her new appreciation of the hardships faced by poor people in America and the heartlessness of those who oppose massive increases in benefits.

Our family recently tried a similar experiment, but with different results. Hearing that it was impossible to live on the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour, we set a food budget of one third of a single minimum wage income. One third of the minimum wage at forty hours per week leaves a food budget of \$68.67 per week, or \$2.45 per person per day. I agreed to do the cooking and cleanup, while my wife and kids (ages 9 and 12) agreed to eat only what I prepared for the week.

A tour of local grocery stores quickly revealed that Wal-Mart had the best prices on most items, even when other stores offered coupons and specials. An hour of planning with our battered Pillsbury Family Cookbook produced a shopping list and we filled our trunk with groceries for \$66.09. We bought staples and some other items in large quantities, knowing that we would have more than enough for the week and would take credit for leftovers that would reduce the next week's grocery bill. We also spent \$4.44 on spices, which would easily have supplied us for six months.

We used a few tricks I remembered from childhood, such as powdered milk (tastes great when made the night before and refrigerated) and dried beans (62 cents for 12 servings), but we also made a few concessions to modern tastes, such as \$1.78 for tofu for our daughter. We had plenty of fruits and vegetables, including fresh apples, pears, lettuce, cabbage, carrots, celery, a cucumber, onions and potatoes, frozen spinach, and canned beets, corn, peas, beans and mushrooms. For meat we bought a canned ham (\$2.58), a pound of lean ground chuck (also \$2.58), turkey sausage (\$2.74) and two cans of tuna (\$1.00). We bought bread, bagels, cereal, pasta, frozen orange juice, eggs, rice, margarine, cooking oil, cream cheese, American cheese, flour, sugar, peanut butter, ketchup and soy sauce.

We had plenty to eat all week. Our main dishes for supper were stuffed cabbage, omelets, spaghetti and meatballs, spinach and ham crepes, tuna casserole, fried rice with ham, and turkey sausage. We always had two vegetables and a side dish, and most nights we had salad. Breakfast consisted of orange juice, milk, and cereal, although I fixed pancakes one morning. The lunches we packed for our kids were similar to what we usually pack; bagels with cream cheese, fruits, vegetables and milk. My wife and I made our lunches out of leftovers from the previous night's supper. I also baked cookies and made rice pudding. Preparation and cleaning time averaged two hours per day, but in our experiment only one adult was working, so there would still have been plenty of time for child care and other household chores.

We ran out of eggs and powdered milk toward the end of the week, so I went to a nearby grocery store and spent \$2.87 on non-powered skim milk and a dozen eggs. We used only a fraction of the staples we bought and still had a few other things left over, which I valued at \$11.80. Adding the original Wal-Mart bill, the second grocery bill, the spice bill divided by 26 (because they would have lasted 26 weeks), and subtracting the leftover food resulted in a grand total of \$57.33 for the week, or \$2.05 per person per day. That is less than 28% of a single minimum wage income, not counting any government benefits. If a similar amount were spent on non-food, non-housing expenses, there would be approximately \$396 left over each month for rent, which in our area would be adequate to make the monthly payment on a trailer, or to share a house with another family.

These calculations assume a single minimum wage earner for a family of four, with no government assistance. The "food stamp challenge" movement argues that this income, along with government assistance, is inadequate. In our situation, a family of four earning \$892.67 per month, we would be eligible for \$79 per week in food stamps, nearly 40% more than the amount that we found would comfortably feed us. In addition, we would be eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit which would offset our payroll taxes plus approximately \$3,470 per year - enough to pay our entire annual food bill. Finally, after a few years on the waiting list living in our trailer, we would be eligible for a Section 8 housing voucher, which would pay the fair market rent on an apartment.

The usual response to our results is to ask "but what about healthcare?" True, most minimum wage jobs do not offer health insurance, and the purchase of health insurance would be out of reach for a family of four living on a single minimum wage salary without other benefits. Such a family would be eligible for Medicaid for their children's healthcare, but the parents would not be eligible. There is a program that essentially provides health insurance to the poor, however. Nearly all poor people are aware of it, but it is ignored in most policy discussions. The program is called bankruptcy. Bankruptcy due to medical bills does not affect the ability of low income people to rent apartments or obtain jobs. With no assets, they have little to fear from declaring bankruptcy. Bankruptcy is the safety net that allows the poor to demand treatment for injuries and serious illnesses knowing that they will never have to pay the bill. It is far from ideal healthcare policy, but it does help to explain why so many people are able to live without health insurance.

It is certainly more pleasant to be rich than poor in America, but contrary to the romantic dreams of liberals, there is not a vast amount of misery in America that a Democratic political savior could end with higher welfare payments. The poor, whether they are recent immigrants, high school dropouts, or simply unambitious people who choose not to advance economically, can find ways to live decently on very small incomes. Any hunger that remains in America is due to ignorance or unwillingness to take advantage of opportunities, not a lack of food stamps.