



# We Can Fix This!

## Shifting the Conversation About SNAP in Texas by Establishing a Problem-Solver Mindset

Topos Partnership  
July 2022

### Introduction

In the 25-plus years since states were allowed to tinker with eligibility broadly for Food Stamps (at the same time as the entitlement for TANF was ended), advocates seeking to address the issue of food insecurity are in a much weaker position.

States like Texas have increasingly limited access to SNAP by implementing stricter policies. Texas is one of only 11 states with eligibility guidelines that exceed federal requirements.<sup>1</sup> It seems clear that there is an agenda that goes beyond preventing fraud or ensuring that those who are able to support themselves and their families are excluded from the program. The intent of some policymakers seems to be punitive and perhaps racist.

To take one particularly telling example relating to asset policies, Texas is one of only six states that do not exempt at least one car's value for eligibility consideration.<sup>2</sup> It is also one of only nine states that limit the value of cars that participants may own. This can put vulnerable people in the impossible situation of having to work—without being able to own a car that can reliably get them to work.

As the research described in this report makes clear, part of what makes the issue so difficult to make progress on is that the “cultural common sense” seems so often to work against food insecurity advocates. To put it bluntly, in too many cases the punitive restrictions that reduce access to SNAP don't strike people as out of line the way they should.

At the same time, the research also demonstrates a clear path forward for changing the conversation. By establishing and building on a pragmatic mindset (which we call Problem-Solver mode), we can introduce facts and tell a story that elicits much broader agreement, and we can come closer to centering equity in the debate.

---

<sup>1</sup> [SNAP Work Requirements Fact Sheet](#) (2018), National Conference of State Legislatures

<sup>2</sup> [State's Vehicle Asset Policies in the Food Stamp Program](#) (2008), Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

## Summary of Message Architecture

<p><b>Top-level Theme:</b> to be reinforced in ALL communications</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● SNAP is the most effective tool we have for addressing hunger. We should use it more, not less.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Core Value:</b> practical, problem-solving</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● We can fix this!</li> <li>● We need to roll up our sleeves and get this done.</li> <li>● We have the tools to solve this problem.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Clarifying Facts:</b> that support and reinforce the problem-solving theme. All of the pieces help, even if we can't tell our whole story, and should be reinforced whenever possible.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The rate of fraud is very low (less than 1%).</li> <li>● SNAP benefits are very low (\$1.40 per meal).</li> <li>● Rates of food insecurity are especially high in rural areas.</li> <li>● SNAP is a Federal program. It has already been paid for with Federal taxes.</li> <li>● Some politicians want to make it harder to access SNAP.</li> <li>● For every meal a food bank provides, SNAP is estimated to provide nine.</li> <li>● Making it harder to access SNAP requires extensive bureaucracy. This actually costs Texas taxpayers more than can be saved by fraud prevention.</li> <li>● Most people on SNAP in Texas are part of working families.</li> <li>● Most people who receive benefits are not able-bodied adults. They're children, people with disabilities, and the elderly.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key Concepts:</b> these will take more investment to establish.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● SNAP helps more than its direct recipients. It helps entire communities.</li> <li>● SNAP makes adults more able to contribute to the community, and children better able to develop into productive adults.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Story:</b> when we have the opportunity, put the pieces into a coherent whole.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● SNAP is the best <b>tool</b> we have for fixing hunger. It's not perfect, but it's highly effective. And it's already paid for by the Federal Government.</li> <li>● Some politicians are working to make it harder to access SNAP benefits, even though there's very little fraud in the program, and even though the vast majority of recipients are either part of working families or are disabled, elderly, or children.</li> <li>● Making it harder to access SNAP benefits creates new bureaucracy that harms those in crisis, which is wrong and actually costs us more money.</li> <li>● This doesn't make sense. We have a perfectly good tool for dealing with hunger. Let's use it!</li> </ul>
<p><b>Centering Equity:</b> this will depend on audience and messenger.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● SNAP helps to reduce historical inequity by disproportionately benefiting those who have traditionally been marginalized.</li> <li>● If it doesn't make sense to reduce access to SNAP, we should ask if there's another agenda here. For example, "if it's not about fraud, and if most people are not able-bodied adults, why exactly are we/you against the common-sense tool that lets us solve this problem?"</li> </ul> <p>In some cases, we may want to be explicit about what we think the motives are, but we should be cautious, because as stakeholders already know, this carries the risk of alienating many listeners.</p>

## Topos Approach

Developed over nearly twenty years of close collaboration between its three principals—a cognitive linguist, a public opinion strategist, and a cultural anthropologist—the Topos approach is designed to deliver communications tools with a proven capacity to shift perspectives in more constructive directions, give communicators a deeper picture of the issue dynamics they are confronting, and suggest the fundamentally different alternatives available to them.

Throughout our unique research process, the focus is on exploring—and ultimately finding ways of shifting—the current “cultural common sense” that shapes thinking on a given issue. In order to make progress, we need to understand the widely shared (mis)understandings, values and perceptions that are currently standing in the way of action and engagement. For instance, one piece of Americans’ cultural common sense is that most poor people are partly or mostly responsible for their own situations, so “fighting poverty” first and foremost means getting people to make smarter decisions rather than changing the conditions they face in their lives. To one degree or another, this perspective is part of the thinking of Americans across the political spectrum, and easily drives attitudes on many different policy debates.

Successful advocacy means taking account of, and even shifting, this cultural terrain. To have a chance at this, messages must do more than trigger “agreement.” (People can agree to statements while interpreting them the opposite of how they were intended.) Successful messaging should provide new perspectives (typically this means connecting the dots for audiences about something they hadn’t understood before), must be “sticky” (i.e. must present ideas and terms that people remember and want to think and talk about again), must seem compelling and relevant, and must be presented in terms that people are comfortable using actively with each other, not just responding to passively.

For this project, our methods for exploring these questions included a combination of a Communication Materials audit, an Argument Lab, Stakeholder Interviews, and Ethnographic Fieldwork and Elicitation Interviews.

## Communication Materials Audit

Initial steps of the larger research effort included an analysis of common assumptions and terms in communication materials. Clients provided the research team with 36 examples of digital and traditional messaging from their organizations and partnering groups. The intended audiences for the materials varied, including donors, food service providers, policymakers, and the public. Formats also varied, including food program flyers, infographics and newsletters as well as press releases, policy briefs, social media postings, and website blogs and pages. Insights from the audit helped the team frame the issues for next steps in the research process.

## Argument Lab

Also during the first phase of the project, at least 11 representatives related to the clients' coalition efforts took part in a one-time, two-hour Argument Lab. They were recommended by the clients based on their ability and willingness to somewhat playfully engage in critical debate. The purpose of the lab is to map the "argument space" of an issue in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the various arguments that surround an issue. Often this comes down to a simple statement that takes a clear position and is hard to refute, for example: "your right to smoke infringes on my right to breathe clean air;" "I have the right to defend myself and my family."<sup>3</sup> This method, developed by Topos, is particularly important for controversial issues, because it focuses on identifying the key rhetorical points that surface. These positions then get built into the interviews with stakeholders and the public.

## Stakeholder Interviews

In order to collect the relevant perspectives of experts and potential voices on the issue and to identify red flags associated with particular approaches, Topos conducted ten stakeholder interviews, averaging about 45 minutes each, throughout March of 2022. Identified and recruited by the clients, stakeholders included coalition members, former Texas lawmakers from both political parties, leaders of state food banks, as well as public policy and research groups, and state and national anti-hunger advocates versed in issues such as child hunger, red-state politics, and systemic racism. Topics for the conversations included such areas as how to talk about the issues, challenges

---

<sup>3</sup> As an example, a prompt from the moderator for this Argument Lab included: *Don't restrict which foods people can buy with SNAP benefits.* In response, lab participants generated pros to this argument, such as: (1) *Everyone has different diets and different needs;* (2) *Restrictions are based on a history of racism and stereotypes;* and (3) *Telling people what they can and can't eat is Regulation Nation!* They also generated cons, such as: (1) *The government shouldn't pay for bad or expensive food choices, like candy and soda;* and (2) *We're subsidizing a health crisis (obesity, diabetes) in low-income communities.*



experienced in communicating with policymakers versus the public, and key policy priorities to be communicated. Topos paid particular attention to the implicit understandings and metaphors stakeholders shared.

## **Ethnographic and Elicitation Interviews**

Building on what was learned from the communication materials audit, argument lab and stakeholder interviews, the team then developed a protocol for interviews with the public (Appendix A: Field Protocol). A white, female ethnographic field researcher from Texas and a male videographer of Mexican American and (Sonoran Desert) indigenous descent comprised the field team.

A total of 41 interviews were completed. In mid-late March 2022, the team conducted 33 ethnographic field interviews in and around the Dallas metropolitan area (i.e. downtown Dallas, Coppell, Duncanville, Richardson). These interviews occurred in the “field,” or natural settings, such as public spaces and workplaces, allowing for the team to make observations of people’s everyday lives. In mid-to-late April of 2022, eight elicitation interviews were then conducted by the field researcher via Zoom, rather than in person. These interviews permitted the inclusion of a wider geographic area and reached suburban areas of Austin, Forney, Garland, Georgetown, Killeen, and San Antonio.

One of the keys to Topos’ interviewing method is to allow patterns to emerge from natural interactions as much as possible. In our brand of ethnographic and elicitation interviews, we decide ahead of time what kinds of topics we would like to cover—what terrain we want to be on, so to speak. We design questions and comments that are structured enough to put us into that terrain, but loose enough to elicit unexpected responses and rejoinders. Researchers are trained and experienced in the techniques needed to maintain and direct these kinds of semi-structured conversations. Interviews are then transcribed and analyzed by a process of “annotation,” where key insights are formulated and their significance related to the project goals is identified through an iterative process.

## **Interview Demographics**

The research team aimed to reach a representative sample of individuals based on statistics of the Dallas metropolitan area from the 2020 census (Appendix B: Data & Demographics Preparation). With a few exceptions, they achieved a balance of representation, reaching a range of age groups, educational levels, income levels and race/ethnicity identifications. Exceptions included a slight skew toward male and Black participants, as well as a significantly higher representation of 35- to 44-year-olds and individuals with a bachelor’s degree or higher. Additionally, Hispanic individuals were slightly underrepresented.

## Ethnographic Findings

### Beliefs about SNAP and Hunger

Some deeply held beliefs, whether substantiated or not, drive people's thinking and can get in the way of communication efforts. A number of such beliefs, most unhelpful and some potentially helpful, frequently appeared in interviews. These are described, presented in Texas' residents' own words, and shown in video clips, as follows.

#### Unhelpful Beliefs

*"There's plenty of food help available."*

Without any actual concrete knowledge, many (but not all) people believe that there is a lot of help available "out there" already, if people would just avail themselves of it or organizations would just share the information better. Their descriptions include food banks and pantries being used by the masses, as seen in person or through the media:



*Well, I don't know about [hunger], because they got a lot of food, banks of food, places where people can go and get food. So I don't know of anybody going hungry myself, personally. (Male, 70, Black, Political affiliation=Not provided by respondent, Some College, Retired, Urban)*

*[Hunger] is an issue, but I think what's nice is we do have a few food pantries around here. ... My church group, we do things, we collect can goods, things like that. (Female, 43, Asian, Republican, Conservative, BA, 70K+, Suburban)*

*I think there's a lot of help out there. I hear a lot of food banks and stuff like that and churches giving stuff out. I think it's a matter of... there's a... informing more of when people put out or give out stuff. (Female, 28, Hispanic, Democrat, Conservative, College, <\$50k, Additional information=Not provided by the respondent)*

*I know for certain there are many different churches that hand out food at a given time. So I know that while there may be food insecurity, that there are resources ... There are many food pantries and help and aid groups that can help out there here in the city. (Male, 23, White, Independent, Moderate, Graduate degree, 100K+, Suburban)*

The high visibility of food pantries in particular leads to a mistaken impression that there is more assistance available than there is. The laudable emphasis on advertising the pantries (on local and national news, for example) has had the unintended consequence of encouraging the belief that the problem is well in hand. If messages don't head off this mistaken belief that there is an abundance of food aid already available, it will lead people to blame those who are hungry since they must not have availed themselves of the help, and may undermine any rationale to increase assistance.

*"Those who are hungry, poor are not like 'us.'"*

People strongly associate hunger with homelessness and all forms of destitution. When asked about experiences and observations of hunger (for example: *Do you feel like hunger is an issue that exists in this state or in Dallas in general?*), residents typically responded as follows:





*So, yeah, in Dallas, I haven't seen any homeless people or hunger and stuff. (Male, 47, Asian, Republican, Conservative, Graduate degree, 200K+, Suburban)*

*So I don't see [hunger], I mean other than the generalized homeless population that we have, which is a huge problem. (Male, 32, White, Independent, Moderate, Graduate Degree, 100K+, Suburban)*

*[Hunger] doesn't seem like it's being addressed at all, honestly. The homeless problem's just getting worse and worse. (Male, 28, Hispanic, Political affiliation=Not provided by respondent, High School, 50K+, Urban)*

With frustration, a stakeholder described this persistent tendency:

*I hate the word poverty. It's the correct word to use. It's the accepted term, the scientific, but poverty paints a picture of a rundown house and a baby sitting in nothing but diapers while everyone looks sad and worried. Right?*

These notions of what poverty is “supposed” to look like continually crop up and interfere with other messaging arguments. It reinforces ideas that people who need food and other public assistance are different from the norm and can prevent people from empathizing with people experiencing hunger.

*“SNAP should pay for the basics, not luxuries.”*

In line with the stereotypical images of poverty, people believe that those who need and receive assistance should be limited to only having the basics. This drives the common complaints and stereotypes of people buying expensive foods and owning luxury cars while at the same time receiving food assistance:

*It was the SNAP thing and they were buying processed and junk food. You know what I mean? And it's like, "Okay, you just spent like \$7 on a frozen pizza that you'll be able to maybe eat, like, for that dinner." (Female, 43, Asian, Republican, Conservative, BA, 70K+, Suburban)*

*I know a lot of people get upset if they see someone buying a steak with SNAP benefits, but, I mean, I don't personally see the problem with it because, one, everyone's taxes is paying for it anyways. (Female, 30, White, Democrat, Liberal, High School diploma, 70K+, Urban)*

*“People should take responsibility for their situation.”*

More than anything or anyone else—discrimination, program rules, legislators—people hold individuals responsible for their life circumstances. They tend to frame hunger and poverty as matters of personal responsibility—to shift the focus to the choices people make and to issues that are within an individual’s control. Education is a key tool that people expect to be utilized.

*Again, I say how can I help you if you want to sleep on the ground? Yes, I'm sorry that you're down there. I hate that you're down there. But if you choose to stay down there, that's your problem. (Male, 56, Black, Independent, Political leaning = Not provided by respondent, Some college, 200K+, Urban)*

*I grew up in a household where sometimes my free school meal at lunch was the only meal I ate all day and it wasn't my fault. I'm the kid here. It's because someone chose to have a kid who couldn't take care of the kid, and people need to be better educated and yeah. That's what I'm saying. (Female, 42, Black, Independent, Liberal, BA, 50K+, Suburban)*

*Thinking about buying fast food for a family, it economically makes a lot more sense, obviously, to buy groceries at a reasonable price and cook for yourself. And it's more nutritious, as well. But that's where I guess the education comes in. (Male, 64, White, Democrat, Liberal, BA, 100K+, Suburban)*

*[A class in school that teaches kids] would go a long way. Even bringing the parents into it, too, because some parents don't know what they're doing, and so I think that that's our problem, education. Period. (Female, 28, Hispanic, Conservative, Democrat, Bachelor's Degree, <50K, Additional information=Not provided by the respondent)*

This personal responsibility narrative is a strong belief and needs work to counter. While most people agree that structural factors exist, they generally resist the notion that they are the major determinants of outcomes. When discussing the role of racism in poverty and hunger, there is ambivalence:

*Some of it has been, in the past, due to racism, but now it's not just racism. (Female, 38, White, Democrat, Liberal, High School Diploma, <\$50K, Urban)*

*La pobreza y el racismo siempre ha existido y, como le digo, depende la mentalidad de uno ... porque el que lucha por sobrevivir agarra una moneda, la mira diferente, y el que no, no tiene la posibilidad, ya sea por falta de decisiones o una mala decisión porque la decisión incluye mucho en cada persona. | Poverty and racism have always existed and, as I say, it depends on the mentality ... because the one who fights to survive grabs a coin, looks at it differently, and the one who doesn't, doesn't have the possibility, either due to lack of decisions or a bad decision because the decision depends a lot on each person. (Male, 62, Hispanic, Additional information=Not provided by the respondent)*

*There's no nothing out there [in my hometown, on the east side]. It's just wild. And can I blame that on racism? I guess not, but it stems back from centuries ago. ... And I think, we're now at a age where we're trying to erase racism like it never happened. But it's just like, "Bro, you can't just sweep that under the rug." I don't know. (Male, 28, Hispanic, Political affiliation=Not provided by respondent, High School, 50K+, Urban)*

This way of thinking permeates the majority party of the Texas legislature, as well. A stakeholder specifically advised against addressing racial injustice, noting existing strain:

*These days with the social justice movement, and Black Lives Matter and some of the more militant stuff, I got to tell you, it's tough these days. Because when you fall on your sword so hard on some of the more extreme measures, and then you want to come talk rationally about race, you can't do it. You've lost the credibility. If you're out there leading the march and waving the flag with protestors, do all those things, and then you want to come talk about race in a civilized manner, this body will not give you that opportunity.*

“Fraud is inevitable.”

Most people have heard and believe fraud and misuse are serious problems:

*I mean, there is going to be fraud with any program. (Female, 30, White, Democrat, Liberal, High School diploma, \$70K+, Urban)*

*Fraud. That's what they're trying to do [by adding photo IDs]. People are selling food stamps and all that type stuff. I get it. (Male, 35, Black, Independent, Bachelor's Degree, 100K+, Urban)*

*There's so much abuse going on with SNAP...you can buy like 30 bags of chips on SNAP. You know what I mean? Or you can sell your funds to people. (Female, 43, Asian, Republican, Conservative, BA, 70K+, Suburban)*

*Porque muchas personas que les ayudan con estampillas de comida, prestan o las venden para otras cosas. Para comprar licor, tabaco... | Because many people who help them with food stamps lend or sell them for other things. To buy liquor, tobacco... (Male, 62, Hispanic, Additional information=Not provided by the respondent)*

False information regarding the realities of SNAP fraud in particular have permeated people's belief systems, which demonstrates the success of larger political efforts, often rooted in racist motives, to demonize beneficiaries of public assistance. They tend to create psychological distance from themselves and those they imagine as hungry, thinking of fraud as an inevitable part of public programming and agreeing that limits should be imposed on participation as a result.

## Summary: Unhelpful beliefs about SNAP and hunger

### **1. “There’s plenty of food help available.”**

Description: Without any actual concrete knowledge, many people believe that there is a lot of help available “out there” already.

Problem: The high visibility of church donations and food pantries in particular leads to a mistaken impression that there is more assistance available than there is.

### **2. “Those who are hungry, poor are not like ‘us’.”**

Description: People strongly associate hunger with homelessness and all forms of destitution.

Problem: These notions of what poverty is “supposed” to look like continually crop up and interfere with other messaging arguments. They reinforce ideas that people who need food and other public assistance are different from the norm. Most problematically, this understanding feeds racialized narratives.

### **3. “SNAP should pay for the basics, not luxuries.”**

Description: There is a strong and hard-to-shake idea that government assistance tends towards overgenerous and frivolous benefits, and that people tend to misuse/abuse help they are given..

Problem: This idea inspires agreement that is difficult to shake, especially related to vehicle asset limits.

### **4. “People should take responsibility for their situation.”**

Description: People believe that structural factors exist but that at the end of the day each one of us is responsible for our own situation..

Problem: Across all groups, this deeply rooted American belief interferes with messaging aimed to point out systemic oppression and other structural factors that contribute to food insecurity.

### **5. “Fraud is inevitable.”**

Description: Most people have heard and believe fraud and misuse are serious problems.

Problem: False information regarding fraud in particular has permeated people’s belief systems, giving decision makers power to limit access to SNAP under the guise of “preventing fraud”.

## Helpful Beliefs

*“This is fixable.”*

Fundamentally, people feel that hunger and food insecurity are fixable. They believe that we collectively have the resources (food and money) to end hunger. They see this as a concrete problem that can be solved:



*Don't think there's any reason why... it's just will, isn't it? Just a will, an act of will. Hunger could be solved. World hunger could be solved if politicians wanted it to be solved. It's not that difficult. Just priorities.” (Male, 64, White, Democrat, Liberal, Bachelor’s Degree, 100K+, Suburban)*

*Like what did Tupac say? Got money for wars, can't feed the poor. That's what's happening right now. They signed a \$15 billion bill to fucking help Ukraine, and it's like, people are starving over here. He said that in the '90s. It's still happening. (Male, 32, Black, 50K+, Urban, Additional information=Not provided by the respondent)*

When people consider the problem of solving hunger, they do not get triggered with an overwhelming sense that it’s an impossible task. Instead, it becomes a practical issue, and the main question becomes: Since we could fix this if we wanted to, why aren’t we? It points to political will. It also points to simply being the right thing to do (because it shouldn’t be a moral hazard to just fix the problem).

*“It’s part of the government’s job to help.”*

People see hunger as a serious enough problem that the government should assist in addressing it. This belief holds even for those who don’t really like the government or

government programs, and it even coexists with the core belief that it would be better if we could help ourselves:



*I think we'll be much better and a better place if we were to do it without government's help, right? I mean, if we were able to. And I see a lot of communities already do that, right? I mean, those drives, those things. I think if anything, there should be more education about this, awareness, and I think the role of the government should be a bit more indirect. That is they are educating, maybe even the kids at the school and other places. (Male, 47, Asian, Republican, Conservative, Graduate degree, 200K+, Suburban)*

*A lot of times more government involvement is a bad idea. I mean, but obviously if anything, if there was any programs or things like your funding or whatever it might be they could help, then that's great regardless of where it's coming from, if it's going to actually help. (Female, 45, White, Republican, Conservative, Bachelor's Degree, 50K+, Suburban)*

Many people expressed the idea that the government isn't doing enough:

*I mean, I just don't understand what [the Texas government] do[es]. I don't think they're doing anything. ... Can you think of anything anybody's said about food in Texas? (Male, 64, White, Democrat, Liberal, BA, 100K+, Suburban)*

*So do I think Texas could do more for my limited vantage point? I think they can, yeah. (Male, 38, Hispanic, Democrat, Moderate, Graduate Degree, \$30K+, Suburban)*

*People are not being informed about what they can do to provide better for their families. There are government schemes that are out there, like WIC, I believe, and other things. But they never seem to be promoted. They never seem to be promoted. Quite the reverse. They seem to be very difficult. Anything that smacks of socialism or giving to people, it's very, very difficult to qualify for. (Male, 64, White, Democrat, Liberal, BA, 100K+, Suburban)*

A conservative stakeholder, aware of the seeming contradiction, similarly pointed to the need for some government involvement:

*So it's kind of interesting that we're getting into this space where some would argue that folks like us just want to kick people off of safety net programs, right. And that's not what we're trying to do. The idea is that I think we could see longer term across the political spectrum and across the viewpoints of wherever you're coming from, of we want a flourishing society where fewer people are in poverty ... But at the same time, we have to look at the reality of where we're at and where the resources and where help is going to come from. And the government has a role to play in that situation.*

People also described an “all-hands-on-deck” approach as most effective. They saw all types of entities (i.e. nonprofits, all levels of government, churches, the community) as needing to work together:

*Everybody would have to get involved to bring people out of the poverty line. Government can't do it all on its own. Communities, churches like you said, I think everybody would have to get involved. (Male, 40, White, Democrat, Liberal, Bachelor's Degree, 50K+, Urban)*

*I think it's a partnership, really, between everybody... business and government have a role to play. (Male, 64, White, Democrat, Liberal, Bachelor's Degree, 100K+, Suburban)*

*I think the city's doing as much as they possibly can. I think that there's always more to do, but I think that the problem is that the city's unsupported at a state level and that the federal level is also just barely there ... (Male, 32, White, Independent, Moderate, Graduate Degree, 100K+, Suburban)*

Because people are already on board with the necessity of government involvement in food programming, it becomes possible to set aside the argument about (whether or not to have) government assistance. This helps to avoid triggering the core value that “people need to help themselves.” Instead, it could be argued that the state has a responsibility to rally all possible resources to help Texans buy nutritious food. It could also be argued that more and more Texans need help putting food on the table, so lawmakers should quickly clean up and increase access to SNAP (as Texas has already done for older adults and individuals with disabilities).

*“You should be able to get help when you need it.”*

When people imagine (or recall) facing hunger, they tap into a sense of urgency. Despite supporting regulations on SNAP, they believe that people should be able to get help when they need it.



*I wish it was a little bit easier for people to get help. But at the same time, I understand why they have a certain system in place to avoid abuse of the system. (Male, 38, Hispanic, Democrat, Moderate, Graduate Degree, 30K+, Suburban)*

*Now, if they put time limits on it, I can understand. ... But just to say that you can't receive it at all? Everybody's going to hit hard times at some point. (Male, 70, Black, Political party=None provided, Some college, Retired, Urban)*

*I'm sure there are some that think that, some of the lawmakers that think that there's just way too many people that apply for these different programs, whatever it may be, to get help ... [but] they're not running through the whole logic of they may have **this** [vehicle], but that doesn't mean that **now** that they're not in a situation where they need help. (Female, 45, White, Republican, Conservative, BA, 50K+, Suburban)*

*Of course there's people that are abusing the system, but you see that in any place, in any circumstance. But I think the vast majority of individuals, they're going to take time to fill out an application because they need food. I feel like nine times out of ten, it's because they actually need the food. So I would do away with all the restrictions, give them the benefit of the doubt and offer them the help that they need. And then if you find evidence of fraud, then you could pursue*



*whatever line of prosecution that's necessary under the law. (Male, 38, Hispanic, Democrat, Moderate, Graduate Degree, 30K+, Suburban)*

People identify with the immediacy of hunger and can recognize how problematic it is to face obstacles while in crisis. They see getting enrolled as a distinct moment in time, which differs from the period of program participation. This may open the door to talking about different rules (and how strict they are, need to be) for qualifying versus participating in programming.

**Summary: Helpful beliefs about SNAP and hunger**

<b>1. “This is fixable.”</b>
Description: Fundamentally, people feel that food insecurity and hunger are fixable. Benefit: This belief fits with a problem-solving mindset.
<b>2. “It’s part of the government’s job to help.”</b>
Description: People see hunger as a serious enough problem that the government should assist in addressing it. This belief holds even for those who don’t really like the government or government programs. Benefit: This belief fundamentally supports the overarching argument that SNAP is the best tool we have for fighting food insecurity.
<b>3. “You should be able to get help when you need it.”</b>
Description: When people imagine (or recall) facing hunger, they tap into a sense of moral urgency. Despite supporting restrictions on qualifying for SNAP, they believe that people should be able to get help when they need it. Benefit: People understand that bureaucracy is the last thing you need when you’re in crisis. They see the stage of applying for benefits as distinct from the period of receiving them. This makes room for the argument to reduce enrollment barriers.

## Gaps in Understanding

The public is familiar with SNAP and other food programs in terms of their general aims, but they possess limited knowledge regarding some basic facts, especially as it relates to how much SNAP support is provided and who participates in food programs. The list of things that people don't know about SNAP is of course very long; here are two examples.

### The amount of the benefit

*“SNAP allows for just \$1.40 per meal?!”*

None of the public was aware that the average meal per person is \$1.40. Universally, people believe that \$1.40 is not enough for a meal, and certainly not a nutritious one:



*Nobody can eat off \$1.40. What can you get? You can't get anything for \$1.40 these days. Nothing. (Female, 38, White, Some College, Political affiliation=Not provided by respondent, \$50-\$100k, Urban)*

*There's no way that you could eat a nutritious meal on a \$1.40 per meal. (Female, 30, White, Democrat, Liberal, High School diploma, \$70K+, Urban)*

*If they're expecting everyone to eat a piece of bread and an orange, then yeah, then it would be around \$1.40, but not for a balanced meal. (Male, 38, Hispanic, Democrat, Moderate, Graduate Degree, \$30K+, Suburban)*

*If I cook from scratch for my family, like economically we're talking probably about \$5 to \$10 for a meal and that's on the cheaper side. (Female, 43, Asian, Republican, Conservative, Bachelor's Degree, 70K+, Suburban)*

## Some groups of SNAP participants are invisible

*“During hard times, it’s low-income people who struggle most, right?”*

Individuals with disabilities and older adults make up a sizeable number of SNAP participants in the state – at least 27% of overall.<sup>4</sup> Still, when describing who might face economic hardship and hunger, people fail to think of these groups and also forget about college students. Instead, in addition to immediately thinking of those who are homeless, they primarily imagine people with low incomes:

*Well, people who are living paycheck to paycheck [are more likely to go hungry when economic times are hard], people who are probably in, I guess, lower-paying jobs. (Female, 42, Black, Independent, Liberal, Bachelor’s Degree, 50K+, Suburban)*

*The groups that live paycheck to paycheck and that can't buy ahead of time I think they're going to be affected the most, single moms, people who have jobs that pay minimum wage that aren't able to get ahead. Those types of groups are going to be most affected by [hard times]. (Female, 43, Asian, Republican, Conservative, Bachelor’s Degree, 70K+, Suburban)*

What people don’t know about SNAP and other food programs is a problem for the current conversation. It is also, as will become clear in the Recommendations section, an opportunity to shift how people think because people are often willing to accept new facts.

---

<sup>4</sup> [A Closer Look at Who Benefits from SNAP: State-by-State Fact Sheets](#) (2022), Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

## Directions that miss the mark

### Summary: Gaps in Understanding

A few ways of addressing food insecurity and related policies faced serious opposition in our ethnographic conversations. Other approaches seemed promising but then proved problematic, including questioning the motives of politicians and using personal stories. As we will discuss in the Recommendations section, this is not to say that all of these messaging directions should be discarded, but that they will have to be set up with the right context to be effective. Leading with these points leads to problems.

### Talking about “food insecurity”

A major issue is that the term “food insecurity” is not recognized or understood meaningfully by most people. The term caused confusion, as can be seen here:



*So, I think of insecurity like having your own insecurities. Just stuff that you're not really happy with about yourself, I guess. But when it comes to food, I don't know what, how that could really translate as to food. (Male, 28, Hispanic, Political affiliation=Not provided by respondent, High School, 50K+, Urban)*

*Food insecurity? I don't know. It's what? There's not enough food going around? (Male, 35, Black, Independent, College, 100K+, Urban)*

This held true among stakeholders, as well. An advocate addressed this by saying:

*So I am from the school of I love to demystify policy because I think we use a lot of terms, a lot of words, a lot of phrases that are unnecessary. Right. And that*

*separates from people who are really experiencing it, they wouldn't describe their experience as food insecurity. They would say I'm hungry.*

While the terms food insecurity and hunger are not interchangeable,<sup>5</sup> food insecurity unfortunately is not useful. When explained to the public, it doesn't engage people, open up new ways of thinking, or inspire action. To further complicate matters, this quickly runs the risk of getting discounted when used with some policymakers:

*I've learned on issues like this, air's got to be clean, kids are hungry, kids are sick, and you just got to keep it basic. Because I think the further and further these groups dig in on the individual policies, they lose.*

Because the term gets in the way of communication, avoid *food insecurity* in public messaging and with many stakeholders, especially policymakers. Despite being imperfect, primarily use *hunger* because it's understood as a physical pang and also a social problem. To get at the economic state that underpins food insecurity, consider adding possible phrases to hunger (or in place of hunger). These could include: *can't afford enough food* and *can't afford nutritious food*. To get at the detrimental health effects, additions could include: *persistent hunger* and *malnutrition*. Of course, the term and related USDA definitions (APPENDIX C: Defining food insecurity, food security) need not be entirely dropped. *Food insecurity* might still be useful when planning and problem-solving among advocates, coalition members and policy allies.

## **Pushing back against photo IDs, without providing our reasoning**

Surprisingly, people believe that putting IDs on benefits cards sounds like a good idea. While some argue that it's a waste of money or that it's unreasonable to make grocery store clerks "police" SNAP, almost everyone still sees it as a way to both prevent fraud and keep the card secure:

---

<sup>5</sup> [Hunger and Food Insecurity are Not the Same](#) (2020), The Counter



*[Requiring people to put their photo ID on the benefits card] would be great Because, I mean, it would... You wouldn't be able to get your extra whatever. You would have to go buy the food ... (Female, 28, Hispanic, Conservative, Democrat, Bachelor's Degree, <50K, Urban, Additional information=Not provided by the respondent)*

*That's a good idea. That really is a good idea, because otherwise it gets stolen. Especially if you're in a shelter, it will get stolen quicker than anything. (Female, 38, White, Independent, Liberal, High School Diploma, <50K, Urban)*

*That's inconvenient. But I don't know if that's just to say, I don't know if I would say, oh, that's totally outrageous and they shouldn't do that. I mean ... I'm not sure totally how it works, but I guess right now, they just have the card and I don't know, could anybody be sliding it at the register? I mean, if anyone can slide it at the register, I'm not sure I'm exactly okay with that either. (Female, 45, White, Republican, Conservative, Bachelor's Degree, 50K+, Suburban)*

The general public has little to no objection to this proposal and is unconcerned with any practical problems created. They see nothing wrong with the necessity of individual workarounds for potential practical difficulties with use. This is an example of introducing a new structural obstacle, and sadly people do not object to it. Even when the practical difficulties it would introduce are explained, they offer possible solutions instead of rejecting the addition of photo IDs:

*Why can't you choose maybe two or three individuals? I mean, you get that at Sam's Club. You go to Sam's Club and sign up for a membership, here's a second card for a second member of the household. (Male, 38, Hispanic, Democrat, Moderate, Graduate Degree, 30K+, Suburban)*

*También debe haber alguna manera de darle una carta poder o autorización para que se pueda usar esa tarjeta. | There must also be some way to give a power of attorney or authorization for that card to be used. (Male, 62, Hispanic, Additional information=Not provided by the respondent)*

*That's a tough one. Maybe put the person that can't go. In that case, if you know that person does have a disability, have that in the bottom, disabled, son or daughter can go, a special note in the bottom. (Female, 28, Hispanic, Democrat, Conservative, College, <50K, Additional information=Not provided by the respondent)*

In sum, don't try to rely solely on existing opposition to benefit card ID photos in messaging—there is little to none. The public sees this as reasonable. A positive case has to be made for why photo IDs are a bad idea.

## **Fighting vehicle asset limits, unless time is on your side**

*“People with fancy cars shouldn't be on SNAP.”*

As discussed, people hold the belief that food program participants should be provided with the basics and not luxuries. In particular, this inspires agreement with asset limits that can be difficult to shake:

*It gets tricky because do you really need [SNAP] if you're able to pay for such a nice car? Where are your priorities at? (Male, 28, Hispanic, Political affiliation=Not provided by respondent, High School, 50K+, Urban)*

*So, I think it depends on the category of car, right? If it's a truck like F-150 or something like that, then of course it should be excluded from [asset calculations]. But if it's a, I don't know, BMW, you know what I mean? (Male, 47, Asian, Conservative, Republican, Graduate Degree, >\$200k)*

*I would think that they [have vehicle asset limits] because some people are... they want to... they want... I guess I... I think it's fine. You know why? Because if someone that's driving a \$50,000 car is trying to get benefits, but... I mean, you have to look at the whole scenario. I mean, it's a tough thing ... They're trying to wean out the people that are able to have, but... How do I explain it? (Female, 28, Hispanic, Democrat, Conservative, Bachelor's Degree, <\$50k, Additional information=Not provided by the respondent)*

Especially related to vehicle asset limits, people eventually think of scenarios (i.e. a layoff, medical emergency or even vehicle loan) to account for having a car worth more than 15K. Unfortunately, these connections are complex and take time to work through in people's thinking, so they are not as powerful as they might initially seem.

## Directly questioning the motives of politicians

Across the board, the public pushed back on the suggestion that elected officials would act in ways to sabotage food programming like SNAP:

*I think it's about fraud. There's no way they can kill that program. (Male, 35, Black, Independent, Bachelor's Degree, 100K+, Urban)*

*I think it's more about fraud. Not about sabotaging or killing the program. (Male, 35, Black, Liberal, Independent, Some College, 50K+, Urban)*

*I understand why they have a certain system in place to avoid abuse of the system. That's unfortunate, but I guess that's their rationale. (Male, 38, Hispanic, Democrat, Moderate, Graduate Degree, 30K+, Suburban)*

*I'm sure there are some that think that, some of the lawmakers that think that there's just way too many people that apply for these different programs, whatever it may be, to get help. And they think they don't need it or they're just, like I said, playing the system or whatever. So they probably think, oh, if we do this or that, that'll weed out these people doing that. So I'm not sure. I don't know if, like I said, I don't think I would go as far as to say they're intentionally sabotaging. (Female, 45, White, Republican, Conservative, Bachelor's Degree, 50K+, Suburban)*

*But I think deep down they think that they're doing the right thing and this is their way to fix a problem that may not really even be a problem. (Male, 34, Asian, Independent, Liberal, Graduate School, 200K+, Urban)*

*I want to give them the benefit of the doubt and say that their decision is data-driven, but past experience has shown that politicians aren't really... and people in general aren't really rational decision makers. (Male, 38, Hispanic, Democrat, Moderate, Graduate Degree, 30K+, Suburban)*

Critical perspectives from the argument lab and stakeholder interviews, including a false emphasis by elected officials on fraud as well as history of racist and/or stereotypical laws related to SNAP, were explored. Not only do most people reject the idea of efforts to shut down programming, they agree with and even expect efforts to prevent fraud. They trust, or want to trust, that their elected officials are doing the right thing, and, especially when pitted against a deeply held belief like fraud, there is little to no room for winning this argument.

## Focusing on empathy/person-centered view

Authentic stories of everyday Texans who experience food insecurity and even hunger are important to share. Your organizations and other partners currently take a person-



centered view and, in doing so, build empathy and emotional power around your efforts. This helps to open hearts and minds to what a lack of reliable nutrition looks and feels like, making it more concrete and actionable.

At the same time, there are some cautions to centering personal stories. One of the more ironic, perhaps, is that evoking empathy can create too narrow of a focus. Topos has found that taking a “close-up” view can invite distraction and a tendency for people to focus on individual responsibility and criticize individuals for their choices. A specific story can get in the way of people seeing the bigger picture, as the circumstance of the case may become the main thing someone remembers. As described in the communications audit, an example of this is the story of “Gabriel and Constancia,” which was shared with donors in a fundraising email.<sup>6</sup>



These older adults have lost their jobs and are now making ends meet by frequenting a local pantry. With the exception of a reference to job loss caused by the pandemic, their story fails to mention a systemic issue (i.e. chronic low wages for marginalized groups, fixed incomes, racial inequity) that may underpin their circumstances. Instead of generating concern and potential donations, this absence of contextualizing information may instead raise questions among the audience about the couple’s financial preparedness and savings.

The goal then is that when personal stories are used, it’s critical to link them to structural issues. An example of this being done well came from the communications

---

<sup>6</sup> “Gabriel and Constancia” Fundraising Email, Feeding Texas

audit. Here, the story of “Adriana” is told within the context of a recession, which helps to frame why she has repeatedly been without a paycheck.<sup>7</sup>



## More Than 2.5 Million Texas Households Don't Have Enough Food to Eat

According to a November survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 2.5 million households in Texas either sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat. **Food banks across Texas are projecting food shortages in coming months** due to the end of three key federal and state programs that have helped them respond to high demand during the coronavirus pandemic and its accompanying recession.

This story includes structural and personal elements, and this helps to sidestep blaming this “South Texas Mom.” In fact, leading with the bigger picture and situating Adriana’s story carefully within it (for example, starting instead of ending the piece with job loss and the recession, providing a statistic about how many working families have been affected by this same issue, etc.) could be even more powerful.

---

<sup>7</sup> “Adriana” Fundraising Email, Feeding Texas

There are indeed important wins to using an empathy-based personal stories approach, but there is also a ceiling on how much support it generates. Strategies to maximize effectiveness of this approach have been developed by Topos. They include a focus on specific places, broader contexts and successes. (See APPENDIX D: Focus on Personal Stories).

## Starting the conversation with a call for social justice

Stakeholders emphasized how hard it is to make the conversation about racism. “It blows up the conversation.”

The research made it clear that the cultural logic is strong and works against leading with a race-centered approach. For example, when we say that “restricting access to SNAP with ‘so-called fraud prevention measures’ is racist,” we run up against the cultural common sense that fraud is a real problem and that it can happen regardless of race, and that the measures—e.g., requiring photo identification—don’t appear to target particular groups or communities. We were struck by how often people supported these measures.

Part of the explanation is that the cultural logic of deservingness, moral hazard, and so on, is in fact color-blind. In previous research in all-white communities in Appalachia, we found the same accusations of laziness and lack of personal responsibility and cheating applied to members of the same community, indeed to members of respondents’ own families.

At the end of the day, though the arguments against SNAP might very well be a cover for racist ideology, it proved hard to call it out as such, given the race-neutral logic of fraud and deservingness, without first establishing the right mindset.

## Messaging Summary: “Be Cautious With”

### **I. Using technical terms that alienate regular people, even some that are very familiar to you, such as “food insecurity.”**

Description: A major issue is that the term “food insecurity” is not recognized or understood meaningfully by most people. The term caused confusion. Of course, the term might still be useful when planning and problem-solving among advocates, coalition members and policy allies.

Possible steps: Despite being imperfect, primarily use *hunger* because it’s understood as a physical pang and also a social problem. For more nuance, add possible phrases to hunger (or in place of hunger). For example:

- To get at the economic state that underpins food insecurity, consider adding possible phrases to hunger (or in place of hunger). These could include: *can’t afford enough food* and *can’t afford nutritious food*.

- To get at the detrimental health effects, additions could include: *persistent* hunger and *malnutrition*.

## 2. Talking about photo IDs without providing our reasoning.

Description: Surprisingly, people believe that putting IDs on benefits cards sounds like a good idea. While some argue that it's a waste of money or that it's unreasonable to make grocery store clerks "police" SNAP, almost everyone still sees it as a legitimate way to keep the card secure and prevent fraud.

Possible steps: Don't try to rely solely on existing opposition to benefit card ID photos in messaging—there is little to none. The public sees this as reasonable. A positive case has to be made for why photo IDs are a bad idea.

## 3. Focusing on fighting vehicle assets limits, especially without enough time to tell your whole story.

Description: As discussed, people hold the belief that food program participants should be provided with the basics and not luxuries. In particular, this inspires agreement with asset limits that can be difficult to shake.

Possible steps: People eventually think of scenarios (i.e. a layoff, medical emergency or even vehicle loan) to account for having a car worth more than \$15K. Unfortunately, these connections are complex and take time to work through in people's thinking, so they are not as powerful as they might initially seem.

## 4. Leading by questioning the motives of politicians.

Description: Not only do most people reject the idea of legislators' efforts to shut down programming, they agree with and even expect their efforts to prevent fraud. They trust, or want to trust, that their elected officials are doing the right thing.

## 5. Focusing too tightly on empathy/person-centered stories.

Description: There are some cautions to centering personal stories. Taking a "close-up" view can invite distraction and a tendency for people to criticize individuals for their choices. A specific story can get in the way of people seeing the bigger picture, as the circumstance of the case may become the main thing someone remembers.

Possible steps: When personal stories are used in communications, it's critical to link them to structural issues.

#### **6. Starting the conversation with a social justice accusation.**

Description: Though the arguments against SNAP might very well be a cover for racist ideology, it proved hard to call it out as such, given the race-neutral logic of fraud and deservingness,

Possible steps: Establish pragmatic, problem-solving arguments and stories before positioning elected officials as acting in oppressive, racist ways.

## Strategic Recommendation: Lead with Pragmatism

People toggle between two very different cognitive mindsets when thinking about the issue of SNAP benefits. On the one hand, they focus on the **individuals** involved, which triggers a number of cognitive frames that are both helpful and unhelpful. On the other hand, they focus on problem-solving.

Unhelpful associations within the train of thought of **Individual-Centered mode** include asking themselves questions about whether a person is **deserving** of benefits:

- Are they able-bodied and should they be working, and are we encouraging laziness by providing benefits?
- Are they defrauding the taxpayers by accessing benefits that they don't deserve, or worse, selling their benefits to someone else?

More fundamentally, are they “like me,” or are they Other, either because they are unable to provide for themselves or are part of a group that I perhaps associate with certain negative traits? In other words, Individual-Centered thinking leads from “neediness” to “otherness,” and this is only one step away from racist thinking. And while it's always hard to determine in conversations what people really feel (implicit bias testing exists for this reason), it's safe to assume, given what we know about the history of the issue and psychological dynamics, that racist thinking contributes to negative public opinion about SNAP benefits.

Individual-Centered mode of course also offers well-known communications opportunities. Helpful trains of thought within Individual-Centered mode include **empathizing** with people (especially children) who are experiencing hunger, in a strongly emotional way, and thinking about how to address the problem. This clearly has potential for drawing attention to the problem, and of course for encouraging support and donations.

But working within Individual-Centered mode, for example by appealing to empathy, has limits. It can prevent people from thinking about what experts recognize are the most constructive policy approaches:

First, it focuses attention on **little-picture** solutions, such as personal charity and food pantries—solutions that are vivid and clear to people—and leaves the more effective policy solutions (like increased SNAP benefits) outside the field of vision. The fact is that hunger can only be solved through government policy.

Second, empathy is an unreliable emotion. It requires particular scenarios and people (such as the ones that are portrayed in communications materials produced by advocates) that don't always map onto the reality of who actually needs help in the real world. For a variety of reasons, including compassion fatigue, empathy can crumble and be replaced by moral judgment and impatience that people need to “get their act together.”

## **Recommendation: Shift the conversation to Problem-Solver Mode**

The ethnographic findings strongly suggest that while we should continue to tap into empathy for certain purposes, we also need to encourage and tap into a different cognitive mindset—**Problem-Solver Mode**. In this way of thinking, hunger becomes “a problem we fix,” like filling potholes or building bridges.

Problem-Solver Mode—in contrast to Individual-Centered Mode—has a number of game-changing implications:

*Problem-Solver Mode avoids the “deservingness” trap.*

When we think about fixing potholes, we don’t worry very much about whether particular automobile drivers are deserving of this help. We roll up our sleeves and do what needs to be done. In the famous saying, there are no Republican or Democratic potholes.

*Problem-Solver mode naturally leads the conversation to policy solutions.*

If we’re thinking about actually fixing the problem of hunger, it makes sense to go beyond relying on charity, food pantries, or personal responsibility. We don’t expect individuals to fix potholes or build bridges, and in this mode we similarly expect government to be involved with solving a problem as big as hunger.

*Problem-Solver mode is quite stable.*

While people may start with the right intuitions about policy solutions, they are often swayed by opposition messaging that focuses on little-picture thinking, and racial biases. Problem-solver mode has the advantage of resisting this tendency. It is, for example, easy to defend in everyday conversation, without falling into the deservingness trap. “You know what, let’s just fix this.”

*Problem-Solver mode offers a way to break apart solving hunger and solving fraud.*

When it comes to SNAP, people are prone to thinking that the problem to be solved is fraud and the need to get people independent, even though many “solutions” actually make hunger worse. By establishing solving hunger as the primary challenge, these other issues not only become secondary, but it becomes clearer that we have to beware of trade offs or unintended consequences when it comes to the true problem to be solved, namely tackling hunger.

*Problem-Solver mode opens the door to a conversation about race.*

As earlier noted, trying to center equity and racism on this issue tends, as one stakeholder put it, to “blow up the conversation” with people outside our base. One of the exciting implications of the research is that it offers a way to bring race into the conversation, by building on Problem-Solver mode.

## **The ethnographic research demonstrates that people are receptive to Problem-Solver mode.**

Importantly, the ethnographic research made it clear that people are open to this communications direction. Specifically, ideas (previously discussed in the ethnographic findings section) that are compatible with Problem-Solver mode are widely shared among the public.

In other words, it’s not the case that we have to impose an entirely unfamiliar way of thinking. We simply have to get them to toggle to a way of thinking that they don’t always default to.

*“Hunger is solvable.”*

*Hunger could be solved. World hunger could be solved if politicians wanted it to be solved. It's not that difficult. Just priorities. (64, White, Democratic, Liberal, Bachelor's Degree, \$100-199k)*

*“It’s the government’s job to fix this.”*

*Generally speaking, yes, but I don't know how the details of implementing would look like. But I think in overall, yes. I think the government is to serve people. And if we have people who are barely even making it, then we're failing as a government to our people. (34, Asian, Independent, Liberal, Graduate Degree, >200K)*

*I'm kind of pro the government helping people. For sure. So yeah, I feel like that should be a part of their job is to address these sort of issues and the ... especially down ... like the food deserts down in San Antonio that we have. (23, White, Liberal, Democrat, Bachelor's Degree, <50K)*

## **Messaging: How to establish and work with Problem-Solver Mode**

Building support for SNAP is both a strategic and a tactical project. At the tactical level, we recommend a series of immediate messaging choices. And we recommend a longer-term process of educating the public (and policymakers, journalists, and other influentials) about some key concepts that promote a more progressive conversation about Hunger.



1) *Set a pragmatic tone.*

Use language that reinforces the idea that hunger is a solvable problem:

“We can fix this!”

“We need to roll up our sleeves and get this done.”

“We have the tools to solve this problem.”

Etc.

2) *Establish key concepts that reinforce the pragmatic mindset.*

This is a longer-term project, but the payoff will be real. Many of the benefits of SNAP are currently not part of everyday conversation but have great promise in becoming part of the cultural common sense. **Two key concepts, which are useful to our story but not yet part of the cultural common sense, stand out as needing communications investment:**

SNAP helps more than just its immediate recipients. It helps entire communities.

For example, when people have money to spend on groceries, this helps local stores, which in turn helps to create jobs. One useful metaphor, at least in English, is to talk about the “ripple effects” of SNAP.

*Well, if people are able to have a roof over their head, have food in their bellies, some type of healthcare and so forth, that's going to give them an availability to be able to be more helpful or productive in society or their local area and be able to do more things and not maybe end up in worse situations or crime or in jail or maybe stealing from business local businesses. (Female, 45, White, Republican, Conservative, BA, 50K+, Suburban)*

*I think if everybody is living a healthier lifestyle ... it would actually benefit society as a whole from a financial tax saving angle. (Male, 34, Asian, Independent, Liberal, Graduate School, 200K+, Urban)*

SNAP benefits make adults more able to contribute to the community, and children better able to develop into productive citizens.

Everyone recognizes—it’s common sense—that children need good food to develop properly and be healthy, or even just to pay attention at school, and that everyone needs food to function and contribute. But the idea is not always top-of-mind in people’s thinking and conversation. It needs to be reinforced at every opportunity.

*I think I totally agree with that. As you get older, you learn more. You wish you did certain things when you were younger. Especially health wise and food wise, and I definitely believe that's true. They need to nurture themselves if they want to learn and be able to grow in a healthy, organic way. So, yes, I agree with that fully. (Male, 28, Hispanic, Political affiliation=Not provided by respondent, High School, 50K+, Urban)*

*Low income families need better access to high quality nutritious food. That's the only way that the kids are going to get the developmental needs that they need. And yes, food is part of that. (Male, 42, White, Democrat, Graduate Degree, >200K)*

*The food that you eat provides your body with the resources it needs to function, and if you're not providing your body with appropriate resources, you're not going to function well, just like a car. If you put premium gasoline in there, your engine's going to run pretty well. If you put a bunch of junk in there, it's not going to run too well. (Female, 42, Black/Native American, Independent, Liberal, Bachelor's, \$50-69k)*

### 3) Establish non-controversial facts about both Hunger and SNAP.

There are basic facts and key concepts that work most effectively as part of an overarching story. This is a starter list—other facts will also be useful. And with trial and error, some may prove to be more effective than others. Note that the exact language is not critical—it's about the facts. Keep in mind, as well, that not all the facts and concepts need to be explicitly stated every time the story is told.

The rate of fraud is very low (less than 1%).

SNAP benefits are very low (\$1.40 per meal).

Rates of food insecurity are especially high in rural areas.

For every meal a food bank provides, SNAP is estimated to provide nine.<sup>8</sup>

SNAP is a Federal program. It has already been paid for with Federal taxes.

Some politicians want to make it harder to access SNAP.

Making it harder to access SNAP requires extensive bureaucracy. This actually costs Texas taxpayers more than can be saved by fraud prevention.

Most people on SNAP in Texas are part of working families.

Most people who receive benefits are not able-bodied adults. They're children, people with disabilities, and the elderly.

---

<sup>8</sup> [Food Banks Plead for Help](#) (2020), Politico

Etc.

These are kinds of facts that don't strike people as political, and the research shows that they tend not to be dismissed as liberal propaganda. They're just basic facts. And yet they help guide the policy conversation in a highly constructive way.



*... those kinds of information that you were sharing about laws and exceptions and how the programs are run. I think I would be interested in knowing more facts of how the programs are ran at that detail. ... Maybe like a 15-minute talk on a topic I would be able to be pretty interested and engaged in that. (Male, 34, Asian, Independent, Liberal, Graduate School, 200K+, Urban)*

*I'm probably going to think some more about what we discussed about the SNAP program and the restrictions that are on there and ones that they want to put on there and that sort of thing. Because I'm curious exactly about those and what all it entails and that kind of thing. So definitely curious about that. (Female, 45, White, Republican, Conservative, BA, 50K+, Suburban)*

*I never knew about this one strike and you starve. I'm very curious to look at this and see if that's something that can be changed. If this is something at a federal level, I would love to write a worthless senator or two about. (Male, 32, White, Independent, Moderate, Graduate Degree, 100K+, Suburban)*

These facts will be most powerful when they work together to tell a story (see Section 4 below). The last point in particular only does constructive work when we establish that it's not about fraud. **But** facts can stand alone, and we don't always get the opportunity to tell our story. For example, not every journalist will tell our preferred story, but media coverage may reinforce particular facts, and this will help to lay the groundwork for our story.

4) *Tell a story that connects the dots.*

Though not possible in all communications, it's important to present a holistic story. The basic outline looks something like this (the exact language and fact-sets will require trial and error, or further research):

SNAP is the best **tool** we have for fixing hunger. It's not perfect, but it's highly effective. And it's already paid for by the Federal Government.

Some politicians are working to make it harder to access SNAP benefits, even though there's very little fraud in the program, and even though the vast majority of recipients are either part of working families or are disabled, elderly, or children.

Making it harder to access SNAP benefits creates new bureaucracy that harms those in crisis, which is wrong and actually costs us more money.

This doesn't make sense. We have a perfectly good tool for dealing with hunger. Let's use it!

To this basic arc, we can add specific success stories; for example, the win on streamlining the application renewal process for individuals with disabilities and older adults (which saved money!).

5) *Decide how far to push the racism angle as we tell our story.*

As earlier noted, both research and the experience of advocates and other stakeholders make it very clear that trying to make the issue of access to SNAP benefits about racism can be very challenging. That said, once Problem-Solver mode has been established, the story can be extended to include more explicitly racial elements. And as we noted in the section on the implications of establishing Problem-Solver mode, the research suggests **two doors for having a successful conversation about race and SNAP:**

Reducing Inequality

Hunger is a problem that doesn't affect everyone the same way, or to the same degree.<sup>9</sup> Problem-Solver mode primes people to hear the message that "As a key tool for reducing hunger, SNAP is also a way to reduce inequality." To take an analogy, when we have a conversation about lead in the water system, it's perfectly reasonable to point out that replacing city pipes will disproportionately benefit folks who have suffered from longstanding

---

<sup>9</sup> [Freedom from Hunger](#) (2015), National Commission on Hunger



marginalization and injustice. This point will energize the base and is hard for the opposition to argue against.

### Calling out Racism

In addition, establishing Problem-Solver mode also allows us to begin to question the motives of those who refuse pragmatic solutions to hunger. We can and should ask, “why, exactly, are you against the common-sense solution that lets us solve this problem?”

But this works only once we establish that hunger is a problem that can be fixed through access to SNAP benefits, and when we’ve established the basic facts around SNAP (e.g., low allowance per meal, very low rates of fraud).

The logic is as follows: If there are no good practical reasons for making SNAP harder to access, it starts to look like policymakers have another agenda—which might have something to do with racial bias. This approach lends itself to being dialed up or down (made more or less explicit) as appropriate. But again, the caveat is that it only works once we’ve established Problem-Solver Mode.

But, to repeat, this works only once we establish that hunger is a problem that can be fixed through access to SNAP benefits, and when we’ve established the basic facts around SNAP (e.g., low allowance per meal, very low rates of fraud).

And how far we dial the racism angle will depend both on the audience and the messenger.

### **Messaging Summary: “Emphasize”**

<b>1. In ALL communications, reinforce this top-level theme:</b>
SNAP is the most effective tool we have for addressing hunger. We should use it more, not less.
<b>2. Prioritize a practical, problem-solving tone.</b>
Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● We can fix this!</li><li>● We need to roll up our sleeves and get this done.</li><li>● We have the tools to solve this problem.</li></ul>

**3. Whenever possible, use clarifying facts that reinforce the top-level theme.**

Examples:

- SNAP benefits are very low (\$1.40 per meal).
- For every meal a food bank provides, SNAP is estimated to provide nine.
- SNAP is a Federal program. It has already been paid for with Federal taxes.
- Most people on SNAP in Texas are part of working families.
- Making it harder to access SNAP requires extensive bureaucracy. This actually costs Texas taxpayers more than can be saved by fraud prevention.

**4. Get creative in order to establish the following key concepts in communications, as they take more investment.**

Examples:

- SNAP helps more than its direct recipients. It helps entire communities. For example, it creates “ripple effects” beyond the individual recipients, as when folks are able to spend money in local food stores or markets.
- SNAP makes adults more able to contribute to the community, and children better able to develop into productive adults.

**5. Tell a pragmatic story, bringing the pieces into a whole, when you have the opportunity.**

Example:

- SNAP is the best **tool** we have for fixing hunger. It’s not perfect, but it’s highly effective. And it’s already paid for by the Federal Government.
- Some politicians are working to make it harder to access SNAP benefits, even though there’s very little fraud in the program, and even though the vast majority of participants are either part of working families or are children, disabled or older adults.
- Making it harder to access SNAP benefits creates new bureaucracy that harms those in crisis, which is wrong and actually costs us more money.
- This doesn’t make sense. We have a perfectly good tool for dealing with hunger. Let’s use it!

**6. Lead with problem-solving when centering equity:**

Examples and notes:

- SNAP helps to reduce historical inequity by disproportionately benefiting those who have traditionally been marginalized.
- If it doesn’t make sense to reduce access to SNAP, we should ask if there’s another agenda here. For example, “if it’s not about fraud, and if most people are not able-bodied adults, why exactly are we/you against the common-sense tool that lets us solve this problem?”

- In some cases, you may want to be explicit about what we think the motives are, but use caution, because as stakeholders already know, this carries the risk of alienating many listeners.

## Conclusion

Persuading the public that SNAP benefits should be made widely available rather than less is a daunting task, given the cultural common sense about deservingness and fraud, as well as underlying racist thinking. And the terrain in Texas is clearly less promising than in other states, for historical and cultural reasons and given the extreme politicization of most policies in the current climate.

But the research demonstrated a very robust way of moving the conversation, and perhaps establishing a new cultural common sense—rooted in existing values of pragmatism. This requires a paradigm shift in how we talk about Hunger and SNAP.

The research leaves many questions unanswered. More research and messaging trial and error are needed, especially about exact language and which basic facts about SNAP are the most compelling and do the most to advance the conversation. But the research strongly suggests that the basic shift to Problem-Solver mode will provide an enormous advantage in the conversation about Hunger and access to SNAP.



## Appendix A: Field Protocol

*Hi, I'm working on a research project, a kind of public opinion survey asking people a few questions about people's thoughts about some food security issues in Texas. We just want to understand what regular people are thinking.*

*Do you have 15 minutes or so to talk? [If asked, you work for PI-Opinion, and this research is for a coalition of nonprofits who work on economic issues in Texas.]*

*If you don't mind, we videotape for research purposes, though this isn't for public broadcast. It's so we have a record of what people have to say. (We won't use the video otherwise without your permission and can talk about that at the end.)*

### **[INTRO Qs] So, the first question is very open-ended ...**

1. Have you noticed more people here in Texas seeming to struggle to make ends meet in the past couple years? Is your sense that things have gotten better, worse, or stayed the same? (How so?) [probe]
2. Have you seen hunger in your community? [probe]
3. Are you familiar with SNAP (what used to be called "food stamps")?
  - a. What is your sense of the goal/mission of that program? What is it trying to do? [probe to see if you can get beyond "giving food" & notice how people get there]
  - b. How about food banks? [Possibly add: What's the difference?]
4. Are SNAP benefits about more than food? That is, what is your sense of the wider ripple-effects on the community (local businesses, schools, the families, etc.) when these services provide food to people? [probe for positives/negatives as applicable]
5. Certain groups may be more likely to go hungry when times get rough. Do you see evidence of need around hunger in your community [for instance: children, college students, individuals with disabilities, individuals in rural areas, mothers with young children, older adults, veterans, minority families]?
  - a. What do you think is going on here? [probe; especially probe race if they brought it up]
  - b. Are there things that make you optimistic about how these issues are handled in your community or overall in Texas (If so, what are they?)
  - c. Are there things that frustrate or worry you?

## [FRAMING IDEAS]

6. Should the government be the answer – or part of the answer – to alleviating hunger in our community? (Why/why not?) [probe for what's working, not working]
7. There is a lot of evidence that getting enough nutrition affects a child's mental and physical development and their overall ability to do well in school and be healthy. What do you think about that? [probe]
  - a. Is this something the community should be invested in helping with, or is it just on the individual families to take responsibility? [probe]
8. Some people argue that hunger is just a symptom of a more fundamental problem of poverty and inequality, which has to be addressed through a combination of economic and political solutions that get at systemic inequalities. What is your reaction to this? [probe]

## **[Qs 9-11 work together: Throughout this line of questions, where possible/natural, try to determine if folks think getting food support should be easier or harder than it is.]**

9. As a state, we have agreed to take this federal money and have this program (SNAP) to feed people. Yet Texas lawmakers put additional restrictions on the program to make it harder for people to access.

For example, although there is no federal requirement to count vehicle values against people's asset limits for eligibility (and 35 out of 50 states don't test vehicle values at all), Texas limits how much a family's cars can be worth in order to still qualify for food aid. (The first car can only be worth \$15,000, and a second vehicle can't be worth more than \$4,650 – even in a two-earner family.)

- a. What is your reaction to this? [probe]
  - b. Should owning a working car disqualify you from SNAP benefits?
10. What do you think is going on here – are Texas lawmakers simply trying to **sabotage** the program without being honest about it? (Is this bad faith?) [probe]
11. Another example to consider: The Texas Legislature is now proposing putting an ID photo on SNAP benefits cards. So even though the whole family may legally use the card to purchase food, only one person will have their photo present to authorize that use. So for instance, the able-bodied teenager won't be able to easily pick up groceries for a disabled grandparent they live with. In fact, they might well be accused of theft simply by trying to use the card they are entitled to.
  - a. What's your reaction to that?

- b. What would be the point of putting an ID photo on the benefits card?
- c. Are they trying to punish people, or is that in the background of their thinking?
- d. Some folks think that all this isn't about preventing fraud at all. It's actually a sneaky way to try to kill a program that's very popular with voters. What do you think of that?

12. Have you heard the term “food insecurity”?

[if yes]

- a. What's your sense of what that means? (and Is it different from people just being hungry?)

[if no]

- b. If you had to guess what food insecurity meant, what would you say? [Note: After they have made an attempt to figure it out, you can give a definition to ease the conversation. *USDA definition = the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.*]

### [SNAP SPECIFICS – Pick one or more as time allows]

- Right now, SNAP benefits are set at food costs from the 1970's, and the average benefits people receive are \$1.40 per meal. Does this seem reasonable?
- One of the problems people point to with SNAP regulations is the so called “one strike and you starve” penalty. If the highest earner in the home drops below the required 30 hours of work a week, even through no fault of their own (a schedule they can't control, having to call out for a sick child, etc.), their entire family can lose their benefits for up to six months. Does this seem reasonable?
- In some cases, SNAP rules have been proven to break up families. If the higher earner can't control their work schedule to maintain the required 30 hours of work per week, in practice, that partner may leave the household so that the remaining members – especially the children-can still receive food support. How does this strike you?

### [BACK TO GENERAL Qs]

13. Do you think fraud is a problem? [probe – you can let them know that fraud is practically nonexistent if it helps the conversation; and that there is actually more retailer than individual fraud]



14. COVID caused small businesses to close their doors and millions of job losses. SNAP was created to help families in times of crisis and economic recession like these. Do you think the benefits are enough to make a difference for families today?
15. What types of changes, if any, do you think we need to make in order to ensure food security and help Texas families and communities thrive?
16. Some argue that poverty causes hunger, and that in many cases, historical racism\* has caused poverty. What do you think/ does this make sense to you?

### **[WRAP-UP]**

17. Are there some things about this topic you wish you knew more about? (If you could, how would you try to reach people on this topic?)
18. Of all the things we've talked about today, what strikes you the most? What might you walk away thinking about?

**APPENDIX B: Demographics**

**Dallas, Texas (and surrounding area)**

<b>Texas stats</b>	<b>Field "targets"</b>	<b>Field results</b>
<u>Race %</u> White 41% Hispanic 40% Black 13% Asian 5% American Indian & mixed/ other 1%	<u>Race #</u> White 17 Hispanic 16 Black 5 Asian 2 American Indian & mixed/ other 0	<u>Race #</u> White 16 Hispanic 10 Black 10 Asian 3 American Indian & mixed/ other 2
<u>Education %</u> Less than HS degree 16% Minimum HS degree (+ some college) 54% Minimum BA degree (or higher) 30%	<u>Education #</u> Less than HS degree 7 Minimum HS degree (+ some college) 22 Minimum BA degree (or higher) 12	<u>Education #</u> Less than HS degree 1 Minimum HS degree (+ some college) 13 Minimum BA degree (or higher) 28 Unknown 2
<u>Sex %</u> Female 50% Male 50%	<u>Sex #</u> Female 16 Male 16	<u>Sex #</u> Female 18 Male 23
<u>2020 general election -            Dallas %</u> Democrat 60% Republican 40%	<u>Dallas #</u> Democrat 25 Republican 16	<u>Dallas #</u> Democrat 18 Republican 5 Independent 9 Other 9
<u>Age range %</u> Children/Youth = 25% = N/A 18-24 = 15% 25-44 = 20% 45-64 = 27% 65+ = 13%	<u>Age range #</u> Children/Youth = 10 = N/A 18-24 = 6 25-44 = 8 45-64 = 11 65+ = 6	<u>Age range #</u> Children/Youth = 0 = N/A 18-24 = 3 25-44 = 25 45-64 = 7 65+ = 6

## APPENDIX C: Defining food insecurity, food security

Populations considered “food insecure” begin with those who experience persistent hunger because they can’t afford enough food and include those who experience malnutrition because they can’t afford enough quality or variety of food. It does not include those who can afford enough nutritious food but worry about it running out. Technically, both groups classified by the USDA as food insecure are malnourished as well as experiencing poverty.

### Definitions by the USDA:

- Food insecurity
  - Very low = not enough food, serious disruptions
  - Low = poor quality and variety of food, few disruptions
- Food security
  - Moderate = anxiety about running out, few if any disruptions
  - High = desired quality and variety, no disruptions

## APPENDIX D: Focus on Personal Stories

[Focus on Personal Stories](#) (2013), Topos Partnership



# Focus on Personal Stories

February 26, 2013 / in Resources

## Close Up vs. Big Picture Stories: The Role of Individual Examples in Advocacy Communications

*Research and real-life experience, plus perspectives from the social and cognitive sciences, tell us that “putting the face on the story” can often backfire. In this memo, we explore the reasons why this approach can go so wrong – from diverting attention away from systemic factors, to inviting the wrong questions and judgments – and suggest other kinds of stories that are more likely to lead to constructive engagement.*

**APPENDIX E: Communications Audit**

**Texas Food Security Preliminary Report**

*Initial Observations from the Communications Audit: Examinations and Opportunities*

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1uAWQuYN-hd8KPf62Z2ZUZgyd0oasYw3q/view?usp=sharing>

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a purple patterned face mask and a light blue denim jacket over a white shirt, pushing a metal shopping cart through a grocery store aisle. The shelves are stocked with various food items. A red banner is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**TEXAS FOOD SECURITY  
PRELIMINARY REPORT**



Initial Observations from  
the Communications  
Audit: Examinations and  
Opportunities

Topos Research  
Partnership, 2022