

The Economist logo, featuring the words "The Economist" in white serif font on a red rectangular background.**Food stamps**

## Counting pennies

**Cory Booker roughs it for a week**

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“TODAY I burned a sweet potato ...with supplies dwindling it was eat around the severely caramelised root vegetable or go without,” blogged Cory Booker, Newark’s mayor, on day five of his week-long pledge to live on food stamps. After sparring with someone on Twitter who questioned whether families on food stamps were too poor to afford breakfast, Mr Booker decided to live as if he relied on food stamps to show how difficult it was. Living off \$29.78-worth of groceries for a week, which included salad, beans and broccoli, was tough. He blogged that if he did not cut back the amount he was eating at each meal, he was going to run out of food before his challenge was over. He did not have even coffee to comfort him. His daily allowance of \$4.25 was not enough for him to be able to afford a Venti at his beloved Starbucks.

Last year an average of 45m people, about one in seven Americans, were taking part in the federal food-stamps programme in any given month. The 40-year-old initiative was designed to help the poor get enough to eat. For many who rely solely on food stamps, there is very little “supplemental” about the programme now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programme (SNAP). Nearly half of the participants are children, and nearly 8% are elderly. Many have jobs, and some are in the armed forces. Many are white. Hungry families live in the suburbs, in rural areas as well as in cities. About 74,000 of Newark’s 277,000 residents get food stamps from SNAP.

Mr Booker said the purpose of his week was to draw attention to the importance of SNAP at a time when Congress is threatening to cut its funding. A House bill aims to cut \$16.1 billion from its budget of about \$80 billion. The programme not only helps lift vulnerable people out of poverty, but every dollar spent on food stamps adds \$1.79 to the economy.

Still, some think Mr Booker’s SNAP challenge is a publicity stunt for a possible run for governor. He denies this, and does have a history of taking food shortages seriously. Earlier this year he hired Elizabeth Reynoso to be the city’s first food-policy director, one of only 14 in the country. Most Newarkers find it hard to get cheap good food, relying mostly on expensive corner shops for groceries. Mr Booker played a big part in the February opening of a supermarket in Newark’s Central Ward, the first new supermarket to open in the neighbourhood for 22 years.

The mayor has long been a man of action. He once chased down a robbery suspect. He shovelled snow during a 2010 blizzard. In April he suffered burns when rescuing a neighbour from her burning house. Earlier this month he directed traffic away from an accident he came across. He has done much to help his beleaguered city battle crime and add jobs. Two years ago he persuaded Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s billionaire founder, to donate \$100m to help improve Newark’s schools.

Now he is considering higher office. He may run for Senate in 2014, an eminently winnable race. But he would probably prefer to be New Jersey’s governor, a job that is also up for election that year. That, however, would mean taking on Chris Christie, the popular Republican incumbent. Battling hunger may be the easier fight.

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