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Food stamp nation

Towns across the U.S. have a monthly boom and bust cycle — and it's based on federal aid

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THE ECONOMY OF Woonsocket, R.I., was about to stir to life. Delivery trucks were arriving and stores were extending their hours. The bus company was warning riders to anticipate “heavy traffic.” A community bank, soon to experience a surge in deposits, was rolling a message across its electronic marquee on the night of Feb. 28: “Happy shopping! Enjoy the 1st.”

In the heart of downtown, Miguel Pichardo, 53, watched three trucks jockey for position at the loading dock of his family-run International Meat Market. For most of the month, his business operated as a humble milk-and-eggs corner store, but now 3,000 pounds of product were scheduled for delivery in the next few hours. He smoothed the edges of a sign posted near his register. “Yes! We take Food Stamps, SNAP, EBT!”

“Today, we fill the store up with everything,” he said. “Tomorrow, we sell it all.”

At precisely one second after midnight, on March 1, Woonsocket would experience its monthly financial windfall—nearly \$2 million from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. Federal money would be electronically transferred to the broke residents of a nearly bankrupt town, where it would flow first into grocery stores and then on to food companies, employees, and banks, beginning the monthly cycle that has helped Woonsocket survive.

Three years into an economic recovery, this is the lasting scar of collapse: a federal program that began as a last resort for a few million hungry people has grown into an economic lifeline for entire towns. Spending on SNAP has doubled in the past four years and tripled in the past decade, surpassing \$78 billion last year. A record 47 million Americans receive the benefit—including 13,752 in Woonsocket, one third of the town's population.

The 1st is always circled on the office calendar at International Meat Market, where customers refer to the day in the familiar slang of a holiday. It is Check Day. Milk Day. Pay Day. Mother's Day.

“Uncle Sam Day,” Pichardo said late on Feb. 28, as he watched merchandise roll off the trucks. Out came 40 cases of ramen noodles. Out came 230 pounds of ground beef and 180 gallons of orange juice.

SNAP enrollment in Rhode Island has been rising for six years, up from 73,000 people to nearly 180,000, and now three quarters of purchases at International Meat Market are paid for with Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards. Government money in effect funded the truckloads of food at Pichardo's dock...and the three part-time employees he had hired to unload it...and the walk-in freezer he had installed to store surplus product...and the electric bills he paid to run that freezer, at nearly \$2,000 each month.

The local unemployment rate was 12 percent. The shuttered textile mills along the river had become Section 8 housing. The median income had dropped by \$10,000 in the last decade. Of the few jobs still available in Woonsocket, many were part-time positions at grocery stores like Pichardo's, with hours clustered around the first of the month.

PICHARDO HAD PLACED a \$10,000 product order to satisfy his diverse customers, half of them white, a quarter Hispanic, 15 percent African-American, plus a dozen immigrant populations drawn to Woonsocket by the promise of cheap housing. He had ordered 150 pounds of the tenderloin steak favored by the newly poor, still clinging to old habits; and 200 cases of chicken gizzards for the inter-generationally poor, savvy enough to spot a deal at less than \$2 a pound. He had bought pizza pockets for the working poor and plantains for the immigrant poor. He had stocked up on East African marinades, Spanish rice, Cuban snacks, and Mexican fruit juice.

Late on the 28th, a boyfriend and girlfriend arrived. “Finally! A customer,” Pichardo said, turning away from a Dominican League baseball game streaming on his computer. The last day of the month was always his slowest. The 1st was always his best, when he sometimes made 25 percent of his profits for the month. Pichardo rang up his last transaction of February: a gallon of milk, a box of pasta, and a bag of discount cookies.

“That's \$5.28,” he said.

The boyfriend handed over his EBT card: “Sorry. Running low,” he said. “I only got \$1.07 on there.”

The girlfriend handed over hers: “I got \$3.20 on this one.”

They paid the remainder of their balance with change, and Pichardo dropped it into his nearly empty register.

Pichardo closed the register and totaled his sales for Feb. 28. He had made \$526.

“Tomorrow, we do 15 times more,” he said.

REBECKA AND JOURIE Ortiz usually ran out of milk first, after about three weeks. Next went juice, fresh produce, cereal, meat, and eggs. By the 27th or 28th, Rebecka, 21, was often making a dish she referred to in front of the kids as “rice-a-roni,” even though she and Jourie called it “rice-a-whatever.” It was boiled noodles with canned vegetables and beans. “Enough salt and hot sauce can make anything good,” she said.

For the past three years, the Ortizes' lives had unfolded in a series of exhausting, fractional decisions. Was it better to eat the string cheese now or to save it? To buy milk for \$3.80 nearby or for \$3.10 across town? Was it better to pay down the \$600 they owed the landlord, or the \$110 they owed for their cellphones, or the \$75 they owed the tattoo parlor, or the \$840 they owed the electric company?

They had been living together since Rebecka became pregnant during their senior year of high school, long enough to experience Woonsocket's version of recession and recovery. Jourie had lost his job at a pharmacy late in 2010 because of downsizing, and Rebecka had lost hers in fast food for the same reason a few months later. They had filled out a one-page application for SNAP and been accepted on Oct. 11, 2011, awarded \$518 for a family of four, to be delivered on the first of every month. Late in 2012, they had both been hired for the only work high school graduates were finding in a low-wage recovery: part time at a nearby supermarket, the nicest one in the area, a two-story Stop & Shop across the Massachusetts line.

She made \$8 an hour, and he earned \$9. She worked days in produce, and he worked nights as a stocker. Their combined monthly income of \$1,700 was still near the poverty line, and they still qualified for SNAP.

Rebecka had read that the average monthly SNAP benefit lasted a family 17 days, and she knew from personal experience the anxiety headaches that came at the end of every



A food stamp card, made to resemble a credit card. Photo: Robin Nelson/ZUMA Press/Corbis

month, when their SNAP money had run out, their bank account was empty, and she was left to ply Woonsocket's circuit of emergency church food pantries.

The government had designated Woon-socket a "highly distressed community" in 2012, and at night Jourie thought it also seemed deserted, a town that disappeared into twisting two-lane roads, shadowy mills, and abandoned smokestacks. He crossed into Massachusetts and cut through a parking lot toward the Stop & Shop. Jourie had almost never shopped at the store himself; it was too expensive. He punched his timecard at 10:57 p.m. and walked into the store, where he stocked the aisles as Feb. 28 ended and March 1 arrived.

THE FIRST FIVE customers came to International Meat Market at 7 a.m., 30 minutes before the store opened. They leaned on shopping carts and smoked cigarettes, passing around a yellow flier that advertised the market's bulk deals for the 1st. The flier detailed eight "Meat Packs." Five pounds of deli cuts went for \$12.99; 28 pounds of beef for \$49.99; a 58-pound variety pack with pork, pig's feet, chicken wings, and London broil for \$99.99.

Pichardo unlocked the store and led the customers to the meat counter, where both the butcher and his apron were already smeared with blood.

Every store had a gimmick for the 1st, and Pichardo's was the meat packs, which accounted for most of his sales. The idea was to sell merchandise in bulk when customers were hungry and most likely to splurge, hours after the government had deposited an average benefit payment of \$265 onto their EBT cards. The nearby Shaw's Market had started a dollar aisle, and the dollar store had 50-cent specials.

A part-time janitor came through with a meat pack, vegetable oil, and canned tomatoes. "That's \$132.20," Pichardo said. An unemployed welder with two meat packs and a 24-pack of ramen. A retired teacher. A single mother of three. A Salvadoran immigrant who wanted the meat pack flier translated into Spanish. A part-time employee at International Meat Market, hired for the day, buying \$69.99 worth of meat with a SNAP card during his 20-minute break.

By noon Pichardo's shirt was drenched and his feet were swollen. His fingers were stained brown after grabbing and sliding 120 EBT cards in the past four hours. The store smelled like meat and sweat, and the aisles were a trail of discarded items.

Pichardo noticed none of it. His store had already sold more than \$5,000, with \$4,700 paid for in SNAP.

REBECCA WENT SHOPPING early that afternoon. She wanted to visit at least two stores to capitalize on the best deals. She packed snacks and diaper bags and loaded the girls into the car, a 2004 Mitsubishi Galant leased on 18 percent interest for \$90 a week. They drove across town to Price Rite, the cheapest chain in Woonsocket, and the town's epicenter of the SNAP economy.

Nearly 150 cars filled the lot, and shopping carts edged into the adjacent road. A city bus had stopped at the entrance a few minutes earlier to drop off 30 shoppers before turning back to pick up 30 more.

Rebecca moved through the lot and lifted her 1-year-old, Jaeliece, and her 3-year-old, Sariah, into an empty shopping cart.

"Please keep your hands in the cart," she told them. "Only Mommy gets to do the shopping."

Rebecca focused on the list and calculated prices in her head. She grabbed two boxes of Cinnamon Toast Crunch (\$2.49), a four-gallon bottle of cooking oil (\$5.99), and three gallons of milk (\$3.10). She pushed the kids toward checkout, where long lines snaked behind all 12 registers. Sariah started throwing items out of their cart. Jaeliece began to cry. "Damn it," Rebecca said. She pushed her cart into an express lane for 10 items or less and set her 22 items on the conveyer belt. "I'm sorry," she told the cashier. Then she handed over her EBT card, paid \$49.20, and loaded the kids back into the car for Walmart.

"I can't do this anymore," she said, after almost an hour in Walmart. She pushed the kids toward the checkout line. Another SNAP shopper was already in front of her with \$230 worth of food on the conveyer belt, so they had to wait.

Rebecca paid \$168 and returned to the parking lot. She had spent about two weeks of SNAP money on groceries that would last seven or eight days.

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