

Now That You Have Your Ph.D., Time to Apply for Food Stamps

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by *Astrid Spota*

Education has always been portrayed as an avenue to career mobility and prosperity. However, recent studies challenge this adage, revealing that advanced degrees may not insulate families from financial hardship.

It is likely not surprising to hear that individuals with less education make up a large majority of households that rely on food stamps (SNAP) or cash assistance such as TANF. After all, access to most better paying jobs is limited to those with greater education. Nevertheless, a recent study from the Urban Institute, finds there has been a dramatic increase in the number of households with advanced degree holders receiving aid since the recession began in 2008.

The recession increased reliance on safety net programs across the board, but whereas for households with no more than a high school degree, the number receiving SNAP or cash assistance increased by 53 percent between 2007 and 2010, for those with a Master's Degree, the number of households receiving aid increased by 188 percent in the same period. Even more shocking, the number of households with doctorate degree holders that receive aid more than tripled, increasing by 244 percent.

These trends are consistent with the findings of the Food Bank's *NYC Hunger Experience 2011: Sacrifice and Support*, which indicates that a rapidly growing percentage of college-educated residents are struggling to afford food and are concerned about needing food assistance in the future. While the percentage of New York City residents struggling to afford food was similar in 2010 and 2011, the percentage of college graduates struggling to afford food increased considerably during the same time period. Between 2010 and 2011, the percentage of residents with a college degree reporting difficulty increased from 24 percent to 30 percent; and for those with a graduate/professional degree, from 19 percent to 21 percent.

Similarly, while the percentage of New York City residents with lower levels of educational attainment who expressed concern that they may need food assistance over the next year did not change significantly, the percentage of New York City residents with a college degree expressing concern increased from 23 to 30 percent.

These findings not only speak volumes about how the recession has halted the progress even of those best equipped to get ahead, they underscore the importance of the safety net in protecting families who are unable to move up the economic ladder. Without resources such as SNAP, food pantries and soup kitchens, many households would be left with nowhere to turn, and forced to make extreme sacrifices that could be detrimental to their health and long-term financial independence.

Astrid Spota, Research Associate, works on projects that help the Food Bank ascertain trends and determine the need for emergency food, nutrition education and income support programs throughout New York City.

