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THE SAFETY NET

Living on Nothing but Food Stamps

By [JASON DEPARLE](#) and ROBERT M. GEBELOFF

CAPE CORAL, Fla. — After an improbable rise from the Bronx projects to a job selling Gulf Coast homes, Isabel Bermudez lost it all to an epic housing bust — the six-figure income, the house with the pool and the investment property.

Now, as she papers the county with résumés and girds herself for rejection, she is supporting two daughters on an income that inspires a double take: zero dollars in monthly cash and a few hundred dollars in food stamps.

With food-stamp use at a record high and surging by the day, Ms. Bermudez belongs to an overlooked subgroup that is growing especially fast: recipients with no cash income.

About six million Americans receiving food stamps report they have no other income, according to an analysis of state data collected by The New York Times. In declarations that states verify and the federal government audits, they described themselves as unemployed and receiving no cash aid — no welfare, no unemployment insurance, and no pensions, child support or disability pay.

Their numbers were rising before the recession as tougher welfare laws made it harder for poor people to get cash aid, but they have soared by about 50 percent over the past two years. About one in 50 Americans now lives in a household with a reported income that consists of nothing but a food-stamp card.

“It’s the one thing I can count on every month — I know the children are going to have food,” Ms. Bermudez, 42, said with the forced good cheer she mastered selling rows of new stucco homes.

Members of this straitened group range from displaced strivers like Ms. Bermudez to weathered men who sleep in shelters and barter cigarettes. Some draw on savings or sporadic under-the-table jobs. Some move in with relatives. Some get noncash help, like subsidized apartments. While some go without cash incomes only briefly before securing jobs or aid, others rely on food stamps alone for many months.

The surge in this precarious way of life has been so swift that few policy makers have noticed. But it attests to the growing role of food stamps within the safety net. One in eight Americans now receives food stamps, including one in four children.

Here in Florida, the number of people with no income beyond food stamps has doubled in two years and has more than tripled along once-thriving parts of the southwest coast. The building frenzy that lured Ms. Bermudez to Fort Myers and neighboring Cape Coral has left a wasteland of foreclosed homes and written

new tales of descent into star-crossed indigence.

A skinny fellow in saggy clothes who spent his childhood in [foster care](#), Rex Britton, 22, hopped a bus from Syracuse two years ago for a job painting parking lots. Now, with unemployment at nearly 14 percent and paving work scarce, he receives \$200 a month in food stamps and stays with a girlfriend who survives on a rent subsidy and a government check to help her care for her disabled toddler.

“Without food stamps we’d probably be starving,” Mr. Britton said.

A strapping man who once made a living throwing fastballs, William Trapani, 53, left his dreams on the minor league mound and his front teeth in prison, where he spent nine years for selling cocaine. Now he sleeps at a rescue mission, repairs bicycles for small change, and counts \$200 in food stamps as his only secure support.

“I’ve been out looking for work every day — there’s absolutely nothing,” he said.

A grandmother whose voice mail message urges callers to “have a blessed good day,” Wanda Debnam, 53, once drove 18-wheelers and dreamed of selling real estate. But she lost her job at [Starbucks](#) this year and moved in with her son in nearby Lehigh Acres. Now she sleeps with her 8-year-old granddaughter under a poster of the [Jonas Brothers](#) and uses her food stamps to avoid her daughter-in-law’s cooking.

“I’m climbing the walls,” Ms. Debnam said.

Florida officials have done a better job than most in monitoring the rise of people with no cash income. They say the access to food stamps shows the safety net is working.

“The program is doing what it was designed to do: help very needy people get through a very difficult time,” said Don Winstead, deputy secretary for the Department of Children and Families. “But for this program they would be in even more dire straits.”

But others say the lack of cash support shows the safety net is torn. The main cash welfare program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, has scarcely expanded during the recession; the rolls are still down about 75 percent from their 1990s peak. A different program, unemployment insurance, has rapidly grown, but still omits nearly half the unemployed. Food stamps, easier to get, have become the safety net of last resort.

“The food-stamp program is being asked to do too much,” said James Weill, president of the Food Research and Action Center, a Washington advocacy group. “People need income support.”

Food stamps, officially the called Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, have taken on a greater role in the safety net for several reasons. Since the benefit buys only food, it draws less suspicion of abuse than cash aid and more political support. And the federal government pays for the whole benefit, giving states reason to maximize enrollment. States typically share in other programs’ costs.

The Times collected income data on food-stamp recipients in 31 states, which account for about 60 percent of the national caseload. On average, 18 percent listed cash income of zero in their most recent monthly

filings. Projected over the entire caseload, that suggests six million people in households with no income. About 1.2 million are children.

The numbers have nearly tripled in Nevada over the past two years, doubled in Florida and New York, and grown nearly 90 percent in Minnesota and Utah. In Wayne County, Mich., which includes Detroit, one of every 25 residents reports an income of only food stamps. In Yakima County, Wash., the figure is about one of every 17.

Experts caution that these numbers are estimates. Recipients typically report a small rise in earnings just once every six months, so some people listed as jobless may have recently found some work. New York officials say their numbers include some households with earnings from illegal immigrants, who cannot get food stamps but sometimes live with relatives who do.

Still, there is little doubt that millions of people are relying on incomes of food stamps alone, and their numbers are rapidly growing. "This is a reflection of the hardship that a lot of people in our state are facing; I think that is without question," said Mr. Winstead, the Florida official.

With their condition mostly overlooked, there is little data on how long these households go without cash incomes or what other resources they have. But they appear an eclectic lot. Florida data shows the population about evenly split between families with children and households with just adults, with the latter group growing fastest during the recession. They are racially mixed as well — about 42 percent white, 32 percent black, and 22 percent Latino — with the growth fastest among whites during the recession.

The expansion of the food-stamp program, which will spend more than \$60 billion this year, has so far enjoyed bipartisan support. But it does have conservative critics who worry about the costs and the rise in dependency.

"This is craziness," said Representative John Linder, a Georgia Republican who is the ranking minority member of a House panel on welfare policy. "We're at risk of creating an entire class of people, a subset of people, just comfortable getting by living off the government."

Mr. Linder added: "You don't improve the economy by paying people to sit around and not work. You improve the economy by lowering taxes" so small businesses will create more jobs.

With nearly 15,000 people in Lee County, Fla., reporting no income but food stamps, the Fort Myers area is a laboratory of inventive survival. When Rhonda Navarro, a cancer patient with a young son, lost running water, she ran a hose from an outdoor spigot that was still working into the shower stall. Mr. Britton, the jobless parking lot painter, sold his blood.

Kevin Zirulo and Diane Marshall, brother and sister, have more unlikely stories than a reality television show. With a third sibling paying their rent, they are living on a food-stamp benefit of \$300 a month. A gun collector covered in patriotic tattoos, Mr. Zirulo, 31, has sold off two semiautomatic rifles and a revolver. Ms. Marshall, who has a 7-year-old daughter, scavenges discarded furniture to sell on the Internet.

They said they dropped out of community college and diverted student aid to household expenses. They received \$150 from the Nielsen Company, which monitors their television. They grew so desperate this

month, they put the breeding services of the family Chihuahua up for bid on [Craigslist](#).

“We look at each other all the time and say we don’t know how we get through,” Ms. Marshall said.

Ms. Bermudez, by contrast, tells what until the recession seemed a storybook tale. Raised in the Bronx by a drug-addicted mother, she landed a clerical job at a Manhattan real estate firm and heard that Fort Myers was booming. On a quick scouting trip in 2002, she got a mortgage on easy terms for a \$120,000 home with three bedrooms and a two-car garage. The developer called the floor plan Camelot.

“I screamed, I cried,” she said. “I took so much pride in that house.”

Jobs were as plentiful as credit. Working for two large builders, she quickly moved from clerical jobs to sales and bought an investment home. Her income soared to \$180,000, and she kept the pay stubs to prove it. By the time the glut set in and she lost her job, the teaser rates on her mortgages had expired and her monthly payments soared.

She landed a few short-lived jobs as the industry imploded, exhausted her unemployment insurance and spent all her savings. But without steady work in nearly three years, she could not stay afloat. In January, the bank foreclosed on Camelot.

One morning as the eviction deadline approached, Ms. Bermudez woke up without enough food to get through the day. She got emergency supplies at a food pantry for her daughters, Tiffany, now 17, and Ashley, 4, and signed up for food stamps. “My mother lived off the government,” she said. “It wasn’t something as a proud working woman I wanted to do.”

For most of the year, she did have a \$600 government check to help her care for Ashley, who has a developmental disability. But she lost it after she was hospitalized and missed an appointment to verify the child’s continued eligibility. While she is trying to get it restored, her sole income now is \$320 in food stamps.

Ms. Bermudez recently answered the door in her best business clothes and handed a reporter her résumé, which she distributes by the ream. It notes she was once a “million-dollar producer” and “deals well with the unexpected.”

“I went from making \$180,000 to relying on food stamps,” she said. “Without that government program, I wouldn’t be able to feed my children.”

Matthew Ericson contributed research.

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