

The Nexus of Hunger and Conflict: A Socio-Ecological Analysis of Youth Violence in the Wake of Acute SNAP Disruption

Abstract/Executive Summary

This expert-level analysis regenerates the core thesis that politically motivated disruption of core social safety nets constitutes a profound act of structural violence, directly activating established criminogenic pathways and undermining long-term community peacebuilding efforts. The current or imminent disruption of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), driven by the ongoing federal funding lapse, threatens to halt approximately \$8 billion in monthly food aid for one in eight Americans. This acute policy shock creates pervasive strain, which, through the lens of General Strain Theory (GST), is predicted to translate into increased rates of youth violence and externalizing behaviors. The structural failure critically compromises the implicit Youth Impact Model of organizations like the Youth Peace and Justice Foundation (YPJF), which is predicated on the fulfillment of physiological needs (Maslow's Hierarchy prerequisite). The central conclusion is that food security is not merely an economic issue but a mandatory, foundational prerequisite for public safety, necessitating the immediate adoption of shutdown-proof funding mechanisms for core safety net programs.

I. Introduction: Structural Vulnerability and the Acute Crisis

The relationship between deprivation and deviance has long been a foundational subject in criminology and public health. This report asserts that the macro-level policy instability surrounding the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) due to the current federal government shutdown represents a textbook example of a structural failure that creates predictable, avoidable risk for increased youth violence. A socio-ecological analysis is the necessary framework for examining how such systemic shocks propagate through the community and familial environment to influence micro-level individual outcomes, specifically aggression and conflict perpetration among adolescents.

A. Framing the Problem: Food Insecurity as a Criminogenic Risk Factor

Food insecurity (FI) is empirically demonstrated to be a serious public health concern, positively associated with violent behaviors among adolescents. Research has quantified this risk: adolescents exposed to moderate FI show pooled odds ratios (ORs) of 1.18 for physical fighting, while those exposed to severe FI show ORs of 1.52 for physical fighting and 1.88 for physical attack. This evidence suggests a dose-response relationship where the severity of food

insecurity linearly increases the probability of engaging in aggressive externalizing behaviors. Crucially, the connection between poor nutrition and persistent behavioral problems is established in longitudinal studies. Malnutrition identified in children as young as age three years is associated with higher levels of aggression, hyperactivity, and conduct disorder throughout childhood and into adolescence (ages 8, 11, and 17). This demonstrates that food stability is not a short-term issue but is fundamental to building the neurocognitive architecture necessary for behavioral control. When this foundation is threatened by sudden, policy-driven hunger, the risk of acute behavioral crisis is compounded upon chronic vulnerability.

B. The Acute Stressor: SNAP's November 2025 Instability

The current threat to SNAP benefits is unique in its acute political origins and dramatic potential scale. The federal government shutdown, which has entered its fourth week in the defined context, directly threatens the issuance of November 2025 SNAP benefits. This instability affects nearly 42 million individuals across the nation who rely on the program.

The policy crisis is exacerbated by the deliberate administrative decision to withhold necessary funding. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has stated it will not utilize the roughly \$6 billion in reserve or contingency funds available to maintain SNAP operations, claiming these funds are legally reserved only for disaster relief. This decision places approximately \$8 billion in monthly food aid at risk and forces millions of families to choose between food and other essentials, such as delaying payment of electricity or credit card bills. The refusal by the administration to deploy available contingency funding transforms what could have been an administrative challenge into a manufactured scarcity—a politically driven threat to the basic sustenance of vulnerable populations.

II. The Policy Shockwave: SNAP Disruption as Structural Violence

The failure to fund SNAP, a mandatory spending program whose administration is jeopardized by a lack of appropriations and the refusal to use existing reserves, must be analyzed as a form of structural violence. This framework moves beyond identifying individual perpetrators and instead focuses on how systemic designs and policy decisions inflict harm.

A. Defining Structural Violence in the American Context

Structural violence, as initially conceptualized by Johan Galtung, refers to the ways in which social structures and institutions cause harm to individuals by depriving them of basic needs, thereby preventing their healthy development and limiting their full potential. When children are the victims, structural violence manifests as institutional activity that deprives them of essential needs for survival and development, aligning closely with definitions of child maltreatment. The current SNAP crisis perfectly illustrates this concept. The political actors responsible for the funding lapse and the refusal to release contingency funds are operating within systemic designs that reinforce inequitable hierarchies and power distributions. By deliberately allowing basic life necessities to be used as leverage in a political negotiation, the government establishes a "linear ranking" wherein those in the highest positions (capable of monopolizing resource decisions) enact harm upon those of lower rank who are dependent on those resources. The resulting deprivation of food security, essential for child health and development,

constitutes a profound act of structural violence, perpetrated through policy inaction and administrative refusal.

B. Meso-Level Strain: The Collapse of Local Safety Nets and Trust

The \$8 billion shortfall generated by the SNAP disruption generates immediate, catastrophic strain at the meso-level—the level of community organizations, food banks, and local government. States have already been directed to pause the issuance of benefits; for instance, Michigan was instructed to hold November SNAP issuance for its nearly 1.4 million recipients, placing a substantial portion of the population at risk of food insecurity and poverty. North Carolina faced similar directives for its 1.4 million recipients.

Local charitable organizations and food banks cannot possibly compensate for the loss of federal dollars. The Vermont Foodbank confirmed that the charitable food system lacks the resources to replace the magnitude of federal aid. This inability of local social institutions to function effectively under crisis conditions is central to Social Disorganization Theory. This sociological framework posits that high crime rates result from the failure of social institutions to maintain order and cohesion. When SNAP benefits halt, the entire community structure—including schools, local grocers, and community support organizations—suffers a cascade of breakdowns, leading to a breakdown in *collective efficacy* (the community's capacity to work together to control crime).

The Socio-Ecological Mapping of Strain Transmission:

The analysis shows that the macro-level political maneuvering initiates a domino effect. The mapping demonstrates how political decisions are internalized, leading to behavioral outcomes. At the **Macro/Structural** level, the deliberate withholding of contingency funds and political gridlock constitute policy-induced structural violence, leading to a trust deficit and a state of anomie. This results in the erosion of faith in legitimate institutions and can foster rebellion or political withdrawal. This strain propagates to the **Meso/Community** level, where overwhelmed food banks and resource exhaustion intensify competition. This results in a breakdown of collective efficacy and social disorganization, leading to outcomes like increased property crime (theft of food/resources) and elevated street violence rates. Finally, at the **Micro/Individual & Family** level, acute hunger and financial instability elevate parental stress and poor mental health, causing neurocognitive deficits and compromised emotional regulation in youth. The ultimate criminogenic outcomes here include increased intra-familial conflict, externalizing behaviors (aggression, fighting), and higher rates of depression and anxiety.

Furthermore, this disruption actively erodes public trust. When legislators engage in high-stakes political games that jeopardize fundamental services, a "trust deficit" develops between the governed and the government. This systematic erosion of confidence in legitimate institutions, coupled with economic instability, creates a breeding ground for deviance and crime. The community strain, driven by resource competition and the failure of official structures, sets the immediate environment for increased localized conflict and violent acts.

III. The Theoretical Foundation of Strain and Deviancy

Criminological theory provides the crucial explanatory link between the macro-level policy failure (structural violence) and the micro-level behavioral outcome (youth violence). The mechanism is best understood through General Strain Theory (GST), which models the psychological process

by which deprivation leads to anger and aggression.

A. General Strain Theory (GST): The Criminogenic Potential of Deprivation

Robert Agnew's GST explains that negative experiences and stress push individuals toward crime. These stressors create pressure for corrective action, often manifesting as negative emotions like anger and frustration, which are potent drivers of violent behavior.

The policy shock of the SNAP disruption encompasses three core types of strain identified by Agnew :

1. **Failure to achieve positively valued goals:** Families relying on SNAP aim for economic stability and consistent food security. The removal of this benefit ensures the failure of these basic goals.
2. **Removal or threat of removal of positively valued stimuli:** The SNAP benefit itself is a crucial, valued stimulus. Its deliberate withholding by administrative decision represents the immediate removal of a necessary resource.
3. **Presentation or threat of presentation of negatively valued stimuli:** The result of this policy failure is acute hunger, increased parental anxiety, and heightened household conflict, all of which are negative stressors presented to the individual.

This multi-faceted strain generates significant criminogenic potential. When legitimate pathways to obtain food and stability are blocked—a situation further illuminated by Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory—youth may resort to innovation or rebellion, which often involves rule-breaking to achieve the goal of survival. The link between economic stress, food insecurity, and increased risk of perpetrating violence is robustly supported by empirical research.

IV. From Deprivation to Aggression: Micro-Level Consequences for Youth

The impact of food deprivation on an individual adolescent is not merely psychological; it is profoundly physiological, affecting brain development, cognitive function, and the ability to regulate emotions—the fundamental capacities required to prevent impulsive aggression.

A. Neurocognitive Deficit and Impulsive Behavior

Poor nutrition, particularly during formative years, predisposes individuals to neurocognitive deficits, which in turn lead to persistent externalizing behavior problems throughout adolescence. Specifically, low IQ acts as a mediating factor linking early malnutrition to elevated rates of aggressive behavior. Consistent nutrient deficiencies undermine the ability to reason, think, and remember information, making long-term educational success challenging.

Furthermore, acute food deprivation compromises impulse control and emotional regulation. Nutritional deficits can impair the adolescent's ability to regulate behavioral control over actions, leading to risky decision-making and an intolerance for delayed gratification. While some adolescent risk-taking is rooted in the exploratory nature of prefrontal cortex development, genuine impulse control problems are distinct and disproportionately linked to severe hazards, including higher rates of violence. When the brain's glucose supply is disrupted—a core consequence of hunger—the mechanisms for emotional processing can be dysregulated. The

sudden, induced hunger caused by SNAP disruption creates an immediate physiological stressor that bypasses learned coping mechanisms, potentially overwhelming the emotional regulation capacities of youth and increasing the likelihood of an angry, impulsive reaction to frustration.

B. Familial Strain and the Conflict Multiplier

The home environment provides the most immediate filter through which the policy shockwave travels. Food insecurity acts as a massive stressor on the household unit, directly contributing to conflict and mental health degradation.

Parental stress scores increase significantly with food insecurity severity; parents in households experiencing moderate-to-severe FI report parenting stress scores that are 0.46 standard deviations higher than food-secure households, and are 565.79% more likely to report handling the demands of parenting poorly. The mental health toll is substantial: parents in moderate-to-severe FI households are approximately nine times more likely to report fair or poor mental health. This deterioration in parental mental health and coping capacity results in a hostile and unstable home environment, which is a key predictor of child externalizing and internalizing problems, including anxiety and depression.

The SNAP disruption, by creating acute scarcity and overwhelming stress, acts as a conflict multiplier. The increased intra-familial tension pushes adolescents toward externalizing behaviors and, subsequently, out of the hostile home environment and into the community, where they are at higher risk of perpetrating violence. Therefore, policy failures targeting basic needs fundamentally compromise the family's ability to act as a protective factor against youth violence.

V. The Youth Peace and Justice Foundation (YPJF): Evaluating the Youth Impact Model Against Structural Erosion

The Youth Peace and Justice Foundation (YPJF) serves as a critical case study demonstrating the fragility of local peacebuilding efforts in the face of macro-level structural violence. YPJF's methodological approach, though implicitly based on the fulfillment of basic needs, is fundamentally undermined when those needs are deliberately stripped away by the political system.

A. YPJF's Mission and the Holistic Approach to Peacebuilding

The YPJF is dedicated to fostering positive change in low-income immigrant communities in the Bronx through education, advocacy, and direct community engagement. Its programmatic structure reflects a holistic, socio-ecological approach, addressing community justice, systemic issues, and individual well-being.

The foundation's history demonstrates its commitment to solving systemic issues, including its successful Sherican Expressway campaign and its innovative approach to local food systems, such as the Soundview Marketplace campaign and the Swale "food forest" project, which directly addressed the need for food access and economic development.

Key YPJF programs, which aim to address higher-level needs, include:

- **Arts for Activism:** Engaging young people in dance, music, and film for personal and social transformation.
- **Education for Liberation:** Serving as a source of academic support and political education.
- **Wellness:** Encouraging a holistic approach to health, including meditation, yoga, and gender-specific groups to discuss mental health and nutrition.
- **Community Justice Programs:** Offering direct support for accessing essential entitlements (such as SNAP/public benefits), health care, and housing. The Community Justice Program's existence is an acknowledgement of the critical need to secure physiological and safety needs before other progress can occur.

B. The Maslow's Hierarchy Prerequisite: An Implicit Model Under Siege

YPJF's operational model, which strives for transformation, activism, and self-actualization through high-level educational and artistic engagement (e.g., civic attitudes, self-efficacy, and problem-solving skills), aligns conceptually with the higher tiers of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (HON). Maslow's theory stipulates that human motivation moves hierarchically, requiring the foundational physiological needs (food, water, shelter) and safety needs to be met before an individual can progress to needs related to belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. The SNAP disruption, however, constitutes an active and direct attack on the physiological foundation of this hierarchy. By deliberately removing access to reliable food, the policy decision immediately forces millions of youth and their families back to the bottom tiers of the pyramid, prioritizing the imperative for survival over all other aspirational or developmental goals. The efficacy of YPJF's mentorship, conflict resolution, and educational programs is severely compromised when the basic prerequisite is violated. A student who experiences hunger always or almost always demonstrates a significant achievement gap compared to their food-secure peers. In this state of acute stress and deprivation, youth cannot effectively engage in the cognitive processes required for *Education for Liberation* or the expressive work of *Arts for Activism*. The organization is forced to divert resources and personnel, intended for transformative work, toward emergency aid (direct services for entitlement benefits), thereby stalling or reversing long-term peacebuilding goals. The political instability has essentially rendered the foundation's aspirational model temporarily inoperable by destroying the physiological base upon which it depends.

VI. Policy Resilience and the Strong Call to Action

The socio-ecological analysis unequivocally demonstrates that policy instability targeting core safety net programs acts as a catalyst for structural violence, translating political gridlock directly into increased criminogenic risk for youth. Therefore, the strategic intervention must focus on insulating these vital programs from political volatility, thereby establishing food security as a permanent feature of public health infrastructure.

A. Insulating the Safety Net: Mandatory, Shutdown-Proof Funding Mechanisms

The core vulnerability of SNAP lies in its reliance on appropriations that can be leveraged during

political disputes. Primary prevention of the hunger-conflict nexus requires legislative action to redefine SNAP funding.

The first policy solution, a **Dedicated Emergency Authority** (as proposed by legislation such as the *Keep SNAP Funded Act*), would grant the USDA immediate access to pre-reserved funds during any funding lapse. This measure provides essential certainty for vulnerable families and removes the executive discretion that is currently a source of structural violence.

The primary rationale is the stabilization of family financial status, which directly reduces household stress and intra-familial conflict, thereby mitigating Micro- and Meso-level strain.

Second, a broader structural reform is the adoption of an **Automatic Continuing Resolution (ACR)** mechanism for all critical anti-poverty and public health programs. An ACR ensures that funding for essential discretionary activities becomes automatically available when appropriations lapse, eliminating the need for annual, crisis-driven negotiations that utilize vulnerable populations as political leverage. Adopting this mechanism for SNAP would eliminate the threat of sudden deprivation, which in turn restores community trust and collective efficacy, directly addressing macro-level structural violence.

Third, **Resilient Food System Investments (RFSI)** must be prioritized. Federal investment must expand programs like the RFSI, which aims to build resilience in local and regional food production and processing. By supporting local producers and distribution efforts, communities can develop localized food security systems that are less dependent on centralized national supply chains, providing crucial resilience against future national political shocks. This provides alternate, reliable food access during shocks, mitigating acute physiological strain and cognitive deficits associated with hunger.

Third, policymakers must recognize uninterrupted SNAP funding as non-negotiable national infrastructure. Similar to essential services that continue during a shutdown (e.g., air traffic control, law enforcement) , food security must be classified as a core component of maintaining civil stability and public health. This shift in policy perspective is the critical determinant in ensuring that the physiological needs prerequisite of Maslow's hierarchy is universally and consistently met.

B. Strengthening Community Resilience and the Public Health Approach

While insulating federal funding is paramount, concurrent efforts must strengthen localized resilience and adopt a true public health approach to violence prevention.

Federal investment must prioritize expanding the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure (RFSI) program, which aims to build redundancy in local and regional food production and processing. By supporting local producers, processors, and farm-to-school programs, communities can develop localized food security systems that are less dependent on centralized national supply chains, providing crucial resilience against future national political or logistical shocks.

Moreover, youth violence must be systematically addressed as a public health crisis. Public health infrastructure must be enhanced to address violence as predictable and preventable. The evidence base mandates that policy explicitly prioritizes the uninterrupted fulfillment of physiological needs (food, housing, healthcare) as the **foundational public health intervention** for violence prevention. The profound economic cost of violence—estimated at billions in medical costs and lost productivity—vastly outweighs the cost of ensuring basic nutritional stability.

Conclusion: Averting Criminogenic Policy

The analysis of the impending SNAP disruption reveals a critical policy failure rooted in structural violence. By deliberately manufacturing scarcity, political actors introduce massive, unnecessary strain across the entire socio-ecological spectrum—from the individual brain chemistry of the adolescent to the collective efficacy of the community. This acute deprivation actively triggers established criminogenic pathways (GST), increasing the likelihood of externalizing behaviors and conflict perpetration, particularly among youth already experiencing social disadvantage. The resulting instability destroys the foundational safety and physiological security prerequisite essential for any effective long-term peacebuilding or youth empowerment work, as exemplified by the YPJF's Maslowian model.

Strong Call to Action

The evidence is clear: food security is a mandatory public safety expenditure. The current administration's refusal to deploy available contingency funds and Congress's reliance on politically motivated brinkmanship transforms budget negotiation into a generator of violence. **The government must immediately and permanently cease the weaponization of the food safety net. We call for the immediate, mandatory, legislative enactment of an Automatic Continuing Resolution for all critical anti-poverty and public health programs, including SNAP and WIC.** This structural reform is not optional relief; it is the most fundamental, cost-effective primary prevention strategy against youth violence available to the nation. Failure to secure this basic physiological foundation means the political system actively chooses to generate conflict, undermining the health, development, and safety of millions of American children. The stabilization of food access is an unconditional prerequisite for justice and peace.

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