

## HUNGER AT HOME: Muslim Americans and Food Insecurity

We often give zakat to feed Muslims abroad — but statistics show that many Muslim families here in the U.S. struggle to put food on the table

### ISNA OFFICE FOR INTERFAITH & COMMUNITY ALLIANCES

IT'S EASY TO ASSUME THAT DAILY hunger is a reality only for Muslims living outside the U.S. We associate food scarcity with drought in the Horn of Africa or conflict in the Middle East. We give zakat to organizations like Islamic Relief (<https://www.islamic-relief.org>) to support their charitable programs overseas, without even realizing that they also feed needy Muslims right here in the nation's capital. Meanwhile, the dominant self-image promoted by Muslim American professionals is one of success paired with generosity: During Ramadan we fast by choice, while giving to those in need.

In a 2015 Al Jazeera op-ed entitled “Ramadan in the shadows: Fasting while poor,” law professor Khaled Beydoun acknowledged the impetus to counter negative stereotypes by pushing a shiny image of Muslims as the “socioeconomic model minority.” And the image is not completely wrong. A July 26, 2017, Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life report shows that Muslims in the U.S. are just as likely as non-Muslim white Americans to be college graduates and to achieve a household income over \$100,000 (<http://www.pewforum.org>). However, those who don't reach these economic benchmarks are actually *more* likely than non-Muslim Americans to be poor.

According to the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding's 2017 American Muslim Poll (<https://www.ispu.org>), Muslim Americans are “significantly more likely than any other faith group to report low (less than \$30,000) household income”: 35 percent of the community faces poverty, compared to an average of 18 percent for other faith groups (see p.3, Executive Summary). The reality is that the Muslim American population has the largest wealth gap of any religious community in the country.

“We can't foodbank our way out of systemic poverty and hunger,” IOICA director Colin Christopher stated. “The most effective way ... is to bolster our federal food assistance programs that have a big enough budget and enrollment system to reach millions of families ... Finally, although federal food assistance programs are essential, they are stopgap measures. ... Federal food assistance enacted by Congress is coming out of the

Even with more than 45 million people on SNAP, millions more who are eligible don't receive benefits. To tackle this discrepancy, Dr. Marium Husain, MD, is spearheading a new collaboration between ISNA and the Islamic Medical Association of North America (IMANA) that will help physicians connect food-insecure patients with public resources such as SNAP, WIC and private sources like food banks/shelters. IMANA, which has already published extensively on food insecurity, is now promoting the Hunger Vital Sign (HVS; <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org>), a recent initiative developed by the Children's Health Watch that physicians give to their patients to gauge food insecurity (E. R. Hager et al., Development and Validity of a 2-Item Screen to Identify Families at Risk for Food Insecurity. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-3146). So far, it has a 97 percent success rate in identifying food-insecure households and specifying their level of need. As IMANA and ISNA team up to promote this easy tool among physicians, social workers and other health advocates, we hope to connect more Muslims with the resources they need to thrive. We also hope that bringing the topic of hunger into the open will destigmatize poverty and foster honest conversations about wealth inequality and public policy among Muslim Americans.



same political institutions through which sweeping measures must eventually be made to tackle the root causes: wealth inequality, low wages, and a widespread lack of affordable housing and healthcare.”

According to the frequently-asked-questions section of Snap to Health!, 45.4 million people currently benefit from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as “food stamps”). We hear about high rates of obesity and food waste, even though so many people are struggling to afford food, because poor people turn to inexpensive fast food and soda to secure cheap calories at the expense of nutrition. SNAP gives each recipient an average of \$126 a month for fresh fruit and vegetables, whole grains and meat.

SNAP is funded by the Farm Bill, a historically bipartisan piece of legislation that Congress has to renew every four years. This year, however, House Republicans targeted SNAP for billions of dollars' worth of cuts; critics point out that they need the money to cover the deficit created by last year's massive tax cut. As part of the Domestic Human Needs working group of the Washington Interreligious Staff Community, IOICA joined the fight to demand #HandsOffSNAP and lobby for a #FaithfulFarmBill.

During Ramadan, we teamed up with Polygon Education Fund ([www.polygonnational.org](http://www.polygonnational.org)) to launch the #MuslimsAgainstHunger Campaign. We sat down with both House and Senate lawmakers,



including staffers from the highest ranking members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, to voice our support for SNAP. Although the House bill ultimately passed, the Senate heeded our call to protect federal food assistance programs and passed a favorable Farm Bill. Anti-poverty advocates hope that the history of bipartisanship championed by the Senate version of the bill will prevail while finalizing the legislation.

Poligon's co-founder and acting executive director Afif Rahman contextualized the struggle: "In the case of fighting food insecurity, SNAP, a federal program, can provide food assistance to 10-15 times more people than all the nation's food banks combined. During these times, the cost of being disengaged is too high and not one we and our brothers and sisters in need can afford to pay."

The scale of federal assistance required illustrates just how deep the roots of food insecurity reach. Some recent reports, such as Columbia University's 2016 "Basic Facts About Low-Income Children" study ([http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub\\_1145.html](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_1145.html)), argue that more than half of American children live in households near the poverty line. Furthermore, as families across the country's colder regions are faced with the choice of "heat or eat" each winter, we realize that housing, gas, wages and healthcare are all part of the same equation when it comes to food access.

No single federal program can completely solve this country's hunger problem, and no amount of charity work can shore up the wealth gap that continues to grow even during this supposed period of economic recovery. Sustained mass civic engagement with federal and state-level policymakers is the only way to turn the tide nationwide in the long run. This is why our office's support for SNAP is just one project in a broad economic justice policy portfolio, and why we are striving to bring more Muslim Americans into larger social movements for systemic change.

spoke out against the interrelated violence of ecological devastation, climate change and the lack of affordable healthcare. Protestors occupied the Rotunda of the Capitol Building while attempting to deliver a message from the people to Speaker Paul Ryan; they were released an hour later. On Saturday, June 23, the campaign concluded with a rally on the Mall. The campaign's local and state-level organizing committees are now planning their next steps.


In connection with his participation, Christopher stated: "I am inspired by our beloved Prophet's (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa*

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We are currently witnessing a powerful political awakening across the country. Along with the fight to protect SNAP, this past Ramadan coincided with the Poor People's Campaign, a "National Call for Moral Revival" that describes itself as a direct continuation of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 movement of the same name. ISNA endorsed the campaign and its tactics of non-violent civil disobedience, which likewise trace back to MLK's legacy. For six weeks, the campaign organized actions in state capitals nationwide. Its intersectional understanding of policy meant that they targeted hunger as just one symptom of a system that sustains itself on "racism, poverty, the war economy, ecological devastation and distorted morality" (<https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/demands>).

ISNA communications director Faryal Khatri offered the opening prayer at one of the many rallies in Indianapolis, while Christopher and dozens of other protestors were arrested on the day that the campaign

*sallam*) hadith: 'Whoever goes to bed while his neighbor is hungry is not a true believer' ("al-Sunan al-Kubra," hadith no. 19049). In 2018 in the U.S., we must advocate for national food programs and continue to work toward the comprehensive political and economic transformation that is ultimately required."

IOICA is planning for the long haul. As our staff members become increasingly effective on the Hill, we encourage all ISNA members to act on our position statements, contact your Senators and Representatives and represent our community in state-level politics. Muslim Americans living near or below the federal poverty line will continue to experience food insecurity until we change laws and policies. As a faith community, it's time to step up our civic engagement. 

ISNA's Office for Interfaith & Community Alliances is located at 110 Maryland Avenue NW, Washington, DC, right next to the Supreme Court and across the street from the Capitol. Our current staff includes three part-time policy fellows. Follow our work in weekly ISNA newsletter updates ([www.isna.net/2018-weekly-newsletter](http://www.isna.net/2018-weekly-newsletter)) and social media posts.