

America's Grocery Lifeline Is Fraying, *The Atlantic*, October 31, 2025

During America's hardest economic times, canned goods were a lifeline. From 1929, the start of the Great Depression, to 1941, when the United States entered World War II, people ate nearly 50 percent more canned fruit, by weight, compared with the preceding 13 years. Some used new community canning centers to safely preserve food for the long term, or depended on the U.S. government's first food-stamp programs to buy "surplus goods," including canned beef, mutton, goat, and peas.

Millions of Americans are now waiting to find out whether they will receive their November benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. SNAP was set to run out of funds on November 1 because of the ongoing government shutdown. As anxiety about hunger mounts, some state agencies have advised SNAP beneficiaries to stock up on canned goods such as beans, soup, fruit, and tuna. Only, those foods aren't so reliably affordable as they once were, in part because of restrictions on the materials that go into the cans themselves.

Roughly 42 million Americans rely on SNAP for food. This week, a number of Democrat-led states sued the Trump administration for refusing to tap into a \$5 billion SNAP emergency reserve. After this article was published, a federal judge in Rhode Island ruled that the administration had to continue funding SNAP through the shutdown. But the administration could appeal the decision to the Supreme Court—or simply ignore the court order, as it has several others this year.

Canned foods have been a lifeline in lean times because they're long-lasting, generally nutritious, and, most of all, cheaper than their fresh counterparts—largely because the necessary materials could be imported reliably and cheaply. Canning requires a special type of metal called tin-mill steel, which the U.S. imports from Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, Tom Madrecki, vice president of supply-chain resiliency at the Consumer Brands Association, told me. Tin-mill steel is unwieldy and fragile, he said, and less valuable than steel meant for cars and machinery. So U.S. steel manufacturers have deprioritized making it. As a result, the U.S. produces only about 20 percent of the tin-mill steel used by domestic can manufacturers, Scott Breen, the president of the Can Manufacturers Institute, a trade group, told me. "We have no choice but to import the other 80 percent," he said.

Since Trump's first term, those imports have been subject to a 25 percent tariff; in June, it rose to 50 percent for steel coming from most countries. Trump's tariffs are meant to stimulate American manufacturing, but the U.S. is simply not equipped to produce enough tin-mill steel: since 2018, the nation's 12 plants have dwindled to three, and there's no sign of further investment, Breen said. The price of tin-mill steel has never been higher. Canned-food manufacturers have been passing the extra cost to retailers and, inevitably, consumers.

That increase is a matter of cents per can, but it does add up quickly. The government itself has been affected, too. One of the biggest purchasers of canned goods is the USDA, Madrecki told me, which uses them to supply food to prisoners, for school meals, and to the Women, Infants, and Children program. By raising tariffs, "the government is increasing its own prices," Breen said.

State governments have encouraged families to continue to gather shelf-stable foods at food banks if the SNAP benefits stop coming. But charitable food organizations are already strained: rising food costs due to inflation have driven more people to seek donated items. The implications of taking SNAP away would be catastrophic for food banks too.

Modern-day hunger isn't as stark as it was during the Depression: in 1933, a New Yorker died every 12 days from hunger, according to *The New York Times*, and many more Americans developed illnesses associated with malnutrition. Today, when budgets run low, people tend to reduce portion size, skip meals, or buy less healthy food; they generally don't go long periods without eating, Berg told me. But if the first few days of November pass without the restoration of SNAP benefits, he said, "you're going to start seeing, for the first time in modern American history, large amounts of Americans going without any food at all."