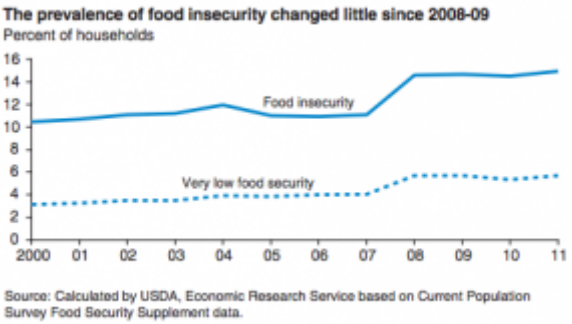
WHAT YOU WON'T HEAR AT THE DNC: CHILDREN ARE GOING HUNGRY IN THE RICHEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

Here's what the Secretary of Agriculture—who is in charge of our nation's Food Stamp program—had to say about food and hunger at his DNC speech last night:



> You know, rural Americans are a special people. Their labor puts food on our table and fuel in our gas tanks.
>
> [snip]
>
> Today, President Obama is making smart investments in clean energy—wind, solar, biofuels —as part of an all-of-the-above energy strategy that supports thousands of jobs, not in the Middle East, but in the Midwest. And in this season of severe drought, President Obama has acted to help, while calling on Congress to act as well.

For Tom Vilsack, corn is what you pour into a car, not what you put into hungry bellies, not even during a year of record drought.

And here's what the Chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee, who is up for re-election and who is fighting with Paul Ryan's obstructionist House Republicans over whether

the Farm Bill will cut food stamps, had to say about food and hunger while she stood on the DNC stage last night:

(In other, um, words, Obama gave Debbie Stabenow no speaking role.) Even Elizabeth Warren, who gave a great speech focused on how rigged the game is against struggling families, didn't talk about hunger. Bill Clinton got huge cheers, though, when he made clear that Obama wants to require the poor to work more for welfare, not less.

And yet this week Vilsack's Ag Department just released the annual report on Food Insecurity showing that more action is needed. (h/t Jeff Bryant) Among other things, the report showed that the number of US households that experienced very low food security last year—6.8 million households or 5.7% of the population—went up last year to the elevated levels of 2008 and 2009. And while parents and policies usually shield children from hunger, in 374,000 homes, they weren't able to (which remains at the level of 2010). Altogether, 17.9 million people were food insecure at some point last year.

I learned yesterday that if I were one of these 17.9 million people I'd be sunk. Rather than watch the early speeches last night (conincidentally, I came home just in time to see Vilsack), I attended a local poverty simulation as part of Hunger Action Week. We broke up into "families" and tried to get through a month making ends meet without enough money to do so; I was the single mother of 3 kids, aged 9 to 17, whose ex-husband had recently lost his job and stopped paying child support.

I found I immediately went into panic mode just figuring out how to pay for transportation to start negotiating the system (it was one thing that added up but wasn't an obvious budget

item). When I was “at work” (a part time minimum wage job at a hospital) all I could think of was dashing to the multiple agencies that might help me make ends meet after work. My “nights,” too, were spent trying to game out how I would accomplish all I needed to the next day to put food on the table. I spent a lot of time waiting in lines. It took me two weeks to figure out how the system worked, at which point I was already behind on utilities and my mortgage. And the kids wanted to help so badly they started listening to the local drug dealer offering to pay them for dropping off packages; since I wasn’t home I couldn’t dissuade them.

In the end, my family fared less well than 2 other families just like mine in the simulation. We did manage to eat all month long—that part I managed really well (though we did rely on food stamps, so we’d surely have them cut back if either the GOP home heating credit rule goes through or if the PA rule on owning cars did). But we got evicted in the last week of the month. Partly, that’s because our 17 year old never got a shit job at Burger King to help pay the bills like the other families’ 17 year olds, though not for want of trying. Partly, that’s because I took the legally sound but pragmatically unsound approach of telling the bank they didn’t own the note to my mortgage so they couldn’t foreclose on me; when the sheriff came to evict me he was uninterested in discussing securitization. And partly it was because I didn’t start negotiating for partial payments with the utilities and bank because that was all I could pay from the start.

I like to think of myself as a competent person, but it turns out I’m utterly incompetent at negotiating the very difficult task of being poor.

One of the most striking parts of the simulation had nothing to do with the very sobering simulation part. As my group was doing introductions and I explained to a local pastor what I do, he asked how I had time to do this

simulation given that it was a September before election season, to say nothing of smack dab in the middle of Convention season.

At the time, I thought it an odd question. Hunger is part of politics, isn't it? Providing for the less well off is one important point of politics, isn't it?

But as it turns out, pouring corn into cars is apparently a higher priority.

Update: There is a line in Clinton's speech describing "no matter how many jobs that he saved or created, there'd still be millions more waiting, worried about feeding their own kids, trying to keep their hopes alive."