



**Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development**  
Office of Domestic Social Development

**FEDERAL BUDGET: Advocating a Circle of Protection**  
February 2013

## **BACKGROUND**

Congress and President Obama continue to focus on the economic crisis and strategies to stimulate job creation and address the deficit, in an environment of continued partisanship and polarization.

Over the course of the next few months, there will be increasing pressure to reduce the budget deficit, especially through efforts to cut discretionary programs focused on poor and vulnerable people. A number of deadlines are approaching, each with the potential to impact people struggling to live in dignity. They include:

- ◆ March 1: Deep, across-the-board spending cuts, known as “Sequestration,” take effect
- ◆ March 27: Current fiscal year spending (FY 2013) expires and will need to be extended
- ◆ Mid-March: Congress crafts new budget for FY 2014
- ◆ Early April: President Obama submits new budget for FY 2014

The federal budget includes two types of spending: discretionary and mandatory (or entitlement). *Discretionary* spending is subject to the annual appropriations process where Congress sets the level of spending on programs. These programs include education, various social service programs, housing, environmental stewardship, international assistance, and defense; it makes up about one-third of federal spending. The other two-thirds is *Mandatory* spending, which includes entitlement programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps), Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and low-income tax credits. Mandatory spending is not part of the appropriations process because those programs are not limited--simply put, if someone meets a set of criteria, they receive the benefit. Congress, however, can control spending on these benefits by limiting eligibility.

## **USCCB POSITION**

In the face of unsustainable deficits, the nation faces unavoidable choices about how to balance needs and resources and allocate burdens and sacrifices. These choices have consequences on people’s lives. USCCB has consistently advanced a set of moral criteria for Congress and the President to use in making important budget decisions:

1. Every budget decision should be assessed by whether it protects or threatens human life and dignity.
2. A central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects the lives and dignity of “the least of these” (Matthew 25). The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty should come first.
3. Government and other institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all, especially ordinary workers and families who struggle to live in dignity in difficult economic times.

Additionally, “a just framework cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons; it requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly” ([USCCB letter to Congress on FY 2013 budget](#)).

## PROGRAMS THAT WORK

The Federal Government has many programs that fight poverty by helping poor and vulnerable people meet basic human needs. By developing a [Supplemental Poverty Measure](#) and studying some of these programs, the Census Bureau can determine how they reduce poverty:

	Reduces the Poverty Rate By...			
	<u>Total</u>	<u>Children</u>	<u>Adults</u>	<u>65+</u>
<i>Social Security</i>	8.3%	2.2%	4.2%	39%
<i>Refundable tax credits</i>	2.8%	6.3%	2.2%	.1%
<i>SNAP</i>	1.5%	2.9%	1.3%	.7%
<i>Unemployment</i>	1.1%	1.3%	1.3%	.4%
<i>SSI</i>	1.1%	.8%	1.2%	1.2%
<i>Housing subsidies</i>	.9%	1.4%	.8%	1.2%
<i>School lunch</i>	.3%	.9%	.3%	-
<i>TANF</i>	.3%	.6%	.2%	-

## CATHOLIC TEACHING

In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, Scripture gives us the story of the Last Judgment (Mt: 25) and instructs us to put the needs of poor and vulnerable people first. Pope Benedict XVI, in [Deus Caritas Est](#), reminds us that “[p]olitics is more than a mere mechanism for defining the rules of public life: its origin and its goal are found in justice, which by its very nature has to do with ethics. The State must inevitably face the question of how justice can be achieved here and now.” (#28)

The [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) clearly states it is the proper role of government to ensure basic human rights are met:

...the common good requires the social well-being and development of the group itself. Development is the epitome of all social duties. Certainly, it is the proper function of authority to arbitrate, in the name of the common good, between various particular interests; but it should make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on. (no. 1908)

And the [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#) teaches that tax revenues and government funding is important to making that happen:

Tax revenues and public spending take on crucial economic importance for every civil and political community. The goal to be sought is public financing that is itself capable of becoming an instrument of development and solidarity. Just, efficient and effective public financing will have very positive effects on the economy, because it will encourage employment growth and sustain business and non-profit activities and help to increase the credibility of the State as the guarantor of systems of social insurance and protection that are designed above all to protect the weakest members of society. (no. 355)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

USCCB Federal Budget Page: [usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/federal-budget/](https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/federal-budget/)

[Primer on Poverty, an Option for the Poor, and the Common Good](#)

Circle of Protection: [circleofprotection.us](https://www.circleofprotection.us)

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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