

US Senate bill cuts \$4 billion from food stamp program

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The Democratic-controlled US Senate passed a \$500 billion, five-year farm bill on Monday that would cut \$4 billion over a decade from food stamps, known today as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Nutrition programs comprise about 80 percent of the farm bill, in addition to commodity programs, crop insurance, conservation and other items. The move to cut SNAP comes as record numbers of Americans—47.8 million as of December 2012—have turned to the program in an effort to meet basic nutritional needs.

The Senate bill, which passed by a 66-27 vote, now goes to the US House, where Republicans are clamoring for even deeper cuts to SNAP—\$20 billion over 10 years. Senate Democrats are well aware that their \$4 billion proposed cut will be a bargaining chip in negotiations to reconcile the Senate bill with any future House version of the legislation. The inevitable result will be deep cuts to food aid—falling somewhere between the Senate and House proposals—at a time when need is growing for millions of poor American families.

In addition to the SNAP cuts, the Senate bill also includes a reactionary amendment authored by Senator David Vitter, Republican of Louisiana, that would bar food stamps to people previously convicted of murder, pedophilia and violent sexual assault. The Senate rejected two other Republican amendments: one that would have cut \$31 billion from food stamps, and another that would have converted SNAP to a block grant program and cut it by \$300 billion.

Food stamp usage has soared since the onset of the recession, rising from 28.2 million people in 2008 to 47.8 million at the end of 2012. A staggering 15 percent of the US population currently receives SNAP benefits, nearly double the rate of 1975. Federal SNAP

funding has risen from \$35 billion in 2008 to \$80 billion today, earning the ire of politicians from both big-business parties who are demanding spending cuts from a wide array of social programs depended upon by millions of people who have been devastated by the economic crisis.

The cut in SNAP funding will translate into increased hunger and food insecurity for food stamp recipients. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the Senate plan would reduce SNAP benefits to 500,000 households, while the House proposal would eliminate SNAP benefits for about 1.8 million people and cut 200,000 children off free school lunches.

The SNAP benefits that Congress proposes to cut are already abysmally low—averaging only \$133 a month per person as of 2012. To qualify, a household's income cannot exceed 130 percent of the federal poverty level, which is about \$25,000 for a family of three, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP). A minimal expansion to SNAP as part of the Obama administration's 2009 stimulus bill is set to expire October 31, which the CBPP estimates will decrease benefits by about \$8 a month per person.

The number of people receiving food stamp benefits corresponds closely to the number of Americans living in poverty, which rose to just below 50 million people in 2011. About half of all food stamp recipients are children, and about half of these children—some 10 million—live in extreme poverty. A household is considered living in extreme poverty if income is less than half the official federal poverty level, or \$11,775 for a family of four.

According to the US Department of Agriculture, more than 50 million Americans lived in “food insecure” households in 2011, a statistically significant

increase of 2.6 percent from 2010. The USDA defines households as food insecure when their “access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources.” Long-term unemployment, underemployment and low wages have all contributed to rising food insecurity.

A long-term study published in the *Journal of Nutrition* in 2005, following more than 20,000 children from kindergarten through third grade, found that food insecurity was a predictor of poor academic and social progress. “The most plausible interpretation of the results is that food insecurity in the early elementary years has developmental consequences,” wrote the researchers, led by University of South Carolina nutritionist Edward Frongillo.

Researchers at Children’s HealthWatch have tracked the health of some 38,000 children across the US since 1998. They have found that food insecurity nearly doubles the risk of child health problems, and raises hospitalization risks by one-third. Children who are food insecure also have lower levels of iron and zinc, nutrients crucial to healthy physiological and neurological functioning.

Cuts to the SNAP program will have a devastating effect on the health and well-being of millions of Americans, and children in particular. Mariana Chilton, public health nutritionist from the Drexel University School of Public Health in Philadelphia, commented to *Wired* magazine, “We know that SNAP cuts will be cutting into the bodies and brains of little kids.” She added, “We know that any kind of nutritional deprivation, even if it’s episodic, once a month during the year, affects a child’s cognitive and emotional development.”



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