

Don't Cut SNAP to Pay For Other Priorities

"Year after year and decade after decade the history of America's conscience is written in what happens with food stamps. It's a remarkable history." Journalist Daniel Schorr, June 11, 2008.

"It is the renowned Harvard economist, Larry Katz, who offers the most compelling analogy. 'Think of the American economy as a large apartment block. [I]n the last generation its character has changed. The penthouses at the top keep getting larger and larger. The apartments in the middle are feeling more and more squeezed and the basement has flooded.'" Quoted in the Financial Times, ft.com, July 30, 2010.

In recent weeks, various Senators and some Administration officials have proposed cutting SNAP (food stamp) benefits as a way to "pay for" added expenditures in other programs. Cutting SNAP benefits is just further flooding the basement in which low-income Americans – most of them working families and seniors – reside.

The SNAP cut has been proposed, variously, as a way to pay for: increased Medicaid help to the states: "Race to the Top" education funding: supports for farmers: funds for the states to retain teachers: increased school meal reimbursements and other child nutrition initiatives: and avoiding cuts in a conservation program.

Most SNAP beneficiaries are children or seniors. They are in households with very low incomes: only 13 percent of all SNAP households have income above the federal poverty line; nearly 41 percent have incomes at or below half of the poverty line.

When Congress passed the economic recovery act in early 2009, it included a hugely important and long overdue increase in SNAP benefits, with the caveat (given the nature of ARRA) that the boost would be temporary and inflation would be allowed to slowly erode the value of that increase. Because inflation has been lower than expected – a result of the same deeper-than-expected recession that has made millions more households reliant on SNAP help and increased the average need of each beneficiary family – the SNAP increase will phase down more slowly than expected. The proposals are to pay for other spending by taking money from SNAP by terminating the ARRA increase early – reducing benefits for families at an early date.

Proponents make a number of incorrect claims:

This isn't a cut in benefits; it's remedying an accounting problem.

This is a very real cut in monthly benefits, with real consequences for real people. Under one recent Senate plan, for example, the maximum food stamp allotment for a family of four will fall, in June 2014 by \$59 per month. Not only is it a real cut, but it's unique. Never before have SNAP benefits been lowered from one period to the following period.

This just returns benefits to prior levels.

Yes, but those levels were far too low for people to purchase enough food to get through the month, much less a healthy diet, which is one reason ARRA raised them. Even with the ARRA boost, the average person per day benefit level is only \$4.50

The monthly SNAP allotment is predicated on a food plan (the "Thrifty Food Plan") which was developed during the Depression in the 1930s "as a restricted diet for emergency use." The allotment typically carries even the most careful of families only three-quarters or four-fifths of the way through the month.

In 1996 Congress changed the law so that in most months SNAP benefits 100 percent of the Thrifty plan. The amount of the federal government's own Low-Cost Food Budget – the lowest of three government budgets for normal use – is approximately 25 percent higher than the Thrifty Food Plan, and that is what should be the basis for SNAP allotments. That Low-Cost Food Budget is generally in line with what low and moderate-income families report that they need to spend on food.

In 2008, USDA reported 49 million Americans lived in food insecure households – one-third more than a year earlier. The recession undoubtedly drove this growth. But in 2009, as the recession continued, after the ARRA boost, roughly the same number of people indicated problems purchasing enough food as in 2008. In other words, even as the recession deepened the ARRA boost buffered families against hunger. (The indicator for 2008 and 2009 is the percentage of households telling Gallup: “Have there been times in the past twelve months when you did not have enough money to buy food that you or your family needed?” ARRA stabilized this problem. “Just returning benefits” to prior levels will mean more hunger.

Now that the cut has been put on the table, it's inevitable.

It's only inevitable if all of the groups and individuals, including members of Congress, who are appalled by the cut, stay silent. Then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Supporters of SNAP had had to defeat “inevitable” cuts before, and have done so.

There's no alternative. Congressional leaders faced, in the words of one journalist, a 'Sophie's Choice.' There was no other way to pay for this bill.

So far, using the SNAP cuts to pay for a bill has not actually succeeded in passing a bill; it's merely whetted appetites and added to the claims of inevitability. Proponents are saying it is necessary to take sums as high as \$12 billion or more from the poorest people in the country when:

- the nation's GDP is more than \$14 trillion;
- the federal budget is \$3.8 trillion;
- the cost of extending the Bush tax cuts for the period 2011-2015 is an estimated \$1.44 trillion.

Kids lose if this money goes to food stamps instead of teachers, Medicaid and other programs.

Kids lose if the SNAP cut happens. Nearly eighty percent of SNAP benefits go to households with children. Teachers report they can't teach hungry kids. Doctors and nurses report that hungry kids are sicker and run up medical costs. As the Pew Charitable Trusts said in [Reading, Writing and Hungry](#), children who go hungry in kindergarten are noticeably behind their peers in reading and math by third grade; and food insecurity and hunger drive poor birth outcomes, poor health and mental health outcomes, and childhood obesity: “When kids grow up undernourished, the architecture of their brains is changed, causing harm to their physical, mental, social and emotional health throughout their lives.” SNAP is the nutrition program that can do the most to eliminate child hunger.

The benefit cuts would affect tens of millions of the neediest children, seniors and working age adults. Today one in five or one in six people in 15 states (including Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, and New Mexico) receives SNAP.

A list of the numbers of people and the percentage of the population receiving SNAP in each state and the District of Columbia can be found here:

<http://frac.org/reports-and-resources/snapfood-stamp-program-participation-data-2009/>