

US food assistance benefits face cut in November

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The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps, will be cut for millions of US families when a temporary increase expires in November 2013. The impending cuts will impact approximately 46 million people, some 13 percent of all US households, with 22 million of those receiving SNAP benefits being children.

According to a report issued by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), a liberal think tank, SNAP benefits will decrease by \$8 per month per person. For a family of three the cut will likely be \$20 to \$25 a month, meaning that such a family would lose \$240 to \$300 a year in benefits.

The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire reports that more than 6.2 million more households use the SNAP program now than five years ago, before the onset of the economic crisis, and more than three out of four households receiving SNAP benefits contain a least one person who is working.

A study by the National Poverty Center found that without SNAP benefits the number of families living in extreme poverty would double in the US. Extreme poverty is defined as a family that earns less than \$2 per person per day. The CBPP notes that while some states in the past have reduced SNAP benefits, there has never been a cut of this size affecting all participants.

SNAP benefits were increased with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The benefits were supposed to continue until the program's annual adjustment for inflation caught up with the expanded benefit amount. However, in 2010 Congress passed legislation ending expanded benefits and President Obama signed it into law, to take effect on October 31 of this year. As a result, the November 1 SNAP benefit levels will be set at the cost of the so-called Thrifty Food Plan, a barebones food budget, which is calculated in June. This is expected to be lower than the current benefit

level. The most recent forecast by the Congressional Budget Office is that this will result in a \$25 per month benefit decrease for a family of four.

As the CBPP notes, the impact of the impending cuts is compounded by the fact that current benefit levels are already inadequate. A report by the National Academy of Sciences found that SNAP does not take into account the many barriers to finding healthy and affordable food for people living in inner cities. Further, benefits lag behind rising food prices and the program penalizes those who both work and receive benefits.

The report noted that there is a 16-month delay between the time the government assesses the cost of food and the time it adjusts benefit levels. It also called into question the formula used to determine the amount of food families receive. The current calculation assumes that an average family spends 30 percent of its income on food. However, the report noted that 13 percent is a more realistic figure given the rising cost of housing and health care.

The cuts to SNAP will drive families further into poverty. Some 10 million children receiving SNAP benefits already live in deep poverty, in families whose income is less than one-half the official poverty level, which is currently set at an unrealistically low \$23,350 for a family of four. Another 9 million are elderly or have a serious disability. According to the CBPP the impending cuts will have the effect of taking away 24 meals a month for a family of three. This is based on the figures used by the government to calculate benefit amounts, which stipulate a mere \$1.70 to \$2.00 per meal.

In September 2012, the US Department of Agriculture reported that 14.9 percent of US households faced food insecurity in 2011. Food insecurity is defined as a household where one or more persons had to skip a meal because of lack of money for food. Also in 2011 the USDA found that 5.7 percent of US households faced what it described as "very low food security." Of the

more than 50 million people facing hunger, 17 million are children. Very low food security has increased dramatically over the past decade, rising from 3.3 percent of US households in 2001 to 5.7 percent in 2011, a more than 72 percent increase.

The USDA determined that the number of households who were food insecure had been cut by the 2009 increase in SNAP benefits by about 500,000. The CBPP also notes that raising SNAP benefits during summer months benefited households with school age children who didn't have access to the USDA's summer food program, reducing food insecurity by 20 percent.

According to the Carsey Institute, the number of those receiving SNAP benefits rose in 2011, despite the fall in the official poverty rate. Between 2010 and 2011 the number of those receiving SNAP benefits rose by 2.7 million people. Among all households SNAP use rose by just over 1 percent in every region and type of place, suburban and urban. The highest rate of SNAP use was in inner cities, 16 percent, followed by rural areas, 15.6 percent. The steepest rate of increase occurred in Northeastern cities, up 8 percentage points since 2007.

SNAP use is highest among families headed by a single woman, 44.4 percent in 2011. The rate of SNAP use by families headed by a single mother in rural areas is especially high, 52.1 percent.

Elderly and people with disabilities are also vulnerable to food insecurity. In 2011, 23 percent of households containing a person with a disability received SNAP benefits. The highest rate was in central cities, where 28.6 percent of households receiving SNAP contained a person with disabilities. Among households with one or more persons age 60 or older, 9.5 percent received SNAP benefits in 2011.



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