US Congress debates deep cuts to food stamps as need surges

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Food stamp usage in the US has soared since the onset of the recession, rising from 28.2 million people in 2008 to 47.5 million people in February 2013. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) kept 4.7 million people out of poverty in 2011 alone, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP).

The discussion in Washington, however, is not about shoring up a vital program that provides food assistance to millions of low-income Americans. Instead, the two big-business parties are debating how many billions of dollars should be slashed from SNAP. The farm bill passed last Monday by the Democratic-controlled US Senate would cut $4.1 billion over a decade from the food stamp program.

On May 15, the Republican-chaired House Agricultural Committee passed farm legislation that included $20.5 billion in cuts to SNAP over a decade. Such a funding reduction would throw nearly 2 million people off the program. The 2013 budget proposal of Paul Ryan, Republican of Wisconsin, calls for a staggering $135 billion in cuts to food stamps and for transforming SNAP into a block-grant program to the states.

The full House is expected to present its version of the farm bill some time this summer, which must then be reconciled with the Senate bill. Any Democratic-Republican "compromise" legislation that emerges will serve to increase hunger and food insecurity among tens of millions of Americans who continue to struggle with poverty, job loss and under-employment five years into the economic downturn.

A bill introduced last month by Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York that would have blocked any food stamp cuts received the support of only 25 of her Democratic Senate colleagues. Senator Debbie Stabenow, Democrat of Michigan and chair of the Senate Agriculture committee, defended the $4.1 billion in SNAP cuts in the bill that eventually passed, claiming the cutback was aimed at rooting out "waste, fraud and abuse" in the food stamp program.

In reality, the Senate bill's cutback to SNAP is largely the result of eliminating the "Heat and Eat" programs adopted by 15 states and the District of Columbia, which allow states to coordinate food and energy assistance programs, eliminating the need for SNAP households to provide burdensome monthly documentation of their shelter and utility bills.

While Senator Stabenow insinuates that such households are guilty of cheating the SNAP system, the Food Research and Action Center notes that about 40 percent of low-income families nationwide regularly report having to choose between paying for food or utilities. The Coalition on Human Needs estimates that participating households stand to lose $50 to $70 a month in SNAP benefits through elimination of the coordinated approach of the "Heat and Eat" program.

The Senate Democrats' approach to food stamp cutbacks dovetails with the Republican House Agriculture Committee proposal, which would eliminate expanded "categorical eligibility" for SNAP benefits, which prevents households below the 130 percent of poverty threshold from losing benefits simply due to the value of their assets, such as a car.

Forty states also currently allow flexibility in food stamp qualification limits by aligning them to more generous income rules under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. According to the CBPP, the typical family participating in SNAP as a result of the expanded eligibility would be a mother earning slightly above the program's gross income limit of $2,069 a month (or about $24,800 a year).

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Even with this expanded eligibility, such a family receives only about $100 in monthly SNAP benefits, about a quarter to a fifth of their actual monthly food needs. In an additional cruel cut, an estimated 210,000 children in those families losing “categorical” SNAP eligibility would be cut off from receiving free school lunch as well, meaning they are likely to go without it.

A cutback of any amount to the SNAP program constitutes a direct assault on the physical well being of working class families who are struggling under the weight of entrenched long-term unemployment, falling real wages and poverty. After unemployment benefits, SNAP is the most widely available federal program providing assistance to stave off poverty during periods of economic downturn. Low-income working families, the jobless, seniors and people with disabilities turn to the program’s limited benefits for nutritional support that is otherwise unavailable.

Nearly three-quarters of households participating in SNAP include children. Over 91 percent of SNAP benefits go to households with incomes below the federal poverty line (FPL), already set at the abysmally low level of $19,530 annually for a family of three in 2013. More than half of SNAP benefits—55 percent—go to the extreme poor, households with incomes below half of the FPL, or about $9,500 for a family of three.

While politicians in Congress argue that bloated SNAP benefits are a drain on the budget and are impeding the economic recovery, a study released in March by the Center for American Progress (CAP) found that for every $1 billion cut from SNAP, 13,718 jobs are lost, largely a result of benefit recipients reducing their spending on food. By this account, the Senate bill would cut 56,243 jobs, which the CAP notes “will likely have the greatest impact on younger workers, since they account for a disproportionate share of workers in food-related industries.”

SNAP recipients will also receive a double hit due to the expiration of benefit increases put in place through the 2009 Recovery Act. The 13.6 percent increase in SNAP benefits as part of President Obama’s stimulus plan is due to run out in November. A family of three can expect to see a $20 to $25 a month reduction in SNAP benefits as a result. There are no moves afoot by either the Obama administration or either house of Congress to forestall this reduction in benefits.

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