

More than 1 million in US face food stamps cutoff

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More than 1 million low-income people across the United States could soon lose their government food stamp benefits if they fail to meet work requirements. The threatened mass cutoff of the government's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits constitutes a vindictive bipartisan attack on some of the nation's poorest and most vulnerable residents.

A Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) report last month predicted 500,000 to 1 million people would be cut off of SNAP benefits in 2016 due to the return in many areas of a three-month limit on benefits for unemployed adults aged 18-49 who are not disabled or raising minor children.

The SNAP cutoffs loom as hunger and food insecurity continue to rise sharply. According to the most recent statistics from Feeding America, a food bank network, a staggering 48.1 million Americans lived in food insecure households in 2014, including 32.8 million adults and 15.3 million children.

US food banks gave away about 4 billion pounds of food last year, double the amount a decade earlier. Social service providers and food pantries are bracing for an influx of hungry people in response to the SNAP rule change.

Following the financial crisis in 2008, virtually every US state qualified for waivers from the three-month limit due to high unemployment rates. On the basis of the supposedly improving economy, these waivers expired in 21 US states in January. The cutoffs are being implemented a month after the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported that more than a quarter of the 7.9 million US unemployed have been jobless for more than six months.

Based on experience in other states where waivers expired last year, the Associated Press now predicts most people will not meet the work requirements and that the number kicked off benefits could top 1 million.

Individuals facing cutoff include about 300,000 in Florida, 150,000 in Tennessee and 110,000 in North Carolina. Some of the 21 states, including these three, could have applied for partial waivers for counties with high unemployment rates but chose not to do so.

"The people affected by this are very poor," Elizabeth Lower-Basch of the Washington DC-based Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) told the WWS. "These are by definition people who aren't working more than about 20 hours a week."

According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), which administers SNAP, about 4.7 million SNAP recipients are deemed able-bodied without dependents, and only 1 in 4 of these has any income from a job. Data from the USDA shows these individuals have gross income averages of 17 percent of the official poverty line, or about \$2,000 *per year for a household of one in 2015*. Beneficiaries receive an average paltry benefit of \$164 a month.

The harsh "work for food" requirements were first introduced for SNAP under the 1996 welfare reform bill signed into law by President Clinton and sponsored by then-US Rep. John Kasich, who is now Ohio's governor and a Republican candidate for president. In 2014, President Obama signed a bill that included \$8.6 billion in cuts to SNAP. The temporary 14 percent increase in SNAP benefits passed by Congress in 2009 ended completely in November 2013.

The provision applies to "able-bodied" adults, ages 18-49, who have no children or other dependents in their homes. Such individuals must work, volunteer or attend education or job-training courses at least 80 hours a month. If they don't, their benefits are cut off after three months.

Looking for work does not qualify as an exemption from the three-month cutoff. "Another major concern is that states are not required to offer people an opportunity

to participate, to keep their benefits,” Lower-Basch said. “It’s one thing to say you’re going to have a work requirement to keep your benefits, but we’re going to offer you an opportunity to participate, and if you don’t you’re going to lose your benefits. But people can be cut off without being offered the opportunity.”

In the states that have already imposed the work requirements, a majority of people have been cut off benefits. In Wisconsin, which began phasing in the work provision last spring, two-thirds of the 22,500 adults subject to the change were dropped from the rolls three months later for failing to meet the requirements.

North Carolina, led by Republican Governor Pat McCrory, enacted a law last fall accelerating the work requirements. The bill further barred the state from seeking any waivers in the future unless there is a natural disaster.

State Sen. Ralph Hise claims that providing SNAP benefits beyond three months diminishes people’s job prospects. “People are developing gaps on their resumes, and it’s actually making it harder for individuals to ultimately find employment,” he said. Such preposterous statements fly in the face of the reality faced by those standing to lose their SNAP benefits.

According to the CBPP report, SNAP beneficiaries subject to the three-month cutoff are more likely than other SNAP recipients to lack basic job skills like reading, writing and basic mathematics. And people without a high school diploma, who make up about a quarter of non-disabled childless adults on SNAP, have double the unemployment rate of those with at least a high school diploma.

While the state and federal governments paint SNAP recipients as lazy and unnecessarily reliant on government handouts, many in the group facing benefit expiration have serious physical and mental health problems despite being identified as able to work.

The Ohio Association of Foodbanks found that 30 percent of those participating in the Work Experience Program in Franklin County to maintain their SNAP benefits reported a physical or mental health limitation, despite being classified as an able-bodied adult without dependents (ABAWD). The most common mental health limitations reported by clients included depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and addiction.

CLASP’s Lower-Basch said that due to state government underfunding and bureaucracy, many people who should qualify for an exemption from the cutoff

don’t receive one. “One of the big concerns is that people who may have disabilities or work limitations, if they’re not receiving Social Security disability benefits, may not know that they have a disability,” she said.

She added that because many people now apply for benefits online it means that “many clients are never sitting across the table from a caseworker, who might look at them and say we should figure out what exemption you meet because you’re clearly not able to participate.”

The Ohio Association of Foodbanks asked those who lost benefits: “How are you providing food for yourself in the absence of food benefits?” In response, 80 percent said that they depended on food pantries and family support. Others said they relied on soup kitchens, homeless shelters and churches.

A sizeable proportion, 18 percent, responded that they got food by asking strangers, panhandling and dumpster diving. Only 21.3 percent of those studied reported being under a doctor’s care, and many clients explicitly reported not being able to afford the medication they have been prescribed.

While the US expends \$609.9 billion a year on the military, prosecuting an endless series of wars around the globe, Obama’s fiscal year 2016 budget proposal included a mere \$83.692 billion for SNAP, which presently serves an average caseload of 45.7 million Americans, almost 15 percent of the population.

The growing and unbridgeable gulf between the rich and poor in 21st century America finds one of its most noxious expressions in the drive by the ruling elite to slash minimal food assistance to some of the nation’s poorest and most vulnerable. While the presidential candidates in both big business parties trip over themselves to support the “war on terror” and the drive to war, the potential cutoff of 1.1 million people from food stamps receives no mention.



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