

Trump proposal denies free school meals to half a million children

Kate Randall
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The Trump administration has provided a new analysis of how proposed changes to eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as food stamps, will impact children who participate in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs. By the White House's own admission, these changes mean that about a half-million children would become ineligible for free school meals.

Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue has described the changes as a tightening up of "loopholes" in the SNAP system. But those affected by the changes are not corporate crooks or billionaires, but hundreds of thousands of children who stand to lose access to free meals. For many American children, free school breakfasts and lunches make up the bulk of their nutritional intake, and they stand to suffer permanent physical and psychological damage as a result of the cuts.

The sheer vindictiveness of the proposed rule change is shown by the minimal savings that would result—about \$90 million a year beginning in fiscal year 2021, or a mere 0.012 percent of the estimated \$74 billion annual SNAP budget. Put another way, the savings would amount to two-thousandths of a percent of the \$4.4 trillion federal budget. But while this \$90 million might appear as small change to the oligarchs running and supporting the government, it will be directly felt as hunger in the bellies of America's poorest children.

SNAP provided benefits to roughly 40 million Americans in 2018 and is the largest nutrition program of the 15 administered by the federal Food and Nutrition Service. Along with programs such as the Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children and school breakfast and lunch programs, SNAP has

been a major factor in making a dent in the hunger of working-class families. But despite these programs' successes, the Trump administration is seeking to claw them back, with the ultimate aim of doing away with them altogether.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA), which administers the food stamp and school meal programs, says that the new analysis presented last week is a more precise estimate of the impact of rule changes in SNAP the USDA first announced in July. The main component of the rule change is an end to "broad-based categorical eligibility" for the food stamp program. Food stamps are cut off for households whose incomes exceed 130 percent of the federal poverty line, or \$33,475 per year for a family of four, calculated after exemptions for certain expenses.

Under "broad-based categorical eligibility," which is currently used by over 40 states, households can be eligible for food stamps based on their receiving assistance from other anti-poverty programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Under this rule, which has been in effect for about 20 years, states are allowed to raise income eligibility and asset limits to promote SNAP eligibility. This prevents many households from falling over the "benefit cliff," which happens when a small increase in income results in a complete cutoff of benefits, leaving a family worse off than before the rise in income.

According to the USDA, the rule change on broad-based eligibility would throw more than 680,000 households with children off SNAP. About 80 percent of these households have school-age children, amounting to about 982,000 children. Of those, 55 percent, or about 540,000, would no longer be eligible for free school meals, although most would be eligible for reduced-price meals. About 40,000 would be

required to pay the full meal rate.

However, this does not paint the full picture. Households thrown off SNAP would be required to apply separately for access to free or reduced-price school meals. The USDA admits that its cost estimates “do not account for potential state and local administrative costs incurred due to collecting and processing household applications … and also do not account for any increased responsibility placed on the households to complete and submit a school meals application.”

While the Trump administration claims that the proposed changes to SNAP eligibility are aimed at closing up “loopholes” and stopping people from claiming benefits they’re not entitled to, the reality is that there is no evidence that broad-based eligibility has allowed significant numbers of people to supposedly “game the system.” A 2012 Government Accountability Office investigation found that only 473,000 recipients, or just 2.6 percent of beneficiaries, received benefits they would not have received without the broad-based eligibility offered by many states.

There is consistent evidence that SNAP contributes to a decrease in food insecurity, a condition defined by the USDA as limited or uncertain access to adequate food. By one estimate, SNAP benefits reduce the likelihood of food insecurity by about 30 percent and the likelihood of being very food insecure by 20 percent. Census data has shown that SNAP also plays a critical role in reducing poverty, with about 3.6 million Americans, including 1.5 million children, being lifted out of poverty in 2016 as a result of the program.

The EconoFact Network reports that SNAP has improved birth outcomes and infant health. When an expectant mother has access to SNAP during pregnancy, particularly in the third trimester, it decreases the likelihood that her baby will be born with low birth weight. There is also evidence that the benefits of nutrition support can persist well into adulthood when access to SNAP is provided before birth and during early childhood. This can have a long-term impact on an individual’s earnings, health and life expectancy. Conversely, food insecurity in childhood correlates with greater risk of developing high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular disease later in life.

The proposed threat to school lunches for half a

million children has elicited little response from Democrats in Congress, who are obsessively focused on the Trump impeachment inquiry. Critical issues such as the health and nutrition of school children are of little consequence to the Democratic Party, which instead gives voice to those sections of the military intelligence apparatus that sees Trump’s actions, particularly his sudden pullout from Syria, as endangering the global interests of American imperialism.

The Democrats’ opposition to Trump is not based on his imposition of austerity measures, or his vicious assault on immigrants. While they will not mount a serious challenge to a proposal that will literally take food out of the mouths of school children, they were complicit in passing the Republicans’ \$1.3 trillion tax cuts in 2017 and the record \$738 billion defense budget agreed to earlier this year. At \$94.6 million, the cost of one of the US Air Force’s newest and most technologically advanced fighter jets, the F-35A, would cover the \$90 annual savings from depriving half a million US schoolchildren of free meals.



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