

Trump administration food stamp cuts spell hunger and destitution for millions

Kate Randall
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The Trump Administration announced Wednesday a rule change that will deprive nearly 700,000 people of benefits from the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, increasing hunger for countless families.

SNAP, formerly known as the food stamp program, currently provides vital federal assistance to over 36 million people.

Beginning in April 2020, the rule will make it much harder for adults, aged 18 to 49, who are without dependents to obtain benefits. It will make it more difficult for states to waive a requirement that these individuals work at least 20 hours a week or lose their benefits by allowing only those states with an official unemployment rate of 6 percent or above to apply for waivers. Currently, some regions with jobless rates as low as 2.5 percent are included in the waived areas.

The print and broadcast media have largely ignored the move, which will lead untold thousands of households to go hungry. Congressional Democrats have remained virtually silent, focused on their impeachment proceedings against Trump centering on claims that his policies are insufficiently aggressive against Russia.

That is because, in attacking the living conditions of masses of people, Trump is carrying out a bipartisan policy supported by both parties of big business. In 2014, President Obama signed legislation into law that cut \$8.7 billion in food stamp benefits over the next decade, causing 850,000 households to lose an average of \$90 a month.

According to a study from earlier this year when the change was first proposed, it will affect the poorest and most vulnerable: 97 percent of SNAP participants affected live in poverty; 88 percent have household incomes at or below 50 percent of the poverty level, or less than \$600 a month.

The work rule change is tied to two other proposals—one capping deductions for utility allowances and another that would lead to nearly 1 million students losing access to reduced-cost or free lunches. Taken together, the Urban Institute estimates that these three proposals would cut *3.6 million people from SNAP benefits*. In the words of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, these measures—which will literally snatch food from the mouths of children, the destitute and the most vulnerable in society—will “restore the dignity of work to a sizable segment of our population, while also respecting the taxpayers who fund the program.”

In reality, Perdue’s dystopian vision has nothing to do with restoring the “dignity of work” and everything to do with plunging millions of Americans further into poverty while increasing the wealth of the already super-wealthy who have been the beneficiaries of Trump’s tax cuts and attacks on social programs. *Forbes* places Perdue’s current net worth at \$5 million, a minor player compared to Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, whose net worth is \$2 billion, the highest in Trump’s cabinet.

The secretary of agriculture and former Georgia governor built a fortune in agribusiness and real estate. Shortly after joining Trump’s cabinet, he transferred control of investments worth at least \$8 million to his adult children. It is a cruel irony that the Trump official leading the assault on food stamps made his fortune profiting from agribusiness, while suicides among financially ruined Midwest family farmers are surging.

The three changes to SNAP rules would reduce the food stamp rolls by at least 15 percent in 13 states, according to an estimate by the Urban Institute. The third of these changes would hit the District of Columbia (24 percent) and Nevada (22 percent). Total

benefits would fall by at least 15 percent in nine states.

In California alone, an estimated 200,000 people could lose benefits as a result of the restrictions on waivers to work requirements.

Americans living in cold-weather states like Vermont, New York and South Dakota will bear the biggest brunt from the rule reducing the amount people can deduct for utility costs. Mostly rural Vermont would lose almost 22 percent of its food stamp aid, while New York, South Dakota and Maine would lose about 11 percent each. The US Department of Agriculture estimates the utility cost overhaul will reduce food stamp spending by about \$4.5 billion over five years.

Almost 7 in 10 Vermonters would see a cut in SNAP benefits, with the typical benefit reduced by almost 40 percent, dropping from an already paltry \$215 a month to about \$133, according to Hunger Free Vermont. Ellen Vollinger, legal director at the nonprofit Food Research & Action Center, said the utility cost proposal will force people to “choose whether to eat or heat.”

It is a myth that any of these measures will help people find jobs. Hunger advocates have emphasized that many of those who will be affected are impoverished, live in rural areas and often face mental health issues and disabilities. “The policy targets very poor people struggling to work—some of whom are homeless or living with health conditions,” Stacey Dean, food assistance policy vice president at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, told NBC News. “Taking away basic food assistance from these individuals will only increase hardship and hunger, while doing nothing to help them find steady full-time work.”

But as the Trump administration touts a rise in the GDP as an indicator of the country’s economic health, renewed signs of social crisis in America portend an increase—not a lessening—of suffering and despair, which will only be exacerbated by cuts to food assistance.

The US has experienced a decline in life expectancy for the third straight year. More disturbingly, growing numbers of people are dying relatively young, between the ages of 25 and 64, an age group that intersects with those targeted by the rule changes to SNAP.

These are people who in a healthy society would be in the prime of their working lives. Instead, rising

numbers of people are dying from “diseases of despair:” suicide, alcohol and drug overdose. Midlife mortality rates have also increased as a result of at least 35 other causes, including diseases and conditions such as diabetes, autoimmune disorders, obesity and high blood pressure.

After a decline in the uninsured rate due to the Affordable Care Act’s requirement that those without health insurance obtain coverage from a private insurer, the uninsured rate is now rising again. The numbers of those who are underinsured and burdened by high out-of-pocket costs are growing, leading to increasing numbers of people filing for personal bankruptcy.

A new report by two non-profit groups reveals the staggering statistic that over 2 million Americans in 2019 do not have access to indoor plumbing or running water. New statistics also show that the Flint water crisis is not an isolated incident, and that the water supply in countless cities and towns across the country are contaminated with dangerous levels of lead.

The defense of the basic human right to adequate nutrition, water and health care cannot be entrusted to either big business party. The Trump administration’s assault on SNAP benefits poses the necessity of the working class adopting its own independent defense of these social rights through the organization of a revolutionary leadership that fights for the socialist organization of society on the basis of human need, not profit.



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