

Poverty in America: US Food Stamp Assistance to be Slashed

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Benefit payments from the US government's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), better known as food stamps, will be slashed drastically on November 1, the first across-the-board cut in food stamp benefits in US history.

The cuts will amount to \$5 billion per year, and a total of \$11 billion through 2016. The average household of three will receive a benefit cut of \$29 a month, or \$319 per year.

"The depth and breadth of the SNAP cuts that take effect in November are unprecedented," wrote Dottie Rosenbaum and Brynne Keith-Jennings of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP). "Past cuts have affected specific states or groups, but they have not affected all participants nor been as large as these cuts."

The CBPP noted, "The cut is equivalent to about 16 meals a month for a family of three based on the cost of the U.S. Agriculture Department's 'Thrifty Food Plan.'" Once the cuts go through, SNAP assistance will amount to less than \$1.40 per person per meal, according to the CBPP.

One in seven Americans receives food stamp assistance, up from 9 percent of the population in 2008 to nearly 15 percent in 2012. The program helps feed 48 million people, up from 26 million in 2007.

The cuts are the result of the expiration of the 2009 Recovery Act's temporary increase in food stamp assistance, which neither the Democrats nor Republicans proposed seriously proposed to prevent.

The expiration of the extension was not scheduled to take place till 2015, when SNAP benefits are slated to increase. But congressional Democrats used \$14 billion that was set aside for food stamps to fund other legislation. In 2010 the Democrats promised to restore the funding before the aid extension expired.

The Democrats have largely kept silent about the slated cut to food stamp aid, and the White House has made no official mention of the benefit cuts in the past week. The media has likewise blacked out the issue, with neither the New York Times, Washington Post or Wall Street Journal carrying stories on the scheduled cut to food stamp aid during the same period.

Over 80 percent of SNAP benefits go to households with incomes below the federal poverty line, an abysmally low \$19,530 annually for a family of three, and 40 percent of recipients

live in deep poverty, defined as below \$9,765 annually for a family of three.

The share of food stamp recipients who are working has risen significantly. Nearly one third of SNAP recipients were working in 2010, up from less than 20 percent two decades before. Of those who do not work, the vast majority are disabled, elderly or under age. The number of people who receive food stamps will continue to rise through 2014, according to projections by the Congressional Budget Office.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, three quarters of households who receive SNAP benefits “included a child, a person age 60 or older, or a disabled person.”

The typical household receiving SNAP had an income of \$731 per month, or about \$8,800 per year, not counting SNAP benefits, according to the Congressional Budget Office. The average SNAP payment per household that year was \$287, or \$4.30 per person per day.

Over 21 million children—more than 1 in 4—live in a household that receives SNAP benefits, according to the CBPP report, and nine million people with disabilities receive SNAP benefits.

The Democratic and Republican parties are planning even more draconian cuts to SNAP. The Democratic budget passed in the Senate earlier this year cuts over \$4 billion from the program, and the Republican House of Representatives voted last month to cut nearly \$40 billion from SNAP over ten years.

The Republican proposal would force adults between 18 and 50 to either work or attend work training in order to reapply for benefits, and would also institute drug testing for recipients. If the Republican proposal were accepted, it would cut 3.8 million people off the program in 2014.

The Democrats and Republicans this week entered conference committee negotiations over the food stamp bill, with the result likely to be some halfway house between the Democratic and Republican proposals. Whatever agreement is worked out will entail billions of dollars in additional cuts, taking the benefit reductions to be implemented next month as a starting point.

Food stamp usage has continued to swell even as the official unemployment rate has gone down because wages have fallen sharply, with the real incomes of the bottom 40 percent of income earners falling 6 percent between 2009 and 2012.

The cuts to food stamps are taking place amid other massive attacks on the living conditions of working people. The federal Emergency Unemployment Compensation program, which provides extended unemployment benefits beyond the 26-week cutoff for most state unemployment assistance programs, is scheduled to expire in December.

In the aftermath of the government shutdown, the Obama administration and Congress are moving to slash hundreds of billions more from basic social programs such as Medicare and Social Security.

These vital programs are being cut even as the super-rich continue to grow ever wealthier. The top ten highest-paid CEOs in the United States each received more than \$100 million in 2012, according to a survey by GMI Ratings released this week. Two chief executives—Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg and Richard Kinder of energy firm Kinder Morgan—each received over \$1 billion, and the combined pay of the top ten CEOs was \$4.7

billion.

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