

The Problem Isn't Food Stamps, It's Poverty



Credit Maria Hergueta

Food stamps work. Each month they help feed 43 million poor and low-income Americans (population 2017 # 324 million, 1 in 8), most in families with children and working parents. Food stamps, officially the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, keep millions of people from falling into poverty each year and prevent millions of poor people, many disabled or elderly, from falling deeper into poverty.

They also improve the future prospects of poor children by fostering better health and graduation rates.

Benefits average only \$1.40 per person per meal, ineligible recipients are rare and incorrect payments are few. Into the bargain, food stamps support the farm economy and the broader economy by creating a bigger market for food and supplying cash that is quickly spent.

President Trump's budget plan would destroy the food stamp program, on the pretense that it discourages work. That's nonsense, because most adult recipients either work or are unable to do so because of age or disability. A more plausible explanation is that cutting food stamps would help to offset the cost of huge tax cuts for the rich.

The damage would likely be permanent. Food stamps would be reduced by 25 percent — \$193 billion over 10 years — much of which would be achieved by shifting costs to the states, which could not afford to make the payment, leading them to cut food aid.

Disparities in hunger and poverty across the states, typical before the modern food stamp program began in the 1970s, would return, as would more hunger over all, especially in recessions, when states are forced to cut spending.

The budget would also reduce the food stamp program by making its strict requirements even stricter. For example, it would all but prohibit states from waiving a federal rule that generally cuts off unemployed childless adults after three months. The cutoff is supposed to prevent freeloading, but it mainly affects people who have low skills, arrest records, substance abuse problems or other impediments to employment. The budget would also make it harder for states to adjust the eligibility formula where rents or child care costs are high. And no matter how large a family is, the benefit calculation would be capped at six people.

The proposed cuts have little chance of enactment, but they are still dangerous. Extreme proposals are a way to make less extreme proposals seem acceptable. To avoid that trap, members of Congress from both parties need to do more than simply declare the Trump budget dead on arrival.

They need to make specific objections and draw clear lines in the sand. Otherwise, the objectionable provisions will return, slightly altered, but hardly less awful. They also need to resist accepting federal spending cuts as inevitable.

That so many working households are eligible for food stamps reflects the prevalence of low wage jobs. **In 2016**, six of the 20 biggest occupations — mainly in retail, restaurants and home care — had median wages around poverty level for a family of three. **Eight of the 10** jobs that are expected to add the most positions in the next decade pay poorly.

So the problem is not the number of people on food stamps; it's that companies pay wages so low that their employees qualify for them. It is a problem that Congress and the White House can rectify, not by cutting spending, but by raising the minimum wage, updating the overtime-pay rules and instituting paid sick leave — for starters.

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