

Harmful House Food Stamp Proposal Poses An Especially Grave Threat to Single Mothers and Their Children

The budget plan for FY 2012 that the House passed in April by a party line vote includes a Food Stamp proposal that the House Budget Committee says is intended to “encourage states to reduce [the Food Stamp] rolls” by applying to Food Stamps the welfare reform principles that Congress enacted in 1996 for welfare cash assistance.¹ As welfare reform did to cash assistance, the House proposal would convert Food Stamps to a block grant, cap federal Food Stamp funding, and weaken or repeal the program’s national standards. House Budget Committee staff have estimated that the proposal would reduce federal Food Stamp spending by \$127 billion, about 20%, over a ten year period.²

The Food Stamp program currently aids over 44 million persons in over 20 million low income households.³ About half of the households aided by Food Stamps are family households with children, and a majority of these family households are families headed by single mothers.⁴

If “welfare reform” in Food Stamps had the same impact as welfare reform in cash assistance, the House proposal, if enacted, could ultimately shrink the number of needy persons aided by Food Stamps by two-thirds or more, shrink real benefits for those still aided by 20% or

This report supported in part by a grant from the Open Society Foundations.

¹ House Budget Committee, *The Path to Prosperity: Restoring America’s Promise*, at p. 41 (April 2011), available at <http://budget.house.gov/UploadedFiles/PathToProsperityFY2012.pdf>.

² Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *Ryan Budget Would Slash SNAP Funding by \$127 Billion Over Ten Years* at p. 1 and n.1 (April 2011), available at <http://www.cbpp.org/files/4-11-11fa.pdf>. The “SNAP” in the title of this report is the acronym for the “Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program,” now the official name for Food Stamps.

³ United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), *Program Data* (as of Feb. 2011), available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/snapmain.htm>. Detailed information about the Food Stamp program is available from the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), <http://frac.org/>, and from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, <http://www.cbpp.org/>.

⁴ USDA, *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2009* at Table 3.3 on p. 19 (2010), available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/Published/snap/FILES/Participation/2009Characteristics.pdf>.

more, and shrink the current 86% participation rate⁵ for eligible family households to 40% or less.

Welfare reform in cash assistance reduced the number of families aided from 80% of poor families in 1995 in the pre-reform Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, to 27% of poor families in 2009 in the post-reform Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program that replaced AFDC.⁶ Welfare reform also reduced the participation rate for eligible families from 84% in AFDC in 1995 to 40% in TANF in 2005, the most recent year for which the federal TANF agency has reported this rate.⁷ Under TANF, benefits have declined in real value in all but three states and by 20% or more in over 30 states.⁸ Benefits are now below the poverty level in every state and less than five dollars a person a day in most states. Though TANF benefits are, in theory, supposed to suffice for all basic needs except health care, in a substantial majority of states the TANF benefit for a family with no income is now less than the Food Stamp benefit for a family with no income.

Due to the contraction of cash assistance, the Food Stamp program now aids several times as many needy families as TANF does. In an average month in FY 2009, Food Stamps aided 7.5 million families with children while TANF aided only 1.8 million.

The House proposal poses an especially grave threat to single mother families for whom the contraction of cash assistance has made Food Stamps increasingly indispensable. In 2009,

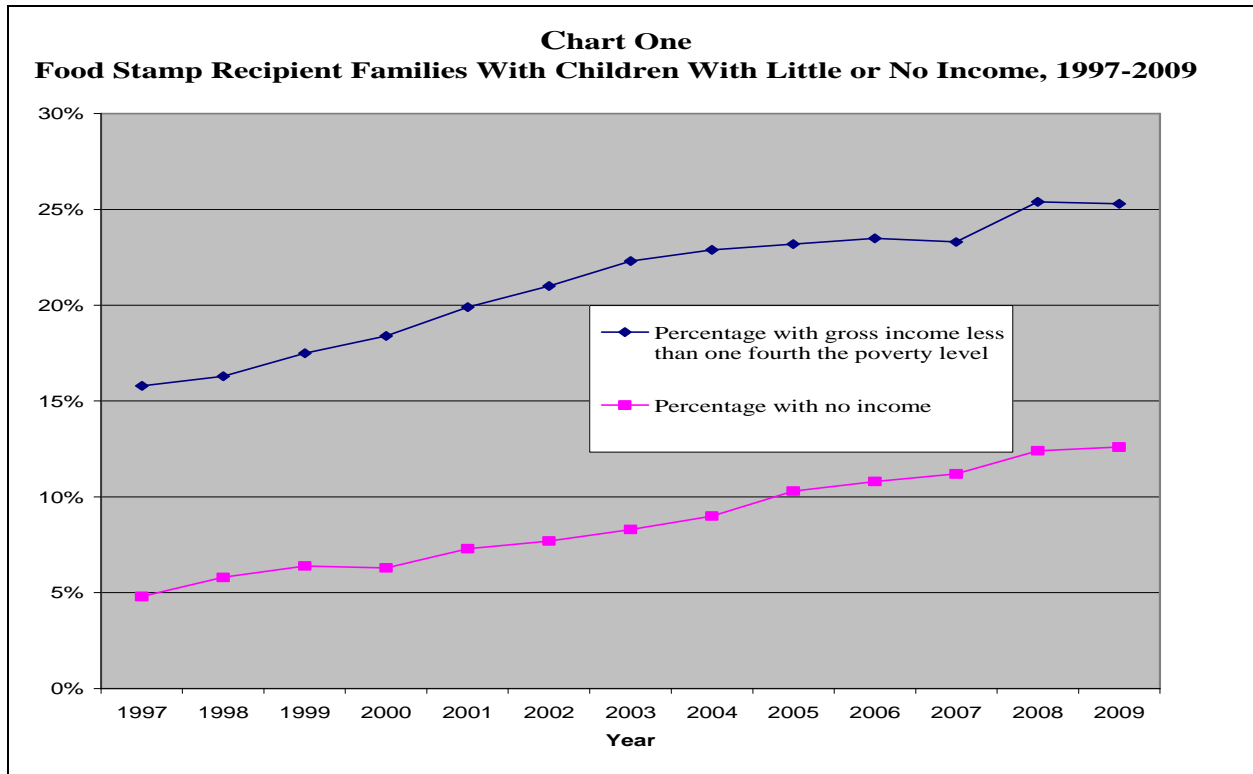
⁵ USDA, *Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: 2001-2008* at Table A.2 on p. 22 (2010), available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/Published/snap/FILES/Participation/Trends2001-2008.pdf>. The 86% figure is the rate for 2008, the most recent available.

⁶ See Legal Momentum, *Welfare Reform at Age 15: A Vanishing Safety Net for Women and Children* (April 2011), available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/our-work/women-and-poverty/resources--publications/welfare-reform-15.pdf>

⁷Id.

⁸ Center on Budget Policy and Priorities, *TANF Benefits Are Low And Have Not Kept Pace With Inflation* (2010), available at <http://www.cbpp.org/files/10-14-10tanf.pdf>; see also, Legal Momentum, *Meager And Diminishing Welfare Benefits Perpetuate Widespread Material Hardship For Poor Women And Children* (2009), available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/assets/pdfs/tanf-meager-benefits.pdf>.

though single mothers had a poverty rate of 38.5%, only 11% reported receiving TANF compared to the 38% who reported receiving Food Stamps.⁹



A contraction in Food Stamps like that in cash assistance would leave hundreds of thousands of families with little or nothing for their basic needs. Due to the continuous contraction of cash assistance, the percentage of Food Stamp recipient families with children with no or little cash income has jumped. As shown in the chart, the percentage with no cash income rose from 5% in 1997 to 13% (942,000 families) in 2009, and the percentage with a gross cash income less than one fourth the poverty level rose from 16% in 1997 to 25% (1.9 million families) in 2009.¹⁰

(May 2011. Contact Timothy Casey, tcasey@legalmomentum.org, for further information.)

⁹ Legal Momentum, *Single Mothers Since 2000: Falling Farther Down* (January 2011), available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/our-work/women-and-poverty/resources--publications/single-mothers-since-2000.pdf>.

¹⁰ The chart is based on the figures reported in the annual publication titled “*Characteristics of [Food Stamp/ Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] Households: Fiscal Year ____*”, the most recent of which is available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/Published/snap/FILES/Participation/2009Characteristics.pdf>.