

HOUSE AGAIN VOTES HUGE SNAP CUTS

*By Timothy Casey**

In April, for the fourth time in recent years, the House approved a budget plan authored by Budget Committee chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI) that would convert the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – formerly known as Food Stamps -- to a block grant, cap federal SNAP funding, repeal the program's national standards, and cut several specific benefits.¹ The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports that the Ryan plan would cut SNAP by \$137 billion (18 percent) over the ten years 2015-2024, and by an additional \$125 billion (almost 30 percent) over the years 2019-2024.² FRAC (the Food Research and Action Center) also sharply criticizes the Ryan plan.³

The Senate has repeatedly rejected the Ryan SNAP proposals, and is almost certain to do so again this year. However, this November's elections may give the Republicans a majority in the Senate, as well as in the House. Republican control of the Senate would make SNAP cuts much more likely.

Congressman Ryan has repeatedly said that the House Republicans' goal is to apply to SNAP the "welfare reform" principles that were applied to family cash assistance when TANF was enacted in 1996 to replace AFDC. Those "reforms" replaced open-ended federal funding based on need with a funding cap, and replaced national eligibility standards and safeguards with near total state discretion.

In cash assistance, the cap on federal funding and the elimination of protective national standards has had disastrous consequences. Before welfare reform, AFDC enrolled 80% of the families who were eligible and 72% of poor families. TANF now enrolls less than a third of eligible families and only a quarter of poor families.⁴ Benefits have also fallen far below the official poverty level.⁵ In 2013, the TANF benefit for a family of three with no other income was less than \$5 per person per day in the majority of states, and less than \$8 per person per day in every state but one.

Currently, federal SNAP funding is open-ended in whatever amount is needed to provide full benefits to all eligible households who apply. Although states administer the program, SNAP has uniform national standards and procedural safeguards. States may not alter the national standards and must provide benefits to all eligible households who apply.



Employment rates among SNAP participants are high and benefit receipt periods are typically brief. Among SNAP households with a non-elderly, non-disabled adult, over half include an employed adult, and over 80% include an adult who was employed in the year before or after receiving SNAP.⁶ Over half of new SNAP participants leave the program in less than a year, and three quarters leave in less than two years.⁷

In January of this year, 46.5 million persons in 22.6 million households were participating in SNAP. Three quarters of SNAP households include minor children, disabled individuals, or elderly individuals, and 87% of SNAP participants are in such a household.⁸ 45% of SNAP participants are minor children, and households with children receive almost 70% of SNAP benefits.⁹ 62% of adult SNAP participants are women.¹⁰ 45% of SNAP participants are non-Hispanic White, 30% Black, 18% Hispanic, 4% Native American, and 3% Asian.¹¹

SNAP eligibility is generally limited to households whose income (after allowable deductions) is below the official poverty level, \$19,790 a year/\$1,649 a month for a family of three in 2014. 42% of SNAP households have a gross cash income less than half the poverty level, and 21% have no cash income at all; after allowable deductions three quarters of SNAP households have a net cash income less than half the poverty level.¹²

SNAP benefits are based on the Thrifty Food Plan, a minimal cost food plan. Benefits are delivered through electronic benefit cards that can be used only for food. Maximum benefits or “allotments” vary by household size. Households with zero income receive the full allotment amount. For households with income, the allotment is reduced thirty cents for each one dollar of income. The maximum allotment for a household of three is currently \$497 a month, about \$1.82 per person per meal a day. FRAC reports that on average SNAP recipient households have less than a quarter of their benefits remaining by the middle of the month.¹³

Unlike TANF, SNAP now enrolls most of those who are eligible. 79% of all those eligible for SNAP actually participate, including over 95% of eligible children.¹⁴ Because households with the greatest need are more likely to participate, SNAP pays out 92% of the benefits that would be paid if all eligible people participated.¹⁵ SNAP error rates are low. Ninety-six percent of SNAP benefits are correctly paid and 98% of SNAP households are correctly determined eligible.¹⁶ SNAP reduces hunger, food insecurity, and poverty. When SNAP benefits are counted, the Census Bureau estimates that SNAP lifted four million people out of poverty in 2012.¹⁷

A cap on federal SNAP funding and a repeal of its national standards and protections would lead to broad and deep harm. The federal government has always borne the full cost of SNAP

benefits. States could not reasonably be expected to assume the new burden of paying for SNAP benefits when the amount needed to pay full benefits exceeded the state's federal funding allotment. Much more likely would be the eligibility restrictions and benefit reductions that have plagued TANF.

Legal Momentum promotes gender equity, personal and economic security for women and girls, an adequate safety net, and an end to poverty through targeted litigation, public policy advocacy, research, and education. To subscribe to Legal Momentum's Women & Poverty listserve, send an email to tcasey@legalmomentum.org with "subscribe" in the subject line.

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ENDNOTES

¹The budget plan (with explanatory material prepared by House Republicans) is available at <http://budget.house.gov/fy2015/>.

² Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *Ryan Budget Would Slash SNAP Funding* (April 2014), available at <http://www.cbpp.org/files/4-4-14fa.pdf>.

³ FRAC, *Ryan Budget Recycles Failed Proposals for SNAP* (April 2014), available at <http://frac.org/frac-statement-ryan-budget-recycles-failed-proposals-for-snap/>.

⁴ See Legal Momentum, *TANF Receipt Falls To Less Than One Third Of Eligible Families* (April 2013), available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/our-work/women-and-poverty/resources--publications/tanf-receipt-falls-to-less.pdf>; and Legal Momentum, *The TANF Misery Index Climbed To A Record National High In 2012* (Feb. 2014), available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/sites/default/files/reports/TANF%20Misery%20Index%202014%20Update.pdf>

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report cited in endnote 2.

⁷ USDA, *Dynamics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation in the Mid-2000s* (2011), available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/DynamicsMid2000.pdf>.

⁸ USDA, *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2012* (Feb. 2014), available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2012Characteristics.pdf>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ FRAC report cited in endnote 3.

¹⁴ USDA, *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Years 2010 and 2011* (Feb. 2014), available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/trends2010-2011.pdf>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ USDA, *Building a Healthy America: A Profile of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* (April 2012), available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/BuildingHealthyAmerica.pdf>.

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2012* (2013), available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p60-245.pdf>. SNAP benefits are not now counted in calculating the official poverty rate because the official procedure counts only cash benefits.