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Commentary: Turning Back the Clock on Hunger and Malnutrition

By Robert Greenstein

In the late 1960s, medical researchers who visited the Mississippi delta, Appalachia's coal fields, and coastal South Carolina were stunned to find, in their words, "large numbers of stunted, apathetic children with swollen stomachs and the dull eyes and poorly healing wounds characteristic of malnutrition."¹ At that time, each state largely decided who was eligible for food stamps. Some states denied benefits to families with incomes as low as half the poverty line; others imposed barriers that disproportionately affected people of color.

In response to the researchers' findings of child malnutrition and related diseases in some parts of America that were akin to the rates in some Third World nations, President Nixon and lawmakers of both parties acted on a bipartisan basis to establish national food stamp eligibility and benefit standards and to ease barriers to enrollment that many of the poorest Americans faced. Ten years later, the researchers returned to the same areas and found dramatic improvement, especially among children. "[N]o program," they concluded, "does more to lengthen and strengthen the lives of our people than the Food Stamp Program."

Since then, we as a nation have continued to improve the program, and we've made further progress in combatting hunger among poor families, children, seniors, and others. Bob Dole, the former Senate Majority Leader and Republican presidential nominee — who, along with the late George McGovern and the late Tom Foley, did as much to strengthen food stamps as any other lawmaker of the past half-century — observed that the program represented the most important accomplishment in American social policy since Social Security.

I have worked on food stamps since the early 1970s,² and I remember when some of those medical research reports came in. And as an Agriculture Department official in the late 1970s, I was privileged to help develop President Carter's proposals for what became the Food Stamp Act of 1977, and I was honored to work then and in ensuing decades with Dole, Foley, McGovern, and

¹ "Hunger in America: The Federal Response," Field Foundation, 1979.

² Robert Greenstein, "Testimony of Robert Greenstein, President, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities Before the House Committee on Agriculture, February 25, 2015, <http://www.cbpp.org/testimony-of-robert-greenstein-president-center-on-budget-and-policy-priorities-before-the-house>.

other senators and House members of both parties. I concur with Senator Dole’s assessment of this program.

But this now raises a profound and timely question: will we keep pushing ahead and continue to make progress, or will we turn the clock back toward the conditions of the 1960s? That’s what’s at stake as President Trump and some in Congress propose to fundamentally alter and deeply cut the food stamp program, in part by giving states broad new authority — and strong financial incentives — to slash the program’s already modest benefit levels.

Today, food stamps — which we now call the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP — is stronger than ever. It provides a basic nutrition benefit to low-income families and individuals, including those who are elderly or have disabilities and can’t afford an adequate diet. As of February 2017, it was providing benefits to 42 million low-income people through a debit card they can use to buy food. The benefits are modest, averaging about \$1.40 per person per meal.

The impacts are impressive. In the short term, SNAP lifts 8 million people, including 4 million children, out of poverty each year and lifts another 26 million people closer to the poverty line. Longer term, it improves the educational, health, and other outcomes of beneficiaries. When researchers compared what happened to poor children growing up in the early 1970s in counties *with* food stamps to comparable children who lived in counties *without* them (the program wasn’t yet nationwide), they found the poor children who had access to food stamps had an 18 percentage-point higher high school completion rate, better health as adults, and, among girls, greater “self-sufficiency” as adults — based on a combination of earnings, education, and employment and less dependence on public assistance.³

SNAP’s impact extends to society writ large. When the economy falls into recession and poverty rises, SNAP expands automatically, providing benefits to people who lose their jobs, fall on hard times, become eligible for the program, and apply. This enables more people to keep buying food in local stores, which helps keep the people in those stores employed and, in turn, helps the economy recover. Moody Analytics Chief Economist Mark Zandi estimates that SNAP provides a greater “bang for the buck” in helping limit the depth and length of recessions than virtually any other tax or spending option.

And when the economy recovers enough to reach people at the bottom, SNAP enrollment recedes. After expanding greatly during the Great Recession and lagging recovery, SNAP caseloads have now fallen for more than four years, and at almost the exact pace that the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) predicted. CBO projects that by 2019, SNAP costs will fall all the way back to their mid-1990s levels as a share of the economy.⁴ CBO also projects that SNAP costs will rise no faster than the economy in the years after that. Since SNAP spending won’t be growing as a share of the economy, SNAP won’t contribute to the nation’s long-term fiscal problem.

³ Steven Carlson *et al.*, “SNAP Works for America’s Children,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, September 29, 2016, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-works-for-americas-children>.

⁴ Dorothy Rosenbaum and Brynne Keith-Jennings, “SNAP Caseload and Spending Declines Accelerated in 2016,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, updated January 27, 2017, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-caseload-and-spending-declines-accelerated-in-2016>.

Though critics suggest that SNAP encourages dependency, it's now a program mainly for low-income workers and their families, along with people who aren't expected to work: children, the elderly, and individuals with serious disabilities. Two-thirds of all SNAP participants fall into one of these categories. Among SNAP households with an adult who isn't elderly or disabled, more than half work while receiving SNAP, and more than 80 percent work in the year before or after. For families with children, the figures are even higher.⁵

Rather than trap families in poverty and discourage work, SNAP provides temporary help for millions of households when they're struggling; when their situations improve, they leave the program. For millions of others working at low-wage jobs, SNAP supplements their wages, helping them make ends meet.⁶ Each year that the federal minimum wage remains frozen and wages at the bottom of the wage scale erode in purchasing power as the cost of food, rent, and other necessities continues rising, more low-wage working families become eligible for SNAP.

Finally, SNAP is efficient. About 93 percent of federal SNAP spending goes directly for food purchases by low-income households.⁷ Most of the rest supports state costs in determining eligibility, administering work requirements, and the like. Less than 1 percent goes for federal administrative costs.

Nevertheless, despite this inspiring success, with an efficient program that provides vital benefits when they're needed, President Trump and some in Congress seek to return to an earlier era and risk much of the progress we've made.

In his budget, the President proposes to make changes in SNAP eligibility and benefit rules that would cut benefits by \$75 billion over ten years, and then proposes to require states to pay an average of 25 percent of the costs of SNAP benefits by 2023 to cut federal costs an additional \$116 billion over ten years.⁸ In exchange for states bearing this burden, the President would essentially end the program's national benefit standards established in response to the medical researchers' findings — and let states cut already modest SNAP benefit levels so that they wouldn't have to cough up as much money. Most states would almost certainly conclude they had to cut benefits, given that these new costs would represent a big hit on state budgets and that states must balance their budgets every year, even in recessions.

As a result, SNAP would no longer guarantee access to a basic diet for low-income families, seniors, and people with disabilities. Instead, like a half-century ago, whether the poor received the

⁵ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Chart Book: SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table," updated March 1, 2017, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/chart-book-snap-helps-struggling-families-put-food-on-the-table>.

⁶ Brynne Keith-Jennings and Vincent Palacios, "SNAP Helps Millions of Low-Wage Workers," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, May 10, 2017, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-helps-millions-of-low-wage-workers>.

⁷ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Chart Book: SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table."

⁸ Dorothy Rosenbaum *et al.*, "Administration's 2018 Budget Would Severely Weaken and Cut the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, May 31, 2017, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/administrations-2018-budget-would-severely-weaken-and-cut-the-supplemental>.

nutrition they need would be determined in part by where they lived. Nor would SNAP automatically expand during a recession — because benefits for added recipients would be dependent on states’ willingness to pay their share, and states generally impose substantial budget cuts during recessions, when state revenues contract and states struggle mightily to balance their budgets.

Meanwhile, House Republican budgets of recent years have proposed to convert SNAP into a block grant that states would operate with shrunken levels of federal funding that would prove increasingly inadequate over time to cover basic need, and with no automatic expansion during times of increased economic hardship.⁹ To cope with the reduced federal funds, states would receive flexibility under these proposals as well to set the program’s eligibility and benefit levels. As with the Trump proposal, a block grant would end the federal commitment to a basic diet for Americans and likely lead to SNAP’s decimation over time. Struggling families — including millions of working-poor families with vulnerable young children — would find themselves at the mercy of policymakers in whichever states they live.

As House GOP leaders prepare to start action on next year’s congressional budget plan, they need to decide whether they want to proceed down this path. In previous years, with Democratic President Barack Obama in office, the budgets that they wrote were largely for show; they had no chance of being turned into law. This time, with unified GOP control of the White House and Congress, the congressional budget plans are for real.

So, the choice is stark. Will we capitalize on the impressive success of recent decades and maintain our national, bipartisan commitment to combatting hunger — or will we turn the clock back? Policymakers should not forget the “large numbers of stunted, apathetic children with swollen stomachs and the full eyes and poorly healing wounds characteristic of malnutrition” whose presence stained our nation not that many decades ago.

⁹ Dorothy Rosenbaum and Brynne Keith-Jennings, “House 2017 Budget Plan Would Slash SNAP by More Than \$150 Billion Over Ten Years,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 21, 2016, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/house-2017-budget-plan-would-slash-snap-by-more-than-150-billion-over-ten>.