

With food insecurity rising in US, SNAP benefits should be left alone

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In a time of record-high food insecurity rates in the US, cutting the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (the former Food Stamp Program) is the wrong approach to fighting hunger, says Craig Gundersen, a professor of agricultural and consumer economics at Illinois. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

In a time of record-high food insecurity rates in the U.S., cutting the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (the former Food Stamp Program) is the wrong approach to fighting hunger, says a University of Illinois economist who studies the efficacy of food assistance programs on public health.

Whether it's some Republicans who have proposed modifying funding, or some Democrats who have proposed restricting what kind of food beneficiaries are allowed to buy, restructuring SNAP would likely only lead to more [food insecurity](#), says Craig Gundersen, a professor of

agricultural and consumer economics at Illinois.

"Food insecurity continues to be a serious problem in the U.S.," said Gundersen, who also is the executive director of the National Soybean Research Laboratory at Illinois. "So it is especially important that we have SNAP, which is an effective weapon in fighting hunger. Not many federal programs have been as successful as SNAP has been, and its effectiveness has been demonstrated again and again in numerous studies."

But both Republicans and Democrats have proposed cuts to SNAP, Gundersen says. Some Republicans also have suggested the idea of changing the funding structure of SNAP into a block-grant program in which each state receives a fixed sum of money.

"That has its advantages – states can construct their program any way that they wish," he said. "But the big problem is that during bad economic times, that pool of money doesn't increase, which destroys the entitlement structure of the program. In the past, programs that have been block-granted are less likely to see increases in bad [economic times](#)."

Some Democrats also have threatened the program in other ways by proposing limits on what types of food beneficiaries could purchase.

A recent proposal in New York City, for example, prohibited participants from buying [sports drinks](#) with SNAP benefits – an idea that the Obama administration ultimately quashed, Gundersen says.

"Telling participants that they could purchase this but couldn't purchase that – well, we know from numerous studies that when you restrict benefits in any way, fewer people participate," he said. "With any sort of program, if you restrict choice, people quit. Nobody tells you how to

spend your mortgage tax deduction; why would we dictate to someone who is hungry what they can or can't eat? Ultimately, it discourages participation in SNAP, and what that means is that millions more adults and children become food insecure."

As long as it's still an entitlement program, the main driver for SNAP is the state of the economy, which means that in bad times, the number of beneficiaries goes up, Gundersen says. According to the USDA, more than 46 million people used SNAP benefits in June 2012 – a new record.

"I'm hoping that we've finally hit the ceiling," Gundersen said. "The economy would have to deteriorate even more for those numbers to go higher. Namely, we would have to have substantially higher levels of poverty and unemployment."

So when the economy improves, that number of SNAP recipients will go down by a large amount, Gundersen says.

"When politicians talk about cuts, whatever those cuts are will pale in comparison to what will happen when the economy itself improves, and fewer people are in need of SNAP benefits," he said.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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