



## SNAP Is Getting Cut This Week— And Democrats Are to Blame

Stimulus funding for food stamps runs out on November 1, but it didn't have to be that way.

October 29, 2013 [Willy Blackmore](#)

This week, the [conference committee](#) tasked with reconciling the two different versions of the farm bill passed by the House and Senate will hold its first public meeting.

We won't know anytime soon which terrible cut will prevail: the \$4 billion cut to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program preferred by the Senate or the [\\$39 billion thrashing](#) of food stamps passed by the House. But one thing is certain: Funding for SNAP will drop starting on Friday, and *all* recipients will receive fewer benefits.

The November 1 drop in funding will amount to 21 lost meals per month for a family of four, according to the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#), and could be seen as a marker of the end of the Great Recession, in a way.

The money is going away because the injection of food-assistance funding provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (better known as the hotly debated "stimulus package"), passed back in 2009, has reached its sunset date, as the twee policy colloquialism goes. The additional benefits helped bolster the program in years when an unprecedented number of people had to turn to SNAP for help. But now? The stock market is hitting record heights, certain housing markets are improving, unemployment is down. The sluggish recovery is looking somewhat sprightly!

Alternatively, the drop in funding could be seen as a very deliberate decision to shrink the safety net for the poor at a precarious time. Kerry Birnbach, a nutrition policy advocate [California Food Policy Advocates](#), says the group that works to increase access to food for low-income Californians has been at pains to explain that this didn't have to happen now.

"This was a choice to cut this benefit. Yes, this benefit was meant to expire, but it's expiring earlier than it was intended to," she says.

The stimulus didn't set a hard deadline for ending the increased funding, and instead it was set to stay in place, "until the program's regular annual inflation adjustments to the maximum SNAP benefit exceeded those set by ARRA," according to CBPP. But Democrats dipped into the money on two separate occasions, each time moving up the sunset date.

First, in August 2010, money was moved out to help keep teachers in their jobs and to maintain and the federal match for Medicaid costs at a higher lever. That withdrawal against SNAP funding set the first hard cutoff day for the stimulus SNAP funding, April 2014, but then Congress went back to the well again four months later, passing the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, which includes funding for youth-gearred hunger programs like the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, and Women, Infants and Children.

It was that bill, passed by a Democrat-controlled House *and* Senate, which set the Friday cutoff for stimulus funding of SNAP. While the money is going to other anti-hunger programs, the across the board reduction will affect the ability of 22 million children to get enough food at home. In 2014, the average benefit per person per meal will be a measly \$1.40.

And coming at a time when the recovery is just taking hold with the middle class means those eligible for SNAP—families whose earnings are less than 130 percent of the federal poverty guideline, \$19,530 in 2013 for a family of 3—are still feeling the aftershock of 2008.

“Low-income people are usually some of the first people to be hit by the recession and some of the last people to feel the rebound,” Birnbach of the California Food Policy Advocates says. “So there are a lot of people who are still struggling out there. There’s a lot of research saying that the SNAP benefit is inadequate as is.”

Furthermore, the benefit is considered to be an effective economic stimulus, with each SNAP dollar spent amounting to \$1.70 in economic activity.

When the Healthy Hunger-Free Children Act was being considered in House, a group of 106 liberal Democrats wrote to then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi asking her to take up a version of the bill that didn’t include cuts to SNAP.

“This is one of the more egregious cases of robbing Peter to pay Paul, and is a vote we do not take lightly,” the Representatives wrote.

Massachusetts Congressman [Jim McGovern](#), a Democrat, helped lead that group of representatives, and writes today in an email that while he opposed the decision at the time, the funding reduction is now an unavoidable reality.

“What we absolutely should *not* do is make the situation even worse by piling on additional cuts in the context of the farm bill,” he adds. “As a member of the farm bill conference committee, I will fight with every ounce of energy I have to prevent additional cuts from happening.”

The loss of stimulus funding will amount to a \$5 billion reduction in SNAP in 2014, and \$6 billion in 2015 and 2016 combined. Congress’s epic \$39 billion cut would be spread out over the course of 10 years, if it somehow manages to become law. And that would come on top of this reduction, which is, in essence, a Democrat-approved cut that’s 1/3 of the size of the House’s slash-and-burn approach to SNAP.

Birnbach sounds weary when asked about the debate over the differing versions of the farm bill. “It’s especially hard to talk about cuts to the SNAP program on top of this cut. It’s like pouring salt on the wound,” she says.