



# In Slashing SNAP, Congress Has Hungry Children in Its Crosshairs

Experts say cuts to nutrition programs in the Farm Bill disproportionately affect young children.

June 14, 2013 [Steve Holt](#)



Congress is looking to cut billions from nutrition programs like SNAP that feed millions of American children.

(Photo: Boston Globe/Getty Images)

At two, the patient weighed what a one-year-old should weigh. The child hadn't gained weight in four months, puzzling doctors. They thought the toddler might be suffering from some rare disease.

But researchers at the [Grow Clinic at Boston Medical Center](#)—to which doctors referred the child—discovered that the cause was a much simpler but equally as frightening ailment: hunger.

You see, child and mother were homeless. When they'd moved out of a shelter months earlier, their address changed, triggering a chain reaction whereby they were unexpectedly dropped from receiving their monthly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) benefit, which they depended on for food. As mom struggled to get back on her feet, she was now unable to feed her child sufficiently.

Sad stories like this are likely to become more common if Congress follows through with its proposed cuts to SNAP—which almost 48 million Americans now receive. Last week, the Senate passed a version of the sweeping [Farm Bill](#) that included \$4 billion in cuts to the food program. The bill is now with the House of Representatives, which has proposed far deeper cuts—\$20.5 billion. These cuts would follow a reduction in benefits set to take effect in October that will [lower the average SNAP benefit](#) from about \$1.50 per person to \$1.30 per person.

All these cuts to SNAP do is cripple a program that is already nutritionally inadequate, says Dr. Deborah A. Frank, who directs the Boston-based Grow Clinic and also serves as a principal researcher for [Children's HealthWatch](#).

"I feel like a doctor who's already coping with an epidemic, the medicine is food, and the public response is to decrease the availability and dosage of the medicine," she says of the cuts. "SNAP is a child health program. It's long-term bang for the buck for our future workforce."

The data overwhelmingly support the premise that low-income children who receive nutritional assistance—either through SNAP or the Women, Infants, Children (WIC) program—have better health outcomes than low-income kids who do not receive benefits. Birth outcomes have improved since the introduction of SNAP, [with fewer babies being born underweight or dying after birth](#). A report published in the journal *Pediatrics* earlier this year studied more than 5,000 low-income children age 4-19, found that those who received SNAP drank more water and took in more calcium, folate, and iron—three key micronutrients. And expanding nutritional assistance in utero and when children are young [results in better health outcomes when they grow up](#).

The solution, experts say, is not to cut these programs, but to bolster them. In March, the United States Department of Agriculture released a study in which researchers interviewed 90 families with children enrolled in SNAP from six states. Interviewers found that receiving SNAP opens up much-needed resources to use on other expenses, which often exceed recipients' income. And yet, SNAP is on the chopping block in Congress, with some lawmakers questioning the usefulness of the program or even denigrating those who receive it. When the Farm Bill hits the house floor in the coming weeks, lawmakers will debate a bill that would cut more than \$2 billion per year from the SNAP budget over the next decade in an effort to control spending. Dr. Frank says this amounts to, "balancing the budget with the bodies of babies," adding that the idea that programs like SNAP enable a nation of takers is, in her words, silly.

"The sicker you make people and their children," she says, "the less likely they are to work."

A number of groups—including Children's HealthWatch—have stepped up to defend SNAP and oppose the steep cuts to the program. Feeding America, the country's largest anti-hunger organization, has said that the SNAP cuts would cost hungry Americans hundreds of thousands of meals per year and overwhelm the 61,000 food pantries and 200 food banks it supports.

"Unemployment is stuck at 7.6% nationally, millions of families are scraping by on reduced wages or with reduced hours, and the charitable system is stretched to the breaking point," Feeding America representative Ross Fraser said in a [statement](#). "Now is the time to protect and strengthen nutrition assistance, not cut the benefits upon which so many vulnerable families rely."

Because as Dr. Frank knows all too well in her work in the Grow Clinic, slashing nutrition assistance is most harmful to the tiniest Americans.

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Steve Holt writes about food for Edible Boston, Boston Magazine, The Boston Globe, and elsewhere.

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