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Putting a Human Face on Food Stamps

by [Von Diaz](#)

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Last week, when the Republican-dominated House voted to cut \$40 billion from the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) over 10 years, it put the nation's high poverty rates in focus. With the [U.S. Census](#) confirming that poverty rates remain at recession level, and the most recent jobs report showing that unemployment is [still](#) at 7.4 percent, the possibility of cutting one of the most widely used safety net programs in the country alarmed advocates, politicians who oppose the cuts, and food stamp recipients alike.

"This will bring [more] poverty, not only for my district, but nationwide," says Rep. Jose Serrano (D-N.Y.), who represents the 15th congressional district in the Bronx. The 15th is the poorest district in the nation with nearly half of its residents currently on food stamps. "It will also bring hunger to people. That doesn't even sound right to say in this country. There are people now who go to bed [without] having enough to eat."

The House pointed to [multiple factors](#) when making cuts, among them fraud (which is currently at 1 percent), and ballooning costs for the program, which has more than doubled in the last four years from \$38 billion to \$78 billion.

Debbie Weinstein, executive director of the national [Coalition on Human Needs](#), says increased program efficiency and the ease of EBT cards has increased participation in SNAP over the past several years, which subsequently led to growing costs. The House cuts, she says, would "take food out of mouths of poor people, and it's likely children will be especially hit."

President Obama has [vowed](#) to veto the House cuts but some states have already begun to make them, [reports](#) USA Today.

So, who currently relies on food stamps? According to [Forbes](#), nearly 49 percent of SNAP recipients are children, 8 percent are elderly, and nearly 20 percent are disabled.

The [Pew Center](#) reports that 18 percent of U.S. adults have received SNAP benefits in their lifetime, the majority of which are people of color. That total number becomes more illustrative when broken down in terms of race and gender: The Pew data show that nearly 40 percent of black women and 30 percent of Hispanic women have used food stamps at some time in their lives, compared to nearly 20 percent of white women. On the whole, women are twice as likely to use food stamps than men. According to the Center for Budget Priorities, the average amount of SNAP benefits for a family of four is [\\$668](#).

Ivonne Canizal is 27 years old and lives in San Francisco's Excelsior neighborhood. She has two children, ages 10 and 5 and she receives SNAP benefits. She first applied for the program because she could only get part-time work doing odd jobs.

Today she works 25 to 35 hours per week as a desk clerk but says she still doesn't earn enough to make ends meet. Canizal gets \$367 in food stamps each month, which she says is barely enough to provide healthy food for her children and still make rent.

"There are no words to describe it for me," Canizal says of the possibility of losing her SNAP benefits. "For me, it'll be bad. It'll put me in a bad situation."

Sonia Suarez, a 42-year-old single mother living in New York City, faces a similar dilemma. She says she started using SNAP benefits in August because she lost her job at a restaurant and had to choose between paying her rent and utilities and feeding herself and her daughter. She currently works part-time cleaning houses but she still isn't able to make enough to pay all of her bills. Losing food stamps would be catastrophic.

"I think I'd lose my apartment," Suarez says.

Also among SNAP recipients are disabled and elderly people like Dave Subran. He is 65 years old and currently homeless, living in a transitional facility in New York City. SNAP benefits provide him with the extra food he needs to make it through the day.

"Oh, holy hell, if [food stamps] were cut it would mean my stomach would have to get acclimated to the days where I would only eat lunch every two days," he says.

SNAP recipients often apply for benefits because they are experiencing temporary hardship, and the food stamps they receive help to [lessen extreme poverty](#) and weather the effects of temporary unemployment.

Astrid Andujar and her family used food stamps after they moved to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic in 2007. Her parents struggled to support their five-person household and began receiving SNAP benefits in 2008. "There were a few times when the pantry was pretty empty," the 23-year-old recalls. "We kept eating the same things like rice with corn and tuna. Those were the three ingredients we seemed to have."

The family was able to leave the SNAP program last year when her mother started a successful business making cakes. Andujar now works full time as a graphic designer.

“[Food stamps] provide stability for my family to move forward,” she says. “It was a gigantic step for us.”

Nancy Biberman, director of the Bronx-based Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation, points to what she describes as a snowball effect that cuts to SNAP benefits could have on the families who lose them.

“Healthy food prevents lifelong bad consequences,” she says. “It’s perverse and cruel to do what they’re proposing to do in Congress.”