

Study details serious health impacts of food stamp program cuts

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Congress' proposed cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—formerly known as Food Stamps—may ultimately increase premature deaths and potentially generate health care costs that exceed the budget savings, according to a new report from Virginia Commonwealth University researchers.

Released by the VCU Center on Society and Health, in partnership with researchers at the University of California, San Francisco Center on Social Disparities and Health, the report details findings that support the relationship between income and health and estimates the impact of reducing income by curtailing SNAP benefits for low-income households. The report is part of a health impact assessment conducted by the Health Impact Project, a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, to inform Congress about the potential consequences of the proposed cuts.

Legislation in 2011-12, H.R.6083 and S.3240, for renewing the Farm Bill called for proposed cuts in nutritional aid to needy families in an effort to lower discretionary spending by billions of dollars over the next 10 years. The proposals would reduce the dollar amount of SNAP payments that some households would receive and in some cases completely eliminate payments. In addition to impacting access to healthy food, the resulting loss of income could affect health outcomes.

"Regardless of whether the cuts affect eating habits, having to spend more on groceries means less money for housing, utility bills or child

care and can push more people into poverty," said Steven Woolf, M.D., director of the VCU Center on Society and Health, professor in the VCU Department of Family Medicine and Population Health and the report's lead author. "Although policy makers might not think of the Farm Bill as a health issue, our report warns that policies that push people into poverty will affect their health outcomes and increase medical costs over the long term."

Using modeling techniques, the researchers estimated how small increases in poverty could affect the rate of premature death, the prevalence of diabetes and the cost of caring for the population with diabetes.

Their findings suggest that increased [health care costs](#) associated with reducing household income would likely exceed the cost savings predicted by the SNAP budget cuts over the long term. Although the Congressional Budget Office projected that the annual "savings" generated by S.3240 and H.R.6083 during 2013-2017 would average \$350 million and \$1.47 billion, respectively, the VCU report demonstrated that medical care for one disease, diabetes, would increase by \$1.47 billion per year if the SNAP reductions increased poverty rates by 0.5 percent.

"The costs for care of other diseases would also increase, making it an illusion to view these budget cuts as a way of saving money," said Woolf.

More information:

www.humanneeds.vcu.edu/DownFile.ashx?fileid=1645

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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