



## With 47 Million Americans on Food Assistance, Congress Considers Cuts

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JUDY WOODRUFF: Now the debate over cutting food stamps.

The Senate agreed today to move forward with a vote next Monday on a wide-ranging farm bill. More than three-quarters of the money for it, or about \$760 billion over 10 years, would go toward food stamps, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. SNAP has grown in the wake of the recession. Roughly 47 million Americans, or about 15 percent of the population, receive assistance from it.

But now there's a push to cut back. The Senate bill would trim it slightly by \$4 billion over 10 years. A version moving through the House would cut at least \$20 billion, possibly more.

We look at all this now with Lori Silverbush. She's a filmmaker who produced the documentary, "A Place at the Table," which explores hunger in the United States. And Chris Edwards, he's director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute and he's editor of its downsizinggovernment.org website.

Welcome to you both.

Chris Edwards, to you first.

With millions of Americans still unemployed, many of them still not earning, those who are employed, as much as they were earning before, why is now the time to cut food stamps?

CHRIS EDWARDS, director, Tax Policy Studies, Cato Institute: Well, I think we need to look at not just the food stamps, but farm subsidies to cut. So I just wouldn't zero in on food stamps.

There's a lot of cutting I think we need to do in this farm bill in general.

JUDY WOODRUFF: But the food stamps are the bulk of the farm bill in terms of...

CHRIS EDWARDS: No, that's absolutely right.

If you look at the big picture, the cost of the food stamp program has roughly quadrupled over the last decade, from about \$20 billion to about \$80 billion today.

And the House Republicans are thinking about cutting about \$2 billion of that, just a couple of a percent. After you have quadrupled the size of a program, I think that's reasonable, a cut that small.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Lori Silverbush, what about this point that the program has grown so much that why isn't it reasonable to begin to make some cuts now?

LORI SILVERBUSH, co-director, "A Place at the Table": Well, I think it's interesting that you say that, Chris.

I mean, it's grown so much because demand has grown so much. It isn't growing because it's bloated or not being administered well. There's that many people hungry who are availing themselves of it. So the word "reasonable" is a funny word.

What's a reasonable amount of hunger for your kids, for example? How many meals would you want your children not to eat in order to balance the budget? I think that's -- the word reasonable is deceptive.

CHRIS EDWARDS: You know, the thing is, it's true that the recession and the economic slowdown has caused food stamp costs to increase.

But the cost of the program roughly doubled under President Bush, even before President Obama came to office, just because Congress and President Bush expanded the eligibility so much. So that's part of the problem.

And even now, the unemployment rate now is lower than President -- when President Obama first came to office, and yet there's millions more on food stamps.

So the Congress and the states have continued to loosen eligibility. So the food stamp program now is not just for the lowest-income people. It's moving up into the middle class.

JUDY WOODRUFF: How do you respond to that?

LORI SILVERBUSH: Well, sure, Chris. I mean, Chris, you're making a very good point. Members of the middle class are now going hungry.

And, as a consequence, they're signing up for food stamps. I mean, I think it makes sense that there would be a bit of a lag between the time in which food stamps -- the food stamp -- people avail themselves of a program after being unemployed.

I'm not an economist. I'm a filmmaker. I went around the country with my partner, Kristi Jacobson, and we -- we met the people that you're talking about, these middle-class people that I think you're trying to imply are somehow gaming the system.

But I saw people, we met people just trying to put food on the table and struggling, or out of work, or cobbling together part-time jobs without benefits, and not paying their rent so that they could buy food, or not -- you know, going without medical care so they could buy food.

So, I think all of the things you're saying are factual, sure, but you're not saying, well, the reason food stamp enrollment went up so much under President Bush was because need went up so much.

LORI SILVERBUSH: This is a program with very, very low rates of fraud. It's not being -- I don't think people are gaming the system at all, and we sure didn't find that.

JUDY WOODRUFF: How do you respond to that?

CHRIS EDWARDS: Well, one of the things that's happened, for example, is there used to be strict income and asset tests on the program. In other words, if your income was too high or you had a lot of money in the bank, you didn't get food stamps.

Those sorts of limits have been basically eliminated in most of the states now for this complicated reason called categorical eligibility.

But, basically, the Republicans have been trying to re-establish some income and asset tests, so that you can't have too much money or too much money in the bank and still get food stamps.

And there has been plenty of anecdotal evidence, for example -- for example, groups of people, college students now often get food stamps, and they never used to. So there's a growing sort of dependence here.

And, you know, a lot of people who didn't used to even want to get food stamps are now being dependent on the government.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Lori Silverbush, what about this argument that the eligibility requirements have now grown looser, so that they are now possibly scooping in people who -- who may not need food stamps?

LORI SILVERBUSH: Well, let's be really clear.

Those eligibility requirements are still incredibly -- the bar is very, very high to entrance to food stamps. As family of four -- I think it's something like a total income of \$28,000 a year for a family of four. That is not people who are living high on the hog. And the food stamp benefit itself comes down to approximately \$1 a meal. It's not a lot of money.

So I would -- my experience meeting the people who are for the first time availing themselves of food stamps is that they're doing it because of straight-up need. We didn't find that people were happy to collect food stamps. They were devastated and humiliated.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Let me ask you about this, this question of changing the eligibility. What's an example of what -- of a requirement that could change that you believe would be fair?

CHRIS EDWARDS: Right.

Well, I will give you an example. It used to be people who are non-citizens did not -- were not eligible for food stamps. That's changed in the 2002 farm bill under President Bush. He made is

so that non-citizens, as soon as they come into the United States, they can get food stamps now. So that's type of expansion in eligibility that has gone on.

JUDY WOODRUFF: So you're talking about legal immigrants?

CHRIS EDWARDS: Yes, legal immigrants didn't used to be eligible. Now they are.

JUDY WOODRUFF: And so you're saying they should be taken off the food stamps?

CHRIS EDWARDS: I'm saying we need to reduce the costs in a lot of different ways, as well as reducing the costs of farm subsidies, which are welfare for higher-income people and -- right.

JUDY WOODRUFF: And, Lori Silverbush, I believe...

LORI SILVERBUSH: Chris, I think you kind of dodged that a bit, because she said, does that mean you think people should be taken off the program?

And, yes, we should reduce costs across the board. We have ag subsidies that are not even on the table that people are collecting, millionaire farmers. Industrial farms that have had record years of farm income are still collecting food subsidies. We're willing to add tens of billions of dollars to our deficit. This is not even in discussion.

And yet we're always somehow at a point of -- at a moment when our nation feels budget anxiety, we always go right back to illegal immigrants and poor people who are fraudulent, when all of these things are myths.

And, frankly, if an undocumented person is feeding their children with food stamps so that they have a shot at succeeding in school, I'm OK with that.

CHRIS EDWARDS: I mean, Lori, come on. The -- when President Bush came to office, there was only about 18 million people on food stamps.

Today, as your program mentioned, 47 million. So this is not just more low-income people getting the benefits here. The benefits have just exploded.

JUDY WOODRUFF: And, quickly, what about her other point, that there is very little fraud, she said, in the food stamp program?

CHRIS EDWARDS: I don't think that is correct. The official numbers by the USDA, the Department of Agriculture, say that.

I don't think it's correct. For example, there's 200,000 retailers in the United States who take these electronic cards to redeem food stamps. There's a lot of fraud at these retailers. And -- yes.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Very quick response.

LORI SILVERBUSH: Well, honestly, they're not -- we're not seeing that. The data is not supporting that.

If anything, the error rates are high because fewer people are participating than are actually eligible. And, frankly, they're participating less because of the stigma of calling it a fraudulent -- a fraudulent handout, which it isn't. It's an investment. If we're feeding people, they can stay productive. They can stay in the work force.

They can actually put their energy into their jobs, into studying, into raising their kids. Those kids can stay in school if they're eating. So, I think it's an investment. I think it's an important investment in our future.

JUDY WOODRUFF: The Senate moves to a vote on Monday.

We thank the both of you, Lori Silverbush, Chris Edwards.

CHRIS EDWARDS: Thank you, Judy.

LORI SILVERBUSH: Thank you, Judy.