

# THE WEEK

## Should criminals be denied food stamps?

*A new Senate bill would deny assistance to "convicted murderers, rapists, and pedophiles"*

By: Keith Wagstaff - May 31, 2013

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The number of Americans who use food stamps hit 47.8 million last December. That is a 70 percent increase since the financial crash of 2008.

Republicans in Congress have long had their eye on the program, known formally as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), though it has largely been spared the ax that has been applied to other areas of discretionary spending.

But with Congress debating a new farm bill (SNAP is administered by the Department of Agriculture), Republicans have once again called on Congress to make food stamp cuts — cuts that would, quite literally, deny food to millions of poor, hungry Americans.

The House Agriculture Committee has passed a farm bill that would trim \$20 billion from SNAP. Rep. Stephen Fincher (R-Tenn.), a farmer who directly received \$70,000 in farm subsidies last year, put his support for cuts in religious terms: "The role of citizens, of Christians, of humanity is to take care of each other, but not for Washington to steal from those in the country and give to others in the country."

In the Senate, David Vitter (R-La.) introduced an amendment to the farm bill that would prevent "convicted murderers, rapists, and pedophiles" from ever getting food stamps.

The amendment was accepted by Senate Democrats, although it can still be modified on the floor. *Salon's* David Dayen believes that the whole point of the amendment isn't to reform SNAP, but rather to score some easy political points:

The amendment was clearly created as a wedge issue, a perennial Republican effort to get Democratic senators to vote for something that can get used against them later in attack ads.

Vitter presented the bill as prohibiting "convicted murderers, rapists, and pedophiles" from food stamp benefits. No senator would vote to "give" violent offenders federal benefits, and in this case they didn't have to. [*Salon*]

The cuts proposed in the Senate are significantly smaller than those in the House: \$4.4 billion. Of that amount, only a small portion would be saved by denying the aforementioned criminals food stamps.

That has even some fiscal conservatives scratching their heads over the amendment. The Cato Institute's Tad DeHaven, no fan of large government programs, finds Vitter's target puzzling:

In terms of budgetary savings, it probably won't save taxpayers much money. In addition to doing little to curb the size of government, it does nothing to rein in the federal government's scope. I believe that it is not a proper role of the federal government to fund and/or administer anti-poverty programs. At most, such concerns should be the domain of state and local governments. Ideally, poverty relief would be completely handled by charities and other private organizations. The Vitter amendment, however, is just another example of the Beltway's one-size-fits-all mentality. [Cato Institute] Robert Greenstein, president of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, argues that "given incarceration patterns in the United States, the amendment would have a skewed racial impact." The organization estimates that around 2 million to 3 million people would be kicked off food stamps if all of the House's cuts were enacted.

That doesn't sit well with Paul Krugman at *The New York Times*:

Look, I understand the supposed rationale: We're becoming a nation of takers, and doing stuff like feeding poor children and giving them adequate health care are just creating a culture of dependency — and that culture of dependency, not runaway bankers, somehow caused our economic crisis.

But I wonder whether even Republicans really believe that story — or at least are confident enough in their diagnosis to justify policies that more or less literally take food from the mouths of hungry children. As I said, there are times when cynicism just doesn't cut it; this is a time to get really, really angry. [*The New York Times*]

It is unclear when the full Senate will debate the farm bill, while the House version is expected to be debated in June.