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Jim Angle - FOXNews.com - May 26, 2010

U.S. Spending on Food Stamps at All-Time High, Sparking Debate Over Welfare

The U.S. is now spending more on food assistance than at any time in its history, sparking a debate over whether the roughly 40 million people now receiving the latest version of food stamps at a cost of \$73 billion a year are a symptom of a weak economy or are part of a long-term expansion in welfare and related programs.



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Food stamp supporters say the record-high spending is simply a reflection of the economic downturn over the last two years.

"The program is expanding because we are realizing a significant downturn in the economy," said Ambassador Eric Bost, who ran the food stamps program in the first years under President George W. Bush. "The food stamp or the SNAP

program, as it's referred to now, responds to the changing [economic conditions](#) of the country."

"Unemployment is the worst it's been in over 30 years," added Sheila Zedlewski, an expert on poverty policy at the left-leaning Urban Institute. "The poverty rate is rising. Some people project it will be 15 percent. That would be the highest it has been since the 1960's."

But critics say this and other welfare programs were growing long before the recession and that food stamp usage has exploded over the last decade.

"The number of food stamp recipients has more than doubled since 2000, and the cost of the program has more than tripled," said Chris Edwards, an expert on federal and state tax issues at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Though no one quibbles about the need for more forms of assistance during times of high unemployment, Edwards fears there is more going on here, that there is an effort to just keep expanding such programs.

Some government figures show that only 10 million people have a serious problem with hunger, Edwards said.

"The number of people on food stamps is four times higher than the number of people with a serious hunger problem," he said.

But Bost defended the food stamp program, saying it helps the most vulnerable.

"Forty nine percent of the people that are participating in this program are [children](#)," he said. "Ten percent are elderly and a vast majority of the other persons that are participating in the program do work. They just don't earn enough money to meet all of their nutritional needs."

Melissa Boteach, a poverty policy expert at the liberal Center for American Progress, said that last year, nearly 1 in 4 children were in a household struggling against hunger.

"And nearly 50 million Americans overall lived in households struggling against hunger so this is a serious problem in this recession," she said.

Bost, the food stamp administrator during the Bush administration, said the numbers should fall as the economy gets better.

"When there's a significant downturn you see an increase in the number of people participating and enrolled in the program when the economy is strong and doing well you see fewer people," he said.

But some critics are not so sure.

"You certainly expect the food stamp program to go up during a recession, that's not a bad thing," said Robert Rector, a poverty expert at the conservative Heritage Foundation. "What we should be concerned about is even before the recession the food stamp program was increasing dramatically, because the government was reaching out to bring people into the program and then make them dependent."

If the program were to return to the levels of the early 2000's, he said, that would be ok, but he fears that is not what's going to happen.

Looking beyond just food assistance, Rector looks at some 70 programs aimed at assisting the poor and points to President Obama's spending projections for them in the years to come.

"If you look at Obama's own projections, he's projecting to spend over \$10 trillion on assistance to the poor over the next decade and that's without the cost of Obamacare, the new [health care program](#) that he's created," he said. "This is something that the United States simply cannot afford."

He argues that Obama has no intention of letting assistance to the poor shrink even when the economy is [healthy](#) again and says he intends to expand such spending by more than a third over usual levels.

"He's creating a permanent spread-the-wealth-state funded through deficits and borrowing from the Chinese," Rector said.

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