



# LSP *Myth Buster* #53

An ongoing Land Stewardship Project series on ag myths and ways of debunking them.

Updated: Nov. 2018

## → **Myth:** Food Nutrition Programs Mostly Benefit Lazy Welfare Cheats

### → **Fact:**

In September, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue marched out a popular trope: federal food assistance programs are being horrendously abused

by people too lazy to work for a living. Speaking before the National Farmers Union, Perdue said, “People who want to stay on food stamps indefinitely I think are saying to me, ‘I don’t really want a job, I just want you to take care of me.’ And the generosity and the compassion of the American people has a limit.”

The timing of Perdue’s comment wasn’t coincidental: the nation’s most significant food assistance program was at the center of a major fight over passage of a new Farm Bill. Called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, it currently makes up 70 percent of Farm Bill spending. Formerly known as Food Stamps, SNAP provides financial resources for low-income people so they can purchase food, and over the years has become a major way for families to keep themselves fed during tough times. This type of food assistance program has existed in various forms since the 1930s.

Critics of SNAP have been particularly willing to use misinformation to attack the program, characterizing it as an expensive handout to anyone who comes in the door, allowing them to buy alcohol, drugs and junk food.

The 2014 Farm Bill officially expired at the end of September as members of Congress grappled over trying to reconcile the House and Senate versions of its replacement. As of this writing, the basic elements of the 2014 law remain in place, and it’s not clear if we will have a new Farm Bill before 2019. A major sticking point preventing the Farm Bill conferees from coming to an agreement centers around changes the House version of the legislation would make to SNAP.

Under that version, nearly two million participating households would be stripped of their SNAP benefits as a result of a proposal to reformulate income and expense criteria, according to the nonpartisan Mathematica Policy Research. Among those households, 34 percent include seniors, 23 percent children and 11 percent a person with a disability.

The House Farm Bill would also impose new work requirements on individuals who want to participate in SNAP. That more stringent work requirement would push another 1.2 million people out of the program, according to an analysis conducted by the Congressional Budget Office.

This comes at a time when 15 million households in the U.S. are considered “food insecure”—in other words, they had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all the members of the household due to a lack of resources.

The recent attack on SNAP fits into a general narrative that there are millions of people freeloading off public assistance programs. Since the 1970s, stories of “welfare queens” who

make a comfortable living by scamming the system have made the rounds in America. Most of those stories, which are often steeped in racism, have been debunked, but that hasn’t killed the narrative that our national red ink is flowing like a river through such programs.

The recent Farm Bill fight over SNAP highlights the need to set the record straight when it comes to this program. For one, SNAP already has a work requirement. Recipients younger than 50 and without children or a disability must work at least 80 hours per month to get benefits. It turns out more than half of SNAP households with at least one working-age, non-disabled adult work while receiving SNAP benefits. Because people often participate in SNAP when they are between jobs, work rates are higher over a longer time frame: more than 80 percent of SNAP households work in the year before or the year after receiving SNAP. Work rates are even higher for families with children: more than 60 percent work while receiving SNAP, and almost 90 percent work in the prior or subsequent year, according to Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

And being a SNAP recipient is not exactly a get-rich-quick scheme. The amount one can get through the program is based on the USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan, which is an estimate of how much it costs to buy food to prepare nutritious, low-cost meals for a household. The estimate is changed every year to keep pace with food prices. SNAP benefits cannot be used to purchase nonfood items, alcohol, tobacco or any food that will be eaten in the store.

In fiscal year 2017, the average SNAP household received about \$254 per month, while the average recipient received about \$126. That latter figure averages out to around \$1.40 per meal. Estimates by Moody’s Analytics showed that in 2009, for every \$1 increase in SNAP benefits redeemed that year (when the economy was in a recession), it generated \$1.70 in economic activity. Some of that activity is generated in surprising places. Each year SNAP participants spend roughly \$70 billion in benefits, and in 2017, more than \$22 million of that was spent at farmers’ markets. Of 8,600 farmers’ markets in the U.S., 7,377 are authorized to accept SNAP transactions, according to the USDA. In fact, the number of SNAP redemptions involving farmers’ markets and direct-marketing farmers have climbed steadily over the past several years, according to the Farmers Market Coalition.

Research has shown that SNAP reduces food insecurity among at-risk children by 20 percent and improves their overall health by 35 percent. Forty-four percent of SNAP participants are children under the age of 18, and it turns out children in SNAP households are not only healthier, but are more likely to graduate from high school, when compared to at-risk children who are not enrolled in SNAP.

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And here's an inconvenient truth that Secretary Perdue might want to keep in mind: of the top 100 counties ranked by the share of the population that participates in SNAP, 85 are rural, according to an analysis of 2015 Census data conducted by the *Daily Yonder* news website. In 2015, 16 percent of rural counties used SNAP, as opposed to 13.5 percent in metropolitan ones. It should be noted that these are participation rates, not pure numbers. Overall, more than 37 million metropolitan residents used SNAP in 2015, as opposed to some 7 million rural residents; there are simply more people living in metropolitan areas. Overall, of the 44 million SNAP recipients in this country, 36 percent are white, 25 percent African-American, 27 percent are Latino, 3 percent Asian and 1 percent Native American, according to the USDA.

When Sonny Perdue vilifies SNAP recipients, he may want to keep in mind he is attacking the very people his position as Secretary of Agriculture is supposed to serve: farmers. As the current economic crisis raging across rural America deepens, SNAP is becoming even more critical to farmers and other rural residents.

Perhaps the biggest irony of the push to deny poor people food through the Farm Bill is the fact that the same Congress pushing for SNAP's tighter restrictions is somehow unwilling to place even the most basic payment limits on farm subsidies, something the Land Stewardship Project and other groups have long called for. One loophole in the current Farm Bill allows people who don't work on farms to get substantial tax-funded subsidies. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, each person who qualifies through this loophole can get up to \$125,000 in subsidies each year; a spouse automatically qualifies for another \$125,000 in subsidies. A payment limit amendment authored by Iowa's Chuck Grassley passed with bipartisan support in the Senate. It remains to be seen what its fate will be when the conference committee finally produces the new agriculture law.

"How can anyone reconcile tightening eligibility for food stamps for the less fortunate while turning a blind eye to the loopholes that millionaires exploit?" Grassley wrote in a blog for *The Hill* newspaper.

In a sense, the House's willingness to further undermine SNAP parallels its efforts

to gut another Farm Bill program that provides public goods, in this case environmental benefits such as clean water, wildlife habitat and healthy soil. The House version of the Farm Bill basically eliminates the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), the biggest conservation program in the Farm Bill and arguably the most effective. CSP is a working lands conservation program, and has been used by thousands of farmers to put in place practices that benefit the land. But, like SNAP, CSP does not benefit large-sale corporate agribusiness.

Attacking CSP and SNAP is shortsighted, and not just because of the benefits they provide in terms of greater food and land security. Both programs are ways to get bipartisan support from members of Congress who do not represent farming areas and so may not see the benefit of, for example, expanding crop insurance. But they may see the benefits of legislation that supports our society's most vulnerable, as well as the environment.

Continuing to shovel Farm Bill resources to big agribusinesses is a handout to entities that seem to have no problem with "welfare," as long as the word "corporate" is attached to it.

### More Information

- The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report, "Chart Book: SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table," is at [www.cbpp.org](http://www.cbpp.org).
- *The Daily Yonder's* "The Geography of Food Stamps" report is at [www.dailyyonder.com](http://www.dailyyonder.com).
- The Congressional Budget Office ([www.cbo.gov](http://www.cbo.gov)) has developed a cost estimate of the House version of the 2018 Farm Bill called, "H.R. 2 Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018."
- The Land Stewardship Project's "Our Farm Bill" priority paper for the 2018 Farm Bill is on the Federal Farm Policy page at <https://landstewardshipproject.org>.

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