How SNAP Hits Home in Iowa
Farm Bill Debate Carries Implications for Many Thousands of Iowans

As of May 2013, 198,843 households in Iowa received assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps. Decisions in the Farm Bill could affect benefits to many of these households.

Nearly 200,000 Iowa Households Depend on Food Assistance through SNAP
SNAP Beneficiary Households in Iowa, May 2013

- In the 198,843 total households cited above, 420,914 individuals in Iowa were served by SNAP in May 2013; this is up 2.5 percent from a year earlier.
- The total value of SNAP benefits, which are typically spent locally, were about $49 million in Iowa in May 2013 ($48,958,306), down 1.5 percent from a year earlier.
- The average allotment per household was $246.22 in May; down 4.7 percent from May 2012.
- The average allotment per recipient was $116.31 in May — or $1.25 per person per meal — down 3.9 percent from May 2012.
Food Insecurity in Iowa
The U.S. Department of Agriculture annually examines food security nationally and in individual states based on families’ responses to a list of Census questions to determine how many are unable to meet basic food needs due to a lack of money or other resources at any time in the previous 12 months. Households that are food-insecure are identified as either “low food security” or “very low food security,” the latter reflecting an actual reduction of food or disrupted eating patterns for one or more members of the household due to insufficient resources. Data are drawn from the Current Population Survey (CPS).

In its most recent report, USDA reports that in Iowa, 12 percent of households had low or very low food security in Iowa on average from 2009-11 — with 4.7 percent identified as very low food security.1 These are significantly below the U.S. averages (14.7 percent, 5.6 percent, respectively).2

SNAP Cuts in the Farm Bill
SNAP and other nutrition services are a substantial share of the Farm Bill, which traditionally sets policy five years at a time. One policy that has drawn fire in the House of Representatives is an option for states called “categorical eligibility,” which permits states to provide access to SNAP benefits for families just above the SNAP earnings limit of 130 percent of poverty. Iowa in 2008 used this option to expand gross income eligibility to 160 percent of poverty. An Iowa Fiscal Partnership policy brief last November noted this is particularly important for low-income working families with children:

SNAP benefits for a family with no special, allowable expenses are $115 at 130 percent of poverty, $46 at 145 percent and zero at 160 percent. One of the major special, allowable expenses a family may have is child care costs. If a family has $400 per month in child care expenses, its SNAP benefits are consequently higher. That family is eligible for $136 in SNAP benefits at 145 percent of the poverty level.3

A recent report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) illustrated why categorical eligibility is so important to some low-income working families, who would not meet the federal 130 percent limit:

The federal SNAP gross income limit of 130 percent of the poverty line excludes some low-income working families whose disposable income is below the poverty line, often because they must incur sizeable child care costs in order to work. ... Some states use the categorical eligibility option to enable households with gross incomes modestly above 130 percent of the poverty line but disposable incomes below the poverty line — or savings modestly above $2,000 — to qualify for SNAP assistance, in recognition of their need.4

Other SNAP Cuts
Even without cuts in any final version of the Farm Bill, SNAP beneficiaries will see significant reductions this November with the expiration of a temporary benefit boost from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA — the 2009 stimulus package). In Iowa, the $28 million cut is projected to affect 400,000 people in the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1. As CBPP has noted:

This cut will be the equivalent of taking away 14 meals per month for a family of four, or 11 meals for a family of three, based on calculations using the $1.70 to $2 per meal provided for in the Food Plan. USDA research has found that the Recovery Act’s benefit boost cut the number of households in which one or more persons had to skip meals or otherwise eat less because they lacked money — what USDA calls “very low food security” — by about 500,000 households in 2009.5

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