

OP-ED COLUMNIST

From the Mouths of Babes

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Like many observers, I usually read reports about political goings-on with a sort of weary cynicism. Every once in a while, however, politicians do something so wrong, substantively and morally, that cynicism just won't cut it; it's time to get really angry instead. So it is with the ugly, destructive war against food stamps.

The food stamp program — which these days actually uses debit cards, and is officially known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — tries to provide modest but crucial aid to families in need. And the evidence is crystal clear both that the overwhelming majority of food stamp recipients really need the help, and that the program is highly successful at reducing “food insecurity,” in which families go hungry at least some of the time.

Food stamps have played an especially useful — indeed, almost heroic — role in recent years. In fact, they have done triple duty.

First, as millions of workers lost their jobs through no fault of their own, many families turned to food stamps to help them get by — and while food aid is no substitute for a good job, [it did significantly mitigate their misery](#). Food stamps were especially helpful to children who would otherwise be living in extreme poverty, defined as an income less than half the official poverty line.

But there's more. Why is our economy depressed? Because many players in the economy slashed spending at the same time, while relatively few players were willing to spend more. And because the economy is not like an individual household — your spending is my income, my spending is your income — the result was a general fall in incomes and plunge in employment. We desperately needed (and still need) public policies to promote higher spending on a temporary basis — and the expansion of food stamps, which helps families living on the edge and let them spend more on other necessities, is just such a policy.

Indeed, [estimates from the consulting firm Moody's Analytics](#) suggest that each dollar spent on food stamps in a depressed economy raises G.D.P. by about \$1.70 — which means, by the way, that much of the money laid out to help families in need actually comes right back to the government in the form of higher revenue.

Wait, we're not done yet. Food stamps greatly reduce food insecurity among low-income children, which, in turn, greatly enhances their chances of doing well in school and growing up

to be successful, productive adults. So food stamps are in a very real sense an investment in the nation's future — an investment that in the long run almost surely reduces the budget deficit, because tomorrow's adults will also be tomorrow's taxpayers.

So what do Republicans want to do with this paragon of programs? First, shrink it; then, effectively kill it.

The shrinking part comes from the latest farm bill released by the House Agriculture Committee (for historical reasons, the food stamp program is administered by the Agriculture Department). That bill would push about two million people off the program. You should bear in mind, by the way, that one effect of the sequester has been to pose [a serious threat to a different but related program](#) that provides nutritional aid to millions of pregnant mothers, infants, and children. Ensuring that the next generation grows up nutritionally deprived — now that's what I call forward thinking.

And why must food stamps be cut? We can't afford it, say politicians like Representative Stephen Fincher, a Republican of Tennessee, who backed his position with biblical quotations — and [who also, it turns out, has personally received millions in farm subsidies](#) over the years.

These cuts are, however, just the beginning of the assault on food stamps. Remember, Representative Paul Ryan's budget is still the official G.O.P. position on fiscal policy, and [that budget calls for converting food stamps](#) into a block grant program with sharply reduced spending. If this proposal had been in effect when the Great Recession struck, the food stamp program could not have expanded the way it did, which would have meant vastly more hardship, including a lot of outright hunger, for millions of Americans, and for children in particular.

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.

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