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5 on 45: Trump should increase SNAP benefits
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CONTRIBUTORS:

ADRIANNA PITA

LAUREN BAUER

Post-Doctoral Fellow, Economic Studies

(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to five on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

BAUER: This is Lauren Bauer. I'm the postdoctoral fellow in Economic Studies here at Brookings. The problem of hunger in America is troubling. 12.3 percent of households were food insecure in 2016, meaning that at some time during the year, they had difficulty providing enough food due to a lack of resources. While rates of food insecurity have been steadily decreasing over the past few years, they are still higher than they were prior to the Great Recession, and 13 million children live in food insecure households. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, plays a central role in ensuring households against food insecurity.

SNAP is a highly effective program. According to new research published today by Laura Wheaton and Victoria Trinh, SNAP lifted 8.4 million people, including 3.8 million children, out of poverty in 2015. SNAP reduces rates of food insecurity and improve health educational and economic outcomes. SNAP relies on the private sector to provide access to food, and beneficiary shop at more than a quarter of a million food retailers nationwide for what their families need. They shop at these stores using a special debit card that's preloaded with their benefits. It's like the one that I have for my health savings account that I can use at the pharmacy to pay for a prescription.

President Trump's budget request proposes changes to the program that would significantly reduce the efficiency and the efficacy of SNAP. He has proposed making a nearly 30 percent cut SNAP and instituting benefit caps. He has introduced new SNAP eligibility restrictions which would cause about 4 million people to lose their benefits, and controversially, the budget proposes replacing a portion of the cash benefit with a box of pre-selected shelf stable canned boxed foods. Instead of shopping for what your family needs and accommodating dietary or allergy related restrictions, with the full amount of the benefit you'd get shelf stable milk and canned goods. Rather than cutting SNAP benefits, or policing the choices of recipients, it's worth asking what types of policy reforms to SNAP would actually reduce food insecurity and actually lead to a more nutritious diet.

First, increase the generosity of SNAP. There are many reasons to increase SNAP benefits. For example the current benefit formula doesn't account for the cost of time available for food preparation. Since SNAP only allows for the purchase of unprepared

foods--that's right no rotisserie chickens. James Ziliak and Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach argue that this should be accounted for in the benefit formula. The benefit formula also doesn't account for the fact that teenagers eat more than children. As any parent of a teenager knows, they eat like an adult, if not more. Changing the formula with the needs of teens in mind could help reduce food insecurity among families.

More generous benefits could also lead to healthier eating. Patricia Anderson and Kristen Butcher found that a 30 dollar increase and monthly SNAP benefits would increase participants' consumption of vegetables and healthy proteins, while simultaneously reducing food insecurity. Second, provide rebates for purchasing fruits and vegetables. Produce is expensive. Acknowledging this, the healthy incentives pilot program was an experiment in which SNAP recipients were given an immediate 30 cent rebate for every dollar that they spent on fruits and vegetables. In response, purchases of fruits and vegetables increased by 25 percent. Schanzenbach has proposed expanding this rebate nationwide. Increasing the generosity of stamp benefits would improve the diets of recipients and reduce rates of food insecurity.

As Congress considers the president's budget request, and looks to reauthorize the Farm Bill, they should consider policy changes that strengthen the purchasing power of SNAP, without policing the food choices of beneficiaries.

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