

Cutting good welfare and preserving bad

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The money in the farm bill is dominated by food stamps. The debate over it is dominated by everything else. But debate or no debate, the Senate wants to cut food stamps a little, the House wants to cut them a lot more, and now GOP Rep. Mike Conaway of Texas wants [to bring House Democrats around to the farm bill by making sure food stamps will get slashed regardless](#). The House is expected to vote today, following several hearings on the farm bill and none on food stamps.

When lawmakers target food stamps for cuts, they tend to talk about the need to get away from lavish handouts and move toward promoting self-sufficiency. You might argue that this is the right goal. It's a lot harder to argue that food stamps somehow work against it.

The average food stamp benefit is \$4.50 a day. [Most recipients work](#); the problem is how little they get paid. The food stamps program is efficient—[92 percent of its funding goes directly to benefits](#)—and it makes for [fantastic economic stimulus](#).

And now [new research finds that](#)

access to food stamps in utero and in early childhood leads to significant reductions in metabolic syndrome conditions (obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes) in adulthood and, for women, increases in economic self-sufficiency (increases in educational attainment, earnings, and income, and decreases in welfare participation).

In other words, food stamps are not a Band-Aid but a solidly effective investment in the well-being of American citizens. The safety-net slashers can decry the welfare state all they want, but this isn't some mindless dole we're talking about. It's one of the main programs keeping Americans out of poverty in both the short and long terms.

The farm bill process is a mess, partly because it makes little sense to bundle agricultural policy with nutritional assistance policy in the first place. Each time the

farm bill comes up for reauthorization, reform advocates get hopeful for major changes to our system of corporate welfare for agribusiness. This never really happens, and eventually success gets defined down to simply passing a farm bill at all. By now, the debate's mostly just about the precise degree to which we should stick it to hungry Americans.

We shouldn't do it all. The farm bill is targeting the wrong kind of welfare, and Americans deserve better.

UPDATE: The farm bill was just [voted down in the House after all](#).