

Sequestration's effects: WIC program may cut free food to low-income children

February 22, 2013 by BLOOMBERG NEWS



Four-year-old children in low-income families who receive free milk, fruit and vegetables through a U.S. government nutrition program might be turned away within weeks if federal spending cuts take effect March 1.

Administrators with the Women, Infants and Children program say they would have to trim their caseloads by 600,000 applicants or participants across the country because of the spending cuts. Four- and five-year-olds would probably be affected before infants and toddlers, said Douglas Greenaway, president of the National WIC Association, a Washington nonprofit group.

Programs serving low-income women and children will be squeezed if [President Barack Obama](#) and [Congress](#) don't reach agreement soon to avert the automatic spending cuts. Early- childhood education, home heating assistance, housing vouchers, domestic violence prevention, nutrition and child-care programs would all be affected.

"It's been hard to break through on this, even the press didn't believe it was going to happen," said California Representative [Barbara Lee](#), a [Democrat](#) who voted against the 2011 Budget Control Act that established the cuts. "It's really very tragic, and in many ways this is very un-American."

\$85 BILLION

If [Congress](#) doesn't act, federal spending will be reduced by \$85 billion in the final seven months of this fiscal year and by \$1.2 trillion over the next nine years. Half of the cuts would come from defense and half from domestic spending. The reductions were designed to be so unpalatable and arbitrary that lawmakers would come up with a way to replace them.



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While scheduled cuts to defense and such programs as air-traffic control and food inspection have been well documented, the reductions in social programs mainly benefiting women and children are receiving less attention though they will be far-reaching.

Much of the effect of the cuts, known as sequestration, won't be seen right away and federal officials can only make estimates. It's possible that [Congress](#) and [Obama](#) will reach a deal to turn off or replace the cuts.

The human toll of sequestration on women and children may be most vivid. Most entitlement programs for the elderly, mainly Social Security and Medicare, are protected because they are considered mandatory. Spending programs affecting women and children are at risk because they are classified as discretionary and are funded annually.

"Kids didn't crash the economy, their mothers didn't crash the economy," said Michael Petit, president of the Every Child Matters Education Fund in Washington, who called the cuts to children's programs unfair. The government has a "long tradition of providing aid to the most vulnerable among us."

While [Democrats](#) and [Republicans](#) say they oppose the March 1 spending reduction plan, last year House [Republicans](#) voted to replace some of the automatic reductions with cuts to additional programs benefiting women and children that currently are exempt. Included were Medicaid, about 70 percent of whose beneficiaries are women, the Children's Health Insurance Program and food stamps, two-thirds of which go to women.

"House [Republicans](#) have twice passed plans to replace the sequester with [common](#)-sense cuts and reforms that protect national security," House Speaker [John Boehner](#), an [Ohio Republican](#), said in a Feb. 20 [Wall Street Journal](#) opinion piece.

Budget Committee Chairman [Paul Ryan](#) of Wisconsin and other [Republican](#) leaders have maintained that the longer the U.S. delays curtailing social safety-net programs to address the budget deficit, the more painful future cuts will be.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

More than one in five children in the U.S. were below the poverty line in 2011, according to the Coalition on Human Needs in Washington. Ninety percent of single-parent families are headed by women, and these mothers have the highest poverty rates among all demographic groups, according to an [Ohio State University](#) study.

For 2013, the cuts would include \$2.1 billion to education programs, \$354 million to nutrition, \$124 million to child welfare and \$596 million to early childhood programs, according to First Focus, a Washington advocacy group for children and families.

That means an estimated 70,000 fewer children would be enrolled in the Head Start program that provides preschool and nutrition programs; 144,000 fewer children would be vaccinated; and 1.2 million fewer students would be served by Title I, the largest federal education program for disadvantaged youth.

The Child Care and Development Block Grant, the main source of federal child-care subsidies for low-income working families, will assist 55,000 fewer children nationwide if the cuts occur, according to an estimate by First Focus.

Women's health programs also would be hurt. In California, 1,455 fewer women will be screened for cancer through breast examinations, mammograms and pap tests, according to a fact sheet

from Sen. [Barbara Boxer](#), a Democrat.

The Violence Against Women Act would lose more than \$20 million, preventing 35,927 victims of domestic violence in the U.S. from receiving assistance, according to the [Justice Department](#). The [Planned Parenthood Federation of America](#), which provides family-planning services to women, says Title 10 funding for such programs may be cut by \$16 million.

The WIC nutrition program serves 9 million women and children monthly, including 2 million infants. Participants have to be in families with income of no more than 185 percent of the poverty level. The program's administrators say choosing who doesn't get the services will be difficult.

LOBBYING CLOUT

"We're essentially triaging," said Greenaway with the National WIC Association. "It will likely be older, healthier children still at nutrition risk but less nutrition risk" who will be turned away, he said. Most WIC administrators budget two months in advance, he said.

Those advocating for children, especially those from low-income families, lack the political clout of other groups.

[AARP](#), the largest U.S. group representing senior citizens, spent \$9.9 million on lobbying in 2012, and the defense industry spent \$129.3 million that year, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a Washington-based research group. The Children's Defense Fund, one of the largest child advocacy groups, spent \$8,182 on lobbying last year.

"Because they're more vulnerable populations it's easier for politicians to push them around," Petit said.

Spending on programs affecting children has represented about 10 percent of total federal outlays in recent years, compared with 41 percent spent on the elderly and disabled through Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, according to a report by the Urban Institute in Washington.

In 2011, federal spending on children's programs fell for the first time since the early 1980s, dropping by \$2 billion in 2010 to \$376 billion, as total federal spending rose. Many states also have reduced spending on community programs that assist children and their mothers.

Education programs would be affected by federal spending cuts, often in addition to state and local funding reductions. Education Secretary Arne [Duncan](#) said yesterday at a Bloomberg Government breakfast that schools on military bases and on Native American reservations will see the most immediate effects because they rely on federal aid.

In the independent school district in Killeen, Texas, which includes the Fort Hood military base, \$2.6 million in federal aid could dry up, according to the Department of Education. That would follow a \$17.5 million reduction in biannual state funding.

"It filters through everything, in our teacher-pupil ratios, less technology in the hands of students, less professional development," said Robert Muller, the district superintendent.

Duncan said there's no way to avoid affecting students if the automatic cuts occur.

"In schools, 80 to 85 percent of costs are people," Duncan said. "I have no ability to mitigate this and say it will be OK."

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