

Study: Food stamps keep people out of poverty

By Nancy Shute, NPR

Food stamps have long been a favorite whipping boy of politicians looking to beat up on government spending. But the massive food-assistance program does help keep people out of poverty, according to new research.

Food stamp benefits led to a decline of 4.4 percent in poverty from 2000 to 2009, according to a new report from the USDA's Economic Research Service.

The impact was particularly strong for children, who are more likely to live in poverty than adults. Child poverty was reduced by 15.5 percent, on average. The researchers also looked at the depth and severity of poverty, and found that severity was reduced by 21 percent. They say looking at this gives a better measure of the role of food stamps in improving the lives of Americans, compared to just a straight look at the poverty rate.

In 2009, 21 percent of all children, or 15.5 million, lived in poverty. That's up from 16 percent in 2001, an increase attributed to the economic downturn. And that's including the buffering effect of food stamps.

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