

Sequestration Continues to Harm Blacks

Written by Freddie Allen

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The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported that nearly 140,000 low-income families could lose rental assistance and “thousands of other low-income families using vouchers could face sharp rent increases because of sequestration.”

Sequestration, the automatic federal budget cuts, was implemented on March 1.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, sequestration will slash \$2 billion from housing assistance and community development programs funded through the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Blacks received 43 percent of housing vouchers to supplement housing costs. Whites received 36 percent of housing vouchers. Without the vouchers, these families would see those costs skyrocket. Other families will lose counseling services that help distressed homeowners navigate foreclosure proceedings.

“Due to sequestration, 337,000 victims of domestic violence, child sexual abuse, adult sexual assault, and other crimes will lose critical support and services they receive through the Crime Victims Fund to help them recover from the heinous crimes committed against them,” wrote Eric Stegman, the manager of the Half in Ten initiative at the Center of American Progress, a non-partisan education and research group.

The Victims of Crime Act, shelters victims from prohibitive costs associated with seeking justice, including sexual assault services, crisis intervention and investigation and prosecuting of child and elder abuse.

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States could lose more than \$37 million to fund these services and victims could lose their right to justice.

After reauthorizing the hotly contested Violence Against Women Act, legislation that assists victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, Congress left the funding of the programs to the mercy of the sequester. More than 100,000 may be turned away.

Black women account for a disproportionate number of domestic violence victims.

According to a report by the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community at the University of Minnesota: "Black women comprise 8 percent of the U.S. population but in 2005 accounted for 22 percent of the intimate partner homicide victims and 29 percent of all female victims of intimate partner homicide."

The institute also found that intimate partner violence among African Americans is related to economic factors.

"Intimate partner violence among blacks occurs more frequently among couples with low incomes, those in which the male partner is underemployed or unemployed, particularly when he is not seeking work, and among couples residing in very poor neighborhoods, regardless of the couple's income," stated the report.

Programs that benefit children are also reeling as a result of sequestration. Head Start, a government funded program that promotes school readiness for poor children, lost an average of 5 percent at each of its local affiliates. Twenty-eight percent of Head Start enrollees are Black and 41 percent are White.

"Sequestration cuts are forcing Head Start programs across the country to drop children from their ranks, despite research showing that every \$1 invested in Head Start brings \$9 in benefits to society," wrote Sally Steenland, director of the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative at the Center for American Progress.

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Experts estimate that 70,000 children will be forced out of those programs.

Some programs are holding lotteries for available slots, juggling budgets and wait listing families. Others have proposed the elimination of transportation to the programs.

“Head Start is a safe haven for parents,” said Almeta Keys, executive director of the Edward C. Mazique Parent Child Center, Inc. in Washington, D.C. “The best that we can do is give our parents referrals to possible programs that they can go to and in some cases, it’s going to mean them being out of childcare. That’s the rude awakening.”

Children will not only loss educational services provided through Head Start, but also nutritional and social programs and comprehensive health services.

“The parents are going to be left to fend for themselves, said Keys. “A lot of our parents are young parents and they need that extra guidance that we are giving them in Head Start.”

Families that depend on neighborhood food pantries for groceries every month may have to fend for themselves, as well. Because of the downturn in the economy, food banks that supply neighborhood food pantries, have also suffered a decrease in donations.

According to Feeding America, a domestic hunger-relief charity, 25.1 percent of Black households live with hunger compared to 11.4 percent of White households that are also food insecure.

“Food banks are struggling across the nation, because we’re not receiving the donations from the community,” said Brian Banks, director of public policy and community outreach for the Capital Area Food Bank. “Many food banks have to go into their operating budgets to purchase food to put on their shelves to get food out into the community.”

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Banks said that hurts their bottom line. The more money food banks spend on food, the less they can spend on other services like nutritional programs, community outreach, and advocating for better safety net programs.

“If there’s less funding to support the staff in doing that work, it’s going to make it more difficult to for us to put a dent in this problem and end hunger in this country,” said Banks.

In April, the White House and lawmakers on Capitol Hill drew the ire of non-profits that service low-income populations, when they stepped in to help airports and air travelers inconvenienced by the sequester, but not others.

In April, Congress acted to help air travelers, that were experiencing flight delays because of the sequester, by passing the Reducing Flight Delays Act of 2013. The bill allowed the Federal Aviation Administration to shift money in its current budget to pay air-traffic controllers that were forced to take unpaid leave, because of sequestration.

Keys and others challenged Congress to act just as quickly for those that don’t have the support of well-financed lobbyists to stand up for them.

“The same vigorous movement that we saw when the air traffic controllers went back to work, that’s what Congress needs to be doing when it comes down to cuts that the Head Start program has received,” said Keys. “Congress needs to be focusing on our future and our children are our future.”

Amelia Kegan, senior policy analyst at Bread for the World, agreed.

“Low-income families who are really struggling in this economy don’t have the resources to mount a huge campaign to bombard Capitol Hill,” said Kegan. “They are most likely to be left out of any legislative attempts to mitigate the impact of sequestration. Congress needs to replace sequestration and deal with the entire thing and take a much more balance approach.”

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Kegan added: "We don't want to see a situation where those who are the most vulnerable are the ones left bearing the brunt of deficit reduction."