Executive Summary

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a critical lifeline for approximately 40 million low-income people across the United States. SNAP has a long and successful history of providing temporary help that reduces food insecurity, lifts people out of poverty, helps families achieve self-sufficiency, and reduces health disparities. Nearly two-thirds of SNAP participants are children, older adults, and people with disabilities. Cuts to the program would have far-reaching ramifications and may disproportionately affect groups like children of color and children in rural communities. Any reforms to SNAP should be driven by analysis of impacts on access, equity, cost, and program outcomes including food security, financial security, and diet quality.
How SNAP works: A critical lifeline

SNAP provides temporary but critical support to help approximately 40 million low-income Americans afford food. It is the nation’s largest nutrition assistance program; SNAP funding totaled approximately $70 billion in FY 2017.

SNAP participants can use their benefits to purchase food at grocery stores, convenience stores, farmers’ markets, and co-op food programs. Family size, citizenship status, total household income, and certain expenses are all calculated together to determine an individual’s eligibility. SNAP benefits are calculated to cover approximately 70 percent of a family’s food budget. In FY 2017, the average SNAP participant received about $126 in monthly benefits, or approximately $1.40 per person per meal.

Any child who lives in a SNAP household is also eligible to receive free school meals.

SNAP helps America’s most vulnerable

Nearly two-thirds of SNAP participants are children, older adults, and people with disabilities. Most people who receive benefits only do so for the short term, such as when they are between jobs or suffering some other economic hardship. Between 2009 and 2012, nearly 50 percent of SNAP participants received benefits for two years or less. These benefits supplement the income that many SNAP participants earn while on the program; most adult SNAP participants who can work do so.

In 2017, 12.3 percent of the U.S. population lived in poverty, a small and statistically insignificant change from 2016’s 12.7 percent poverty rate—40.6 million people. Food insecurity, or the inability to afford enough food, among children is linked to increased risk of poor diet; chronic health conditions, including asthma; cognitive and behavioral problems; anxiety and depression; and poorer general health compared to their food-secure peers. Studies show that as income declines and needs grow, food insecurity increases.

Children, in particular, need nutritious food to grow, learn, and thrive. Research shows access to nutritious food helps children’s brains develop, improves their academic performance, has long-term health benefits and establishes healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime. SNAP helps children and families suffering from food insecurity have a better chance at staving off poor health outcomes.
SNAP has a proven track record

Overall, SNAP makes it easier for families to afford nutritious food without having to sacrifice health care or other basic needs. The program:

- **Lifts millions of people out of poverty and helps them stay out.** SNAP helps recipients avoid poverty and hunger. The program lifted 3.4 million people out of poverty in 2017.

- **Boosts children's health.** When children have access to SNAP, from birth through early childhood, their risk of developing high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and other poor health outcomes later in life greatly decreases. Children on SNAP can immediately experience a reduction in food insecurity.

- **Helps children perform better in school.** Studies have found improved reading and math skills, and an increased chance of graduating from high school.

- **Improves the economy.** Every $5 in new SNAP benefits generates as much as $9 in economic activity, helping farmers, grocers, truckers, and other members of local and regional workforces.

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Incentive programs show promise to further boost health

To teach families how to eat healthy on a tight budget, SNAP-ED, SNAP’s nutrition education program, helps participants learn how to get the most out of their benefits. And incentive programs that encourage the purchase of the most nutritious foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, have shown early promise. Some approaches include:

- **Healthy Incentives Pilot**: SNAP participants received 30 cents back for every $1 in SNAP benefits spent on targeted fruits and vegetables. An evaluation of the program found that participants ate 26 percent more fruits and vegetables without added sugars, fats, oils, or salt compared to nonparticipants.

- **Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI)**: This program funds incentive programs that encourage SNAP participants to make healthier food purchases. Early data from 2015, FINI’s first year, revealed that over 25,000 participating SNAP households purchased more than half a million dollars’ worth of produce. Sixty-two percent of participants purchased more fruits and vegetables, 90 percent said they would increase their intake, and 63 percent ate fewer chips, cookies, and candy. As of 2017, FINI has supported these types of incentive projects in 45 states and the District of Columbia.

- **Double Up Food Bucks**: The Double Up Food Bucks Program started in Michigan in 2009. The program doubles the value of SNAP benefits for fruits and vegetables bought at farmers’ markets and from grocery store produce sections, helping people bring home healthier options and supporting local farmers. It has grown to more than 250 sites across Michigan and in five years has benefited more than 300,000 low-income families and more than 1,000 farmers. A 2017 study of a local health center program that educated SNAP participants about Double Up Food Bucks found that participation increased as more people learned about the incentive. Participants continued to consume more fruits and vegetables two months after the incentive program ended.
Cutting SNAP would have far-reaching effects

A majority of registered voters oppose funding cuts to SNAP. They believe that the government should be doing far more than it is to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Any cuts to the program would mean:

- **Children and seniors could go hungry.** An independent analysis from Mathematica Policy Research funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation looked at how SNAP eligibility would be affected by two policy adjustments: changes to participants’ countable resources—including cash, any resource that can easily be converted to cash, and some non-liquid resources participants can have and remain eligible for SNAP—and eliminating the ability of households to qualify for SNAP if they already meet the financial criteria to qualify for certain support under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. The analysis found that approximately 1 in 11 SNAP households would lose eligibility for SNAP under these changes, or approximately 2 million households based on 2015 SNAP participation data; of those households, 34 percent include seniors and 23 percent include children.

- **Local food banks and charities could get overwhelmed.** They play a critical role in ensuring that children and families have enough to eat, but they would simply be unable to make up for SNAP funding cuts. Food banks serve four billion meals annually; by comparison, SNAP funds 40 billion meals annually. The strain on local food banks is already significant; SNAP cuts could make it worse.

- **Health care costs could increase.** Annual health care costs due to hunger and food insecurity are already estimated at $160 billion; cutting SNAP could exacerbate those costs further.

- **Food retailers could lose business.** Food retailers depend on SNAP participants for business—for each $15 in additional SNAP benefits, estimated grocery spending among SNAP participants increases by nearly $10.

SNAP should be maintained and supported; any undue barriers to eligibility, enrollment, or utilization should be removed to ensure those who rely on SNAP have access to its benefits.
Policy Recommendations: Continue supporting and maintaining SNAP

No one in America should go hungry. No parent in America should have to choose between buying food for their kids or paying the rent. No family in America should live in poverty.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation believes that SNAP serves a crucial role in protecting our nation’s children and families who are struggling to gain access to necessities like affordable food. To maintain and strengthen SNAP, we offer the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 1:** Use objective data and economic realities—such as family size, employment levels, wage growth, and food cost—to determine overall SNAP spending, enrollment, and benefit levels.

**Recommendation 2:** Expand SNAP-ED and financial incentive programs to encourage participants to purchase more fruits and vegetables and help them make healthier purchases with their benefits.

**Recommendation 3:** Ensure that any changes to SNAP do not disproportionately affect certain groups, such as children of color and children in rural communities.

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Further Reading

Simulating Proposed Changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Countable Resources and Categorical Eligibility

The Impact of Proposed 2018 Changes to Key Safety Net Programs on Family Resources (2017)


Does SNAP Cover the Cost of a Meal in Your County? (2018)

Analysis of Proposed Changes to SNAP Eligibility and Benefit Determination in the 2013 Farm Bill and Comparison of Cardiometabolic Health Status for SNAP Participants and Low-Income Nonparticipants

Health Impact Assessment of Proposed Changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

SNAP to Health

Stateofobesity.org: SNAP Policy Page


References


2 Fox L. The Supplemental Poverty Measure: 2016; Issued September 2017. www.census.gov/content


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