

Increasing Access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to Advance Health Equity

THE ISSUE

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides financial support to individuals and families furthest from economic opportunity. It is the nation's largest nutrition assistance program and is designed to respond to times of increased need. [Two-thirds](#) of participants are children, older adults, and people with disabilities. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been several significant changes to SNAP and related nutrition programs:

- Legislation increased funding to SNAP to cover millions of additional participants during the pandemic and to support a temporary 15 percent increase in monthly benefits for participants through September 2021.
- Additional regulatory changes expanded eligibility and enabled more participants to use benefits online.
- The [Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transfer program](#) was created and then expanded to support families whose children would have been receiving meals at school or child care but could not because of pandemic-related closures.
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) withdrew a proposed rule that would have ended categorical eligibility, a change that would have resulted in millions of people losing SNAP benefits.
- Finally, in October 2021, USDA implemented updates to the [Thrifty Food Plan](#) (TFP), which calculates food costs and considers the latest nutrition research to determine SNAP benefit levels for all participants. These updates, which took effect in October 2021, will provide SNAP participants with an additional [\\$36 extra per month](#), on average—approximately a 27 percent increase compared with pre-pandemic benefit levels. A [report](#) analyzing the impact of the Thrifty Plan Updates found that even with the additional benefit increases, the maximum SNAP benefit still does not cover the cost of a modestly priced meal in 21 percent of U.S. counties. By comparison, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the maximum SNAP benefit did not cover the cost of a modestly priced meal in 96 percent of U.S. counties.



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WHY IT MATTERS

Hunger and food insecurity are directly tied to poverty. These severe conditions threaten the lives and health of tens of millions of Americans, with a disproportionate impact on communities of color and those with low incomes. The economic crisis tied to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic puts millions more at risk.

Today, children are [more likely to](#) face food insecurity than any other group in the United States. Up to 29 percent of children in Black households and up to 31 percent in Latino households (based on the race or ethnicity of the parent) [live in households where children didn't eat enough](#) in the last seven days because the household couldn't afford it, compared to 9 percent of children in White households. Food insecurity among children is linked to [increased risk](#) of poor diet, chronic health conditions, cognitive and behavioral problems, anxiety and depression, and poorer general health, compared with their food-secure peers. 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 and economic benefits](#), and establishes [healthy eating habits](#) that can last a lifetime.

Research links SNAP participation with significant, long-lasting benefits for America's most vulnerable children and families—and the program is proven to boost a lagging economy by increasing spending on food and, indirectly, on other goods. Expert analyses also identify specific strategies designed to modernize SNAP and further strengthen its benefits. The program:

Reduces Poverty

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, SNAP is responsible for a [decline in the U.S. poverty rate](#), from 14.3 percent to 13.2 percent, between 2016 and 2018. The program lifted 2.9 million people [out of poverty](#) in 2020.

Improves the Economy

Research shows SNAP benefits infuse money into the economy quickly—approximately 80 percent of benefits are spent within two weeks and 97 percent are spent [within a month of receipt](#). According to the [Congressional Budget Office](#), increasing SNAP expenditures during an economic downturn is one of the most effective fiscal policies for sparking economic activity and jobs. Increasing SNAP benefits by [\\$1 billion during](#) an economic downturn would increase the gross domestic product by \$1.54 billion, support more than 13,000 jobs, and create \$32 million in [farm income](#).

Improves Food Security

The largest and most rigorous examination of the relationship between SNAP participation and food security, conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), found that overall food insecurity fell by as much as 20 percent and food insecurity among children fell by approximately 33 percent after their families [received SNAP benefits for six months](#).

Boosts Children's Health and Academic Performance

Studies show that when children have access to SNAP, their risk of developing high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and other poor health outcomes later in [life decreases](#). Participants also attain [improved reading and math skills](#) and have a greater chance of [graduating from high school](#).

Encourages Healthier Purchases and Healthier Eating

Evaluations of SNAP incentive programs, which provide matching dollars to encourage healthier purchases, find participants buy and consume more fresh fruits and vegetables. During the first year of the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive, more than [25,000 participating SNAP households](#) purchased more than \$500,000 worth of produce.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

SNAP serves tens of millions of Americans who are vulnerable to hunger and serious health issues linked with poor nutrition. SNAP has been even more critical to families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to be until the economy stabilizes. The updates to the Thrifty Food Plan ushered in the largest permanent benefits increase in the nearly 60-year history of the program. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation believes we must build on this historic investment and the evidence suggests the following steps are crucial to eliminating poverty and hunger.

- Broaden SNAP eligibility to cover more college students, unemployed adults without children, and lawfully residing immigrants.
- Ensure the Thrifty Food Plan covers the cost of a modestly priced meal in every U.S. county.
- Streamline eligibility and enrollment processes and focus enrollment efforts on populations with low participation rates, including immigrants, people of color and rural residents.
- Eliminate the lifetime ban on SNAP participation for convicted drug felons.
- Continue to support the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) beyond 2023 to provide financial incentives for SNAP participants to make healthier purchases with their benefits.

Need a content expert for more information?

Giridhar Mallya
gmallya@rwjf.org
 609-627-6000

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RWJF has funded extensive research and analysis on SNAP and related programs. Dive deeper [here](#) and visit StateofChildhoodObesity.org to learn more about SNAP and other nutrition programs that are supporting children and families across the country.