

## **SNAP Policy: A Policy to Grapple with Food Insecurity in the United States**

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### **Abstract**

Every month, 35 million Americans struggle with food insecurity and receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) benefits (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2019). SNAP has a vibrant history and has made a tremendous impact on the lives of Americans. Not only does the policy help address hunger in the United States, it also impacts the American economy. For every billion dollars invested, the gross domestic product of the United States increases by 1.5 billion dollars (Nestle, 2019). SNAP has many strengths in its eligibility and benefits as it offers a clear-cut approach to food insecurity with its specific poverty classifications. It also offers flexibility with the usage of the Link Card to buy and purchase groceries (Gunderson, 2019). Additionally, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act offers alterations to the policy to address COVID-19 concerns (Poole et al., 2021). While the policy has made a significant impact on hunger in the United States, there are several ways that SNAP could be improved to expand its impact on Americans and represent a more equitable policy.

*Keywords:* SNAP, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, food insecurity, food equity, COVID-19 food insecurity

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## **Introduction to Social Issue**

A shocking 35 million Americans battle food insecurity and receive SNAP benefits monthly (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2019). While food insecurity has been improving since the 2008 recession, it has been projected that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will show increases in hunger across the United States (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2019). It was reported that 15 percent of households were impacted by food insecurity during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing from 11 percent pre-pandemic (Harrison, 2021). Food insecurity is connected to many significant negative health effects, and children are particularly victimized by the harms associated with hunger and food insecurity. Many research studies have echoed children in households that struggle with food insecurity are more likely to have cognitive issues, anxiety, developmental issues, and behavioral problems (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2015). A shocking 44% of SNAP participants were found to be children (USDA, 2021). These findings also connect to the demographics of people who struggle with hunger. Households that were at the greatest risk for food insecurity were single-parent households (USDA, 2021). Additionally, Latinx and African American households were much more likely to be food insecure than White families (USDA, 2021). In Kornbluh's research, they argue hunger has always been a civil rights problem because it has disproportionately impacted People of Color (POC) individuals in the southern United States (Kornbluh, 2015). Kornbluh traces how the movement to establish the Food Stamp Act of 1964 nationwide was greatly connected to African American activists in the South during the 1960s (Kornbluh, 2015). Latinx households also have had a very complex history of fighting to improve food access. Language barrier issues, racial discrimination, and immigration issues

all represent significant barriers when obtaining nutritious and healthy food options (Vasquez-Huot & Dudley, 2021).

Even though research is still being conducted about the implications of COVID-19 on food insecurity and hunger in the United States, preliminary studies of the impacts of COVID-19 have found insights about the rise of hunger in the United States. More than one out of four families did not have dependable sources of food during the recent events of COVID-19 (Poole et al., 2021). COVID-19's impact on schools have affected food security tremendously, and families with children have had to rely on food programs to buoy their households (Poole et al., 2021). When the pandemic first began, around 30 million children were not able to receive food that they would typically receive at school due to the pandemic (Poole et al., 2021). Heads of households had lost jobs, and many schools closed during the height of the pandemic (Poole et al., 2021).

### **Current Policy Provisions and Funding**

When policies are put into place to address food insecurity and hunger, there are many benefits for the country at large. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest federally funded program to address hunger in the United States, and it is an aspect of the Food Stamp Act of 1964 (Nestle, 2019). Although its name has been changed to SNAP, the benefits associated with SNAP were an important aspect of the Food Stamp Act of 1964 (Nestle, 2019). The Food Stamp Act of 1964 was passed in response to John F. Kennedy finding out that the views of American prosperity were not the case for all Americans (Kornbluh, 2015). The Food Stamp Act of 1964 was passed in order to address hunger that was fueled by the rampant poverty issues in the United States, particularly in the South and Appalachia America (Kornbluh, 2015). This act included the Women, Infants, and Children program, food programs for children,

and food stamps (Kornbluh, 2015). One distinguishing characteristic of SNAP is its protection under the Farm Bill, which does not allow for SNAP to ever be fully eliminated from American policy (Nestle, 2019). This was partially passed because there has been a long-term uproar by politicians to eliminate SNAP participants who abuse the welfare system (Nestle, 2019). There are many reasons why investing in SNAP represents value for American society. When money is invested into SNAP, there are many beneficial effects to the economy. One billion dollars of funding has established around 8,900 to 17,000 jobs (Feeding America, 2021). Additionally, when 1 billion dollars is invested into SNAP, the United States' gross domestic product increases by 1.5 billion dollars (Nestle, 2019). Currently, 68 billion dollars are spent on SNAP (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2019). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) funds all of the benefits, but 50% of the administrative costs are up to the specific states and counties to cover (Barusch, 2018). Even though it is funded federally, states have their own offices that individuals attempting to receive SNAP benefits must go to in order to complete the SNAP application process (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2019).

### **Eligibility**

Any person can apply to receive SNAP benefits if they have qualifying incomes because SNAP is a means-tested program (Nestle, 2019). Federally, incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line qualify for SNAP (USDA, 2021). The program targets families with children, and there are rules surrounding households without any children (USDA, 2021). If you do not have children and are able to work, you can only get benefits for three months during a three-year timeframe, then you are required to work a minimum of 20 hours a week in a job or participate in a job training program for an equivalent timeframe (USDA, 2021). Additionally, most participants are United States citizens. There are certain immigrant groups that qualify for

SNAP, but other groups, like undocumented immigrants, do not qualify (Keith-Jennings et al., 2019). In Illinois, income, household expenses, and the number of people in a household are considered in the determination of SNAP benefits (Illinois Department of Human Services, 2019). It is necessary to consult one's state-specific office to determine the benefits (Illinois Department of Human Services, 2019).

### **Benefits and Delivery of SNAP**

Individuals who receive SNAP benefits will be given these resources through the Illinois Link Card, and this card functions similarly to a debit card (Illinois Department of Human Services, 2020). However, individuals cannot spend their SNAP money on all items available for purchase. They can buy most food items, drinks, and food plants, but there are some exceptions relating to what SNAP participants are able to purchase (Nestle, 2019). They cannot buy tobacco, pet food, foods that are hot, supplements, or alcohol (Nestle, 2019). The USDA, which helps facilitate the SNAP program, regulates some official stores to have SNAP-approved food available for those in the program (Nestle, 2019). For this reason, most SNAP benefits are spent at grocery stores and gas stations/convenience stores, but New York has recently tested how SNAP could be used online food markets, like Amazon and Walmart (Nestle, 2019).

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of SNAP**

With SNAP being a significant program to address hunger issues in the United States, it is important to consider how well it targets the policy's concerns. One major strength of the program is its ability to focus on the vulnerable populations in the United States (Gundersen, 2019). In some ways, SNAP adequately addresses hunger for those who are below the 130 percent index, and the very specific eligibility requirements successfully targets those with the greatest likelihood of struggling with hunger (Gundersen, 2019). Even though poverty alleviation

is not necessarily the prime reason for SNAP's development, those who are struggling are targeted through the income requirements (Gundersen, 2019). An additional strength of SNAP is its options which allow those who receive benefits more flexibility, such as how many stores allow shoppers to use their SNAP Cards to purchase food items (Gundersen, 2019). This allows recipients the opportunity to choose how they spend their SNAP benefits, and it does not limit them into specific locations to use their benefits (Gundersen, 2019). Another strength of the SNAP program is that the current concerns associated with hunger and the COVID-19 pandemic have been incorporated into the policy. For instance, programs that target the malnutrition of children often took place in schools, such as the National School Lunch Program (Poole et al., 2021). In the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, SNAP benefits were allowed to increase to the maximum amount for a family of four people (Poole et al., 2021). Even though the attempts to adapt the SNAP program to fit the new needs of the pandemic are admirable, it also is important to consider that the increase in the SNAP benefits did not impact the families collecting the maximum amount of SNAP benefits (Poole et al., 2021).

Though SNAP has greatly impacted hunger and food insecurity in the United States, it is important to note that there are significant weaknesses in the current policy. Even though it could be argued that SNAP's current iteration adequately provides benefits, one weakness of SNAP is that the eligibility requirements can be very rigid and favor individuals with children. For this reason, some people may be left out and unable to receive food resources. Those who are unemployed, able-bodied, and do not have any children are held to very rigid standards with limited timeframes of program involvement (Gundersen, 2019). College students often fit into these descriptions, and even though they have limited income, they typically are not able to qualify for SNAP (Keith-Jennings et al., 2019). Additionally, these strict requirements are

punitive to individuals who are viewed as able-bodied. The specific work requirements of SNAP can ignore a very vulnerable population of individuals with disabilities (Ku et al., 2020). Another problematic component of SNAP is its limitations on the types of items purchased (Gundersen, 2019). The USDA affirms these rules and regulations are important in order to make sure that the recipients are using their SNAP benefits for the most important items to prevent malnutrition (Gundersen, 2019). These limitations are important to consider because they limit the self-determination of SNAP recipients and also intensify the stigmas associated with individuals who partake in SNAP (Gundersen, 2019). By making SNAP more regulated and making some purchases taboo, these regulations alienate and isolate SNAP recipients further from their communities. Some of the taboo items are pet foods, hot foods, and vitamins (USDA, 2021). There can be additional restrictions if an individual has a felony, and this can greatly impact marginalized communities who have been targets of mass incarceration (Gundersen, 2019). In Ku et al.'s work, they examined how the work requirements can impact the equity of SNAP and put the supposed equality of the program into question. Their research found that the work requirements of SNAP made Black and Latinx Americans less likely to participate in SNAP than their White counterparts (Ku et al., 2020). Another weakness is that the program might not provide adequate resources in order for families to purchase enough food. SNAP recipients often purchase the bulk of their goods at the beginning of the month, having little money left over. As a result, families often decrease their caloric intake by 38% in the later part of any given month (Keith-Jennings et al, 2019). This is an important point to consider because families may not be able to purchase nutrient-dense foods with such a limited budget. As a result of this low amount of money per meal, the SNAP benefits provided often causes many families to seek out

unhealthier food options to make SNAP stretch. Obesity has become a significant issue after the passage of SNAP in the Food Stamp Act of 1964 (Baum, 2011).

The SNAP program also can be evaluated through the lens of adequacy, equality, and equity. This program is very much adequacy-based because there is a standard which if not met is considered inadequate. That standard is at or below 130% poverty line (USDA, 2021). The government has deemed that those below this poverty line would be living in inadequate conditions, primarily food insecurity. The SNAP program does not seem to be concerned with numeric or proportional equality. If it were, these benefits would be going equally to everyone in the United States or to only those who earn more and thus pay more taxes. On the other hand, SNAP can be seen as equitable depending on one's perspective. If one believes that families are providing the state with an important service, that service being raising children to be productive citizens, then the assistance they receive would be equitable. However, if one believes that children and less advantaged families are a drain on society, providing little benefit compared to families with higher earning jobs, then SNAP would not be seen as equitable. SNAP is equitable, because it is providing crucial resources for families to nurture the next generation.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Even though SNAP has provided significant resources for individuals struggling with hunger in the United States, it is important that the policy continually improves to fit the needs of American society. One aspect of the SNAP program that should be reconsidered to improve its adequacy, equity, and equality is the work requirements necessary to receive these benefits. For instance, if the United States changed the work requirements, SNAP would cover more Americans and as such would better represent numeric equality. College students are an extremely vulnerable population, and it would be worthwhile to reconsider work requirements in



their case (Keith-Jennings et al., 2019). Relaxing student work requirements would make the policy more equitable, as students would be receiving compensation for the future value the state will receive in tax revenue after these individuals become educated. Additionally, the work requirements would also help to address the equality issues of SNAP. The policy associated with SNAP is unintentionally not providing equality to African American and Latinx individuals in the United States (Ku et al., 2020).

Another component of SNAP that should be examined and altered is its stipulations on the products that individuals can buy with SNAP. In American history, there has been a maligning of welfare policies, leading to the limiting of these types of purchases (Nestle, 2019). These effects have predominantly been present in African American and Latinx individuals and families, realized in lowered participation in the program (Nestle, 2019). By relaxing these regulations, the policy better represents equality through the increased participation of qualifying families and individuals.

SNAP has been a revolutionary policy to address food insecurity in the United States. It has made tremendous strides to improve food access for all Americans and has had a significant impact on the lives of future generations in the United States. Its impact shouldn't be understated, but there are several avenues to improve its effectiveness and efficiency. With these alterations, SNAP can continue to amplify its legacy and reach more Americans to create a more abundant, equitable, and flourishing country.

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