

Research Brief, January 2022

## Problem Statement

During the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity [increased](#) among U.S. households with children, while [overweight and obesity increased among children aged 2-19](#) as families lost sources of income and services offered through schools and childcare settings. Federal nutrition assistance programs have served as a first line of defense against food and nutrition insecurity for millions of families during the pandemic response.

## Background and Challenges

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which served nearly [42 million](#) individuals in 2021. SNAP provides households with a monetary Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card that can be used to purchase groceries at authorized stores. To receive benefits, individuals must meet [eligibility requirements](#) (e.g., have a household annual income of  $\leq 130\%$  of the U.S. federal poverty level) and apply directly through their state agency. [Research](#) has shown numerous benefits of SNAP participation, including: 1) stabilizing the economy, 2) reducing food insecurity, 3) reducing health care expenditures, 4) reducing poverty, and 5) improving health outcomes.

Despite the significant need for food assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, SNAP participants faced many barriers to accessing and redeeming benefits.



**The pandemic presented new challenges and exacerbated existing barriers faced by SNAP participants and administrators, including:**

- ▶ **Inequitable access to SNAP online purchasing:** Prior to the pandemic, SNAP participants could not use their benefits to purchase groceries online in most states. The [Online Purchasing Pilot \(OPP\)](#), a nationwide pilot launched in 2019 that authorized states and retailers to accept SNAP benefits for online grocery purchases, rapidly expanded to 47 states and Washington, D.C., by March 2021. Despite this expansion during the pandemic, online purchasing is still not available in all areas of approved states, the benefits do not cover delivery costs, gaps remain in rural areas, and many independent stores are unable to participate.
- ▶ **Overburdened administrative staff and agency systems:** During the pandemic, there was an unprecedented increase in SNAP applications. Simultaneously, administrative staff were working at reduced capacity due to illness and had difficulty transitioning to telework due to outdated technological infrastructure. Early waivers offered by USDA required states to submit monthly waiver requests and waiver approvals often came late, resulting in delayed issuance of benefits and confusion among clients and staff.
- ▶ **Low digital literacy and technology deficits:** The digital divide disproportionately affects adults with low incomes, senior citizens, non-native English-speakers, and individuals with disabilities. SNAP and SNAP-Ed, an affiliated nutrition education program, currently do not offer digital food and nutrition literacy training or support to build these important skills and competencies. Further, some SNAP participants have no or limited access to broadband services and digital devices required to access services and order groceries online.

## Response to Challenges and Lessons Learned

In response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the [American Rescue Plan](#) included \$25 million to expand SNAP online purchasing, provide technical assistance to smaller retailers and farmers markets, and expand virtual payment methods. The USDA offered program flexibilities and guidance that allowed states to adapt their standard operating procedures to address challenges. Examples of [these waivers](#) include: 1) waive initial and recertification interviews, 2) extend certification periods, and 3) waive audio recordings for telephonic signatures. The most notable programmatic change during the COVID-19 pandemic was the [expansion](#) of the Online Purchasing Pilot from [six](#) to 47 states and Washington, D.C., between April 2020 and March 2021.

These waivers and flexibilities provided researchers a natural experiment opportunity to understand the impact of these program changes on diet quality, food security, and related health and economic outcomes for children and families. In response, Healthy Eating Research (HER) announced a special COVID-19 Rapid-Response Funding Opportunity in Summer of 2020 focused on the Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs to inform decision-making regarding innovative policies and/or programs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. HER [funded](#) three research teams to examine challenges and opportunities for SNAP; this brief presents key findings from those studies.



## Administration of and Access to SNAP Benefits

### Perspectives of State SNAP Directors on State Waiver Flexibilities

Early in the pandemic, the U.S. Congress enacted several new laws authorizing SNAP waivers and program flexibilities; simultaneously, many changes were occurring at the state agency level. To better understand state agency perspectives on the successes, challenges, and lessons learned from waivers and flexibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health collaborated with the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) to conduct a mixed-methods [research project](#). This project included two components: 1) a nationwide survey of SNAP administrators and 2) focus group discussions with SNAP administrators.

#### Key Findings:

- ▶ Waiver flexibilities helped states manage their caseloads and maintain benefit access. However, the timing of waiver approvals, short duration of waivers, and rigid waiver guidance created challenges for states.
- ▶ Waivers improved benefit access and adequacy, but a more coordinated response was needed earlier in the pandemic. Many states would have preferred to expand eligibility to college students earlier in the pandemic response, and states commonly expressed concern that the emergency allotments and benefit increases were inequitable, confusing to clients and staff, and would be needed far beyond the end of the public health emergency.
- ▶ States had difficulty leveraging existing infrastructure to meet new program needs (e.g., increased caseloads, telework, waiver implementation, service delivery adjustments, Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) implementation, and outdated IT capabilities made operational adaptations challenging). States with modernized infrastructure were better able to adapt eligibility systems to accommodate waivers, transition to telework, and process applications remotely.

## Equitable Expansion of the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot

With the expansion of the OPP, it is important to understand how current online food retail policies and practices may unintentionally widen disparities in healthy food access, food security, and diet quality. The brief, entitled [Promoting Equitable Expansion of the Online Purchasing Pilot](#), reviews the evidence available to-date and provides recommendations for advocates and policymakers to guide an equitable expansion of the USDA OPP.

### Key Findings:

- ▶ While the OPP has expanded the availability of online purchasing for SNAP participants, important gaps in services remain. States participating in the OPP are home to 97% of SNAP participants, but availability of OPP within those states is significantly lower in rural food deserts.
- ▶ Despite increased OPP participation by large retailers, and growing acceptability and utilization of the program by eligible participants, there are many personal, structural, and financial barriers that make further adoption challenging. Such barriers include distrust in technology and hesitancy about sharing personal information online, a lack of stable and secure internet needed for online grocery shopping, and the perceived higher cost of online grocery shopping than shopping in the store.
- ▶ Online retail platforms provide numerous opportunities to encourage participants to purchase healthy foods and reduce unhealthy impulse purchases. However, these strategies are used infrequently and inconsistently, and the online purchasing platforms are currently dominated by unhealthy food and beverage marketing.



## Nutrition Services and Digital Literacy

### Using a Digital Food and Nutrition Literacy Model to Enable Adults Participating in SNAP to Make Healthy Purchases in the Online Food Retail Ecosystem

The waivers and programmatic changes made to SNAP during the COVID-19 pandemic moved many of the services to an online platform during a short time frame. Although online services may increase the reach of SNAP services, the changes highlighted the need to identify the type of digital literacy skills and capacities of SNAP adults to purchase healthy groceries online. Kraak and colleagues conducted a [scoping review](#) of the published literature measuring food and/or nutrition literacy outcomes for U.S. adults and applied a multi-dimensional digital food and nutrition literacy model to assess the types of literacy levels that had been measured.

### Key Findings:

- ▶ Of 18 studies published between 2006 and 2021, adults with higher food or nutrition literacy scores had better cognitive, behavioral, food security, and/or health outcomes. All of the studies measured functional and interactive literacy, but no study measured communicative, critical, translational, or digital literacy.
- ▶ The lack of available research coupled with rapid growth in digital platform use for SNAP justify the need for additional research, policies, and actions to support U.S. adults in making healthy purchases via online food retail systems.
- ▶ Diverse strategies could be implemented by U.S. government agencies, retailers, foundations, practitioners, and non-governmental organizations to strengthen digital food and nutrition literacy and the infrastructure to promote a healthy online food retail ecosystem.



## Immediate Needs for Short-Term Recovery

Findings from these three rapid-response projects emphasize the importance of modernizing the SNAP program. Yet additional policy, program, and research efforts are needed in the short-term to improve both state's ability to administer SNAP and improve the availability and accessibility of services.



### Administration of and Access to SNAP Benefits

- ▶ **Policy:** In future emergencies, waiver flexibilities should be made automatically available to states and states should be provided with the flexibility to implement waivers in ways that meet their unique needs. Additional investments are needed to help states modernize and invest in their staffing and IT infrastructure.
- ▶ **Program:** The participation of diverse retailers in the OPP should be supported, and infrastructure and services needed to facilitate online ordering and delivery—such as subsidizing online purchasing and delivery fees and offering secure, refrigerated pick-up locations for delivery—should be provided. State demonstration programs are needed to test different approaches to streamlining interview requirements to improve the client experience.
- ▶ **Research:** Further research is needed to better understand the types of virtual services that are most successful in reaching clients equitably and delivering effective programming. Continued monitoring of authorized retailer availability and coverage of delivery services is needed to ensure and support equitable access to online purchasing.



### Nutrition Services and Digital Literacy

- ▶ **Policy:** Policies are needed to protect SNAP adults as they navigate the digital food retail ecosystem. Most immediately, access to broadband services should be expanded in rural areas and tribal nations. Privacy policies for authorized online food retailers should be developed and firms should be encouraged to comply with updating personal data and geolocation disclosures.
- ▶ **Program:** Additional educational resources and tools are needed to strengthen SNAP adults' digital food and nutrition literacy skills. Digital, food, nutrition, financial, and marketing literacy skills training could be incorporated into SNAP-Ed to support participants' use of digital technology.

- ▶ **Research:** Research is needed to better understand the support systems required to develop the digital literacy skills of SNAP participants, as well as testing of nutrition interventions in online food retail settings to support healthy food choices. The extent to which online food retail marketing is personalized and impacts food choice should also be measured and evaluated.

## Long-Term Recovery and Innovation

The rapid innovation and expansion of SNAP services during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant permanent opportunities for the program. The three most prominent steps needed for long-term recovery and innovation are:

- ▶ **SNAP Modernization.** Modernization of SNAP is needed to ensure the long-term availability and accessibility of SNAP services. Administrative funding is greatly needed to achieve IT system modernization, including updating eligibility systems and customer portals, increasing availability of online purchasing, building mobile-friendly applications, and expanding mobile and virtual EBT access.
- ▶ **Improving SNAP Benefit Adequacy.** Improving benefit adequacy is an important step in increasing SNAP effectiveness. SNAP benefit amounts are based on the [Thrifty Food Plan](#) (TFP), which is the cost of groceries needed to provide a healthy, budget-conscious diet for a family of four. USDA's recent re-evaluation of the TFP resulted in the [first increase of SNAP benefits since 1975](#). In October 2021, the maximum SNAP benefit amounts increased by 21%. Evaluations are needed to determine if this benefit increase is sufficient to promote nutrition security and improve diet quality of participants with low incomes and members of their households.
- ▶ **Expanding Program Access.** Similarly, program access should be expanded to underserved populations, such as college students and individuals with low digital literacy skills (e.g., adults with low incomes, senior citizens, and non-native English speakers). Ensuring participants have digital literacy skills is an important step in expanding program access. Pilot programs that allow for SNAP supportive services (i.e., SNAP-Ed, SNAP Outreach) to develop and test services that could close the digital divide for SNAP clients is critical as the use of digital platforms and technology for SNAP and SNAP-Ed is expanded.

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### Citations for rapid-response grants summarized in this brief:

- ▶ Bresnahan C, Ellison C, Green C, Headrick G, Lee CJY, Lyons M, Moran A, Tse J. [SNAP Waivers and Adaptations During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Survey of State Agency Perspectives in 2020](#). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2021.
- ▶ Bresnahan C, Ellison C, Green C, Headrick G, Lee CJY, Lyons M, Moran A, Tse J. [Executive Summary: SNAP Waivers and Adaptations During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Survey of State Agency Perspectives in 2020](#). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2021.
- ▶ Headrick G, Ellison C, Bresnahan C, Green C, Lyons M, Moran A. Building a resilient Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Lessons Learned from State Agencies During COVID-19. Under Review.
- ▶ Moran A, Headrick G, Khandpur N. [Promoting Equitable Expansion of the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot](#). Healthy Eating Research; Durham, NC: 2021.
- ▶ Consavage Stanley K, Harrigan PB, Serrano EL, Kraak VI. [Applying a Multi-Dimensional Digital Food and Nutrition Literacy Model to Inform Research and Policies to Enable Adults in the U.S. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to Make Healthy Purchases in the Online Food Retail Ecosystem](#). *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2021, 18, 8335.
- ▶ Consavage Stanley K, Harrigan PB, Serrano EL, Kraak VI. A Systematic Scoping Review of the Literacy Literature to Develop a Digital Food and Nutrition Literacy Model to Encourage Low-Income Adults to Make Healthy Dietary Choices in the Online Food Retail Ecosystem to Reduce Obesity Risk. In Press.
- ▶ Kraak VI, Consavage Stanley K, Harrigan PB, Serrano E.L. [A Multi-Dimensional Digital Food and Nutrition Literacy Model to Enable Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Adults to Make Healthy Purchases in an Online Food Retail Ecosystem: A Scoping Review to Inform U.S. Policies and Actions](#). Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech, May 2021.

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### About Healthy Eating Research

*Healthy Eating Research* (HER) is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Technical assistance and direction are provided by Duke University under the direction of Mary Story PhD, RD, program director, and Megan Lott, MPH, RDN, deputy director. HER supports research to identify, analyze, and evaluate environmental and policy strategies that can promote healthy eating among children and prevent childhood obesity. Special emphasis is given to research projects that benefit children and adolescents and their families, especially among lower-income and racial and ethnic minority population groups that are at highest risk for poor health and well-being and nutrition related health disparities. For more information, visit [www.healthyeatingresearch.org](http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org) or follow HER on Twitter at [@HERResearch](https://twitter.com/HERResearch).

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