

Strengthening the Public Health Impacts of SNAP: Key Opportunities for the Next Farm Bill

Healthy Eating Research

Executive Summary, July 2021

Introduction

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) federal nutrition assistance program. As an entitlement program, SNAP is designed to expand as incomes fall, enabling the program to respond quickly when need increases. For example, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, SNAP served an average of 37 million income-eligible Americans each month; however, SNAP enrollment has increased to more than 41.5 million during the pandemic as many individuals have lost jobs or other sources of income. SNAP is a proven policy approach for stabilizing the economy and lifting Americans out of poverty, reducing food insecurity, improving health and well-being, and reducing health care costs.

Congress reauthorizes SNAP approximately every five years as part of the Farm Bill, with the current Farm Bill expiring on September 30, 2023. The reauthorization process provides a regular opportunity to examine the operation and effectiveness of an array of agricultural, food, and nutrition programs. Given the reach of the federal nutrition safety net, efforts to strengthen the public health impact of programs, including SNAP, have provided critical opportunities to improve food security, diet quality, health, and well-being for millions of Americans. Over the past year, Congress has acted swiftly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to expand and extend the reach of SNAP. The continued pandemic response and associated economic recovery may necessitate the need for even bolder changes to SNAP, either in the next Farm Bill or sooner through forthcoming stimulus relief activities and/or executive actions.

This executive summary summarizes recommendations from a report on *Strengthening the Public Health Impacts of SNAP: Key Opportunities for the Next Farm Bill*. The opportunities put forth are evidence-based policy changes that have the greatest potential to improve SNAP participants' diet quality and health. The full report also provides a research summary of the effectiveness of SNAP, reviews prior efforts to increase the public health impacts of SNAP, and goes into greater depth on the current policy landscape and key actions for each of the seven opportunities presented.



This brief is based on the technical report, [Strengthening the Public Health Impacts of SNAP: Key Opportunities for the Next Farm Bill](#). More details and a list of references can be found in the full report.

Key Opportunities to Strengthen the Public Health Impacts of SNAP

Four key areas and seven specific opportunities are identified in the full report to strengthen the public health impact of SNAP in the next Farm Bill.

Increase SNAP access and adequacy
1. Increase SNAP participation 2. Increase SNAP benefit adequacy
Promote healthier foods and beverages in the retail environment
3. Offer SNAP-authorized stores incentives, capacity building, and technical support to meet stronger stocking standards—particularly non-chain, smaller retailer venues in underserved areas 4. Ensure more retailers are authorized for online SNAP 5. Promote healthier purchases with SNAP benefits, including online purchases
Strengthen federal nutrition education and promotion
6. Increase SNAP-Education (SNAP-Ed) reach and impact
Foster more resilient food systems
7. Strengthen the public health impacts of SNAP during disasters and through resilient food systems

The recommendations focus primarily on federal-level interventions. Still, state, tribal, territorial, and local innovations are also needed and play a critical role. Also of note, racial equity and tribal government equity are intentionally not identified as standalone opportunities, as they should be woven throughout all efforts with the understanding that a focused effort on socially disadvantaged populations is vital to strengthening the public health impacts of SNAP. Without a deliberate focus on racial equity, tribal government equity, and socially disadvantaged populations, the full potential of SNAP to promote the public's health cannot be fully realized.

1. Increase SNAP Participation

Increasing SNAP participation reduces food insecurity, reduces healthcare costs, and helps stabilize the economy. A variety of federal, tribal, territorial, state, and local eligibility and enrollment policies, as well as outreach practices, impact SNAP participation and will need to be considered.

Key actions

- **Advance equity** – President Biden's executive order to advance racial equity and support for underserved communities requires each federal agency, including the federal nutrition safety net, to assess whether, and to what extent, its programs and policies perpetuate systemic barriers to opportunities and benefits for people of color and other underserved groups. Congress could host hearings to explore emerging best practices in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion among our social safety net and key strategies needed to accelerate this work. In addition, Congress could amend the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (*P.L. 88-525*) to transition Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands from the Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) to SNAP. Congress could also allow participation in the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) and SNAP in the same month.
- **Strengthen national monitoring and surveillance systems** – Most U.S. food security- and nutrition-relevant monitoring and surveillance systems do not include Native Americans, among other socially disadvantaged populations. When these groups are included, they are often categorized as “other,” given their relatively small sample size. More work remains to ensure our monitoring and surveillance systems are adequately supported to ensure Native Americans and other socially disadvantaged groups are visible in national data.
- **Stronger whole-of-government approach** – Better synergies at the federal, tribal, territorial, state, and ultimately local levels to help an individual or family navigate the portfolio of available federal nutrition assistance programs, as well as other social services (e.g., Medicaid), are critical. Stronger interdepartmental partnerships could be made to streamline enrollment across the social safety net and develop innovative approaches to lift participants out of poverty. For example, the U.S. Department of Labor and USDA's SNAP Employment and Training program could provide better coordinated support for SNAP enrollees to return to the workforce.
- **Better leverage data and pilots using a human-centered design approach** – USDA grants to state agencies and their community-based and faith-based partners help, but stronger investments in administrative data, pilot programs, and initiatives that aim to simplify and expand federal nutrition assistance program participation reach using an equity lens are needed. For example, pilots could be conducted to identify and scale up common enrollment platforms or integrated benefits applications across multiple safety net programs to promote participation and reduce participant burden. This work necessitates gathering input through public dialogue with SNAP participants and those eligible but not participating, particularly among socially disadvantaged populations and with an eye toward cultural inclusiveness.

2. Increase SNAP Benefit Adequacy

The current monthly SNAP benefit allotment is inadequate. In 2018, the average SNAP household received \$239 in monthly benefits, which averages to about \$1.40 per meal. Food cost data from 2018, however, show that this does not cover the cost of a meal in 99 percent of U.S. continental counties and the District of Columbia. The USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP) puts forth food plans intended to represent a nutritious diet at four different costs, the lowest being the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), which is the basis for determining the monetary value of SNAP benefits. Last updated in 2006, the TFP is based on the premise that all meals and snacks are prepared at home, food prices do not vary across the country, and all Americans have access to the resources necessary to prepare nutritious foods and beverages. Increasing the monthly SNAP benefit allotment is likely to reduce food insecurity and increase food spending, as well as potentially improve healthier weight outcomes.

Key actions

- **Refine the SNAP benefit calculation** – Efforts to review and update the TFP are already underway and represent a fundamental step forward in improving benefit adequacy. Congress could also consider legislative changes to ensure that SNAP benefit calculations are instead based on the Low-Cost Food Plan or the Moderate-Cost Food Plan.
- **Sustain the 15 percent benefit increase** – Congress should consider sustaining the 15 percent increase of SNAP benefits—provided by the Fiscal Year 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act (*P.L. 116-260*) and extended through the American Rescue Plan (*P.L. 117-2*)—as needed through the pandemic economic recovery and consider ways to make this increase permanent.
- **Evaluate the impact of the 15 percent benefit increase** – Congress could mandate and appropriate funding for USDA to examine the impacts of the 15 percent increase in SNAP benefits, as well as the SNAP emergency allotments on food security, diet quality, and health outcomes.
- **Advance equity in NAP and FDPIR** – Congress could amend the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (*P.L. 88-525*) to transition Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands from NAP to SNAP. Congress could assess the benefit adequacy of FDPIR to determine if changes are needed to better align SNAP and FDPIR benefits.

3. Strengthen Requirements for SNAP-Authorized Retailers to Promote Healthier Retail Food Environments

Improving access to healthy foods and beverages, while also reducing marketing of unhealthy items can improve public health. SNAP-authorized stores, which in many cases are convenience stores or small grocers, often offer comparatively fewer fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain-rich foods, and low-fat dairy products in communities with lower incomes (high SNAP-eligible) than food retailers in communities with higher incomes. In addition, food marketing of energy-dense (i.e., high calorie, low-nutrient), nutrient-poor foods and beverages disproportionately occurs in communities of color, which may influence purchasing and contribute to disparities in diet-related diseases. Furthermore, recent research has found increases in sugar-sweetened beverage marketing during the SNAP benefit issuance period compared to other days of the month.

Key actions

- **Promote and facilitate stronger stocking standards and discourage marketing of unhealthy products** – Congress and USDA could emphasize and promote opportunities for SNAP retailers to stock healthier items while also offering SNAP-authorized stores—particularly non-chain, smaller retailer venues in underserved areas—incentives, capacity building, and technical support to meet stronger stocking standards. Food diversity and food quality should be key considerations. In addition, further attention is needed to limit the commercial marketing of foods and beverages that do not align with the latest *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* at SNAP-authorized stores.
- **Support state waivers to pilot innovative approaches** – Congress could consider supporting state waivers to pilot innovative approaches to promote healthier retail food environments among SNAP-authorized stores, particularly in socially disadvantaged areas, working in conjunction with federal nutrition education and promotion programs. More evidence is also needed regarding how promoting healthier foods and beverages within SNAP-authorized stores impacts the overall retail food environment and food supply for *all* Americans.
- **Encourage use of retailer and government data to understand SNAP impacts** – Innovative public-private partnerships are needed to encourage the use of retailer and government data to better understand: (1) what SNAP-authorized retailers are selling; (2) what SNAP participants are purchasing; and (3) what retailer-level innovations have the greatest potential for promoting healthier retail food environments.

- **Understand the relationship between improving the U.S. food supply and impacts on the broader retail food environment** – Additional policy changes and efforts are needed to better align the U.S. food supply with the latest edition of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Specifically, studies are needed to identify how to better utilize the Farm Bill to incentivize growing specialty crops—the technical term used for non-commodity crops such as fruits and vegetables—and how to make these items more affordable for all Americans. These analyses could more explicitly explore the benefits to our nation’s farmers and how to better utilize the Farm Bill to incentivize growing specialty crops. Potentially building on provisions in the American Rescue Plan (*P.L. 117-2*), these analyses could help identify policies, practices, and resource allocations in the next Farm Bill to better align with the latest edition of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

4. Ensure More Retailers Are Authorized for Online SNAP

The online SNAP purchasing pilot shows promise for increasing healthy purchases by simplifying shopping, expanding grocery options, reducing unhealthy impulse purchases, addressing transportation barriers, and improving visibility of nutrition-related information and healthy cues. Online SNAP can also help with COVID-19 disease mitigation by promoting physical distancing.

Key actions

- **Expand store access** – More attention should be given to expanding vendor participation by non-chain, smaller stores, and farmers or farmers’ markets, particularly in socially disadvantaged areas, which will require innovative initiatives to better address financial and technological barriers to online SNAP vendor requirements. Promoting universal broadband access, particularly in rural areas, will be critical; provisions in the American Rescue Plan (*P.L. 117-2*) support this kind of investment. Equally as important, legislative and executive branch efforts should explore other strategies to reach rural, remote areas.
- **Identify the best online ordering mechanism and delivery approaches** – Despite nationwide expansion of the online SNAP purchasing pilot, SNAP benefits cannot currently be used to pay for membership or delivery fees or tips for drivers. While some larger chain stores are able to waive these fees if a minimum purchase is met, this is prohibitive for many non-chain, smaller retailers. More work remains to consider the best delivery approaches for online SNAP purchases, including exploring innovative partnerships with AmeriCorps, modeled after Meals on Wheels. In addition, technology is often a barrier for smaller stores, as is the availability of affordable and accessible internet, particularly in more rural, remote communities. Understanding and

coordinating efforts to expand online benefit redemption and home delivery capabilities within WIC will also be important to enable a participant in both programs to use SNAP and WIC benefits for a single food transaction.

- **Raise consumer awareness** – Further attention should be given to ensuring SNAP participants are aware of the online options available in their state/territory and are provided the technical assistance and other supports necessary to utilize online options. More work remains to ensure online SNAP participants are protected from predatory marketing practices, such as targeted advertisements or data collection. Congress, USDA, and the Biden administration could also work toward better leveraging federal nutrition education and promotion programs, along with principles of behavioral economics to encourage healthier purchases through online platforms.
- **Understand unintended consequences** – While the expansion of online shopping stands to address several access barriers for program participants, USDA should also monitor and, if needed, address potential unintended consequences of online expansion on smaller and independent vendors. These examinations should also explore the implications and intersections with promoting local foods and fostering environmental sustainability.

5. Promote Healthier Purchases With SNAP Benefits Including Online Purchases

SNAP benefits can be used to purchase any type of food or beverage, excluding alcoholic beverages, tobacco products, hot prepared foods (e.g., rotisserie chicken), and nonfood items (e.g., pet food, soap). Currently, it is not permitted to restrict which items can be purchased with SNAP benefits, such as sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) and/or candy, without a waiver from USDA, but programs incentivizing purchases of healthier items, such as fruits and vegetables, have become popular in the past decade. The Gus Schumacher Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) is a federal nutrition incentive program that provides financial incentives to participants for fruit and vegetable purchases and also supports produce prescription programs. Nutrition incentive programs positively impact fruit and vegetable purchasing and intake, reduce food insecurity, and may assist in reducing health equity gaps. Similarly, produce prescription programs point to improvements in diet quality and food security, along with improvements in diet-related health outcomes for participants, which in turn reduces healthcare costs. There is also some evidence supporting the use of disincentives or restrictions—for example, restricting sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB) purchases in SNAP may reduce the calories consumed from SSBs by 15 percent and reduce related negative health consequences from overconsumption.

Key actions

- **Promote healthier eating patterns** – Nutrition security and diet quality should be incorporated as core objectives of SNAP. Such changes will likely require action at both the legislative and executive levels. Strategies should focus on promoting healthier eating patterns among participants, rather than targeting particular foods or beverages. More work remains to ensure equitable access to innovative programs such as GusNIP around the country; this will require additional investments and capacity building in retail food outlets, particularly those located in socially disadvantaged communities.
- **Explore impacts of GusNIP matching requirements** – Congress could explore the role of decreasing or eliminating the current matching requirements for GusNIP grantees (required for nutrition incentives) to better understand if and how these requirements impact socially disadvantaged communities' ability to apply and compete for funding. These analyses should examine whether current requirements unintentionally support better resourced communities and examine how the matching requirements impact the business sustainability of these types of programs. This work could also explore how to better support cost-effective produce prescription program infrastructure to foster participation by a diverse range of customers, retailers, and health care partners.
- **Support research to address key gaps** – Further attention should be given to the pairing of incentives for healthy foods and beverages with disincentives or restrictions for less healthy items. One approach might be Congress authorizing USDA to approve state waiver requests and appropriating funds for the evaluation of the approved waivers. Research is also needed to better understand the economic impacts of these programs, as well as longer-term impacts on participants' dietary intake and health outcomes. In addition, impacts on the U.S. food system, with special attention to small and mid-size farms and socially disadvantaged farmers, should be further examined.

6. Increase SNAP-Education Reach and Impact

SNAP-Education (SNAP-Ed) is a federally funded grant program that builds partnerships with community organizations to help individuals and households participating in or eligible for SNAP to lead healthier lives. In 2010, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (*P.L. 111-296*) expanded SNAP-Ed into a nutrition education and obesity prevention program that now allows funding to go toward policy (e.g., ordinances), systems (e.g., resource allocation), and environmental changes (e.g., observable changes in the built environment)—otherwise known as PSE-focused interventions.

Given that SNAP-Ed's direct nutrition education activities reach fewer than 15 percent of SNAP participants, PSE approaches have the potential to expand the reach of SNAP-Ed. Besides limited reach, direct education may have limited effectiveness because individual behavior change is difficult to achieve without addressing the context in which people make decisions. PSE interventions are among the most effective strategies for creating large-scale improvements to the food environment and addressing food security. PSE targets have the added benefit of improving the healthfulness of a variety of food-related settings (e.g., early care and education, schools, food retail outlets, government buildings) shared by SNAP participants and non-participants, potentially resulting in greater public health impact.

Key actions

- **Support the shift to more PSE-focused interventions** – Even though SNAP-Ed was expanded over a decade ago to include PSE-focused interventions, no additional funding was allocated to support this program expansion. Congress could explore how to better support successful implementation, evaluation, and sustainability of PSE-focused interventions within SNAP-Ed via additional program funding or partnerships.
- **Advance tribal governance equity** – Congress could authorize SNAP-Ed administrative authority and direct eligibility status to tribes.
- **Promote cultural and contextual competence** – Meaningful ways to promote and better integrate cultural and contextual competence across all federal nutrition education and promotion programs should be explored. This work could include examining tribal administration of SNAP-Ed within their own communities and incorporating other community-driven approaches to successful PSE-focused interventions.
- **Strengthen program coordination, leadership, and funding** – A strategic plan could be created for developing, implementing, evaluating, and sustaining the recent but temporary 2 percent set-aside of SNAP-Ed funding through September 30, 2022, for investment in a federal SNAP-Ed coordinating entity. For example, Congress could consider authorizing USDA to establish a permanent office for SNAP-Ed coordination. Moreover, Congress and the USDA could consider ways to better support the role of the State Nutrition Action Council (SNAC), as well as foster stronger engagement and evaluation efforts across USDA- and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)-supported programs at the federal, tribal, territorial, state, and local levels.

7. Foster More Resilient Food Systems and Strengthen SNAP's Public Health Impacts Before, During, and After Natural Disasters

USDA Disaster Assistance provides essential food and nutrition resources to vulnerable populations; however, recent research suggests that more could be done to improve the nutritional quality of our nation's emergency food response. In addition, these disaster mechanisms are likely too short in duration to meet the enormous food insecurity ramifications of these disasters. A recent National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) rapid expert consultation examined food insecurity, among other food related issues, during the COVID-19 pandemic and acknowledged more work remains to identify best practices for preparedness planning to address food insecurity and food-related disease transmission reduction. Regarding nutrition research coordination, a 2020 report examined the current landscape for federal nutrition research and identified strengthening federal food and nutrition coordination during pandemics and building resilient food systems as key opportunities.

Key actions

- **Support stronger infrastructure, authority, and coordination around nutrition security before, during, and after natural disasters** – Congress could examine existing or enhanced infrastructures, authority, and coordination mechanisms with the greatest potential to prioritize nutrition security, particularly strengthening the public health impacts of SNAP and Disaster-SNAP before, during, and after natural disasters. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) could be asked to expand a current report examining connections between food policy and public health, or to specifically explore the proposed Office of the National Director of Food and Nutrition to provide essential coordination and harmonization of the work of more than 10 U.S. departments and agencies comprising the federal nutrition community. Another option is the development of a National Food Strategy to better coordinate the federal approach to food and agricultural law and policy, as has been done in numerous peer countries.
- **Support research to strengthen the emergency food response** – Congress should appropriate funding for research to allow real time assessment of emergency food assistance approaches implemented during COVID-19. Such funding would allow innovative approaches like the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer Program (P-EBT) to be evaluated for effectiveness and enhanced or improved upon in the short- and long-term, including identifying which federal nutrition

assistance waiver flexibilities should be codified for future state, tribal, territorial, and national emergencies. Congress could also authorize and appropriate relevant investments to improve the U.S. emergency food relief response.

- **Promote food system sustainability and resiliency** – Congress could commission and appropriate funds to the National Academy of Science, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) to examine the actions federal nutrition assistance programs could take to effectively nudge participants towards more sustainable eating patterns and identify other ways key stakeholders can foster more resilient food systems.
- **Better leverage the restaurant industry during natural disasters** – Congress could further explore through hearings or briefings how to best leverage the restaurant industry to help address U.S. nutrition security while also helping this sector hit hard during pandemic-related business closures. Historically and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the food service sector has stepped in to provide hot meals to socially disadvantaged communities through the provision of kitchens, cooking equipment, and chefs. More work remains to better leverage their roles for prioritizing nutrition security before, during, and after natural disasters, while ensuring these efforts do not compete with meal-to-go options offered through our USDA Child Nutrition programs.

Conclusions

SNAP offers a vital lifeline to millions of Americans. The size and reach of SNAP suggests that policy changes via the next Farm Bill can meaningfully promote food and nutrition security and improve public health, while having additional co-benefits such as: lifting SNAP participants out of poverty; reducing health care expenditures; increasing purchases of fruits and vegetables; expanding local and regional food economies; creating jobs; promoting opportunity in rural and tribal communities; promoting racial equity; and, with more targeted efforts and research, mitigating climate change. Recognizing that the policy landscape is likely to evolve over the next few years due to the COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery, dedicated funds to evaluate the relevant COVID-19 program adaptations to date and conduct the necessary consensus building across key stakeholders will be instrumental. Additional research and evaluation resources to monitor program impacts and evaluate emerging innovations is also warranted to better understand what is working and not working and make course adjustments along the way.

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The technical report can be found at: healthyeatingresearch.org/research/strengthening-the-public-health-impacts-of-snap-key-opportunities-for-the-next-farm-bill/

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 or follow HER on Twitter at [@HERResearch](https://twitter.com/HERResearch).

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