



SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Racial Equity in Advocacy, Fact Sheet #11

September 2020

This fact sheet is the eleventh in the *Racial Equity in Advocacy* series for social policy advocates addressing unequal opportunities by race. Each fact sheet will provide information equipping advocates to embed a racial equity lens into their work to close gaps and improve outcomes for communities of color. Please see the [first fact sheet](#) in the series for a review of key terms and concepts.

America is an extremely prosperous country with ample food for all. Acquiring America's fertile land required displacing Native Americans to barren lands, cultivating it required enslaving Africans, and continuing to produce food on it requires employing migrant Hispanic workers at low wages.ⁱ Our country's food system was built on inequity and, without policy intervention, these inequities will continue.

Food insecurity closely parallels poverty rates. Americans who experience food insecurity and hunger lack the purchasing power to acquire the plentiful food. People of color, who disproportionately live in poverty, also disproportionately experience hunger.

Public assistance to purchase food is just one of many programs that must continue in order to narrow gaps in hunger and rectify past wrongs. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, is a cornerstone of the nation's social safety net serving 41.5 million people in FY2017.ⁱⁱ

Origins

In the aftermath of widespread unemployment brought on by the Great Depression, the original Food Stamp Program (FSP) was authorized in 1939 as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs. Its purpose was two-fold: help stave off hunger and deal with agricultural surpluses. This program ended in 1943 because of the reduced availability of surpluses due to the war effort, and a decline in unemployment.ⁱⁱⁱ

After 20 years of studies, reports, and proposals, FSP finally returned and became permanent in 1964 with the Food Stamp Act.^{iv} As the legislation passed during the same period as President

Johnson's War on Poverty programs and civil rights policies, it notably prohibited discrimination on basis of race, religion, or national origin.^v

Participation and costs of the program surged from 1990-1994, occurring simultaneously with the growth in Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). AFDC families were categorically eligible for FSP and 90 percent enrolled.^{vi} Amidst political will to restrict AFDC and social shaming of welfare recipients, FSP also became a casualty of attacks on social services. These attacks often portrayed recipients as "welfare queens," a narrative that became synonymous with single mothers of color living in urban areas. While most food stamp households living in urban areas were Black or Hispanic, the majority of food stamp recipients living in rural areas were White, and actually represented the larger share of recipients.^{vii}

Welfare Reform

With passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), AFDC became a block grant (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF) and FSP remained an entitlement. However, PRWORA still reduced FSP benefits for everyone. Furthermore, some groups of people were denied access, including convicted felons and legal immigrants who had been in the country less than five years.^{ix} It also placed time limits on benefits for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) who were working part time or not enrolled in a work program.^x

The result of these changes was a precipitous drop in food stamp participation. Many families who left the cash welfare program also stopped receiving food stamps, even though they were likely still eligible.^{xi} There was speculation that state diversion policies, local office practices, and misinformation about the program were operating to increase the difficulty for eligible families to enter the program.^{xii} Less often, some states used their new authority to expand access, including restoring benefits to legal immigrants, expanding categorical eligibility to align with TANF, and expediting application and recertification processes.^{xiii}

Work Requirements

The fact that food stamps survived welfare reform and remained an entitlement is a victory for equity. However, recent policy threats have undermined its ability to offer widespread assistance for people in need and are driving disparities in access. Spurred by racist assumptions that SNAP¹ recipients (stereotyped to be people of color) do not want to work, the USDA this past spring finalized a rule narrowing state options to waive work requirements for ABAWDs. The changes are expected to cause over 900,000 individuals to lose benefits within a year of the rule going into effect.^{xiv}

During the last economic recovery after the Great Recession, federal policy allowed states to qualify for a statewide waiver of the ABAWD time limit because of high unemployment.

¹ In October of 2008, the name of the food stamp program was changed to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

However, as the economic recovery progressed and unemployment declined, states began to lose this waiver and some declined to apply for continued waivers even though they still qualified.^{xv} In a study that analyzed the impact of SNAP work requirements in states without ABAWD waivers in recent years, authors found that Black adults disproportionately lost benefits and individuals with disabilities also experienced a drop in participation.^{xvi}

While proponents of ABAWD time limit policies claim a desire to “incentivize work,” we know from historical precedent with TANF that work requirements neither incentivize nor promote work, but results in loss of benefits for individuals who cannot find work or who become lost in the maze of paperwork. In truth, 58% of SNAP households with at least one working-age, non-disabled adult were employed but didn't make enough to leave SNAP.^{xvii}

COVID-19 and Future Directions

Fortunately, part of the federal government's economic response to COVID-19 suspended the USDA's recent restriction on ABAWDs. These new accommodations will expire whenever the federal public health emergency ends. Based on recent history, we know what will happen if the ABAWD time limit goes back into effect. Close to a million people, many of whom are noncustodial parents, will suffer undue hardship and have even more difficulty getting back on their feet. Disparities will increase because a disproportionate number of people losing benefits will be people of color.

Although the USDA final rule is in place, policy advocates must continue to push for federal legislation that permanently removes the ABAWD time limit from SNAP. Advocates can influence states to apply for waivers to serve the greatest number of ABAWDs that federal policy allows.

When restrictions on movement were put in place to stem the coronavirus outbreak, there were reports of millions of pounds of food going to waste.^{xviii} In this land of plenty, there is no reason why anyone should struggle with hunger.

ⁱ Haynes-Maslow, L. and Salvador, R. (2015). The Food System Should Unite Us, Not Divide Us. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 5(4), 105-108. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.054.019>

ⁱⁱ Cronquist, K. (2019). *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2018* (Report #SNAP-19-CHAR). Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support. Retrieved from <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/Characteristics2018.pdf>

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- iii Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. (2013). *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Examining the evidence to define benefit adequacy*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- iv Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. (Sept. 11, 2018). "A Short History of SNAP". Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap>
- v Ibid.
- vi Bartfeld, J., Gundersen, C., Smeeding, T., and Ziliak, J. P. (Eds.). (2016). *Snap matters: How food stamps affect health and well-being*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- vii Weber, B. A., Duncan, G. J., & Whitener, L. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Rural Dimensions of Welfare Reform: Welfare, Food Assistance, and Poverty in Rural America*. Kalamazoo, MI: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.
- viii Vollinger, E. (Jun. 25, 2018). "Rural areas see highest SNAP participation". Washington, DC: National Association of Counties. Retrieved from <https://www.naco.org/articles/rural-areas-see-highest-snap-participation>
- ix Bartfeld, J., 2016.
- x Food and Nutrition Service, "A Short History of SNAP."
- xi Weber, B. A. et al., 2002.
- xii Ibid.
- xiii Bartfeld et al, 2016.
- xiv Merker, R. (Feb. 3, 2020). "USDA finalizes rule expanding SNAP work requirements". Washington, DC: National Association of Counties. Retrieved from <https://www.naco.org/articles/usda-finalizes-rule-expanding-snap-work-requirements>
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- xvi Milken Institute School of Public Health. (June 26, 2020). "SNAP Work Requirements Put Low-Income Americans at Risk". Washington, DC: George Washington University. Retrieved from <https://publichealth.gwu.edu/content/snap-work-requirements-put-low-income-americans-risk>
- xvii Phillips, N. (2018). *SNAP and Work*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy. Retrieved from https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2018/01/2018_snapandwork.pdf
- xviii Evich, H. B. (Apr. 26, 2020). "USDA let millions of pounds of food rot while food-bank demand soared". Politico. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/26/food-banks-coronavirus-agriculture-usda-207215>