

2025 Budget Stakes: Proposals Would Reduce Children's Access to School Meals and Other Food Assistance



In seeking deep cuts through a fast-track budget process, Republican lawmakers could soon advance proposals that would take away food assistance from low-income families with children or make it harder for these families to get the food aid they need, which would increase their grocery costs and their children's food insecurity. These proposals include [staggering cuts](#) to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides food assistance to 1 in 5 children, and changes to the school meal programs that would erase years of progress, miring schools in red tape and making it more likely that low-income, eligible children [miss out on meals](#).

Because participation in one program often streamlines access to other assistance, these cuts would have harmful ripple effects. The proposed deep cuts to SNAP and [Medicaid](#) could make it harder for schools to operate meal programs and for families to obtain free or reduced-price school meals, Summer EBT, or benefits through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). These changes would likely increase food insecurity for children in low-income families, with lasting consequences for their health and learning.

Community Eligibility Cut Would Harm Children in Low-Income Families and Add Red Tape for Schools

The Department of Agriculture (USDA) has modernized the school meal programs in recent years. Instead of requiring school officials to assess household income and composition, the programs increasingly rely on highly accurate SNAP and Medicaid data to determine which children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Schools that serve enough children receiving these benefits can offer free meals to all students under the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

As a result of these modernization efforts, school administrators now process applications for fewer than 1 in 5 children receiving free or reduced-price school meals. Eliminating applications reduces both paperwork for families and the stigma children can feel about receiving free meals. Not having to process applications or collect meal fees creates administrative savings for schools. Economies of scale when more students eat school meals let schools invest in healthier and more appealing meals. Research shows that providing meals at no charge to all students is associated with improvements in student attendance, behavior, and learning outcomes, along with reductions in food insecurity. Due to these advantages, CEP is extremely popular: 85 percent of eligible schools have adopted it. That's more than 47,000 schools, in all 50 states and D.C., serving more than 23 million children nationwide.

House Republicans may be considering a proposal to severely limit which schools can adopt CEP by restricting it to schools where at least 60 percent of students have been identified as receiving benefits like SNAP or Medicaid — a large increase from the current threshold of 25 percent. These students are a subset of those who would qualify for free meals based on applications, and the lower their share of all students, the less federal funding the school receives. If this proposal is enacted, *more than half* of the participating schools — [24,000 schools spread across every state, serving more than 12 million children](#) — would no longer be able to use CEP. Children in low-income families would likely miss out on meals, jeopardizing their health and learning. Grocery bills would rise for families who don't qualify or don't realize they have to apply for free or reduced-price school meals. And these schools would have to start processing applications again.

SNAP, Medicaid Cuts Would Exacerbate Food Insecurity, Make It Harder for Families With Low Incomes to Get Other Food Assistance

Proposed SNAP cuts would [reduce benefits](#), [restrict eligibility](#), or [both](#), costing families more on groceries and increasing the risk that children don't get enough to eat. For example, one proposal would [end SNAP eligibility](#) for certain working families and those with modest savings. When this was proposed during the first Trump Administration, USDA estimated that eliminating this option would terminate SNAP benefits for more than 3 million people and end automatic eligibility for free school meals for nearly 1 million children.

These cuts, along with proposed [Medicaid cuts](#) affecting families with children, would make it harder for families to obtain free or reduced-price school meals, Summer EBT, or WIC benefits. To reduce duplicative applications, these programs simplify enrollment for children enrolled in SNAP or Medicaid. The school meal programs and Summer EBT use SNAP and Medicaid data to automatically enroll children. WIC staff use automated phone or web-based systems to check for SNAP or Medicaid receipt, which confers "adjunctive income eligibility" so families do not have to provide pay stubs and staff do not have to calculate household income. About 80 percent of WIC applicants are approved this way.

If low-income families with children lose their SNAP and/or Medicaid benefits, they would have to complete a school meal application instead of being automatically enrolled. In addition to diminished access to meals during the school year, families who are unable to successfully navigate the application process would no longer be automatically enrolled in Summer EBT. Families with children who lose SNAP and/or Medicaid would also lose their adjunctive income-eligibility for WIC. Moreover, fewer schools would be eligible for CEP and would have to reinstate individual eligibility determinations for free or reduced-price school meals. The extra paperwork would increase the workload for schools and WIC staff while burdening struggling families and making it less likely that their children get enough food.

Other Cuts Would Limit Access to School Meals, Slash Summer EBT

House Republicans also may be considering making it harder to apply for school meals. The school meal programs require some families to provide pay stubs and other income documentation to deter and detect income reporting errors. Republicans are proposing to require all families approved for free or reduced-price meals to provide this data despite research showing that this approach does [not reduce program errors](#) but does result in a substantial share of *eligible* children losing meal benefits.

Other potential changes could lead to cuts in Summer EBT benefits. Those benefits are adjusted each year based on changes in the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), a market basket of foods set by USDA that is also the basis for SNAP benefits. Harmful changes, such as rolling back a recent update to modernize the TFP or permanently freezing the TFP's cost outside of inflation adjustments, would cut Summer EBT benefits in addition to slashing SNAP benefits for all participants. In addition, as described above, proposed cuts to SNAP, Medicaid, and the school meal programs could make it harder for eligible low-income families to access Summer EBT.

Alternative Path Would Help Families Get Needed Food Assistance

Instead of adding red tape for parents, schools, and WIC staff, a far better approach would be to make it easier for eligible families with children to access food assistance. For example, Congress could [expand CEP](#), allow schools to rely more heavily on data from other programs to [automatically enroll](#) children for free or reduced-price school meals, [modernize WIC enrollment](#), and [strengthen SNAP](#).

March 12, 2025