

House Farm Bill's SNAP Cuts, Work Requirements Would Hurt Children



The House farm bill (H.R. 2) would end or cut SNAP (formerly food stamp) benefits for a substantial number of households with children, [increasing food insecurity and hardship](#).

SNAP is the country's most effective anti-hunger program, helping 1 in 8 Americans afford a basic diet. Despite providing modest benefits averaging about \$1.40 per person per meal, it combats food insecurity, alleviates poverty, and has long-term positive impacts on health as well as on children's educational attainment. In 2016, some 19 million children received SNAP each month, accounting for 44 percent of all SNAP participants.

For more than 15 years, state and federal policymakers have worked on a bipartisan basis to strengthen SNAP. This bill would take a large step backward, reducing or eliminating benefits for more than 1 million households with more than 2 million people. It would make significant overall cuts to SNAP and put in place unworkable, expanded work requirements that would take benefits away from people who don't meet them, despite the [evidence](#) that such requirements do little to improve employment. When parents lose SNAP, there is less money for food for everyone in the household. This increases the risk that children will face food insecurity, which is particularly harmful in early childhood when children experience rapid growth in their bodies and brains. [Studies have shown](#) that children raised in households without enough nutritious food are more likely to suffer poor health, face deficits in cognitive development, and exhibit behavioral and emotional problems.

Unwieldy Work Requirements Would Burden Recipients and States

SNAP already requires working-age adults (with limited exceptions) to register for work and accept a job if offered. States can go further and impose very tough work requirements (up to 30 hours a week) and cut off benefits for people who don't comply. And, individuals aged 18-49 without children can only participate for three months out of every three years unless they are working 20 hours per week, a policy that has led [many poor participants to lose SNAP](#).

The House bill would impose an even harsher policy, requiring most adult SNAP participants, including parents who have no children under age 6 and older workers up to age 60 (among others), to prove every month that they worked, participated in a work program for at least 20 hours a week, or qualified for an exemption. Workers whose employers don't provide enough hours or who don't have paid sick leave, and recipients, including caregivers and those with disabilities, who can't navigate a bureaucratic exemption process could lose SNAP benefits.

Beginning in 2021, up to an estimated 7.5 million people, including about 2.5 million parents, would have to prove every month that they met the requirement or were exempt. States would have to build expensive systems to track each of these SNAP participants every month. An estimated 3.4 million SNAP participants (including 920,000 parents) would need a job training or employment program to retain SNAP benefits – a number that far exceeds current job training programs. The bill's new funding for such programs is woefully inadequate, amounting to less than \$30 per month for each recipient who would need a work slot to retain benefits – [well short](#) of the cost for effective employment programs. States would find it impossible to provide high-quality job training for those that need it.

Parents who couldn't comply with the requirements would be at risk of harsh sanctions: the first failure would mean a loss of benefits for 12 months, while each subsequent failure would lock out individuals for 36 months. They could regain eligibility only by working at least half time for a month or requalifying through an exemption.

Many Households with Children Would Lose Some or All Benefits

Children in working families would lose. Most parents who are able to work are working or are temporarily between jobs. Some 65 percent of households with children and an able-bodied, working-age adult work in a typical month

while receiving SNAP; fully 87 percent work in the year before or after SNAP receipt. But while the House farm bill's supporters say they want to do more to help people work, its proposals would hurt many working families. It would:

- *Reimpose a benefit "cliff" on families that get a small increase in their earnings.* The bill eliminates a state option to prevent families whose overall income rises just above the eligibility cutoff, but who have significant expenses such as child care that make it hard for them to afford food, from abruptly losing SNAP benefits. This proposal would take away \$100 in SNAP benefits per month from the typical family affected. For a parent earning \$13 per hour, that's a significant hit to her budget.
- *Implement a work test that would take SNAP from working families.* Parents would have to prove each month that they worked or were in job training 20 hours per week. Someone who missed work because she was sick or needed to stay home with a sick child or family member and didn't have sick leave would risk losing SNAP benefits. Workers whose employers cut their hours would also be at risk. [About half of SNAP participants](#) had at least one month in which they participated in SNAP but didn't work at least 80 hours. Even among those who worked 20 hours per week over the year on average, more than one-quarter didn't meet those requirements every month.
- *Make the program less accessible for working families.* Parents subject to the requirements would have to submit documentation *each month*. Any clerical slip-up, by workers or caseworkers, could result in lost benefits. This is in stark contrast to simplifications made on a bipartisan basis over the last 15 years to reduce paperwork burdens. Between 2002 and 2015, the share of eligible individuals in low-income working households receiving SNAP increased from 43 percent to 72 percent, largely due to policies that improved program access.

Households with children with disabilities could lose. Parenting a child with a disability is difficult and time-consuming. Added paperwork, mandated participation in ineffective work programs, and loss of SNAP benefits would make it even harder to manage these responsibilities and afford food. Frequent medical and school appointments can take time away from work and make it harder for parents to keep a job. And they often face higher expenses, including higher food costs to meet children's specialized nutrition needs. Many parents with significant caregiving responsibilities may not qualify for an exemption under the bill's strict standard that the individual needing care must be "incapacitated." Moreover, many may not know to apply for the exemption or can't supply the documentation. Those who aren't exempt risk losing SNAP if medical and school appointments force them to miss work or training.

New child support requirement would cut families' SNAP benefits. The bill would convert an unpopular state option requiring single parents to participate in the federal child support enforcement program into a national requirement. Only six states take this option because it's expensive, risks increasing food insecurity among children if parents don't meet the child support requirements, and isn't likely to generate significant child support collections. Parents who don't engage with the child support agency often have good reason; some already receive support from the other parent and some don't want to risk undermining the relationship with the other parent to pursue support they know he cannot pay. Moreover, some survivors of domestic violence decide that seeking child support would put them or their children in harm's way. Research from Texas found that [more than 4 in 10](#) mothers who do not receive formal or informal child support are survivors of "emotional or physical abuse."

SNAP eligibility workers often lack the training to screen for domestic violence and make appropriate determinations about whether it's safe for someone to engage with child support officials. Taking away SNAP from women who decide that it isn't in their family's best interest to pursue child support would leave them with less help affording food — and deter other families from seeking SNAP altogether.

New paperwork requirements would make it harder for families to access SNAP. This bill makes several changes that would increase paperwork burdens and eliminate state efforts to streamline administration, raising barriers to access. Under the bill's new requirements, including those involving income eligibility, more families would have to document their utility costs, provide proof that their assets (including the value of a car) are below a certain value, and document their hours of employment each month. Also, more recipients would have to go to the SNAP office in person if they misplaced their SNAP electronic benefit card. Each of these proposals would make the program less accessible and make it more likely that families lose SNAP benefits as a result.