

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



The House farm bill (H.R. 2) would end or cut SNAP (formerly food stamp) benefits for a substantial number of low-income women, [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. Women are especially likely to receive SNAP benefits due to their higher poverty rates and their role as mothers and as caregivers for other family members. In 2016, some 15.2 million women received SNAP, or 63 percent of the program's adult recipients.

For over 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 impose 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. Women, parents, older workers, caregivers, and people with disabilities would all be hurt.

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, an estimated 7.5 million people, including 4.4 million women, 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 1.8 million women) 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.

Recipients 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 Women Would Lose Some or All Benefits

The bill's SNAP provisions would hurt many low-income working women, including those with disabilities or chronic health conditions and those caring for family members with disabilities, and survivors of domestic violence.

Working women. Most non-elderly women who receive SNAP and don't receive disability benefits are workers. Some 62 percent of such women are in households that work in a typical month while receiving SNAP; fully 84 percent are in households that work the year before or the year after SNAP receipt. But while the bill's supporters say they want to do more to help people work, the bill 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 away from working families.* Recipients would have to prove each month that they worked or trained 20 hours per week. Someone who misses work because she is sick or needs to stay home with a sick child or family member and doesn’t have sick leave would be at risk of losing SNAP benefits. And, workers whose employers cut their hours would also be at risk. Many working women receiving SNAP have jobs with low pay, high turnover, and poor benefits, such as home health workers, nursing home staff, custodial staff, and cashiers. That’s why, over the course of a year, [about half of working 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 in every month.
- *Make the program less accessible for working women.* Workers 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.

Women with disabilities and caregivers. Adults who receive disability benefits would likely be exempt from the work requirements. But others with serious health conditions — and those caring for family members with such conditions — would have to prove that they qualified for an exemption. Experience from other programs shows that this isn’t likely to work well. Recipients would have to understand that they qualify for an exemption, gather documentation, and submit it to their caseworker, who then must accurately decide if they qualify and process the paperwork properly. Women who have serious health conditions, including mental health issues, may find it very difficult to manage the red tape.

Also, many women with significant caregiving responsibilities may not be exempt under the bill’s strict standard that the person needing care must be “incapacitated.” Mothers whose children have asthma or diabetes, for example, might not qualify. Mothers with children who have serious health conditions often have to take time off work to care for their children; rigid work requirements and new demands to document their caregiving obligations will make it even harder for them to juggle their responsibilities. Some women with health conditions, and those caring for family members with health issues, will fall through the cracks and lose the SNAP benefits their families need to keep food on the table.

Single mothers, including survivors of domestic violence. 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 will leave them with less help affording food — and will deter other families from seeking SNAP altogether.