

July 18, 2020

Boost SNAP to Capitalize on Program's Effectiveness and Ability to Respond to Need

By Dorothy Rosenbaum

SNAP's (food stamps) broad reach among low-income families with children and others who may struggle to afford an adequate diet makes it one of the most effective means of delivering food assistance. The economic crisis spurred by COVID-19 has resulted in an unprecedented increase in SNAP's reach: 6 to 7 million more people have applied and been approved for benefits since February, state-reported data show.

As a result, an across-the-board 15 percent increase to SNAP's maximum benefits, as policymakers are considering as part of the next COVID response package, would reach even more low-income people, many of whom are struggling with food insecurity. A SNAP benefit increase also is one of the highest bang-for-the-buck measures for economic stimulus to help support the economy.¹

According to national SNAP participation figures from the Agriculture Department (USDA) for March 2020, the first month that the nation began to feel the economic effects of the pandemic, SNAP participation grew that month by more than a quarter of a million people over February.² Preliminary state figures for April and May, as reported by nearly all states, show even larger increases in those months:

- In April, the number of SNAP participants was 12 percent higher than in February in the 43 states that have provided data for April. These states include 97 percent of the SNAP caseload.³

¹ Dorothy Rosenbaum, Stacy Dean, and Zoë Neuberger, "The Case for Boosting SNAP Benefits in Next Major Economic Response Package," CBPP, updated May 22, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/the-case-for-boosting-snap-benefits-in-next-major-economic-response-package>.

² Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, "SNAP Data Tables," FY16 through FY20 National View Summary, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

³ USDA posted preliminary April 2020 SNAP participation figures on July 17 showing 43.0 million individuals participated in SNAP that month. That would be a higher (16.6 percent) increase over February 2020. However, these preliminary data appear to have several data reporting problems and are likely to be revised. They appear, in a handful of

- By May the number of SNAP participants was 17 percent higher than in February in the 42 states that have provided figures. These states include 97 percent of the SNAP caseload.

If the increases in the other states are similar in magnitude, the number of people participating in SNAP will have risen by 6.2 million in just three months, from 36.9 million in February to more than 43 million in May.⁴ (See Table 1.)

The increases across states vary substantially. At the high end, the number of SNAP participants in May had risen by 20 percent or more over February in Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, and Ohio. Almost every state that has reported data saw growth of at least 5 percent over the three-month period, though in a few smaller states, including Idaho, Montana, South Dakota, and Utah, participation has risen by smaller percentages or edged down slightly.

These increases are unprecedented: during and after the Great Recession of a decade ago, SNAP participation rose by no more than 6 percent over any three-month period (excluding months in which large Disaster-SNAP programs, with more people eligible to participate, were in place). It took 17 months after the start of the Great Recession to add 6.2 million people to SNAP.

While SNAP participation in most states is still substantially lower than during the peak months after the Great Recession, the rise since the start of COVID-19 has been rapid, and SNAP caseloads could continue to climb for some time, depending on what happens with respect to the pandemic, the economy, and future legislation. Growth may slow in June as states took higher income from unemployment insurance (UI) benefits into account for households that were approved for UI in late April or May and the economy partially reopened in some places. But if UI income falls substantially as a result of the scheduled expiration in coming weeks of the temporary \$600-per-week federal UI supplement, or if unemployment spikes again, SNAP caseloads will likely rise further. SNAP caseloads also shrink when the economy is strong, as they did in the years leading up to the COVID-19-related downturn. They will fall again when the economy rebounds and need declines.

SNAP reaches a broad cross-section of low-income people, including many families with children, households with members who are elderly or have a disability, and other low-income adults. These increases in participation reinforce SNAP's valuable role in reducing the hardship that the downturn is causing for households across the country. Other data reveal rapidly rising food needs, especially

states, to include school-aged children who received benefits from the new Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) program, under which benefits are being issued through SNAP's electronic benefit transfer cards, but which should not be counted as SNAP. For about ten other states, USDA's figures show substantially more or fewer SNAP participants than states themselves reported. See footnote 2 for the link to the USDA SNAP participation data.

⁴ CBPP, "SNAP Online: A Review of State Government SNAP Websites," April 23, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-online-a-review-of-state-government-snap-websites>, includes links to the data on each state's website for the states that post them. We also have obtained data from a handful of states that do not post their monthly data. We expect USDA to publish preliminary May SNAP participation data for all states (and to update prior months' preliminary data) in August.

among people of color and families with children.⁵ These problems would be substantially worse without SNAP benefits and the program's ability to serve more households when need increases.

Policymakers should boost SNAP benefits by 15 percent in the next relief-and-stimulus package, as the House-passed Heroes Act would do.⁶ Such an increase would give SNAP households an additional \$25 per person per month in benefits, which would help reduce poverty and hunger and lessen the rise in food insecurity. It also would serve as effective economic stimulus, with every additional SNAP dollar provided during an economic downturn resulting in \$1.50 in spending that's injected into the economy, according to a 2019 U.S. Department of Agriculture study,⁷ and in more than \$1.65 in spending, according to the estimates of Moody's Analytics' chief economist, Mark Zandi.⁸

⁵ For more on the effects of COVID-19 on the need for household food assistance, see Brynne Keith-Jennings, "Boosting SNAP: Needed to Reduce Hardship, Long-Term Effects on Children," CBPP, July 8, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/boosting-snap-needed-to-reduce-hardship-long-term-effects-on-children>. See also Diane Schanzenbach and Abigail Pitts, "Food Insecurity During COVID-19 in Households with Children: Results by Racial and Ethnic Groups," Institute for Policy Research, July 9, 2020, <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/reports/ipr-rapid-research-reports-pulse-hh-data-9-july-2020-by-race-ethnicity.pdf> and Lauren Bauer, "About 14 million children in the US are not getting enough to eat," Brookings Institution, July 9, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/09/about-14-million-children-in-the-us-are-not-getting-enough-to-eat/?preview_id=906357.

⁶ Brynne Keith-Jennings, "Boosting SNAP: 5 Reasons Why Households Need More," CBPP, July 13, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/boosting-snap-5-reasons-why-households-need-more> and Brynne Keith-Jennings, "Heroes Act Provides Much-Needed SNAP Boost," CBPP, May 18, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/heroes-act-provides-much-needed-snap-boost>.

⁷ Patrick Canning and Brian Stacy, "The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Economy: New Estimates of the SNAP Multiplier," USDA, Economic Research Service, July 2019, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/93529/err-265.pdf?v=8907.3>.

⁸ Mark Zandi, "Fiscal Support in the Pandemic Economy," presentation during CBPP media briefing, July 8, 2020.

TABLE 1

Number of SNAP Participants Has Increased Substantially in Almost All of the 42 States That Have Provided Preliminary Data

Preliminary and subject to change

State	February 2020	May 2020	% change February to May
Alabama	705,000	755,000	7%
Alaska	81,000	88,000	9%
Arizona	801,000	915,000	14%
Arkansas	318,000	393,000	24%
California	4,063,000	4,698,000	16%
Colorado	431,000	524,000	21%
Connecticut	360,000	387,000	8%
Florida	2,684,000	3,661,000	36%
Georgia	1,278,000	1,707,000	34%
Hawai'i	152,000	178,000	17%
Idaho	149,000	151,000	2%
Illinois	1,748,000	2,032,000	16%
Indiana	617,000	715,000	16%
Iowa	296,000	338,000	14%
Kansas	190,000	209,000	10%
Kentucky	482,000	624,000	29%
Louisiana	770,000	843,000	10%
Maine	165,000	180,000	9%
Massachusetts	729,000	890,000	22%
Michigan	1,176,000	1,528,000	30%
Minnesota	370,000	424,000	14%
Mississippi	424,000	479,000	13%
Missouri	657,000	766,000	17%
Montana	106,000	110,000	4%
Nevada	412,000	512,000	24%
New Jersey	661,000	718,000	9%
New Mexico	445,000	492,000	11%
New York	2,560,000	2,749,000	7%
North Carolina	1,224,000	1,383,000	13%
Ohio	1,326,000	1,610,000	21%
Oklahoma	576,000	608,000	6%
Oregon	586,000	691,000	18%
Pennsylvania	1,737,000	1,907,000	10%
South Carolina	568,000	625,000	10%

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State	February 2020	May 2020	% change February to May
South Dakota	78,000	79,000	2%
Tennessee	844,000	891,000	6%
Texas	3,284,000	3,899,000	19%
Utah	170,000	166,000	-2%
Virginia	680,000	767,000	13%
Washington	801,000	923,000	15%
West Virginia*	282,000	299,000	6%
Wisconsin	598,000	697,000	17%
Total these states	35,586,000	41,614,000	17%
Extrapolated to U.S.	36,867,750	43,113,000	17%

* Estimated individuals receiving SNAP based on reported households.

Source: Compilation of state-reported number of SNAP participants. CBPP, "SNAP Online: A Review of State Government SNAP Websites," April 23, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-online-a-review-of-state-government-snap-websites>, includes links to the data on each state's website for the states that post them. We also have obtained data from a handful of states that do not post their monthly data. Historically, the data states reported have differed only slightly from the Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. For April 2020, however, the most recent month for which USDA has posted preliminary data, there appear to be significant data reporting issues in about one-fifth of the states.

The U.S. total for February 2020 is from the Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, "SNAP Data Tables," FY16 through FY20 National View Summary, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.