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Policy Brief: More Adequate SNAP Benefits Would Help Millions of Participants Better Afford Food

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The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) is the primary source of nutrition assistance for many low-income families and individuals.¹ SNAP enables low-income households to spend more on food than their limited budgets would otherwise allow and makes it easier to put enough food on the table. Households participating in SNAP include low-wage working families, low-income seniors, and people with disabilities living on fixed incomes; close to 70 percent of participants in an average month are in families with children, and more than one-quarter are in households with seniors or people with disabilities. SNAP forms a critical foundation for their health and well-being, lifting millions out of poverty and improving food security.

Despite the program's success, millions of Americans, including roughly *half* of all households participating in SNAP, are still food insecure, meaning they lack consistent access to enough food to support an active, healthy life. Even those who achieve food security (and do not have to reduce food intake due to lack of resources) often find it hard to stretch their limited resources far enough to purchase and consume a diet that is healthy. This suggests that SNAP's relatively modest benefits — which average less than \$1.40 per person per meal — may not be sufficient to meet the needs of America's poor.

Our review of research from the last decade strongly suggests that SNAP benefits do not account for the full cost of a healthy diet or current consumption patterns and consequently fall short of what many participants need to purchase and prepare a healthy diet. This evidence shows that for many SNAP participants, raising SNAP benefits would increase food expenditures, improve food security, and help families afford nutritious food for more days of the month — and could contribute to other positive outcomes, such as improved health. Numerous experts have long pointed to the need to increase SNAP's basic benefit levels. Given the evidence that current benefit levels are not adequate and that raising benefits would have a number of positive effects, policymakers should act to substantially raise SNAP benefits.

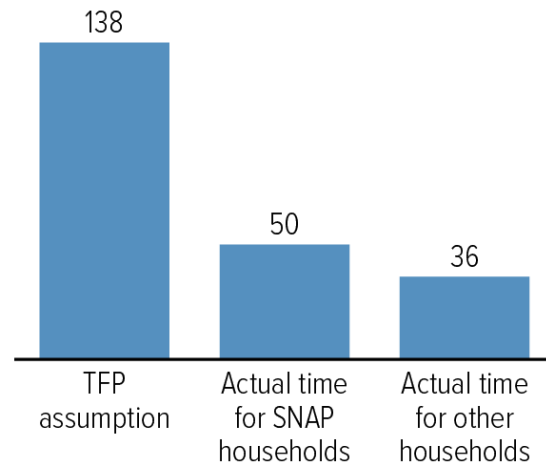
¹ For the full version of this paper, see Steven Carlson, "More Adequate SNAP Benefits Would Help Millions of Participants Better Afford Food," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, July 30, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/more-adequate-snap-benefits-would-help-millions-of-participants-better>.

- **SNAP benefit levels do not account for the time required to purchase and prepare a healthy diet.** Preparing a healthy meal requires both time — to plan menus, travel to and from a grocery store, comparison shop to minimize costs, and prepare meals — and resources. But the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) — the Agriculture Department’s (USDA) estimate of a bare-bones, nutritionally adequate diet, on which SNAP benefit levels are based — may require low-income households to devote much more time than most households actually have to preparing meals, and to make meals largely from scratch. (See Figure 1.) SNAP benefits cannot easily be stretched to purchase as many of the more convenient, but often more costly, processed or prepared foods as American consumers typically eat today. Nearly 9 in 10 households with a single adult (with or without children) lack the combination of time and money required to purchase and prepare healthy meals.² Given that three-quarters of SNAP households are headed by a single adult, many participants likely lack the time to prepare meals mostly from scratch as the Thrifty Food Plan assumes.

FIGURE 1

Families Spend Far Less Time Preparing Food Than Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) Assumes

Average minutes per day



Note: All estimates exclude time spent shopping for food; TFP estimate excludes time spent on cleanup.

Sources: Rose (2007), "Food Stamps, the Thrifty Food Plan, and Meal Preparation," Hamrick and McClelland (2016), "Americans' Eating Patterns and Time Spent on Food."

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- **To meet dietary recommendations at a low cost, the TFP adopts assumptions about food consumption patterns that can vary significantly from what people actually consume.** USDA imposes several constraints on the development of the TFP. Its cost, for example, has been fixed in inflation-adjusted terms since the 1970s. When combined with nutrient standards, food group requirements, and other considerations, these constraints result in market baskets of food that deviate — sometimes dramatically — from current consumption patterns. To enable the TFP to more closely resemble people’s actual consumption patterns would likely require raising the TFP’s cost. The TFP also fails to fully meet nutritional recommendations and doesn’t allow for differences in family types or dietary needs.
- **Studies show that additional SNAP benefits increase food expenditures and food security.** SNAP households’ food spending increased, and their food security improved, after

² George Davis and Wen You, "Not enough money or not enough time to satisfy the Thrifty Food Plan? A cost difference approach for estimating a money-time threshold," *Food Policy*, 36(2):101-107, 2011, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306919210000941>. These estimates are based on a sample of single-adult households regardless of income. It is not clear how the results would change if limited to low-income or SNAP households.

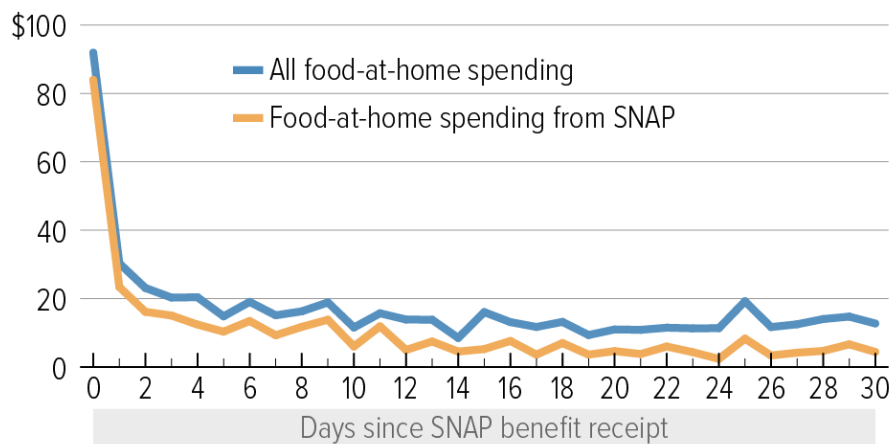
policymakers temporarily boosted SNAP benefits in response to the Great Recession. These trends subsequently reversed as inflation eroded the benefit increase and policymakers later ended it. Similarly, a study found that increasing benefits in the summer — when children lack access to free or reduced-price school meals — reduced by one-third the share of children who experienced very low food security (that is, who had to cut the size of meals, skip meals, or go entire days without food due to lack of resources).³

- **Many families struggle once SNAP benefits run out.** A quarter of all households exhaust their benefits within a week of receipt, and more than half exhaust benefits within the first two weeks.⁴ Even though SNAP benefits are intended to supplement other income that households can use to purchase food, food expenditures and consumption fall — and food insecurity increases — as families use up those resources. (See Figure 2.) Running out of benefits may also harm participants’ health and educational achievement: studies find that hospital admissions and school disciplinary problems rise, and test scores decline, among SNAP families later in the month.

FIGURE 2

SNAP Household Spending on Food Falls Throughout the Month

Average daily expenditures



Source: Laura Tiehen, Constance Newman, and John Kirlin, *The Food-Spending Patterns of Households Participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Findings From USDA’s FoodAPS*, Economic Research Service, USDA, August 2017

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³ Ann Collins and Jacob Klerman, “Improving Nutrition by Increasing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Benefits,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 52(2S2): S179-S185, 2017, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0749379716303890>.

⁴ Laura Castner and Juliette Henke, “Benefit Redemption Patterns in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,” USDA Food and Nutrition Service, February 2011, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/benefit-redemption-patterns-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program>.

- **Current benefits fall well short of what households may need to ensure an adequate diet.** Food-insecure SNAP participants report that they need about \$10 to \$20 more per person each week to buy just enough food to meet their needs.⁵ Somewhat larger benefit adjustments would be needed to reflect more realistic expectations about the degree to which families can prepare meals from scratch.
- **Families in high-cost areas find it especially hard to afford a healthy diet.** SNAP benefits are adjusted each year to account for rising food prices, and maximum allotments are the same across most states and the District of Columbia. While this ensures that poor households with similar circumstances are eligible for the same SNAP benefit regardless of where they live — an essential feature of SNAP — it can make a healthy diet even less affordable for families in high-food-cost areas.
- **Increased SNAP benefits could help reduce child poverty.** Children growing up in poor families typically fare worse — in terms of physical and mental health, educational attainment and labor market success, and other outcomes — than children from wealthier families. Increasing SNAP benefits, particularly when coupled with expanded work supports to encourage and reward work, would reduce the number of children in poverty. Policy options focused on work alone would fall far short of this goal.

This large and growing body of evidence strongly suggests that current SNAP benefit levels are not sufficient to enable all participants to afford a nutritious diet throughout the month and that raising SNAP benefits would have significant positive impacts for participants.

⁵ Craig Gundersen, Brent Kreider, and John V. Pepper, “Reconstructing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to More Effectively Alleviate Food Insecurity in the United States,” *Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 4(2):113–130, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.7758/rsf.2018.4.2.06.pdf>; Patricia Anderson and Kristin Butcher, “The Relationships Among SNAP Benefits, Grocery Spending, Diet Quality, and the Adequacy of Low-Income Families’ Resources,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 14, 2016, <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/6-14-16fa.pdf>.