

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, is the nation's most important anti-hunger program. In a typical month in 2018, SNAP helped 40 million low-income Americans afford a nutritionally adequate diet.¹

What Is SNAP?

SNAP provides important nutritional support for low-wage working families, low-income seniors and people with disabilities living on fixed incomes, and other individuals and households with low incomes. More than two-thirds of SNAP participants are in families with children; a third are in households with seniors or people with disabilities. After unemployment insurance, it is the most responsive federal program providing additional assistance during economic downturns.

The federal government pays the full cost of SNAP benefits and splits the cost of administering the program with the states, which operate the program.

Who Is Eligible for SNAP?

Unlike most means-tested benefit programs, which are restricted to particular categories of low-income individuals, SNAP is broadly available to households with low incomes. SNAP eligibility rules and benefit levels are, for the most part, set at the federal level and uniform across the nation, though states have flexibility to tailor aspects of the program, such as the value of a vehicle a household may own and still qualify for benefits. Under federal rules, to qualify for SNAP benefits, a household must meet three criteria (although states have flexibility to adjust these limits):

- Its gross monthly income generally must be at or below 130 percent of the poverty line, or \$2,252 a month (about \$27,020 a year) for a three-person family in fiscal year 2019. Households with an elderly or disabled member need not meet this limit.
- Its net monthly income, or income after deductions are applied for items such as high housing costs and child care, must be less than or equal to the poverty line (\$1,732 a month or about \$20,780 a year for a three-person family in fiscal year 2019).

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- Its assets must fall below certain limits: in fiscal year 2019 the limits are \$2,250 for households without an elderly or disabled member and \$3,500 for those with an elderly or disabled member.

Some categories of people are not eligible for SNAP regardless of how small their income or assets may be, such as strikers, most college students, and certain legal immigrants. Undocumented immigrants also are ineligible for SNAP.

The SNAP benefit formula targets benefits according to need: very poor households receive larger benefits than households closer to the poverty line since they need more help affording an adequate diet.

Most unemployed childless adults are limited to three months of benefits, unless they are working at least 20 hours per week or participating in a qualifying workfare or job training program. States may seek temporary waivers from this time limit for areas with high unemployment, where qualifying jobs are scarce. To receive a waiver, states must provide detailed Labor Department unemployment data for the state or areas within the state that demonstrate sustained levels of high unemployment. During the Great Recession and its aftermath, most states were covered by waivers from the time limit due to high unemployment. However, as unemployment rates fell, fewer areas across the country qualified for statewide waivers. The time limit is now in effect in at least a portion of the state in most states. States also have separate, broad authority to impose work requirements on many adults in SNAP households.

For more information, see [Waivers Add Key State Flexibility to SNAP's Three-Month Time Limit](#).

How Do People Apply for SNAP?

Each state designs its own SNAP application process, following federal guidelines. In most states, households apply in person at the local SNAP office, though they can also mail or fax their applications, and most states have online applications. Applicants must participate in an eligibility interview, which can often be on the phone. They must also document numerous aspects of their eligibility, including their identity, residency, immigration status, household composition, income and resources, and deductible expenses.

Households found to be eligible receive an EBT (electronic benefit transfer) card, which is loaded with benefits once a month. Household members may use it to purchase food at one of the 263,000 retailers authorized to participate in the program. More than 80 percent of benefits are redeemed at supermarkets or superstores. SNAP cannot be used to purchase alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, vitamin supplements, non-food grocery items such as household supplies, or hot foods.

Households must contact the local SNAP office to report if their income goes up dramatically. They also must reapply for SNAP periodically, typically every six to 12 months for most families and every 12 to 24 months for seniors and people with disabilities.

How Much Do Households Receive in Benefits?

The average SNAP recipient received about \$127 a month (or about \$4.17 a day, \$1.39 per meal) in fiscal year 2018. The SNAP benefit formula targets benefits according to need: very poor households receive larger benefits than households closer to the poverty line since they need more help affording an adequate diet. The benefit formula assumes that families will spend 30 percent of their net income for food; SNAP makes up the difference between that 30 percent contribution and the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, a diet plan the U.S. Agriculture Department (USDA) establishes that is designed to be nutritionally adequate at a very low cost.

A family with no net income receives the maximum benefit amount, which equals the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan for a household of its size (see Table 1). For example, a family of three with \$600 in net monthly income receives the maximum benefit (\$505) minus 30 percent of its net income (30 percent of \$600 is \$180), or \$324.

TABLE 1

SNAP Benefits by Household Size

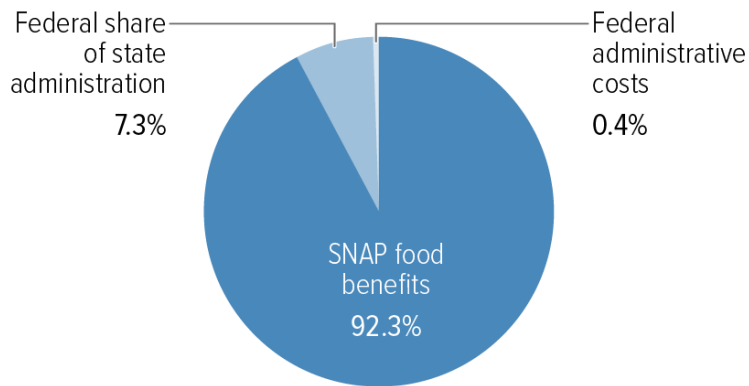
Household Size	Maximum Monthly Benefit, FY 2019	Estimated Average Monthly Benefit, FY 2019
1	\$192	\$131
2	\$353	\$239
3	\$505	\$365
4	\$642	\$448
5	\$762	\$506

Note: Estimated average benefits are calculated using fiscal year (FY) 2019 income eligibility standards and deductions and FY 2017 SNAP Quality Control Household Characteristics income and expense data, inflation-adjusted to FY 2019. Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, “SNAP Fiscal Year 2019 Cost-of-Living Adjustments” (<https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/COLAMemoFY19.pdf>), FY 2017 household characteristics data, and cost of food plans. SNAP benefits in Alaska, Hawaii, Guam, and the Virgin Islands are higher than in the other 48 states and D.C. because income eligibility standards, maximum benefits, and deduction amounts are different in those states and territories.

How Much Does SNAP Cost?

In fiscal year 2018, the federal government spent \$68 billion on SNAP and other related food assistance programs. Ninety-two percent of SNAP spending went directly to benefits that households used to purchase food, and 7 percent went to state administrative costs, including eligibility determinations, employment and training and nutrition education for SNAP households, and anti-fraud activities.

92 Percent of Federal SNAP Spending Is for Food



Notes: Chart excludes spending on activities not directly related to SNAP but in the SNAP budget account, such as nutrition assistance in the U.S. territories, support for food banks, and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. The federal share of state administration includes state costs associated with SNAP operations – including eligibility determinations, benefit issuance, and quality control – as well as certain services for SNAP recipients such as employment and training and nutrition education. Federal administrative costs include the mandatory and discretionary federal costs of administering SNAP.

Source: Department of Agriculture, Fiscal Year 2018, CBPP estimates based on fiscal year 2020 “Explanatory Notes for Committee on Appropriations” and SNAP program data.

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Less than 1 percent went to federal administrative costs. In addition to SNAP, the SNAP budget includes about \$2.5 billion in other food assistance programs, including the block grant for food assistance in Puerto Rico and American Samoa, commodity purchases for the Emergency Food Assistance Program (which helps food pantries and soup kitchens across the country), and commodities for the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. (In 2018 Puerto Rico received an additional \$1.27 billion for disaster nutrition assistance after Hurricane Maria.)

SNAP Caseloads and Costs Are Falling

SNAP experienced large but temporary growth during and after the Great Recession. Caseloads expanded significantly between 2007 and 2011 as the recession and lagging economic recovery dramatically increased the number of low-income households that qualified and applied for help. In addition, SNAP delivered more than \$40 billion in benefit increases that delivered fast and effective economic stimulus as part of the 2009 Recovery Act.

SNAP spending as a share of GDP will return to the 2007 level by 2026. As currently structured, SNAP is not contributing to long-term budgetary pressures.

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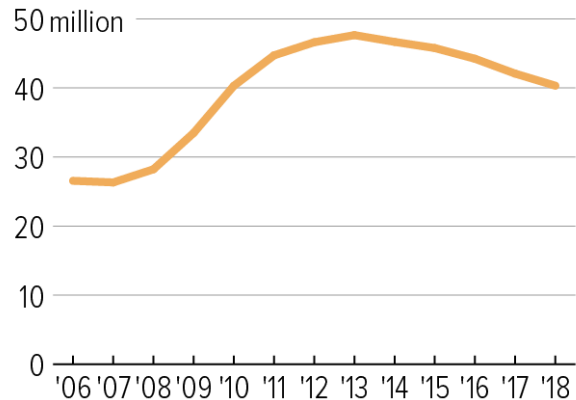
These changes were temporary, however. SNAP caseloads grew more slowly in 2012 and 2013 and fell by 2 percent in both 2014 and 2015. Caseloads declined more quickly beginning in 2016, when the number of SNAP participants fell 3.4 percent from the year before; it then declined 4.6 percent in 2017 and 4.7 percent in 2018.

² Nationally, SNAP caseloads have been falling for five years; about 7 million fewer people participated in SNAP in 2018 than in 2013.

SNAP spending has fallen as well, due to declining caseloads as well as a drop in average benefits from the end of the Recovery Act benefit increase and low food price inflation. SNAP spending has fallen every year beginning in 2014. Measured as a share of the economy (gross domestic product or GDP), SNAP spending has fallen by 32 percent since 2013, and the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projects that it will return to the 2007 level by 2026. Thus, as currently structured, SNAP is not contributing to long-term budgetary pressures.

SNAP Participation Rose Due to Recession But Now Is Falling

Number of SNAP participants in average month in fiscal year

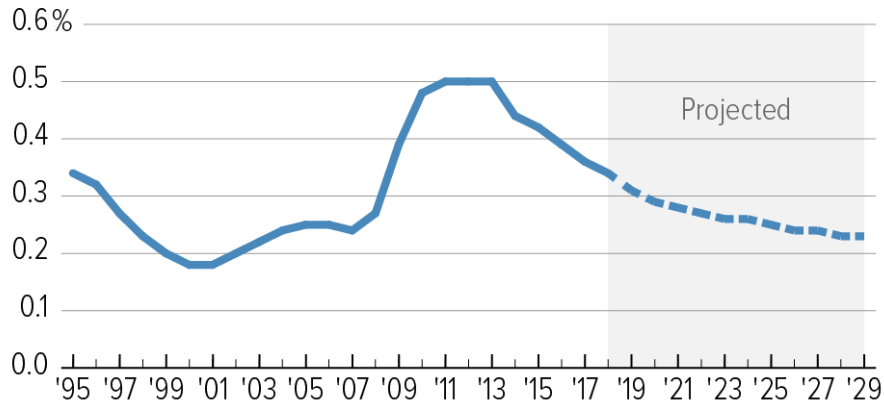


Source: Department of Agriculture

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SNAP Costs Falling, Projected to Fall Further

Spending as a share of gross domestic product



Note: Dotted line indicates CBO projection.

Sources: Department of Treasury, Office of Management and Budget, Bureau of Economic Analysis, and Congressional Budget Office May 2019 baseline

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For more information, see [SNAP Caseload and Spending Declines Have Accelerated in Recent Years](#).

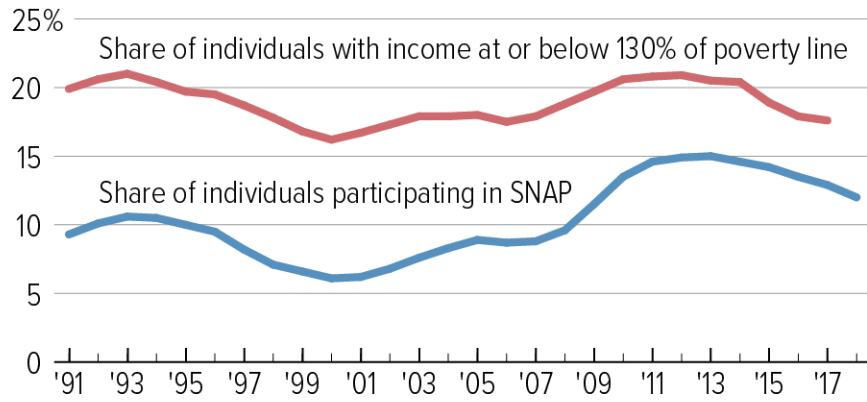
Special Features of SNAP

While SNAP's fundamental purpose is to help low-income families, the elderly, and people with disabilities afford an adequate diet, it promotes other goals as well:

Protecting families from hardship and hunger

SNAP benefits are an entitlement, which means that anyone who qualifies under program rules can receive benefits. As a result, SNAP responds quickly and effectively to support low-income families and communities during times of increased need. Enrollment expands when the economy weakens and contracts when the economy recovers and poverty declines. In this way, SNAP helps families to bridge temporary periods of unemployment or a family crisis. If a parent loses her job or has a job that pays low wages, SNAP can help her feed her children until she is able to improve her circumstances.

SNAP Tracks Changes in Share of Population That Is Poor or Near-Poor



Note: Poverty estimates are annual estimates. SNAP shares of resident population are calendar year averages.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Agriculture

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SNAP helps households with limited resources to purchase adequate food. Some 15 million households, with 40 million people, were food insecure in 2017. Studies show that SNAP benefits have reduced food insecurity for those households.

Protecting the overall economy

SNAP benefits are one of the fastest, most effective forms of economic stimulus because they get money into the economy quickly during a recession. Low-income individuals generally spend all of their income meeting daily needs such as shelter, food, and transportation, so every dollar in SNAP that a low-income family receives enables the family to spend an additional dollar on food or other items. Some 80 percent of SNAP benefits are redeemed within two weeks of receipt and 97 percent are spent within a month.

Moody’s Analytics estimated that every \$1 increase in SNAP benefits during 2009, when the economy was in a recession, generated about \$1.70 in economic activity. Similarly, CBO has found that SNAP has one of the largest “bangs-for-the-buck” (i.e., increase in economic activity and employment per budgetary dollar spent) among a broad range of policies for stimulating economic growth and creating jobs in a weak economy.

Lessening the extent and severity of poverty and hardship

SNAP is heavily focused on the poor. About 92 percent of SNAP benefits go to households with incomes at or below the poverty line, and 55 percent go to households at or below *half* of the poverty line (about \$10,390 for a family of three in 2019). Families with the greatest need receive the largest benefits, as noted above.

These features make SNAP a powerful anti-poverty tool. A CBPP analysis using the government’s Supplemental Poverty Measure (which counts SNAP as income) and correcting for underreporting in government surveys found that SNAP kept 7.3 million people out of poverty in 2016, including 3.3 million children. SNAP lifted 1.9 million children above half of the poverty line in 2016, according to this same analysis – more than any other program.

By helping families buy food and freeing up resources for other basic needs, SNAP helps reduce food insecurity and other hardships such as trouble paying bills or rent.

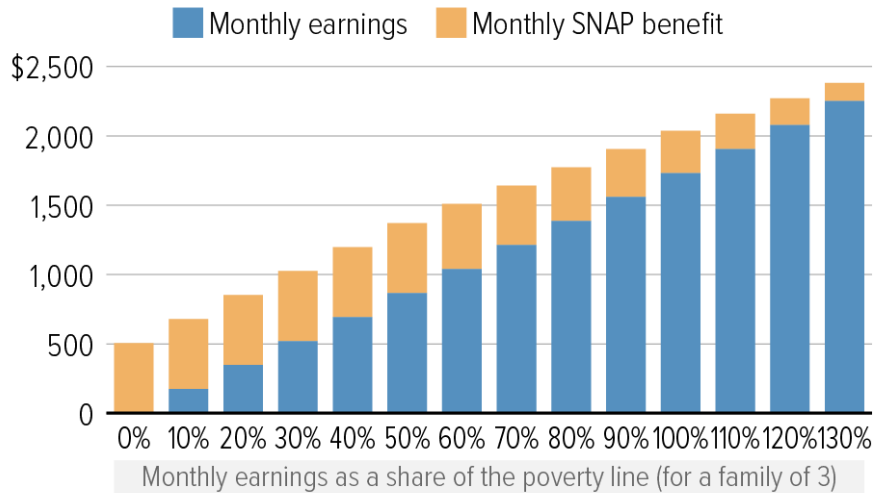
Supporting and encouraging work

In addition to acting as a safety net for people who are elderly, disabled, or temporarily unemployed, SNAP is designed to supplement the wages of low-income workers.

Millions of Americans work in jobs with low wages, unpredictable schedules, and no benefits such as paid sick leave – all of which contribute to high turnover and spells of unemployment. SNAP provides monthly benefits that help fill the gaps for workers with low and inconsistent pay, and can help workers weather periods without a job. Workers who participate in SNAP most commonly work in service occupations, such as cooks or home health aides, and sales occupations such as cashiers, which are often jobs with low pay and income volatility.

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SNAP Benefits Gradually Phase Out as Earnings Rise



Note: This chart shows the phase out for a family of three with earned income that claims the \$164 standard deduction and the 20 percent earned income deduction, and that has \$1,209 in monthly shelter costs (the median value for working households of three with children that have incomes at or above 125 percent of poverty based on the fiscal year 2017 SNAP Household Characteristics data, inflation-adjusted to 2019 dollars).

Source: CBPP calculation based on fiscal year (FY) 2019 SNAP federal benefit parameters and FY 2017 SNAP Household Characteristics data

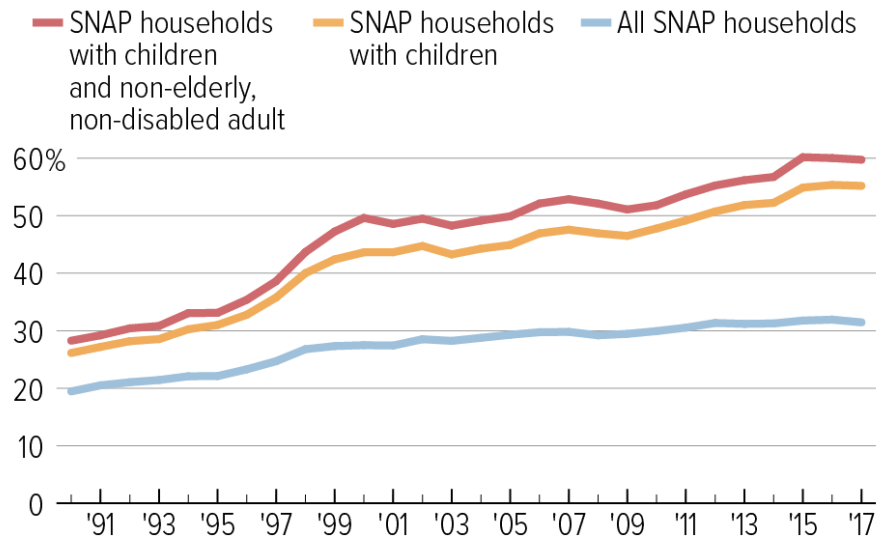
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Several features of SNAP make it an effective work support. The SNAP benefit formula contains an important work incentive. For every additional dollar a SNAP recipient earns, her benefits decline gradually, by only 24 to 36 cents. This means that for most SNAP households, the program continues to serve as an income support — making it easier for families to afford food — as they earn more and work toward financial stability and self-sufficiency. Because SNAP is an entitlement program and it serves all eligible people who apply, participants who lose jobs can apply for SNAP and receive it quickly, and workers who participate do not risk seeing their total income (earnings plus SNAP) fall if the promise of increased hours or a new, higher-paying job does not come through. States further support work through the SNAP Employment and Training program, which funds training and work activities for unemployed adults who receive SNAP.

The number of SNAP households that have earnings while participating in SNAP has more than tripled — from about 2 million in 2000 to 6.5 million in 2017. The *share* of all SNAP households that have earnings while participating in SNAP has also increased — from about 27 percent in 2000 to about 31 percent in 2017.

Share of SNAP Households With Earnings Has Risen Considerably

Share of households with earnings

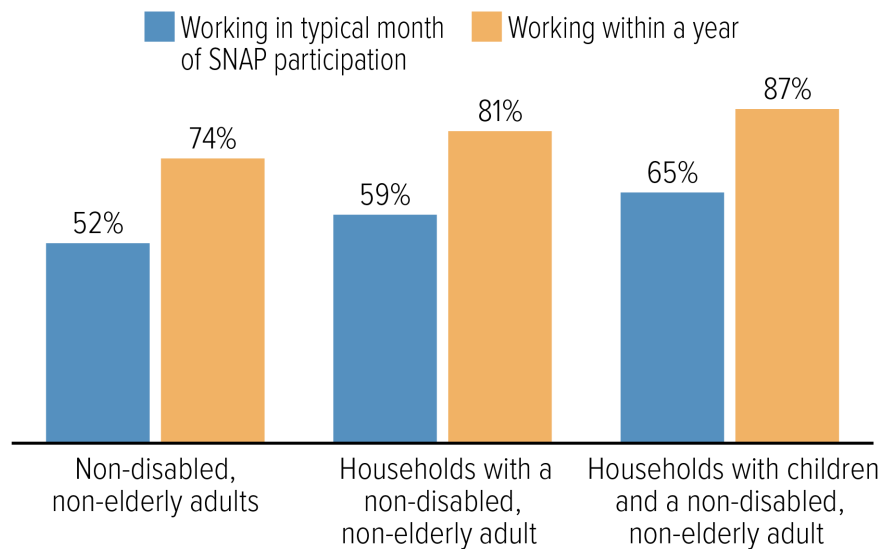


Source: CBPP tabulations of Agriculture Department data

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Most SNAP recipients who can work do so. Over half of individuals who were participating in SNAP in a typical month in mid-2012 were working in that month. Furthermore, 74 percent worked in the year before or after that month (in the 25-month period). Rates were even higher when work among other household members is counted: 87 percent of households with children and a non-disabled adult included at least one member who worked in this 25-month period. About two-thirds of SNAP recipients are not expected to work, primarily because they are children, elderly, or disabled.

Most SNAP Participants and Households Work



Note: Individuals and households include those who were participating in SNAP in a typical month in mid-2012. A working household refers to a household in which either the household head or spouse worked. Individuals include any non-disabled adult who reported participating in SNAP.

Source: CBPP analysis of SIPP data from 2011-2013

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For more information, see [Most Working-Age SNAP Participants Work, But Often in Unstable Jobs](#); [The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Includes Earnings Incentives](#); and [SNAP Helps Millions of Low-Wage Workers](#).

Supporting healthy eating

SNAP enables low-income households to afford more healthy foods. Because SNAP benefits can be spent only on food, they boost families' food purchases. SNAP participants consume a diet similar to comparable low-income individuals not participating in SNAP. In addition, all states operate SNAP nutrition education programs to help participants make healthy food choices.

Recent research on the nationwide expansion of food stamps in the 1960s and 1970s finds that children born to poor women with access to food stamps had better health outcomes as adults — and girls grew up to be more self-sufficient — than those born in counties that had not yet implemented the program.

Responding quickly to disasters

SNAP acts as a first responder in the wake of natural disasters, providing critical food assistance to vulnerable households. After disasters, USDA and states work together to provide quick, targeted assistance. This can include replacing participants' benefits to compensate for lost food, providing temporary Disaster SNAP (D-SNAP) benefits to non-participants who have suffered significant loss, and relaxing program requirements to ease access and relieve undue burden on staff. In 2018, SNAP helped households affected by hurricanes Harvey, Maria, and Irma in multiple states, wildfires in California, the eruption of the Kilauea volcano in Hawaii, and Hurricane Florence in North and South Carolina put food on the table. Congress provided additional funds for Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. (Because Puerto Rico receives food assistance in the form of a block grant, disaster funding there was not available without congressional action, as it is in other U.S. states, most territories, and the District of Columbia.)

How Effective and Efficient Is SNAP?

SNAP and other nutrition programs have helped make severe hunger in America rare. Before the late 1960s, when the federal government began providing nutrition assistance on a permanent basis, hunger and severe malnutrition could be found in many low-income communities in the United States. Today, in large part because of these programs, such severe conditions are no longer found in large numbers.

To promote efficiency and program integrity, SNAP has one of the most rigorous upfront eligibility determination systems of any public benefit program. Households applying for SNAP report their income and other relevant information; a state eligibility worker interviews a household member and verifies the accuracy of the information using data matches, paper documentation from the household, or by contacting a knowledgeable party, such as an employer or landlord. Households must reapply for benefits periodically, usually every six or 12 months, and between reapplications must report income changes that would affect their eligibility.

To promote efficiency, SNAP has one of the most rigorous quality control systems of any public benefit program.

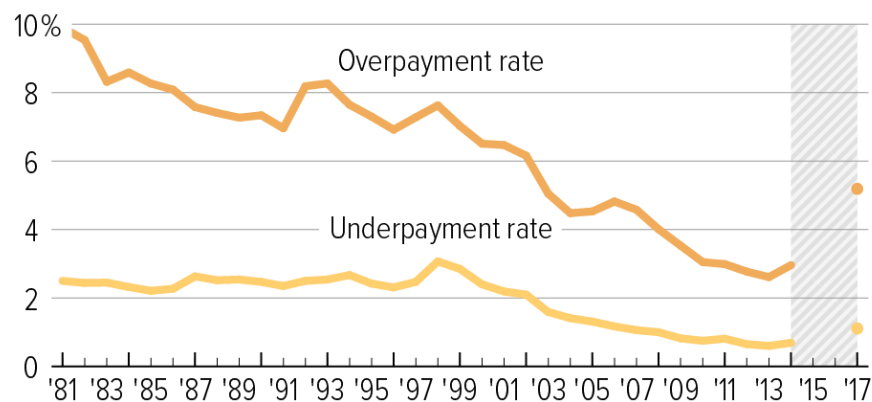
In addition, the SNAP quality control (QC) system requires states each month to select a representative sample of SNAP cases (totaling about 50,000 cases nationally over the year) and have independent state reviewers check the accuracy of the state's eligibility and benefit decisions within federal guidelines. Federal officials then re-review a subsample of the cases. USDA annually releases state and national payment error rates based on these reviews. States are subject to fiscal penalties if their error rates are persistently above the national average. This system is among the most extensive of any federal public benefit program.

A USDA Office of Inspector General report in 2015 drew attention to concerns about data quality issues with SNAP QC error rates in many states. As a result, USDA did not report national or state-level error rates for all states for 2015 or 2016. During this time USDA conducted detailed reviews in all states and took action to

address the quality and consistency of the measure. In June 2018 it released SNAP error rates for 2017, which were nearly double the rates published in 2014, but still well below historical levels. USDA indicates that the increase was a result of the improved measurement process, rather than an actual increase in improper payments.³ The national “combined error rate,” which adds together the overpayment and underpayment error rate, was 6.3 percent in 2017. Only states with combined error rates above 6 percent currently are subject to fiscal penalties, and prior to 2003, 6 percent was the standard for enhanced funding for outstanding performance.

SNAP Error Rates Lower Than Historical Levels

Fiscal years 1981-2014, 2017



Note: The discontinuities in 2015 and 2016 reflect corrections to error reporting by the USDA. The increase in 2017 is largely the result of improved measurement procedures, rather than an increase in improper payments.

Source: Agriculture Department, Quality Control Branch

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SNAP reaches a large share of eligible households. Eighty-five percent of individuals who qualified for SNAP benefits received them in fiscal year 2016. This represents a significant improvement from 2002, when the participation rate bottomed out at 54 percent. Participation among eligible people in low-income working families rose from 40 percent in 2002 to about 75 percent in 2016.

Nonetheless, many low-income households that receive benefits still have trouble affording an adequate diet. An Institute of Medicine report identified several shortcomings with the current SNAP benefit allotment and noted that most household benefit levels are based on unrealistic assumptions about the cost of food, preparation time, and access to grocery stores. Many families face stark choices between purchasing food and paying for rent and other necessities. If they manage this shortfall by buying lower-cost but less nutritious foods, it can adversely affect their health.

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¹ The U.S. Agriculture Department (USDA) reports that 39.7 million individuals participated in SNAP in an average month of 2018. This figure understates SNAP participation by approximately 1 million individuals, however, because it excludes data for Rhode Island in all months and for North Carolina in most months of the year. These states have temporarily stopped reporting SNAP participation data. See <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

² These figures exclude Rhode Island for each year, use state-reported data for North Carolina beginning in May 2017 due to data-reporting issues, and take out months when participation was elevated due to disasters in Texas and Florida in 2017 and 2018. Without adjusting for disasters, participation in 2017 fell by 4.3 percent compared to 2016, and fell by 3.7 percent in 2018. The acceleration in SNAP participation declines occurred despite a larger number of people receiving SNAP benefits as a result of disasters in 2016 than in 2015.

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, “USDA Corrects Error Reporting Issues; Releases FY 2017 SNAP Payment Error Rates,” June 2018, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pressrelease/2018/fns-000418>.