

Who Gets to Eat? SNAP, Work Requirements, & Food Insecurity

Abstract

This brief analyzes food insecurity in the United States with an emphasis on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). It evaluates SNAP's historical development, recent policy changes, and their implications for food security, employment, and public health.

Keywords

Food Insecurity, SNAP, Low-Income Households, Work Requirements, Social Welfare Policy

I. Executive Summary

This brief examines food insecurity in the United States, and more specifically, how Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is working to curb this issue with increased access to nutritious food. It will consider the development of SNAP, each party's claims, and past attempts to address the pressing need for improved food accessibility.

II. Overview

This section provides a brief look at the origins of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as well as its important role in handling food insecurity in the United States.

A. Pointed Summary

- SNAP supports approximately 41.7 million Americans per month; however, recent policy changes have altered eligibility and work requirements.
- Such alterations to SNAP policies are predicted to echo throughout public health, economic, and social policy.
- Those who reject recent changes argue that food insecurity is bound to worsen while supporters claim that the changes will foster an increase in employment.

B. Relevance

SNAP was created to provide low-income households with access to nutritious food. However, recent federal funding cuts have left them with no choice but to narrow the population they can afford to support. This shift not only poses a threat to the well-being of low-income individuals, but also to workforce stability and local economies. Current debates regarding the federal funding of SNAP have raised questions regarding how to provide low-income families with support while encouraging employment as well as the true role of federal safety net programs.

III. History

A. Current Stances

Following the One Big Beautiful Act of 2025, several changes were made to certain eligibility factors for SNAP. Most notably, stricter work requirements, targeted food restrictions, immigrant limitations and state cost sharing [1]. In October 2025, two federal judges ruled that the Trump Administration had to pay food stamps in November, however this was delayed because of the government shutdown. While around 70% of Americans support the program, conservative lawmakers are driving cuts, making the future very uncertain.

B. Tried Policy

Federal involvement in addressing hunger expanded significantly during the Great Depression [2]. However, true involvement began in the 1930s. Towards the end of the Great Depression, Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace and Administrator Milo Perkins championed the creation of what is now known as the 'Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program', formerly known as the Food Stamp Program [3]. It served two purposes - feeding a starving population and offsetting the surplus of produce that farmers were not able to sell.

By World War II, the agricultural economy and unemployment rate had been equalized, so the government felt as if it did not need to continue the program.

In the following years, multiple senators - George Aiken, Robert M. La Follette Jr, etc [4] - strove for the renewal of the food stamp program. The Eisenhower administration did not take much action even though PL 86-341 [5] authorized the Secretary of Agriculture to operate a program. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy's first Executive Order called for expanded food distribution and food stamp pilot programs. Furthermore in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson fought for a permanent food stamp program. Agricultural Secretary Orville Freeman submitted legislation on April 17, 1964, with H.R. 10222 [6] being passed by Congress later that year.

The most recent rendition of SNAP was authorized by the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 [7], strengthening the agricultural economy and fuller, more effective use of food abundances.

IV. Policy Problem

A. Stakeholders

SNAP benefits are distributed to tens of millions of low-income U.S. citizens across the country. As of November 2025, this means that around 42 million Americans qualify to receive these benefits [1]. However, due to the Trump Administration's imposition of H.R.1 or OBBBA (One Big Beautiful Bill Act) on July 4th, 2025, the requirements to be eligible for SNAP benefits have become stricter, meaning the ability to receive them for millions of families is now in jeopardy.

In H.R.1, changes to SNAP include limiting benefits to U.S. citizens only and extending the work requirement to a greater range of ages. Able-bodied adults up to age 65 must now meet the work requirement of 80 hours/month (20 hours/week), whereas

previously, only adults up to age 55 had to meet them [2]. Similarly, able-bodied adults with children younger than 14 must meet the requirements, whereas previously, adults with children younger than 18 had to meet them. In shorter words, this means that a greater number of people must meet the work requirement. Low-income families with children under 18 run the risk of losing their benefits entirely if they cannot find proper childcare while attending work. H.R.1 also declares that legally present noncitizens, humanitarian parolees, and human trafficking victims are no longer eligible to receive benefits; a population of over 41,000 people consequently lose their eligibility entirely due to these changes [3].

According to an ABC News report, under this Republican-led bill, an estimated 1.1 million Americans will lose SNAP benefits partially or entirely between 2025 and 2034 [4].

B. Risks of Indifference

The government shutdown in late 2025 has exacerbated this problem. These new work requirements are bound to cause an immense ripple effect, affecting the millions of Americans that rely on SNAP to buy nutritious food to aid various diet-sensitive chronic diseases such as diabetes and kidney disease, said Northwestern University health economist Lindsay Allen [5]. Additionally, SNAP benefits are crucial to the sustainment of economic health. As each SNAP dollar generates approximately \$1.54 in economic activity, a precipitous drop in spending may trigger business layoffs, closures, and minimized access to affordable, healthy food options for low-income households [6]. Policy changes to SNAP have a direct impact on eligibility for subsequent federal programs such as WIC, further hindering healthcare access [6]. An overall decline in the number of people eligible to receive SNAP benefits without proper government treatment will inevitably result in broader social and economic consequences.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Policymakers remain divided on how SNAP should be structured, as well as its effect on employment rate, particularly. Congressional republicans and conservatives believe that currently, federal benefits have become too easy to obtain, as well as overly generous. They argue that there is a lack of incentive to work, and by widening the range of ages that must meet the work requirement to receive benefits and making it more difficult for groups to obtain them, we will see a rise in employment rates [7]. In contrast, progressive lawmakers take the stance that SNAP primarily supports families already making low-wages and who face unstable jobs. Many of these jobs are unpredictable and do not offer time-off benefits such as sick leave. Because SNAP benefits are rescinded after only three months of noncompliance and time spent job searching is not counted towards total work hours, a strict enforcement of work requirements removes critical support for low-income individuals actively trying to maintain employment. Democratic proponents thereby argue that cuts to SNAP would drastically increase food and economic insecurity, and would not raise employment rates [8].

V. Policy Options

President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act places restrictions on access to SNAP benefits by implementing guidelines on general work requirements.

In light of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, the U.S. Department of Agriculture [16] is empowering states to approve SNAP Food Restriction Waivers which seek to "restrict the purchase of non-nutritious items like soda and candy" most notably in states like Florida, Texas, and Indiana.

To ensure that Americans can put food on the table, SNAP should increase benefit adequacy so individuals have resources to purchase healthier food. Increasing

incentive-based programs such as produce discounts and expanding nutrition education have proven to be effective and widely supported strategies. Through focusing on expanding access to resources and healthier foods rather than stigmatizing SNAP recipients, food insecurity will be reduced while promoting better health outcomes for Americans.

Congressman Keith Self (R-TX) recently introduced a bill to improve oversight of SNAP and nutrition outcomes [20]. This bill would require the Secretary of Agriculture to submit an annual report to Congress on the state of food security and diet quality in the United States. The report would analyze how changes to SNAP impact participants and nonparticipants alike to ensure informed decisions are being made and analyze the effectiveness of recent policy changes to SNAP, improving nutritional outcomes across all income levels.

VI. Conclusions

This brief investigates food insecurity in the U.S., along with the changing role of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) in relation to food insecurity and the U.S. government. This is accomplished through an analysis of the history of SNAP, recent policy developments that affect SNAP, and the competing political perspectives about SNAP. The brief discusses how changes to SNAP eligibility and work requirements can have an impact on healthcare, economic stability, access to food assistance, and food security for low-income Americans. SNAP's future is currently in flux due to competing priorities for Congress regarding federal spending, the employment of low-income individuals, and SNAP's historical role as an important social safety net. The evidence suggests that strict work requirements risk undermining SNAP's core function of reducing hunger without producing meaningful gains in employment.