



Food Research & Action Center Statement for the House Democratic Task Force on Agriculture and Nutrition in the 21st Century: 2023 Farm Bill Roundtable — July 13, 2023

Congressman Bennie G. Thompson (MS-02), Chairman
Rep. Chellie Pingree (ME-01)
Rep. Jim McGovern (MA-02)
Rep. Jahana Hayes (CT-05)
Rep. Mark Pocan (WI-02)
Rep. Kim Schrier (WA-08)
Rep. Josh Harder (CA-09)
Rep. Luis Correa (CA-46)

Good afternoon, Chairman Thompson and esteemed Task Force Members.

I am Luis Guardia, president of the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC). On behalf of our national network and the community members we serve, I appreciate the opportunity to share 2023 Farm Bill recommendations to improve the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and systemically tackle hunger in the United States. FRAC supports other federal nutrition programs authorized by the Farm Bill, such as the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), and Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP). However, my comments today will focus on SNAP. The 2023 Farm Bill provides a key vehicle to strengthen and protect SNAP and make it even more effective for people with lower incomes who struggle to afford food.

FRAC is a national nonprofit with a 50-year track record of improving the nutrition, health, and well-being of people struggling against poverty-related hunger in the United States through advocacy, partnerships, and by advancing bold and equitable policy solutions. We have a national network of thousands of national, state, and local nonprofit organizations, food banks, policy organizations, public agencies, corporations, schools, health care providers, and labor organizations committed to ending hunger in America. We champion federal nutrition programs because of their critical role in reducing the hunger and food insecurity suffered by households with low incomes. FRAC works closely with key SNAP and child nutrition agencies and anti-hunger community partners to improve access to key federal nutrition programs.

As you know, SNAP is our nation's first defense against hunger. SNAP is an effective program that promotes food security, generates economic activity, fosters well-being, and provides dignity of choice for consumers to purchase the food that meets their cultural needs. SNAP responds quickly to increases in need, whether due to recessions, natural disasters, or pandemics. We urge Congress to prioritize protecting and strengthening SNAP to improve benefit adequacy and equitable access. The improvements would strengthen food security, health, and well-being, as well as positively impact all parts of the food chain — from farmers, ranchers, and other producers, to truckers, grocers, and store employees.

Food Insecurity Is a Serious Problem in the United States

Food insecurity and poverty have serious health repercussions across one's lifespan, negatively impacting the ability of children to develop and learn. The detrimental and

lifelong consequences of childhood poverty and resulting hunger are well documented. The toxic stress of living in poverty has negative, life-long impacts on a child's brain development. When children live in poverty, they endure hardships that impair their ability to [thrive](#), which impacts their capacity to learn, and develop, and this continues throughout their [lives](#). Children are less likely to succeed in school and at home, and poverty increases the likelihood that childhood impairments will result in a lifetime of poverty. Ultimately, poverty damages a child's chance for economic security as an adult and fuels an intergenerational cycle of poverty: Children who are born in poverty are three times as likely to be poor at age 40 than children not born in [poverty](#).

Hunger also fuels costly and chronic health conditions, costing the nation many [tens of billions](#) of dollars each year. An explosion of [research](#) has provided more and more evidence that food insecurity is linked to costly chronic diseases and unfavorable medical outcomes, including diabetes, hypertension, poor mental health, iron deficiency, poor disease management, cost-related medication underuse, and increased health care utilization and costs. The [research](#) is clear that more adequate SNAP benefits improve participant food security, economic security, nutrition, health, and performance in school.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite a continued period of national economic growth and declining unemployment, tens of millions of people struggled to put food on the table. These unacceptable rates of food insecurity disproportionately hit Black and Latinx households. According to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service's most recent annual data, over 33.8 million Americans (10.4) lived in households that struggled against food insecurity, or lack of access to an affordable, nutritious diet in 2021. The most recent monthly U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey data released this June, show that food insufficiency is peaking this summer. Food insufficiency among Black households is 21.4 percent (over 1 in 5), and among Latinx households, it is 17.3 percent (1 in 6) — twice the rate of White households (8.8 percent). Across the country, there are disproportionate burdens of food insecurity along geographic lines and by income, race, and ethnicity. The disparities are real and unacceptable.

Temporary Measures Had Positive Impacts

The COVID-19 crisis entailed greater hardship and economic disruption — and exacerbated disparities. Temporary relief measures that Congress enacted helped mitigate food insecurity. Without SNAP, the situation for people would have been much worse. In addition, vital SNAP improvements included SNAP Emergency Allotments (EAs) to boost SNAP benefit adequacy, a 15 percent increase in benefits from January 2021 through September 2021, suspension of arbitrary time limits on certain unemployed and underemployed adults struggling in the labor market, easing of access for more college students, and streamlining SNAP application and certification processes to assist clients and caseworkers. Also, during this time, USDA implemented the 2018 Farm Bill directive to reevaluate the Thrifty Food Plan.

As a result of USDA's evidence-based review and revision of the [Thrifty Food Plan](#) (TFP) — based on a directive in the bipartisan 2018 Farm Bill — SNAP experienced one of the most meaningful increases in benefit amounts in decades. This update, along with SNAP COVID-19 emergency allotments, kept nearly 2.3 million people out of poverty and reduced poverty by 4.7 percent in 2021. The higher benefits from the reevaluated TFP reduced child poverty by 8.6 percent. In states that chose to keep emergency allotments until they ended, the combined effect of the reevaluated TFP and emergency allotments reduced poverty by 14.1 percent in states with emergency allotments and reduced child poverty by 21.8 percent relative to a scenario without these benefit [expansions](#). The poverty reduction from these benefit expansions was highest for Black and Latinx people, [helping reduce disparities between these groups](#).



Recommendations for Strengthening SNAP Benefit Adequacy and Equitable Access

These improvements ended with the premature termination of SNAP EAs after February 2023; others are ending now that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE) sunset in May. The changes not only impact individuals, but they also negatively impact the food supply chain. In fact, economists estimate that grocery retailers are set to [lose \\$20 billion](#) this year in sales due to the SNAP benefit reduction caused by the end of emergency allotments.

The post-PHE recovery period is far from complete, including for many households with lower incomes now that most temporary COVID-19 federal supports have ended. It has been three months and the impact has been felt deeply. According to a national survey by [Propel](#), an all-time high of 60 percent of users surveyed report not having the household essentials they typically need. Survey participants reported being forced to choose between buying food and paying their bills and falling behind on rent and utility payments. The survey also found that Black respondents were more likely to be behind on rent and utility payments than White and Latinx respondents.

Even with the 2021 updating of the TFP, in March 2023 after SNAP EAs ended, SNAP benefits averaged only about \$6 per person per day. High food price inflation, along with increased costs for other basic needs, has contributed to worsening food insecurity. While the price of groceries only went up 3 percent from 2017 to 2020, these costs have risen 25 percent since Jan 2020.

Moreover, gaps in equitable SNAP access remain — including for unemployed and underemployed adults struggling in the labor market, many college students, those with drug felony convictions making new fresh starts, residents of Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands, and many documented noncitizens who face a five-year residency bar. Moreover, changes can give SNAP customers additional access points to use their benefits, including for the purchase of hot prepared foods. The time is now to redouble efforts to address this crisis.

Accordingly, FRAC specifically, urges Congress to:

- **Calibrate SNAP benefit amounts to a more realistic food plan.** As previously proposed in the *Close the Meal Gap Act* by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Rep. Alma Adams (D-NC), substitute the Thrifty Food Plan for the USDA Low-Cost Food Plan as the basis for SNAP benefits. In addition, increase the minimum SNAP monthly benefit amount, which currently is only \$23; take into account all of a household’s excess shelter costs in determining their SNAP

benefits; and streamline states' use of a Standard Medical Expense Deduction.

These changes can ease the untenable choices too many families with children have to make between paying for food or paying for shelter and that too many older adults and people with disabilities must make between paying for food or paying for medicine.

- **End SNAP time limits as previously proposed in the *Improving Access to Nutrition Act*** by Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA). This legislation would eliminate three-month time limits on SNAP eligibility for certain working-age adults who cannot document sufficient hours of work. The current law takes food off the table of unemployed and underemployed people. The proposal is a long overdue and permanent law change that will promote food security and equity for Americans with low incomes.
- **Repeal the lifetime ban on individuals with a past felony drug conviction from receiving SNAP.** Access to nutrition is a basic human right. Moreover, access to nutrition can make a difference in the successful transition for formerly incarcerated people making new starts.
- **Improve SNAP access for college students with low incomes** by dropping the extra work requirements that full-time college students face in qualifying for SNAP. This was previously proposed in *The Enhance Access to SNAP Act (EATS Act)* by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Rep. Jimmy Gomez (D-CA). The regular SNAP student rules increase access barriers, are difficult for state agencies to administer, and are confusing for students. The [Government Accountability Office estimated](#) in 2018 — well before the pandemic — that 57 percent of college students who were likely food insecure and potentially income-eligible for SNAP (representing more than 1.8 million students) do not receive benefits.

The *EATS Act* permanent law change is warranted and long overdue. A large body of research [documents](#) that food insecurity is a significant problem among college students, especially students of color, students with low incomes, older students, and students who are parents. Food insecurity not only undermines the mental and physical health of college students, but it also undermines their short-term success and long-term financial stability, with detrimental impacts on their academic performance and ability to complete their degree.

- **Eliminate SNAP policies that disproportionately harm immigrant communities.** This includes the *Lifting Immigrant Families Through Benefits Access Restoration (LIFT the BAR) Act*, led by Reps. Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) and Tony Cárdenas (D-CA) and Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-HI), that removes harmful barriers to federal public benefits for immigrants who are lawfully residing, including removing the five-year residency waiting period in SNAP that most documented immigrant adults face.

Conclusion

Far too many families in the U.S. continue to lack reliable access to the nutrition they need, and this crisis is only deepening. SNAP is a proven benefit to the nutrition, health and well-being of the nation. The time is now to redouble efforts to address this crisis. We cannot rely on charity alone. For every one meal that food banks provide, SNAP provides nine. We look forward to working with this Task Force to ensure the outcome of a Farm Bill that strengthens and protects this vital program.