

What Is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's (SNAP) 'Shelter Cap'?

SNAP eligibility is based on a household's income and resources. Most households must meet two income tests, gross and net income, to qualify financially. The net income test for SNAP is at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty level.¹

The SNAP Excess Shelter Deduction allows households applying for SNAP to claim a variety of shelter costs² related to housing (such as rent, property taxes, repair costs) and utilities³ when determining net income.⁴

Current federal law, however, places a limit on the amount of excess shelter costs that households can claim unless one of their members is 60 or older or has a disability. In fiscal year 2023, the SNAP "shelter cap" is \$624 per month.⁵

How SNAP's Shelter Cap Exacerbates the Food and Shelter Costs Squeeze

Working-age renter households spend a significant amount of their income on rent,⁶ utilities, and other basic needs. Accessing SNAP benefits helps low-income families afford food; however, the shelter cap undercuts the adequacy of monthly SNAP food aid they receive, and ultimately, the extent to which SNAP eases the reliable food and stable shelter costs squeeze.

In 2019, 2,638,000 — 14 percent of SNAP households in the U.S. — hit the shelter cap and were shortchanged.⁷

In Vermont (27.3 percent) and California (25.9 percent), the percentage of households who hit the cap was nearly double the national rate.⁸



The Shelter Cap Reinforces Racial Inequities

Households of color accessing SNAP are disproportionately affected by the rent versus food squeeze. People of color accessing SNAP have been recently reported as more likely to pay their rent late due to financial strain than white participants.⁹


Furthermore, rent-burdened households spend a significantly high percentage of their income on rent alone. While 47.5 percent of all Americans are rent burdened,¹⁰ rental cost burdens for Black and Latinx households are higher than costs for white households in America. In 2019, 54 percent of Black households and 52 percent of Hispanic households are considered moderately or severely rent-burdened as compared to 42 percent of white and Asian households.¹¹

How Shelter Cap Widens Food Affordability Gap

The shelter cap mostly impacts working families and is especially harmful in areas with higher costs of living. Without temporary pandemic SNAP boosts, the average SNAP benefit is only \$5.40 per person per day.¹²

The shelter cap is a significant contributor to the shortfall between what households need for food and what they can afford for the month.

Real World Impact of the Shelter Cap



Mallory's family receives about \$424 per month in SNAP benefits. If the shelter cap was lifted, their SNAP would be \$577 per month. The additional SNAP benefits would help her meet her child care costs, her rent, and her family's food needs.¹³

Take Action

H.R. 4077/S. 2192, the Closing the Meal Gap Act, introduced by Rep. Alma Adams (D-NC-12) and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), would remove the cap on the SNAP shelter deduction. It would allow households to deduct their full excess shelter costs when determining net income for SNAP. Removing the cap on the SNAP shelter deduction can provide more adequate benefits. It will promote food security, health and racial equity, and well-being.

Take action by asking your members of Congress to support the Closing the Meal Gap Act.

- ¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Fiscal Year 2023 Cost-of-Living Adjustments. 8/9/2022. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/snap-fy-2023-cola-adjustments.pdf>.
- ² "The shelter deduction is for shelter costs that are more than half of the household's income after other deductions." See USDA Food and Nutrition Service (accessed 2022, August 22). "SNAP Excess Shelter Costs Deduction." <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility>.
- ³ Most states have adopted a mandatory Standard Utility Allowance to calculate utility expenses. USDA Food & Nutrition Service. State Options Report, 14th Edition. (2018, May 31). <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/snap/14-State-Options.pdf>.
- ⁴ For an explanation and sample math of how "Excess" shelter costs are defined, see: USDA Food and Nutrition Service. (2021, October 01) SNAP Eligibility. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility>.
- ⁵ The cap does not apply to households with a member aged 60 years or older, or persons with disabilities. The cap varies for some states and territories based on local cost of living. See: USDA Food and Nutrition Service (2022, August 09), SNAP – Fiscal Year 2023 Cost-of-Living Adjustments, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/snap-fy-2023-cola-adjustments.pdf>.
- ⁶ See, for example: Whitney Airgood, Alexander Hermann & Sophie Wedeen. 2022. "The Rent Eats First": Rental Housing Unaffordability in the United States, Housing Policy Debate, DOI:10.1080/10511482.2021.2020866.
- ⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2019, 2021. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/Characteristics2019.pdf>.
- ⁸ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2019, 2021. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/Characteristics2019.pdf>.
- ⁹ Propel. (2022, July) SNAP Households Survey July Results. <https://www.joinpropel.com/july-2022-covid-pulse-survey>.
- ¹⁰ Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. (2016). Renter Cost Burdens By Race and Ethnicity (1B). https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/ARH_2017_cost_burdens_by_race.
- ¹¹ Wedeen, S. (2021, January 11). Black and Hispanic Renters Face Greatest Threat of Eviction In Pandemic. Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/black-and-hispanic-renters-face-greatest-threat-eviction-pandemic>.
- ¹² Cheyne, A. and Ellen Vollinger. (2022, June 17). Calls for Action to Avert SNAP Hunger Cliff Mount. FRAC Chat. <https://frac.org/blog/calls-for-action-to-avert-snap-hunger-cliff-mount>.
- ¹³ Massachusetts Law Reform Institute. (2021, December). Sample SNAP Benefits for Working Families: The Shelter Cap vs. No Shelter Cap. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Exs-LVWOy4NRoIY5JWQii954HBM71861/view>.