

Initiatives to Make SNAP Benefits More Adequate Significantly Improve Food Security, Nutrition, and Health

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly “food stamps”) is the largest nutrition assistance program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. SNAP has a critical role in reducing food insecurity and in improving health, nutrition, and well-being.

SNAP Benefits are Inadequate

The monthly benefits provided by SNAP enhance the food-purchasing power of eligible low-income individuals and families. However, as described by many studies, including one by the Institute of Medicine, the greatest shortcoming of SNAP is that benefits for most households are not enough to get through the entire month without hunger or being forced to sacrifice nutrition quality. This limitation persists even in the face of overwhelming evidence on the gains from more adequate monthly SNAP benefits.

More Adequate SNAP Benefits Improve Food Security, Nutrition, and Health

The research is clear: more adequate SNAP benefits improve participant food security, economic security, nutrition, health, and performance in school. More specifically, each time Congress has one way or another improved the adequacy of SNAP benefits for some or all beneficiaries, follow-up research has found positive effects for affected program participants.

- The significant, temporary increase in monthly SNAP benefits from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 helped reduce food insecurity by 2.2 percentage points and reduce very low food security by 2.0 percentage points among low-income households between December 2008 (pre-ARRA) and December 2009 (about eight months post-ARRA).
- In another of the many studies showing positive effects of the ARRA boost, inpatient Medicaid cost growth significantly declined in Massachusetts after the ARRA

increase, especially among people with chronic illnesses. The cost declines were driven by reduced hospital admissions and, to a lesser extent, reduced length of stay per admission.

- The Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children demonstration project provided low-income households with children \$60 per month in SNAP-like benefits. Among families receiving SNAP before the project started, food insecurity among children was reduced by one-fourth. The demonstration project also had favorable impacts on multiple nutrition outcomes among participating children.
- Federally funded financial incentives to purchase fruits, vegetables, or other nutritious foods, which boost the overall purchasing power of SNAP benefits, have improved food security and dietary intake among SNAP participants.

Policy Solutions Exist to Improve the Adequacy of SNAP Benefits

To make SNAP a fully effective antidote to food insecurity and a far more effective boost to nutrition, health, and child development and learning, the following actions to improve SNAP benefit adequacy should be considered:

- replace the Thrifty Food Plan with the more appropriate Low-Cost Food Plan as the basis for SNAP benefits;
- eliminate the cap on the SNAP Excess Shelter Deduction;
- raise the minimum SNAP benefit; and
- authorize a SNAP Standard Excess Medical Deduction for persons who are elderly or have disabilities.

The full white paper, available at www.frac.org, briefly analyzes why SNAP benefits are inadequate, reviews the body of research showing positive effects from more adequate SNAP benefits, and concludes with some of the key policy solutions that can improve benefit adequacy.