



# Food (In)Security: Issues and Answers





## About This Issue Guide

Food and nutrition insecurity is a common public problem throughout the United States. This issue guide is designed to help citizens, stakeholders, and public officials understand the causes and consequences of food insecurity. Moreover, this issue guide details three specific policy options that can reduce food insecurity here and now.

According to the USDA, food insecurity is defined as "...a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life." Common causes leading to food insecurity

are poverty, unemployment, low income, chronic health conditions, lack of affordable housing, lack of access to healthcare, and racial discrimination. The major effects of these causes include serious health issues, financial anxiety in deciding between buying food or paying rent and harmful outcomes to a child's well-being both physically and mentally. Because food and nutrition insecurity play a major role in the overall health of the nation it is a serious public issue that needs to be addressed.

# ◆ Food (In)Security: Answers and Solutions

Food policy is not simple. There are many questions that policymakers have to ask when drafting, passing, and implementing policies that seek to address food insecurity.

- How much does (and should) the government spend?
- What level of government bears the cost of the program?
- Are there alternatives to these policies and what are the trade-offs?
- What is the effectiveness and efficacy of providing nutrition assistance?

The largest federal social welfare policy, SNAP, attempts to answers those questions and ameliorate food insecurity





# What is the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program?

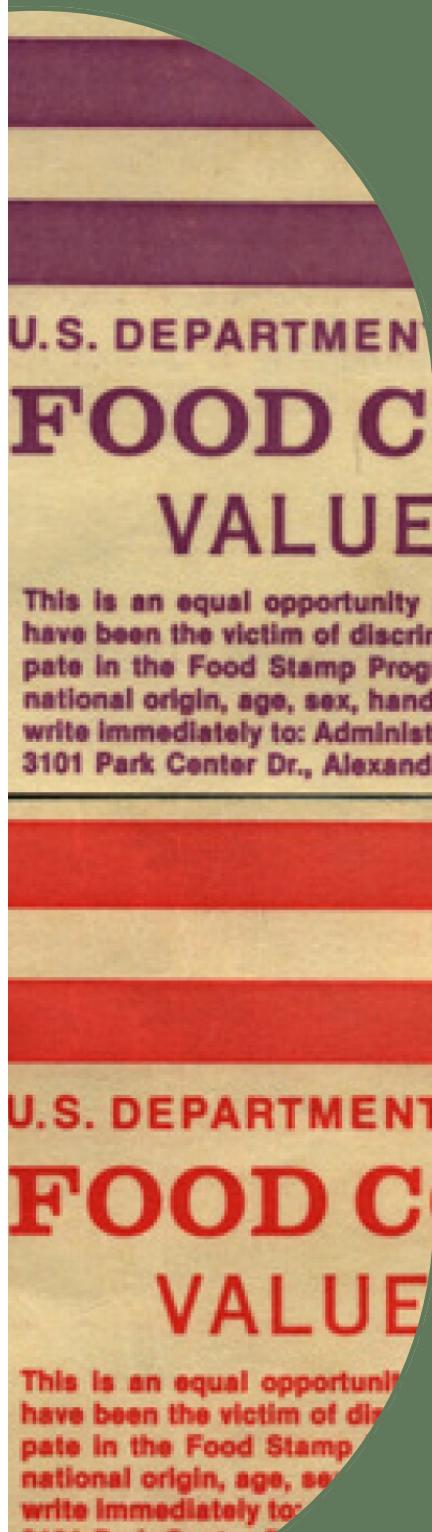
SNAP, or the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, is a federal welfare program designed to assist low-income households, elderly adults, those with disabilities, and other fixed income individuals.

The program works by supplying those in need with monthly funds to purchase food. Although the cost assistance is covered by the federal government, the administrative portion of the program is funded by the states.

Insight: 41% of households that participate in SNAP have children



# Why is SNAP ♦ relevant?



SNAP is a federal welfare program designed to assist low-income households, elderly adults, those with disabilities, and other fixed income individuals.

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History Lesson:  
SNAP -- formerly referred to as Food Stamps -- was originally created in 1939



## Option 1: SNAP as it currently stands

Under the Agricultural Act of 2014, or the *Farm Bill*, the SNAP program is re-evaluated every five years. Funds and resources can be redirected based on the needs of the population in each state. However, certain state legislatures provide more benefits to their state citizens while others provide less.

The Farm Bill enabled more individuals to access the benefits of the SNAP program with a better distribution of funds.

The EBT form of exchange has been introduced to better track and regulate the purchasing of food and products. This system provides individuals with a "debit card" form of payment.

With the introduction of EBT, more businesses are able to accept the form of exchange, thus increasing accessibility for participants

Fact:  
The SNAP program produces about \$5.5B in administrative costs





# Trade-Offs and Downsides of the Status Quo

As a welfare program, SNAP receives both positive and negative attention from the public

- Positive: Higher rate of benefit allocation based on various factors. Healthier food options are easily accessible.  
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- Negative: Funds should not be allocated to only certain members of the population. Limitations on purchasable items for participants.

The SNAP-Ed program was introduced to encourage the purchasing of healthier food options by making the products more accessible. This program is regulated by the Food & Drug Administration (FDA). This program prevents participants from purchasing "unhealthy" food.

Fact: SNAP recipients are more likely to experience obesity as "unhealthy" food is cheapest





## Option 2: Modernize the Thrifty Food Plan

The adequacy of benefit levels has been studied and deliberated since the implementation of the program. The last revision of the Thrifty Food Plan was in 2021 (and 2006 before that!)

As it stands, the current level of benefits for SNAP participants is too low. Empirically, this has been studied at the individual and programmatic level. Qualitatively, program participants, too, feel that benefit levels are too little to adequately purchase healthy meals.

In order to purchase nutritious meals, the benefit that participants receive per month must

**Fact:** The average monthly benefit for a single participant in SNAP is \$195



## ◆ Option 2: Modernize the Thrifty Food Plan

"31% of  
participants still  
report food  
insecurity"

The goal of any food program is to adequately provide supplemental nutrition to program participants as effectively and equitably as possible. But what if the current level of benefits are to austere?

This option contends that the way in which benefit levels are determined -- the Thrifty Food Plan -- should be modernized to better align with contemporary consumption patterns, regional differences in food prices and the current cost of purchasing healthy, nutritious, and available foods.

Primarily, there are two ways in which the SNAP program can be modernized to better fit the needs of program participants.

- Increase the benefit levels for SNAP participants
- Split the monthly benefit into two payments in order to avoid the "SNAP Cycle"

## ♦ Option 2: Increase Monthly Benefits

A \$60 increase per month per child contributed to modest improvements in childhood nutrition\*

One of the main barrier to success for SNAP is "inadequate benefit levels" and the "high cost of nutrient-rich foods." Further research identifies that dietary quality is held back by the high cost of food.

But what if benefits were increase across the board? There is demonstrative evidence that an increase to participant benefits leads to:

- Decreases in instances of "food insecurity"
- Decreases in food pantry visits
- Higher test scores
- Decreases in crime

While the goal of the program is to "increase food security and reduce hunger", there are other

societal benefits that are experienced when program participants are adequate access to affordable, nutritious food.

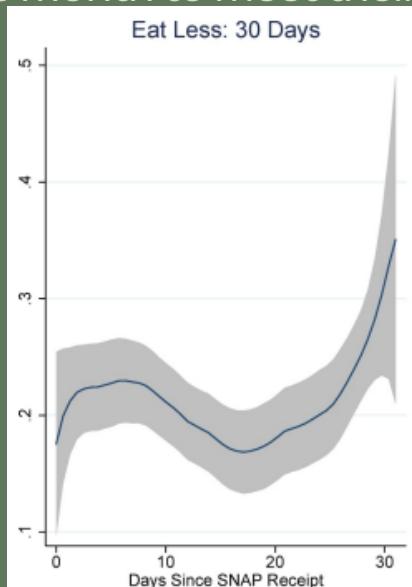
## ◆ Option 2: Split Benefits into Two Payments

One way in which program administrators could increase the purchasing power of SNAP participants without increasing benefit levels per se is by simply splitting benefits into two payments throughout the month.

Typically, benefits are proffered at the beginning of the month on participants' EBT cards. There is evidence that through the first half of the month, food insecurity decreases until around the 15th. Slowly, then all at once, food insecurity increases until the next benefit payment. This is known as the SNAP Cycle.

By splitting the benefits into two payments -- on the first of the month, the other on the 15th --

participants can better portion their spending throughout the month to meet their needs.



Source: CA Gregory,  
Snap Timing and Food Insecurity

# Trade-Offs and Downsides of Modernizing the TFP



While the administration of SNAP is very efficient (roughly 95% of funding goes directly towards nutrition payments), any increase in funding would necessarily come from the federal government. In a highly-polarized environment, such as Congress, this could prove difficult.

Additionally, benefits are geographically diffuse as well which means that those aid dollars would have to be nuanced to differences in regional economies. State implementation agencies would have to administer the additional aid. Fears of inflation, administrative bloat, and the federal deficit would all have to be considered in this case.

Fact: Every \$1 in spending on SNAP is associated with a \$1.5 "multiplier" increase in GDP



## ◆ Option 3: Increase the use of

### Community- Supported Agriculture

CSA's, or Community Supported Agriculture, is "a mutually beneficial relationship between producer and customer or "shareholder" in which both share in the bounty and risk of sustainable agriculture"

The advantages of CSAs:

- provides a local, fresh, and nutritional option for food
- provide diverse types of produce that are customizable to the stakeholders
- sets consistent, reliable times in which food is coming from



# Trade-Offs and ♦ Downside of CSAs

## Community Supported Agriculture Downsides:

- dependability of harvest
  - drought, flooding, or insect infestation
- transportation
  - adequate and reliable access to the farm to pick-up the produce
- limited in the number of stakeholders they take on
  - depending on that years crop production, size of the farm, or overall availability of staff

Fact: As of 2012, there were close to 13,000 registered CSA's across the US with 41 in California.



# Summary



There are many options and opportunities to address food and nutrition insecurity.

This issue guide has detailed three ways: SNAP; Modernizing the TFP; and increasing the usage of CSAs. However, nutrition policy is not simple and there are always trade-offs, particularly in a hyper-polarized political environment that we are faced with.

## Option

**SNAP**

**Modernize the Thrifty Food Plan**

**Increase CSA Usage**

## Trade-Off

Benefits are not adequate

Expensive and partisan;  
polarization may make implementation difficult

Dependent on weather;  
agriculture, transportation