



# The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) A Vital Resource for Children, Youth, and Families

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Food is a foundational need and a basic human right. All children, youth, and families deserve to have the nutrition they need to be healthy and lead fulfilling lives. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, helps families put food on the table by providing monthly benefits that individuals and families can use to buy groceries. As the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) has heard in our work with families and communities, SNAP plays a critical role fighting hunger and malnutrition and promoting economic wellbeing. Rachelle, a mother in North Carolina who works full time in child care while raising her five-year old, told us that SNAP helps her budget, enabling her to feel secure that she will be able to put food on the table and pay for other household essentials, even as prices rise. As Rachelle explained, SNAP is “definitely helpful. Food [cost] seems like it’s getting higher and higher each time I go to the grocery store. And so being able to use the food stamps to purchase what we couldn’t daily, that’s more money I have to put towards the other bills that are harder to pay, like insurance and gas.”

In 2021, SNAP reached 41.5 million people in an average month,



providing an average benefit of about \$218 per person per month.

This brief highlights the experiences of children, youth, and families with SNAP, and offers recommendations for improving SNAP so it can more effectively meet families’ needs moving forward. SNAP has the power to advance racial and economic justice. To do so it must be responsive to the needs of families and communities who have been historically excluded from economic supports and systematically harmed by public policy and stereotyped as undeserving—including youth and families impacted by child protective services, who may come to the attention of an agency because of lack of food, and Black, Latinx/e, Indigenous, and immigrant families. This brief shares the experiences of youth and

families who CSSP has worked with and interviewed, so they can inform policymakers’ efforts to improve SNAP.



## SNAP IS A CRITICAL RESOURCE FOR YOUTH AND FAMILIES

CSSP's work directly with youth and families reinforces [decades of research](#) documenting how SNAP promotes [child and family well-being](#).

→ For families, SNAP can help lift some of the weight off parents and caregivers as they struggle to feed growing children. As Joy, a mother of two in Michigan, told CSSP, “Groceries, it’s like a whole thing. I don’t know if it’s because of the pandemic everything is more expensive, or my kids are just eating more. I think it’s a combination of both because it just seems like food in my house is just always disappearing. I don’t know where it goes, but it’s just, I buy it and then it disappears.” When parents have to worry about how they are going to find food for the next meal, the stress can be all-consuming, but SNAP can reduce that stress— helping families weather the unexpected and promoting economic stability. As Lisa, a mother in Southern California, told CSSP “With food stamps? It’s like a lot of help. ...they have this thing now with Amazon where you get the groceries delivered to your house. So that’s an advantage, too. Because recently my car broke down and I didn’t have any way to fix it.”

In 2021, SNAP lifted 2.8 million people out of poverty...



...including almost 900 thousand children.

→ For youth and young adults, SNAP provides some security and stability as they transition to adulthood and pursue their goals. This support is especially critical for young people who age out of foster care and are disproportionately likely to struggle to afford food, as they often lose access to social services and economic supports when they leave foster care. One youth who had aged out of foster care told CSSP, “I had no support...I just really feel like I was just thrown in an ocean, and I was going to sink or swim. So that’s what I’ve been doing. I just been swimming.” SNAP can be a [critical resource for young people](#), helping them buy food and meet their needs as they set out on their own, further their education, embark on their careers, and form their own families.

While SNAP provides critical support, it can and should be more responsive to the needs of children, youth, and families, so that it can become a more powerful tool to promote well-being and advance racial and economic justice in the future.

## SNAP SHOULD BE MORE RESPONSIVE TO PEOPLE’S NEEDS MOVING FORWARD

As CSSP has learned from our work with families and communities, SNAP can do even more to help people meet their needs and pursue their goals. To improve SNAP moving forward, policymakers should:

**Increase benefit levels.** SNAP is helpful to the individuals and families who receive it, but benefits [typically run out before the end of the month](#), leaving people scrambling to feed their families while they wait for the next month’s benefits. As Sofia, a parent of three in California explains, “we try to live a plant based diet, but...it’s expensive. So I run out of my food stamps pretty fast... it’s tough... I don’t think it’s enough for any family, you’ve got to just make it work.” For some families this changed during the pandemic, when states issued additional “[emergency allotments](#)” for SNAP, significantly increasing SNAP benefits. The increased SNAP benefits were a game changer, Jamila, a mother living in North Carolina explained at the time: “I think with that extra money that they give, it definitely has met my needs. Before, when I was just getting that first installment, it was enough to pay for our groceries for the first half of the month.... you still have to pay for stuff out of your pocket.” Since the end of the emergency allotments, as SNAP benefits have decreased

for families, [food insufficiency has increased](#). Policymakers should permanently increase SNAP benefits, so that families can afford the healthy food they need at all times.

**Repeal the three-month time limit for adults.** Many adults without children living with them need to meet additional work reporting requirements in order to receive SNAP—if they do not, they are limited to receiving the benefit for three months out of every three years. Work reporting requirements are a [failed policy](#)—they do not improve employment prospects but rather take away much-needed assistance from children, youth, and families. In SNAP, [research](#) has clearly shown that work reporting requirements threaten people’s health and well-being, and can be particularly difficult to meet for young people, including youth who have experienced foster care, students, kinship caregivers, and parents who do not have custody of their children but may have significant caregiving responsibilities. For example Evan, a father in Michigan, turned to SNAP to help put food on the table, but was thwarted by work reporting requirements. Evan was already working at the time he applied, but he nonetheless went through a “four-month span where every week... I had to turn in a check stub, or proof of verification to work, they were asking for things all the way back to 2018...It got overwhelming.” Ultimately, the stress wore Evan down and he gave up trying to get the support he needed. Work reporting requirements undermine the central purpose of SNAP, which is to improve the nutrition and economic security of individuals and families, and they should be repealed.

**Restore access to immigrant families.** Service providers who work with immigrant families who have recently arrived in the United States have told CSSP that “food is [their] number one” need. But since 1996, [federal law has limited immigrants’ eligibility](#) for SNAP, including by requiring lawful permanent residents to wait five years before accessing benefits. Mixed immigration status families where children born in the US are eligible for SNAP, but older relatives are not, are [less likely to access](#) the critical support—perhaps out of fear or confusion about eligibility. As one caseworker at an immigrant-serving community-based organization told CSSP, she regularly tells the families she works with “it’s for the kids, you know like still food is really expensive so if this help is available to them,” they should take it. But many families she works with “don’t want to risk anything,” concerned that accessing SNAP might impact their ability to [adjust their immigration status](#) or swayed by misinformation prevalent in their communities. Policymakers should lift all immigration status eligibility restrictions to SNAP, so that everyone who needs it is eligible for the benefit, and agency staff and community based organizations can clearly communicate eligibility to immigrant communities.

**Lift the ban on hot food.** SNAP participants are [not allowed](#) to use their benefits to purchase hot meals, with limited exceptions. But for many families, preparing a meal from scratch may not be possible. Families who are homeless and living in a hotel room may not have access to a kitchen. People with [disabilities and chronic health conditions](#) may not be able to cook every night. Parents and caregivers who are busy raising children and working long hours may not have time to make a hot meal. As Amara, a mother in North Carolina, explained: “Really I understand the whole idea [with the hot meal ban in SNAP] is for families to go home and cook, but sometimes it’s between McDonald’s or having a healthy option to pick up a hot fresh chicken or sides to bring home when you don’t have the time between school, home, and work.” Policymakers should lift the hot meal ban in SNAP.

A more responsive SNAP program can ensure that moving forward, all children, youth, and families have the food they need to thrive.

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