



DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

THE JUSTICE
COLLABORATIVE
INSTITUTE

THE GOVERNMENT MUST INCREASE SNAP BENEFITS AND ELIGIBILITY TO AVOID A NATIONAL FOOD EMERGENCY

Andrea Freeman *Associate Professor, University of
Hawaii William S. Richardson School of Law*

May 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The coronavirus pandemic has created a global food security crisis that threatens to eclipse the disease itself. A recent survey by the Brookings Institution revealed unprecedented numbers of children going hungry in the United States. In late April, close to one in five households with young children did not have enough food for their kids, a rate three times higher than at any point during the 2008 recession.

One of the government's band-aid solutions was to allot funds to the Department of Agriculture (USDA) to buy food from farmers to give to food banks. This ad hoc measure has proven clumsy and inefficient. Millions of desperate, newly-unemployed people, from Egg Harbor, New Jersey, to Honolulu, Hawaii, wait in miles-long lines to receive food that is often inadequate, low-quality, and unhealthy.

The only real solution to rampant food insecurity is a more generous and flexible food assistance program. Democrats reintroduced legislation in April that would expand the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as “food stamps,” to stave off the hunger awaiting many families. Unlike food banks, SNAP uses existing infrastructures to get food to people quickly and effectively. As an anti-hunger program, SNAP works.

The good news is that voters know this. A majority of Democrats and Republicans alike support increasing the amount of SNAP benefits and making them available to more people. Voters are in favor of enlarging a tried and true program to prevent an unprecedented hunger epidemic.

Polling by Data for Progress found that 65% of all respondents—including 65% of people who

identify as Republican—support increased federal funding for SNAP as a response to COVID-19. Only 7% of those polled strongly oppose such an increase.

Additionally, 60% of all respondents—including 60% of people who identify as Republicans—support relaxing SNAP's work requirements. Only 6% of respondents strongly oppose such a step.

The History of SNAP

Even before the current pandemic, many people in America went hungry. In 2018, over 10 percent of US households lacked steady access to “enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members,” according to a USDA report.

While SNAP benefits can and do help the people who receive them, the program requires key reforms. As it is, thousands fall through the cracks of US food policy's excessive bureaucracy, unrealistic budget, and punitive conditions.

SNAP's earliest incarnation was the 1939 Food Stamp Program, tasked with the dual objectives of supporting US agriculture and relieving hunger. Program participants purchased orange food stamps to spend on any food they wanted. Then, for every dollar of orange stamps they bought, they received fifty cents' worth of blue stamps, which they could use only to buy surplus foods—subsidized agricultural products left over when supply exceeded consumer demand. The government ended the program in 1943 due to a decrease in commodity surpluses and an increase in employment.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy responded to rising levels of food insecurity with a new food stamp pilot program. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson officially reinstated food assistance in the Food Stamp Act as part of his “War on Poverty.” In 1977, the Food and Agriculture Act eliminated the requirement that people purchase food stamps, making it easier for individuals without cash on hand to use them. The 1977 Act also expanded program access to tribes while restricting student eligibility. Even before adding the word “supplemental” to the program’s title, the USDA intended food stamps to cover some, but not all, monthly food expenses.

By 2004, all states completed a switch from food stamps or coupons to a debit card. SNAP users could use Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards only to purchase specific foods from eligible vendors. The USDA calculated that SNAP would cover approximately two-thirds of monthly food expenses. Program participation soared, peaking in 2013. But work requirements created significant barriers to accessing SNAP. They disproportionately barred people of color from joining the program or forced them into premature exits, plunging them back into food insecurity. Nonetheless, in 2019, the Trump administration sought even more stringent work requirement rules that would have blocked 700,000 to 1.3 million additional people from receiving SNAP benefits. A federal court in the District of Columbia issued a temporary injunction stopping the measures from taking effect on April 1, 2020, as planned. The Trump administration agreed to hold off on challenging the court order for now. It also waived work requirements for the duration of the coronavirus emergency.

Now is the time to scale up hunger relief through SNAP. The government’s haphazard response to growing food insecurity exposes our precarious social safety net and the structural limitations of

the existing food assistance system. While many families have turned to overburdened food banks for temporary relief, expanding SNAP will help them more. SNAP allows people to shop in their local grocery stores and purchase the foods their families want, accommodating their dietary needs and cultural preferences, while preserving their dignity and agency.

The government must expand SNAP benefits

The amount that SNAP provides is a pittance: in 2018, on average, individuals got \$127 per month, or \$1.39 per meal. Most households that receive SNAP run out before the end of the month. Food allowances are low because, with a few exceptions, they do not adjust to the cost of living in different locations. Even more importantly, SNAP benefits have never reflected the reality that many households depend on the program to meet all their food needs. Under the “Thrifty Plan” from the chart that determines benefit amounts, SNAP gives adult men \$44 a week. Even assuming that SNAP users spend 30% of their income on food, this amount seems ridiculously low. And now, millions more Americans than before have no income.

SNAP allowances also need to be higher so that people can afford to buy healthy food. SNAP benefits are not even enough to buy the foods recommended in the federal Dietary Guidelines published by the USDA (with the Department of Health and Human Services). This means that SNAP recipients must rely primarily on processed, packaged, low nutrition foods to stave off hunger, instead of more expensive, unsubsidized but nourishing fruits and vegetables.

A healthy diet is a matter of life and death. In 2017, poor nutrition surpassed all other causes of preventable deaths, including smoking and

car accidents. Now, food-related conditions, including obesity, type II diabetes, and high blood pressure, are underlying risk factors for the most serious and deadliest cases of coronavirus. These conditions are especially prevalent in people of color and children.

Even before the pandemic, almost half of the 38 million Americans who received SNAP were children. Now, young people are experiencing food insecurity at higher levels than at any other time in the modern era. Before the coronavirus crisis forced school closures, children living in households that receive SNAP consumed most of their daily calories at school through the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs. Now, despite efforts in many school districts to continue handing out meals, with no capacity to deliver, they cannot reach the most vulnerable students. Without school meals, households have to stretch their meagre SNAP budget to feed more family members.

Decisions the administration makes about SNAP now have the potential to exacerbate or lessen racial inequality. People of color suffer from health conditions related to poor nutrition at higher rates than whites. This fact likely contributes to the racial disparities in coronavirus-related deaths. As states begin to open up despite the continued spread of the disease, maintaining strength through healthy diets will be more important than ever.

A few key changes to SNAP can make an important dent in the food security, health, and economic crises. Online food delivery and prepared food, traditionally excluded from the program, are now central to its ability to feed households. Online food delivery allows SNAP users to avoid in-person shopping. Venturing out to stores is particularly hazardous for the many SNAP recipients who have underlying conditions that make them more vulnerable to the worst

effects of coronavirus. Many SNAP users also lack access to transportation and other necessary resources to search for basic foods that may be missing from their local grocers. For those who live in food deserts or food swamps, online food delivery will expand their access to a range of food options.

All SNAP users should be able to use their EBT card at restaurants. Three states already allow houseless, elderly, and disabled recipients to do this. Expanding this rule to all states and program participants (through the proposed SNAP CARRY Act) will support the struggling restaurant industry. It will also provide hot, nutritious meals to recipients who have lost their homes, gas, or electricity, are sick, or are juggling too many responsibilities to devote time to cooking.

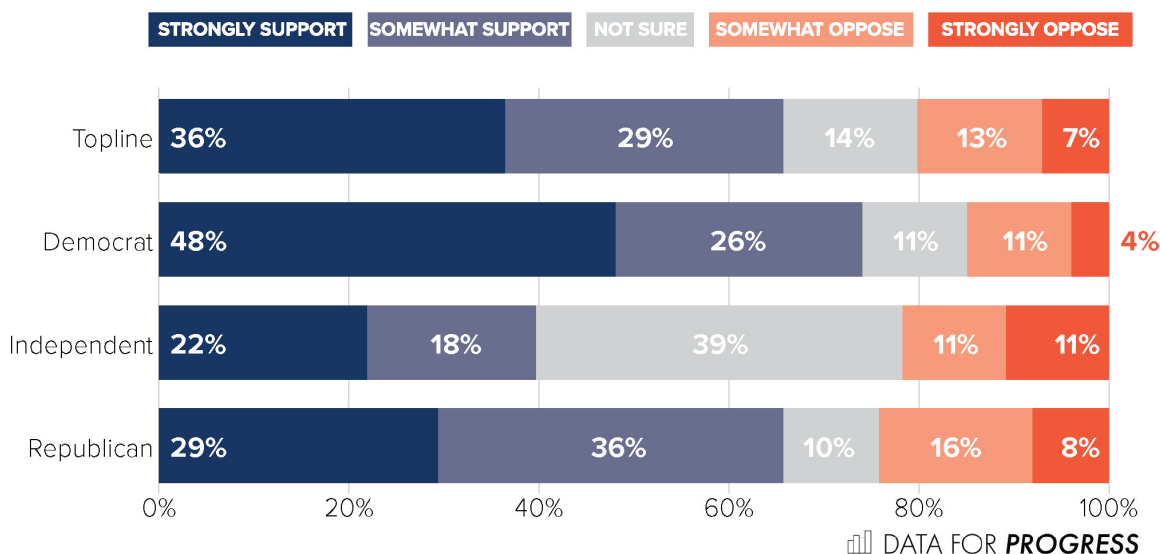
The stimulus bills passed by Congress in response to the pandemic allocate funding for emergency increases in SNAP benefits but fail on several counts. They exclude nearly 40 percent of SNAP users from receiving any of the emergency funds; they require state-by-state action that will result in inconsistent relief; and they are limited to the duration of the federal public health emergency declaration rather than what experts predict will be a much longer period of severe economic hardship.

Increasing SNAP benefits for all recipients will not just save lives and improve health, it will boost the economy. The benefits have a multiplier effect—every \$1 given to households can generate as much as \$2 spent. A \$1 billion increase in benefits lifts the GDP by \$154 billion, funds 13,560 new jobs, and boosts farm income by \$32 billion. Recipients spend the money right away, injecting it directly into the ailing food production and distribution sectors. History proves that this is the right solution. When Congress increased SNAP benefits by 14% in response to the 2008 Depression, food security rose and Medicaid costs fell.

There is an urgent need for adequate food assistance, reflected in the endorsement of nearly two-thirds of voters, Democrats and Republicans

alike. Voters, when polled, support increased funding for SNAP.

Do you support or oppose the federal government increasing funding for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) as a response to COVID-19?



The government must expand SNAP eligibility

SNAP’s onerous work requirements keep people from applying for the program and force others out of it when they cannot comply. Indefinitely lifting these work requirements is the only way to ensure that people will get enough to eat in the uncertain future.

Work requirements are a relatively new aspect of SNAP. In 1996, as part of broad welfare-to-work reform, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PROWRA) limited the benefits period for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) who do not comply with unrealistic work requirements. These rules affect approximately 7% of SNAP recipients. ABAWDs between 18 and 49 years old can only get SNAP for three months out of every three years unless they work or attend job training at least twenty

hours a week. Many SNAP users work but still cannot meet the requirements.

These harsh conditions reflect the popular but mistaken belief that welfare is a windfall to the undeserving poor, subject to rampant fraud. Leaders on the right have historically supported work requirements based on a conviction that people should not receive hand-outs from the government. Racial tropes such as the Welfare Queen drive public perception of social assistance. Stereotypes that cast people of color as lazy or criminal hide the structural elements of poverty and racism that make it difficult for many people to earn enough money to support themselves and feed their families. At first glance, work requirements appear effective because they reduce the number of SNAP participants. But they do not lift people out of poverty. Instead, they keep more people hungry. They also erect an unequal barrier to food assistance for people of color.

Emergency measures temporarily paused work requirements in response to COVID-19. That suspension should continue once we are on the other side of the pandemic, both because of the lasting effects this crisis will have on the economy and because SNAP work requirements create more problems than they solve.

Immigrants, both documented and undocumented, should have full access to SNAP benefits. Under current rules, immigrants with legal status, such as a work visa, can apply, but some states make this process overly complicated. There is also confusion surrounding the new public charge rule that bars immigrants from coming to the US if they are likely to rely on government benefits. Immigrants who are here temporarily may fear that if they use SNAP, they will never be able to return. They may have similar worries about family members that they hope will join them here in the future.

Other factors that discourage immigrants from applying for SNAP are language barriers, fear of exposing an undocumented family member, and confusion about eligibility. Immigrants often have no other access to social assistance or economic relief and are therefore particularly vulnerable to hunger. They should be able to access SNAP without disclosing their immigration status.

SNAP benefits should also universally extend to people with criminal records. Nearly 91% of people released from prison are food insecure; 37% reported going without food for at least one full day in the previous month. In addition to adding work requirements, the 1996 PROWRA disqualified individuals convicted of drug-related federal or state offenses from SNAP. But some states rejected or modified this rule. Despite the existence of racial inequalities in conviction and incarceration rates for drug crimes since the War on Drugs began in the 1970s, it took the opioid epidemic, generally considered to be a problem among suburban whites, to reach near consensus

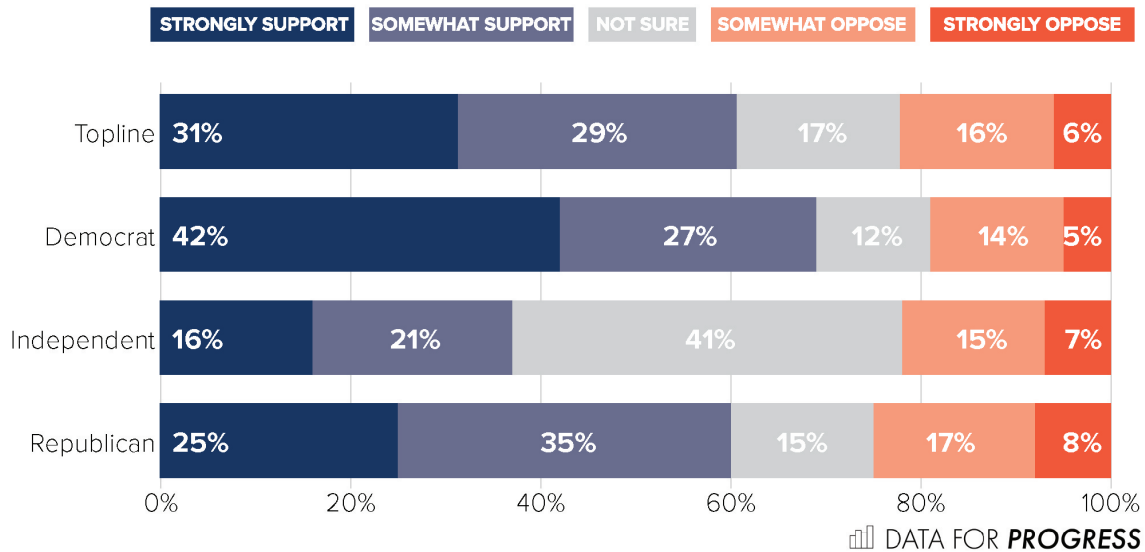
among states on the rule's unfairness. Now, every state but South Carolina has eased the lifetime ban on SNAP eligibility based on drug-related convictions. But the lack of uniformity among states has created a patchwork of inconsistent rules that can confuse and sometimes discriminate against potential SNAP users.

For example, Michigan permanently bars individuals with two or more felony drug convictions from receiving SNAP benefits. The state temporarily suspends SNAP eligibility for people who violate their terms of probation or parole (such as failing to meet with a parole officer or missing a phone call). These rules disproportionately harm Black households. Black people make up 50% of Michigan's prison population but only 14% of Michigan residents. This overrepresentation reflects racism in the criminal justice system that has led to disproportionate incarceration of Blacks for drug crimes.

Some states allow people with criminal records or a history of arrests for drug crimes to receive SNAP if they agree to periodic drug testing or other treatment. These conditions can be impractical or dangerous during social distancing. Work requirements also restrict access to SNAP for people with criminal records, who are disproportionately people of color, because many employers do not hire people with felony convictions. People with criminal records are therefore more likely to be unemployed and houseless, making SNAP benefits even more important for them.

SNAP benefits must be freely available to everyone who needs food assistance. This means relaxing the rules that have disqualified too many people, often in a racially imbalanced way. A majority of voters, when surveyed, support loosening the restrictions on who is eligible to receive SNAP benefits.

Do you support or oppose the federal government relaxing the work requirements that are a part of the SNAP as a response to COVID-19?



CONCLUSION

SNAP is not a perfect program, but it provides an essential lifeline to households in need. Eliminating barriers to entry and raising dollar amounts to levels that allow every member of a household to eat nutritious meals are necessary to fight the economic and health ravages of coronavirus. A better SNAP program will take the pressure off food banks, which currently suffer from supply chain issues and lack of volunteers.

Polling shows that a majority of voters of both parties support these policy changes. An improved SNAP program will feed hungry people and boost local economies. Government leaders should reform SNAP to make adequate amounts of nutritious food accessible to all.

METHODOLOGY

From May 8, 2020 to May 9, 2020, Data for Progress conducted a survey of 1235 likely voters nationally using web panel respondents. Data For Progress weighted the sample to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, urbanicity, race, and voting history. It conducted the survey in English. The margin of error is ± 2.7 percent.