

# Food Stamp Policy is Failing. Here's Why.

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Nearly 12% of Americans struggle to put food on the table.<sup>1</sup> The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly referred to as food stamps, has played a significant role in reducing hunger and the effects of inequality in America. In 2017, SNAP provided aid to 42 million Americans, with  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the beneficiaries being elderly, caring for children, or being disabled.<sup>2,3,4</sup> The program has been threatened by Republican members of Congress whose plan would put millions of Americans in a state of food scarcity by mandating stricter work hour requirements. This initiative is misguided since an expansion of the program, rather than a reduction, is needed to improve the nation's health, economy and efficiency of tax-payer spending. This article will dive deeper into the comparison between current policy and the ideal expansion, explaining how the latter is necessary for many in the working class to survive.

In 2018, the House narrowly passed a revision of SNAP that would prevent 2 million Americans from accessing the benefits of food stamps. While work requirements already exist and mandate that people under the age of 50 without children work 80 hours a month or participate in job training in order to be eligible for benefits, the House revised the bill to increase the number of hours a person must work to maintain eligibility.<sup>5</sup> This change may seem appropriate and even beneficial since longer work hours would decrease one's need for monetary support, but in reality, it disadvantages the rural poor. Many people in rural areas who use food stamps have limited access to job opportunities.<sup>5</sup> Searching for jobs outside of these communities can be challenging since many rural areas that rely heavily on SNAP lack reliable internet access. Moreover, this new bill makes people log their work hours electronically which is not feasible for the same reason.<sup>5</sup> Although this version of the farm bill was eventually overridden by the Senate, it shows how a large portion of the country is pushing for regressive change rather than working to expand and improve the legislation that positively impacts so many.

Instead of decreasing the spending on food stamps, Congress should be expanding the program. With an average of only \$1.40 to spend per person on each meal, 13% of the population using SNAP were still unable to budget their allowance to last all month.<sup>6</sup> Another 13% reported that they could not afford to buy balanced meals.<sup>6</sup> Another 13% reported that they could not afford to buy balanced meals (6). Aside from the serious moral obligation to provide equal opportunity for a healthy life to all American citizens, the lack of investment in low income communities' health has contributed to higher rates of chronic illnesses. In families that earn \$35,000 or less, 14% of adults experience heart disease, 4% experience stroke and 29% have hypertension. In households with incomes of \$100,000 or higher, only 10% of adults have heart disease, 1% suffer from strokes and 22% have hypertension.<sup>7</sup> In addition, people living below the poverty line are two times more likely to have diabetes compared to those who live 400% above the federal poverty line.<sup>8</sup> A poor diet has been shown to increase the risk of these diseases, so it is not surprising that the population that struggles to buy nutritious foods is less healthy.<sup>9,10</sup>

Treating chronic illnesses is expensive. A patient with diabetes costs almost \$8,000 more per year to treat than a patient without diabetes, and this financial burden falls upon society, since people with incomes low enough to qualify for SNAP are also likely to qualify for Medicaid.<sup>11,12</sup> Furthermore, a person's decrease in productivity due to chronic illnesses also has a negative impact on society. For example, on average a business loses \$203, \$230, \$324, and \$328 annually from workers who suffer from obesity, hypertension, diabetes and heart disease, respectively.<sup>13</sup> Providing more resources to these vulnerable communities to buy healthier foods is one way to combat the chronic illnesses that have become so prevalent and cost so much.

As with other ‘entitlement reform’ efforts, advocates of tightening eligibility requirements point to fraud, waste, and inefficiencies in administration to legitimize their efforts. In reality, only one cent for every dollar spent on the program is used fraudulently.<sup>14</sup> While fraud is an issue that needs to be solved, it is no reason to weaken the program. Even with the fraud that occurs, SNAP has been shown to strengthen weak economies: during the economic downturn of 2008, every dollar invested in the program expanded the economy by \$1.70.<sup>15</sup> At the peak of the recession in 2009, \$50 billion were spent in local stores, which generated \$85 billion in the local economy even though the overall economy was struggling.<sup>15</sup> Even in stronger economies, SNAP has a positive impact. About 80% of SNAP authorized retailers are small businesses that benefit from the added revenue. This benefit is especially marked for small businesses in economically deprived areas, where an even larger percentage of sales is paid for by food stamps.<sup>15</sup> The retail food industry is not the only one benefitting from SNAP. Food stamps provide low income families with more purchasing power, which enables them to buy other essentials like diapers and medications.<sup>15</sup>

Food stamps have become an essential safety net for millions of Americans, with 30% of the population utilizing the program for only one year and 56% of the population stopping after 3 years.<sup>16</sup> Two-thirds of the Americans utilizing this program are disabled, elderly, or caring for children so this legislation also serves as a form of social equity, limiting the stress of obtaining food.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the program is still too limiting. Many Americans have food insecurity and can’t afford healthy options. This shows that the current program still does not completely address those in need and certain subpopulations are still suffering.<sup>17</sup> For these reasons, making the eligibility requirements more strict is not acceptable. America should be expanding this program so that no one struggles to afford food.

## About the Author

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