

## THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Education Program (SNAP-Ed) are two critical programs to combatting food insecurity for millions of children and families. With Congress soon approaching the process of reauthorizing SNAP and SNAP-Ed (which were last authorized in 2014) through the Farm Bill, budget proposals from the White House and House of Representatives have suggested drastically reducing funding and access to these crucial programs. The stakes are incredibly high, as these programs provide food, improve nutritional outcomes, and increase economic security for millions of low-income children nationwide.

## SNAP FIGHTS CHILD FOOD INSECURITY

Though down from its peak during the recession, child food insecurity is a persistent problem in America. In 2016, 17.5 percent of children (nearly 13 million) in the United States were food insecure<sup>1</sup>, meaning they lacked consistent access to enough healthy food to lead a productive life. Households with children continue to experience food insecurity at significantly higher rates than the general population.

**Without steady access to healthy food, children suffer adverse consequences to health, learning, and development, including:**

- A higher likelihood **poor health** and **frequent hospitalizations**,<sup>2</sup> **mental health symptoms** such as depression and anxiety,<sup>3</sup> and hyperactivity.<sup>4</sup>
- Less healthful food environments that may promote **obesity**.<sup>5</sup>
- **Adverse educational outcomes**<sup>6</sup>, such as lower math and reading skills, higher rates of absenteeism, and tardiness

**SNAP mitigates the threat of food insecurity by providing low-income households with monthly funds specifically designated for food purchases.** Participating individuals include low-income adults, people with disabilities, and seniors. Given their higher prevalence of food insecurity, however, **children are SNAP's greatest beneficiaries:**

- **Children made up nearly half (44 percent) of SNAP beneficiaries** in 2015, meaning that nearly 20 million children relied on the program to access food that year.<sup>7</sup>
- **Nearly half of every SNAP dollar goes to hungry children**<sup>8</sup>, while households with children receive **65.9 percent** of monthly benefits.<sup>9</sup>

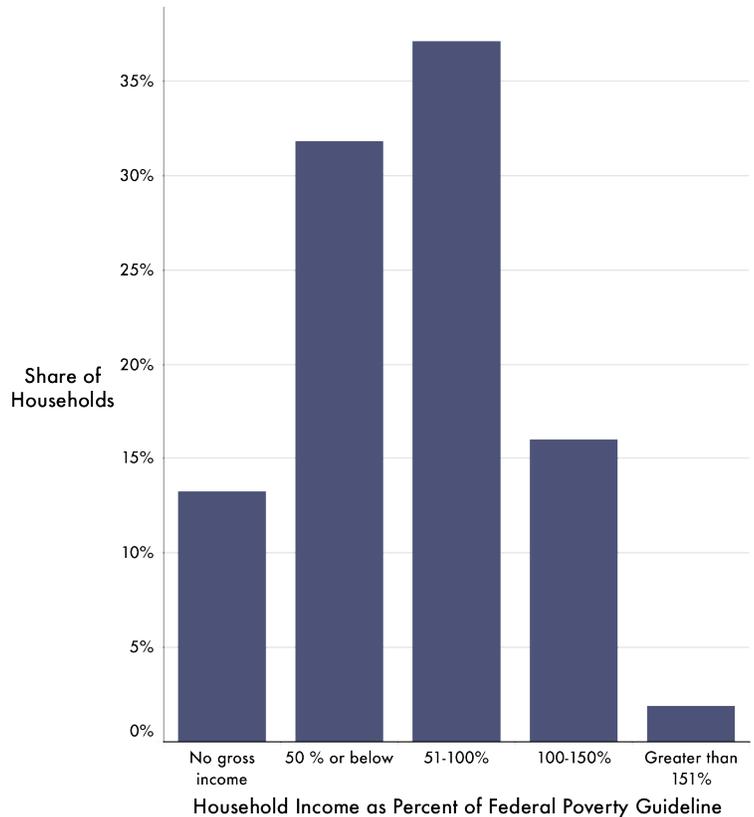
- SNAP helps families access healthy food and gives parents the ability to feed their children. Research links **participation in SNAP for 6 months** was associated with an **8.5 percentage point decrease in food insecurity** in households with children.<sup>10</sup>
- SNAP benefits can lead to improvements in short-term health and educational outcomes in children.<sup>11</sup>

## SNAP FIGHTS CHILD POVERTY

SNAP is also an important lifeline for children in poverty. As a counter-cyclical government assistance program, SNAP helps more people during economic downturns. **Families impacted by recessions, natural disasters, and other economic shocks can rely on SNAP** to supplement tightened budgets and put food on the table. SNAP is thus an anti-poverty tool, making it especially important for children, who **experience poverty at higher rates than other groups in America.**

- SNAP effectively targets children living in poverty: roughly 69 percent of SNAP households with children had incomes at or below the Federal Poverty line in 2015, while some 13 percent had no gross income at all.
- In 2016, **SNAP benefits lifted 1.5 million children** out of poverty.<sup>12</sup>
- Every \$5 in new SNAP benefits generates as much as \$9 of economic activity<sup>13</sup>

Depth of Poverty in SNAP Households with Children, 2015



Data: US Department of Agriculture. Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households, 2015, Table A.3.

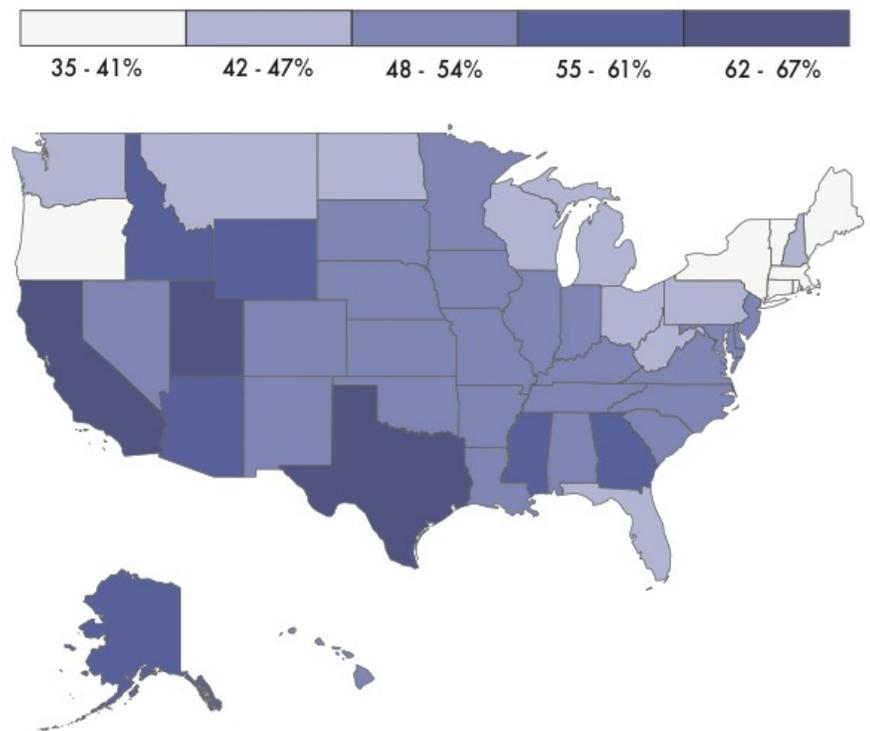
## PROTECTING and STRENGTHENING SNAP IN THE FARM BILL

Spending for SNAP benefits is based on mandatory formulas rather than year-by-year appropriations. SNAP expenditures thus tend to shift with changes in household economic conditions. However, as Congress reauthorizes SNAP in an upcoming Farm Bill, there are real threats to maintaining the integrity and scope of this program. **To ensure that SNAP continues putting healthy food on the table for children, lawmakers should strengthen benefits, ensure access, and invest in nutrition education and awareness.**

## Maintain and Strengthen Benefit Levels

- 1) Prevent cost-shifting to states:** The President's FY 2018 budget proposal takes aim at SNAP funding under the guise of increasing state flexibility. The proposal would require states to share the cost of SNAP, and give them the opportunity to reduce benefit levels and adjust eligibility requirements to afford the match.<sup>14</sup> Similar language in the 2018 House Budget Resolution calls for cuts of \$150 billion over ten years by transforming SNAP's structure to a block grant in which states receive a reduced, fixed amount of funding for the program each year. Such proposals would force states—already struggling to balance their budgets—to slash SNAP benefits.<sup>15</sup> **The 2018 Farm Bill must protect SNAP's existing structure and funding levels to keep food on the table for low-income children.**

Share of SNAP Households with Children by State, 2016



Data: US Census American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, 2016. S2201: Food Stamps/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

- 2) Increase maximum benefit allotments:** As of 2015, children received an average monthly amount of \$122 through SNAP.<sup>16</sup> Research suggests that these levels are insufficient, as households with children report exhausting their SNAP benefits before the end of the month.<sup>17</sup> For children, this monthly drop-off in SNAP benefits is associated with reduced caloric intake and behavioral problems in school.<sup>18</sup>

SNAP benefits are based on outdated assumptions about the cost and preparation of food, especially amongst low-income families. To ensure children have steady access to food each month, the 2018 Farm Bill should modernize the process for calculating maximum SNAP benefits.<sup>19</sup>

- 3) Maintain benefits for large households:** The President's budget also proposes capping benefits for households with more than six members. Policymakers must reject such proposals, which would exclusively target households with children.<sup>20</sup>

## Protect Access to SNAP through Simplified Eligibility Requirements

While participation in SNAP by eligible households with children is high, the latest data suggests that seven percent of eligible households did not access the program in 2014.<sup>21</sup> The gap between eligibility and participation could reflect lack of knowledge about the program, as well as barriers created by burdensome eligibility requirements. To ensure that all children in need access SNAP, policymakers should **use the Farm Bill to protect SNAP eligibility and increase participation, especially in families with children.**

- **Preserve and encourage categorical eligibility:** Categorical eligibility is a state option that makes households already receiving certain forms of government assistance automatically eligible for SNAP. States can also implement broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE), which generally makes all households with incomes below a state-determined income threshold eligible for SNAP and allows them to bypass some cumbersome eligibility requirements.<sup>22</sup> BBCE is an essential tool, utilized by 42 states, for ensuring vulnerable families do not face barriers in accessing food.<sup>23</sup> BBCE also ensures that vulnerable children receiving SNAP are enrolled in child nutrition programs such as the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program. Yet policymakers looking to cut SNAP funding have proposed eliminating or restricting this option. The Farm Bill must protect the **8.5 million households with children**<sup>24</sup> who are considered categorically eligible for SNAP.
- **Expand access to SNAP for child populations with low program uptake:** Congress can also do more to increase participation amongst youth populations that are especially susceptible to economic hardship and food insecurity, but have low SNAP participation rates:
  - **College Students:** Households with two-year college students had an average food insecurity rate of 17 percent (compared to the national average of 13 percent) between 2011 and 2015.<sup>25</sup> While there are exemptions to rules barring college students from receiving SNAP benefits, lawmakers should expand existing eligibility criteria to better target college students with the most need. This includes college students experiencing homelessness: a 2015 survey found that 73 percent of food insecure college students were also housing insecure (including 23 percent who were homeless), yet only participated in SNAP at a rate of 22 percent.<sup>26</sup>
  - **Young Adults Aging out of Foster Care:** Youth aging out of foster care often face various challenges, such as accessing affordable housing and employment. This population is among the estimated 500,000 to 1 million adults impacted by a 2016 rule allowing states to place time limits on SNAP participation Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD). In 2014, only 30 percent of youth age 19 or older who have left the foster care system received public food assistance, including SNAP, compared to the 71 percent who participated in Medicaid. The similar economic eligibility requirements for these programs indicates that there may be significant barriers preventing this population from accessing SNAP.<sup>27</sup> To ensure that youth who have aged out of foster care can put food on the table, the Farm Bill

should remove, or allow far more generous state exemptions to, ABAWD requirements.

- **Low-Income Immigrant Children:** Eligible low-income children whose parents are foreign-born are less likely to receive SNAP than those with native-born parents, regardless of their parents' citizenship status. Research suggests that among immigrant communities, SNAP-eligible citizen and non-citizen children participate at lower rates due to lack of outreach, language and cultural barriers, and fear of deportation. Lawmakers must protect SNAP eligibility for immigrant families with children (regardless of citizenship status) and fund increased linguistically and culturally appropriate outreach to improve program participation among this population.

## Invest in Nutrition Education for Children

- 1) **Continue robust funding for SNAP-Ed:** Hunger and food insecurity can increase the risk for lower diet quality and undernutrition, which in turn can impact children's overall health, cognitive development, and school performance<sup>28</sup>. Through SNAP-Ed, the U.S. Department of Agriculture provides funding to states for nutrition education interventions for SNAP recipients. To maximize SNAP-Ed funding, the Food and Nutrition Service encourages States to focus their resources on changing the nutrition and physical activity behaviors of women and children in SNAP households. Evaluations have found SNAP-Ed to be effective: positive outcomes for participating children include increased fruit and vegetable intake and healthier milk choices.<sup>29</sup>

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