

Fact Sheet: Administrative Threats to The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)



BACKGROUND

Food insecurity remains a major threat to health and wellbeing of 12.5 million children in America.¹ This means that in 2017, one in six children lived in a household that had uncertain access to enough healthy food for a productive lifestyle. Food insecurity has devastating consequences for children.

Now, more than ever, we need investments in programs and research to ensure we're doing everything possible to keep kids fed and well-nourished. However, those investments are under threat thanks to various Executive Branch administrative efforts to undermine key data collection and analysis as well as reduce eligibility and access to critical supports like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The Administration outlines most of these efforts in its "Fall 2018 Regulatory Plan," released in October 2018.² If implemented, these administrative tactics would make it harder for families with children to put food on the table.

THE ROLE OF SNAP IN FIGHTING CHILD FOOD INSECURITY

Without access to healthy food, children suffer negative consequences to their health, education, and development. In fact, studies have shown that food-insecure children are almost twice as likely to have fair or poor health, about one third more likely to be hospitalized since birth,³ 14 percent more likely to show symptoms of anxiety and depression,⁴ and 9.8 percent more likely to display hyperactivity.⁵ Food insecurity is further linked to environments that promote obesity⁶ as well as adverse educational outcomes, such as lower math and reading skills and higher rates of absenteeism and tardiness.⁷

As the nation's largest federal food assistance program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the first line of defense against child food insecurity. SNAP works efficiently and effectively by providing low-income households with monthly funds specifically designated for food purchases. Research links participation in SNAP for 6 months with an 8.5 percentage point decrease in food insecurity in households with children.⁸

Given their higher prevalence of food insecurity and high rates of participation, children are SNAP's greatest beneficiaries. In 2015, 19.2 million children relied on SNAP for access to consistent food.

Beyond its role in fighting food insecurity, SNAP significantly reduces child poverty and helps struggling families to make ends meet: SNAP benefits lifted 1.5 million children out of poverty in 2017 alone.⁹

ADMINISTRATIVE PROPOSALS THREATENING SNAP	
Proposal:	Harm To:
Reorganize the Economic Research Service	Independence, quality of food insecurity and SNAP research and data
Changes to Work Requirements for "Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents"	Children who rely on pooled resources from non-custodial adults, former foster and unaccompanied homeless youth
Changes to Categorical Eligibility	Children between 130-200 percent of the poverty line
Changes to Inadmissability On Public Charge Grounds	Children of immigrants, immigrant children who may eventually apply for a green card

PROPOSAL TO REORGANIZE THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE

Accurate and comprehensive data detailing food security, food access, and the outcomes associated with various nutrition programs are critically important tools for policymakers seeking to formulate effective, evidence-driven policy. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) plays a crucial role in providing that information by performing independent statistical analysis on a broad range of issues, including food security and nutrition assistance programs, including SNAP.

The agency recently announced its plans to realign ERS under the Office of the Secretary as well as relocate ERS outside of the National Capital Region.¹⁰ Together, these plans represent a direct threat both to the independence and quality of that data analysis. For instance, the department has acknowledged that many economists and researchers will choose not to relocate to a new region and has not made clear whether it will fill those vacancies. The relocation proposal appears to represent an indirect vehicle to accomplish the proposal in the administration's Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 budget request to cut the ERS budget by 48 percent and lay off half its staff.¹¹ Meanwhile, realigning ERS under the Office of the Secretary—shifting leadership from a civil servant to a political appointee—threatens the entity's independence and autonomy as well as its legitimacy.

These planned shifts threaten the crucial role ERS plays in analyzing food security and nutrition assistance programs and could harm the quality of the information guiding policymakers as they seek to effectively implement strategies to fight childhood hunger.

PROPOSED RULE ON ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS FOR ABLE-BODIED ADULTS WITHOUT DEPENDENTS (ABAWDS)

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) announced with an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking in February 2018 that it is considering changes to the SNAP time limit rules for Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs). After collecting comments, the Agency appears poised to soon post an official proposed rule, likely to make them even harsher for individuals struggling to find adequate employment.¹²

Under current law, existing SNAP work requirements aimed at so-called childless adults are already quite stringent. Adults between ages 18 and 49 who don't have dependents and the state deems "able-bodied" (ABAWDs) must provide evidence that they are working or in an employment training program for at least 20 hours a week, or they cannot stay on the program for more than three months in a three-year period. State agencies may automatically exempt up to 15 percent of its relevant ABAWD caseload from this time limit, allowing them to extend SNAP eligibility to the adult for an additional month. States can also apply waivers to exempt specific regions from the time-limit if they have high unemployment (10 percent or greater.)¹³

Tightening SNAP's rules for ABAWDs would, in reality, also unduly harm low-income and food insecure children. These children often depend on pooled resources (including SNAP benefits) from extended family members who do not claim them as dependents, including non-custodial parents. Administrative changes that make ABAWD time limits stricter or hinder the ability of states to apply for waivers would also harm youth aging out of foster care and unaccompanied, homeless youth and young adults who are over the age of 18, who already experience high rates of unemployment and poverty and face barriers in accessing public assistance programs.¹⁴ Furthermore, new analysis of data from 2013 and 2014 shows that the overwhelming majority of SNAP participants who struggle to meet the threshold of 20 hours of work per week are not uninterested in working, but instead are experiencing the consequences of volatility in the low-wage labor market, caregiving duties, or personal health issues.¹⁵

PROPOSED RULE ON CATEGORICAL ELIGIBILITY OPTIONS

The USDA's unified regulatory agenda also includes a rule proposal to would limit the use of Categorical Eligibility¹⁶, an important tool that reduces red-tape and burdensome administrative steps during the SNAP eligibility determination process.¹⁷ Categorical Eligibility streamlines the process by which households receive SNAP eligibility, eliminating cumbersome asset tests. Currently,

federal law requires states to confer SNAP eligibility to households that receive cash assistance through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or a state assistance fund. However, states also have the option to extend that eligibility so that households receiving non-cash benefits through TANF are also automatically eligible. In many states, this flexibility allows low-income families earning between 130 percent and 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Line to participate in SNAP and saves states money by forgoing their need for expensive asset and resource testing.

USDA indicates that in this proposed rule, it will limit state flexibility in extending categorical eligibility to low-income families, a move that would make it harder for some families to access the program and force many states to reinstate costly administrative processes. Considering the various categories of state TANF programming and limited access to “substantive assistance” through TANF, this would no doubt reduce the number of households, including those with children, who can avail themselves of the streamlined eligibility process to access food assistance.

Contrary to the administration’s reasoning that this step would ensure that SNAP “is appropriately targeted toward low-income households most in need,” eliminating state flexibility around Categorical Eligibility is not an effective tool for shoring up program integrity. In fact, including asset limits in eligibility determinations for public benefit programs is counterproductive, as it tends to penalize low-income families for building savings. Families should not have to choose between meeting their basic need for food and building up the savings and resources that would help them weather emergencies and achieve economic mobility.

What’s more, analysis of legislation aimed at narrowing Categorical Eligibility options suggests that instead, it would reinstate a benefit cliff in a majority of states, jeopardizing food assistance for 400,000 households who are scraping by on earnings just above 130 percent of the Federal poverty line.¹⁸ Some 265,000 children in those households who rely on their SNAP participation status to receive categorical eligibility for free school meals would lose access to both programs.¹⁹

PROPOSED RULE ON INADMISSIBILITY BASED ON PUBLIC CHARGE GROUNDS

The Department of Homeland Security has also proposed a rule with sweeping changes to long-standing, bipartisan immigration policy determining eligibility for green cards and admission to the United States. The rule proposes to expand who may be deemed a public charge (i.e., burden on the public coffers) in the consideration of an application for lawful permanent resident status and/or lawful admission. As a result, the determination would now include a broader range of services including Medicaid, nutrition assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and housing assistance such as Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers, Section 8 Project Based Rental Assistance and Public Housing.

Including SNAP in a public charge determination would significantly undermine the program's role in fighting child poverty and food insecurity as well as erode its ability to generate economic activity on the whole in times of financial downturn. Already, undocumented non-citizens are ineligible to participate in SNAP. However, U.S.-born citizen children of immigrants and children who are 'qualified' immigrants are eligible for the program.²⁰ As a result, 411,000 eligible immigrant children received food assistance through SNAP in Fiscal Year 2017. If and when these children apply for Legal Permanent Residency, this proposed rule would penalize them for relying on SNAP to avoid going hungry.

There are also millions of other children with immigrant parents participating in SNAP (3.9 million of whom are U.S. citizens)²¹ who could have less food as a result of this proposed rule. By design, SNAP benefits grow with the size of a household, because they are intended to put food on the table for the whole family. If parents lose access to the program, the whole family will have less to eat. Though research shows that food-insecure parents seek to shield their children from hunger by "rationing" their own food intake, this puts additional stress on the household and keeps parents from accessing the food they need to be productive and healthy enough to provide for their families.

According to DHS, this rule will indeed result in "increased prevalence of obesity and malnutrition, especially for pregnant or breastfeeding women, infants, or children."²² The agency claims that these consequences are "non-monetized costs," but this misleading assertion ignores a wide body of economic analysis quantifying the economic impact of obesity²³ and malnutrition²⁴ in America.

CONCLUSION: PROTECTING SNAP MATTERS FOR CHILDREN

If successful, the Administration's regulatory agenda for SNAP is all but guaranteed to make it harder for low-income children to access the food assistance they need. Children are our economic future. Making it harder for them to learn, grow, and thrive will make us all worse off.

TAKE ACTION

To track the Administration's progress on its regulatory agenda, visit <https://www.reginfo.gov/public/do/eAgendaMain>.

We encourage partners to submit comments on the Public Charge rule before the deadline of December 10, 2018 through the Protecting Immigrant Families Campaign at <https://protectingimmigrantfamilies.org/#take-action>

CONTACT:

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