



for every child

FEEDING OUR FUTURE

Preserve SNAP for Children and Families

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Cuts to SNAP—the nation’s largest nutrition program—will deepen child hunger, weaken health and educational outcomes, and cost the U.S. economy billions in lost productivity and future public spending. State and Federal policymakers must act to protect children and families.

POLICY SOLUTIONS AT A GLANCE

- The U.S. Federal Government should restore SNAP funding
 - The U.S. Federal Government should protect food insecurity data collection and reporting
 - State governments should run independent analysis to understand how many children will be impacted by cuts to the SNAP program and enact policies to strengthen other nutrition programs to fill gaps in the social safety net
 - The ten states with county-administered SNAP programs should move toward more efficient, centralized, and modernized state-administered SNAP programs
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SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP): AN OVERVIEW

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest federal nutrition program in the United States, serving roughly 42 million individuals in February 2025.¹ It provides support to low-income individuals and families to purchase food, playing a critical role in reducing food insecurity and supporting child health and development. Roughly 40% of SNAP recipients are children², making the program essential to ensuring the health of American youth. The lifetime value of providing SNAP benefits to children are substantial; every dollar invested in providing SNAP benefits to children produces a \$62.25 return on investment through improved health, educational, economic and social outcomes over the life of the child.³

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SNAP

In 1939, the federal government launched the first Food Stamp Program to support struggling families and American farmers during the Great Depression.⁴ After lapsing in the 1940s, the program was revived in 1961 under President John F. Kennedy as a pilot initiative and was permanently authorized in 1964 with bipartisan support.⁵ The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 introduced broad sweeping changes to federal social safety net programs including SNAP.⁶ The law tightened eligibility, imposed work requirements, and limited benefits for certain groups. Following the 1996 welfare reforms, the number of households receiving SNAP benefits fell from about 10.3 million in 1996 to 7.3 million by 2000—a decline of nearly 30%.⁷ Lessons learned from the 1996 welfare reforms demonstrate how administrative and eligibility changes can reduce access to essential services among families who would benefit from assistance.

HOW SNAP WORKS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Eligibility: To qualify for SNAP, households must meet both gross and net income limits based on household size, generally at or below 130% of the federal poverty level for gross income and 100% for net income.⁸ Assets are also considered, although many states have adopted Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE), which raises or eliminates asset tests. BBCE works by enrolling eligible individuals into SNAP when they qualify for other social safety net programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).⁹

Application: Individuals apply through their state SNAP office, typically online, by mail, or in person. Applicants must provide proof of identity, income, household composition, and expenses. An eligibility interview is required, usually conducted by phone or in person.¹⁰

Certification Period: Once approved, households are assigned a certification period during which they receive benefits. Most households have a 6- or 12-month certification period, while elderly or disabled households with fixed incomes may be certified for up to 24 months. Participants must complete a recertification process at the end of each period to maintain benefits.¹¹

COUNTY-ADMINISTERED MODEL

As of October 2025, ten states (California, Colorado, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin) rely on county-administered SNAP programs.¹² County agencies handle eligibility determinations and case management, correlating with higher administrative costs per case. In FY 2014, states that use county-administered SNAP had average administrative costs of over \$21.27 per case per month, compared with less than \$9.63 per case in state-administered systems.¹³ The decentralized nature of county-administered SNAP slows adoption of modernization, including online applications.¹⁴

County-administered states are particularly vulnerable to funding cuts due to high administrative costs. When administrative funding is reduced, counties experience staff shortages, delayed application processing, and uneven service delivery across jurisdictions.¹⁵ Poorer counties are less able to supplement budgets, widening inequities.¹⁶ Despite the challenges of county-administered programs, decentralized administration does have some benefits. For example, it allows states to have location specific programming,¹⁷ such that counties can tailor aspects of the application process, allowable assets (e.g., the value and number of vehicles a household can own), and how SNAP offices work with community partners for outreach.¹⁸ However, counties may not determine Federally-set regulations such as benefit eligibility or benefit amount.¹⁹

LESS MODERNIZED STATE-ADMINISTERED

State-administered SNAP programs operate under centralized structures but vary in the extent to which they have implemented modernization strategies. Modernization strategies include the use of technology to automate core functions of the SNAP program, reducing the manual process of applications and increasing efficiency within the SNAP administrative system. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the SNAP program, has encouraged states to adopt modernization programs to improve efficiency within the SNAP program.²⁰ Less modernized state-administered programs still benefit from the efficiencies of centralized administration and tend to operate at lower cost than county-administered models. However, they have not fully adopted streamlining measures and therefore face relatively higher administrative costs and longer wait times compared to their more modernized counterparts.^{21,22}

Some modernization strategies may come with high costs to establish and begin use, including building technologic systems and implementing staff trainings. Many states choose to implement some parts of modernization strategies on a rolling basis as budgets allow per fiscal year.^{23,24} As modernization of SNAP programs relies on the adoption of an ever-evolving suite of tools and policies, there is no agreed upon list of which states are less modernized versus fully modernized.²⁵

FULLY MODERNIZED STATE-ADMINISTERED

More modernized state-administered programs have adopted technologies to automate much of the administration of SNAP, simplified reporting, and longer periods between recertification. Many modernized SNAP programs have also adopted Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE). BBCE often relaxes some of the asset testing for SNAP in favor of relying on TANF eligibility, which may expand access to SNAP to more families in need.²⁶

These strategies reduce administrative burden, lower per-case costs, and shorten wait times for participants.^{27,28} However, state-administered programs are not without some risk. States that have centralized SNAP programs sometimes struggle with data and accountability as centralized data systems may contain errors or weaknesses that affect the entire state. Additionally, there is a risk that centralized state programs lack visibility and local management of the program. As new technologies are adopted in modernized SNAP programs, there is also a risk of outages that can impact the entire state, particularly when states try to operate new technologies in outdated systems.²⁹ Overall, while all state-administered SNAP programs are generally more efficient than county-administered systems, their level of modernization significantly affects cost-efficiency and the timeliness of service delivery.

SNAP Administration Models:

Fully Modernized State-Administered

Pros

- ✓ Centralized structure that improves efficiency & consistency.
- ✓ Simplified reporting & longer certification periods reduce burden.
- ✓ Lower per-case costs than less modernized states.
- ✓ Faster processing & shorter wait times.

Cons

- ✗ Requires IT investment & staff training.
- ✗ Vulnerable to state-wide outages.
- ✗ Less local tailoring & flexibility.

✓ Pros & Cons ✗

Less Modernized State-Administered

Pros

- ✓ Centralized structure reduces duplication.
- ✓ More efficient than county-administered systems.
- ✓ Potential to scale easily.

Cons

- ✗ Higher per-case costs than fully modernized states.
- ✗ Longer wait times & more paperwork burden.
- ✗ Vulnerable to state-wide outages.

County-Administered

Pros

- ✓ Can tailor services to meet community needs.
- ✓ Allows flexibility in workflows & partnerships.
- ✓ Closer to clients, potentially improving service.
- ✓ Can adapt quickly to local conditions.

Cons

- ✗ Fragmented systems can cause inefficiencies.
- ✗ High administrative costs.
- ✗ Disparities in timeliness and access between counties.
- ✗ Inconsistent staff training & quality.

IMPACTS ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Cuts to SNAP are expected to increase food insecurity among children, undermining their health, development, and future economic productivity.³⁰ SNAP participation has been shown to reduce rates of child food insecurity by up to 30%.³¹ Even short administrative delays or funding reductions can cause benefit lapses, forcing families to rely on emergency food pantries and placing the burden on schools to recognize and address visible signs of hunger among students.³² Food insecurity has immediate and long-term harms for children. In the short term, children in food-insecure households face higher rates of hospitalization and developmental delays and are more likely to exhibit behavioral and emotional problems. Over time, childhood food insecurity is associated with lower educational attainment, poorer health in adulthood, and reduced lifetime earnings potential.^{33,34} These cascading effects perpetuate cycles of poverty and increase future public spending on health care and social services.

The economic returns on SNAP are substantial. Every \$1 invested in SNAP benefits generates about \$1.50 to \$1.80 in economic activity.^{35,36} Cuts that increase food insecurity among children therefore risk eroding human capital and generating significant downstream economic losses.

MONITORING IMPACTS OF SNAP OF FOOD INSECURITY

The federal government's recent cuts to food insecurity data threaten to undermine public and private actors' ability to fully understand the landscape of food insecurity in the United States. USDA has terminated its Household Food Security Report, ending a 30-year series built on the Census's Current Population Survey and long used to guide policy and track hunger trends.^{37,38,39} At the same time, proposed FY 2026 cuts to CDC will slash \$5 billion in funding, imperiling nutrition surveillance, while more than a dozen CDC health-tracking programs have already been eliminated.^{40,41} Without these core federal datasets, state and local governments cannot target resources efficiently, and federal agencies lose the ability to monitor trends nationwide. Equally troubling, private industry and nonprofit partners are left to operate "blind". No private entity has the infrastructure, authority, or continuity to replace this public data backbone, meaning the entire food security system risks misallocating resources at a time of growing need.

CALL TO ACTION

National

- **Urge Congress to restore SNAP funding.** The current cuts to the SNAP program are the largest cuts the program has ever experienced, estimated at a loss of \$187 billion over the next 10 years. This unprecedented move will slash a critical lifeline for American children and families, increasing hunger among the country's most vulnerable populations.
- **Protect food insecurity data collection.** Restore USDA and CDC measurement of food insecurity in the United States. Consistent federal reporting on food insecurity is essential for federal, state, and local government, as well as private organizations, to monitor hunger and evaluate whether nutrition programs are meeting their goals. Without this data, SNAP cuts occur in the dark, masking harm and debilitating agencies seeking to respond. Further, the collection of this data ensures accountability and transparency to the American public.

All States

- **Every state should run its own analysis estimating how many children are projected to lose SNAP benefits under the current policy environment.** Those results should then be tied to budget proposals that use existing child nutrition programs—such as school meals, summer EBT, supplemental funding to the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program, the Child, Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and afterschool nutrition programs—to fill gaps that are left by SNAP cuts. This type of proactive planning ensures that children do not bear the brunt of Federal cuts and that state governments maintain a baseline of food security for their youngest residents.

Ten County-Based States

- **The ten states that currently administer SNAP at the county level should begin a structured transition toward centralized, state-level administration.** While the upfront financial costs of modernization are significant and must be acknowledged, the long-term gains are greater: consistent eligibility standards, improved efficiency, and more equitable access across counties. Failure to transition to state-level modernization will compromise SNAP's fiscal sustainability and weaken its long-term viability.⁴²

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