

What is SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) currently serves more than 47 million participants in about 23 million low-income households.ⁱ Enrollment in the program has almost doubled over the past five years as more people struggle to make ends meet. Even as more people are turning to SNAP to feed their families, many people remain misinformed about this vital program.

Here are some key facts about SNAP:

SNAP works exactly as it's supposed to. SNAP was designed to respond quickly and efficiently to increased poverty and unemployment. When these spiked in 2008, 2009, and 2010, so did SNAP participation. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimates that participation will go down to pre-recession levels as the economy recovers.ⁱⁱ

SNAP reaches exactly whom it's supposed to. The average SNAP household has a gross monthly income of \$731 and countable resources, or assets, of \$333. This is well below the strict national income and asset limits. Eighty-five percent of SNAP households have incomes below the poverty line, which is \$22,050 for a family of four. Additionally, 84 percent of all SNAP benefits go to the most vulnerable households—those with children, elderly, or disabled people.ⁱⁱⁱ

People are hungry in the United States. New data released in September 2013, by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reveals that in 2012, 14.5 percent of Americans, included more than one in five children, lived in households that had trouble putting food on the table. The figures show that SNAP provided assistance to 42 percent of these households.^{iv}

SNAP participation has increased mainly due to the poor economy. The largest increases in SNAP participation came on the heels of the recession (see above). Additionally, a greater percentage of eligible recipients accessed SNAP in the last decade. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 72.2 percent of eligible Americans participated in the program in 2009 (the latest year for which we have data) compared to 56.7 percent in 2000.^v

SNAP doesn't create dependency. Despite “welfare queen” and “don't feed the bears” rhetoric suggesting that food stamp recipients become life-long moochers,^{vi} data show that SNAP participants are on the program an average of nine months.^{vii} In a family budget, food is the most easily squeezed line item. SNAP helps fill the food budget gap for households struggling with unemployment or underemployment.^{viii}

Far from needing to be trimmed, SNAP benefits are inadequate for many families. SNAP benefits don't last most participants the whole month. Ninety percent of SNAP benefits are redeemed by the third week of the month, and 58 percent of food bank clients currently receiving SNAP benefits turn to food banks for assistance at least 6 months out of the year. The average monthly SNAP benefit per person is \$133.85, or less than \$1.50 per person, per meal.^{ix}

SNAP has the lowest fraud and error rates on record. Increased oversight and transparency at USDA has led to better enforcement.^x The big picture shows that fraud and errors are exceptions. USDA tracks two types of SNAP fraud data: trafficking and error rate.

1. SNAP trafficking is the illegal, intentional exchange of SNAP benefits for cash. *Trafficking has dropped from about 4 cents on the dollar to about 1 cent.*

2. SNAP's error rate, which accounts for both underpayment and overpayment of benefits, is at a record low of 3.8 percent. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), *the majority of SNAP payment errors are a result of administrative errors, not intentional fraud.*

Charity alone can't feed everyone. Our federal nutrition programs deliver more than 23 times the amount of food assistance as private charitable sources. All food programs have been stretched thin by our economic downturn. Food bank demand has increased nearly 50 percent since 2006^{xi} and 34 percent of Americans admit that they've cut back on donations to congregations and houses of worship,^{xiii} making the role of federal programs even more crucial.

With budgets and spending at the forefront of national discourse, it's easy to put a target on a program that's grown as much as SNAP. But it's dishonest to say SNAP is out of control spending when the facts show that it's a temporary increase in a program meant to expand when people are hungry and struggling. On the contrary, with the unemployment high and a sluggish economic recovery that is failing to reach the vast majority of workers, we should be investing in the programs that enable working families to weather the storm.

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ⁱ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. SNAP is Effective and Efficient. Updated March 11, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Congressional Budget Office. An Overview of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. April 2012
<http://www.cbo.gov/publication/43175>

ⁱⁱⁱ USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis. Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Households: FY2010. September 2011.

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/ORA/menu/Published/SNAP/FILES/Participation/2010CharacteristicsSummary.pdf>

^{iv} USDA Economic Research Service. Household Food Security in the United States in 2012. September 2013.

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err155.aspx#.UjdwO2SglME>

^v USDA Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis. Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Years 2002-2009 (Summary). August 2011.

^{vi} Huffington Post. Mary Franson, Minnesota State Representative, Compares Food Stamp Recipients to Wild Animals. March 6, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/06/mary-franson-minnesota-food-stamp-recipients-wildanimals_n_1322366.html.

^{vii} USDA Food and Nutrition Service. USDA Food Stamp Program: Food Stamps Make America Stronger. Last modified February 16, 2012. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/FactSheets/SNAP.htm>.

^{viii} Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Policy Basics: Introduction to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Updated July 9, 2012. <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=2226>.

^{ix} U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Benefit Redemption Patterns in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Final Report. February 2011.

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/Published/SNAP/FILES/ProgramOperations/ARRASpendingPatterns.pdf>

Feeding America. Food Banks: Hunger's New Staple. Preliminary Findings. September 2011.

<http://feedingamerica.org/press-room/in-the-news/the-new-normal.aspx>

^x USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Fighting SNAP Fraud. Last modified May 24, 2012.

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/fraud.htm>.

^{xi} Feeding America. Hunger and Poverty Statistics. <http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-facts/hunger-and-poverty-statistics.aspx>.

^{xiii} Barna Group. The Economy Continues to Squeeze Americans' Charitable Giving. June 28, 2012.

<http://www.barna.org/donorscause-articles/571-the-economycontinues-to-squeeze-americans-charitable-giving>.