

Children's HealthWatch 2023 Farm Bill Priorities

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) ensures families can put food on their table and have the nutrition they need to thrive. For families with young children especially, [SNAP offers a foundation for health and learning so they can](#) reach their highest potential. As Congress prepares to reauthorize SNAP in the Farm Bill, [Children's HealthWatch](#), a network of pediatricians and public health researchers, recommends evidence-based solutions that improve health and promote equity among families with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Our recommendations are rooted in over 25 years of research from the frontlines of pediatric care and centers experiences of families with young children. To ensure policies are equitable and effective, we urge Congress to engage the expertise of families and individuals with lived experience of food insecurity and identify solutions that are responsive to their realities, particularly those who have been marginalized by systemic racism and injustices.

In response to growing health inequities and experiences of food insecurity, we recommend the following improvements to SNAP that reduce barriers to enrollment and boost benefit amounts:

Eliminate inequitable eligibility restrictions and barriers to accessing SNAP by:

1. **Removing the five-year bar on lawfully present immigrants eligible for SNAP.** Discriminatory policies against immigrants and their families, including the requirement that lawfully present immigrants otherwise eligible for SNAP wait five years before they are eligible for benefits, increase risk of [food insecurity](#) among immigrant families with children and threaten health.
2. **Eliminating federal prohibition of formerly incarcerated individuals participating in SNAP.** Given longstanding inequities in the criminal legal system in the US, the federal ban on SNAP for formerly incarcerated individuals enforced by many states has a [disproportionate impact](#) on the health and well-being of children of color. Lifting this ban would promote health equity.
3. **Removing asset limits for SNAP eligibility.** Widening wealth inequality in the US contributes to [health inequities](#). Building assets is critical for financial stability and upward economic mobility, but [asset limits](#) in SNAP and other assistance programs threaten economic stability and health, especially when families face unexpected income shocks from things like illness, natural disasters, or unemployment.
4. **Promoting and investing in opportunities to streamline enrollment and eligibility across public assistance programs.** Children's HealthWatch research shows that eligible families participating in [multiple public assistance programs](#) are more likely to be stably housed, a key indicator for positive health. Reducing barriers to participation in multiple assistance programs through investment in co-enrollment mechanisms and streamlining application processes is necessary for promoting economic stability and health among families. Further, ensuring benefits [gradually decrease across programs](#) to avoid families losing resources as they increase their income is critical for advancing economic mobility.
5. **Retaining Broad Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE):** BBCE provides states the ability to confer eligibility for SNAP based on a family's participation in other cash or non-cash means tested benefits and raise gross income and asset limits. As a result, BBCE gives states the ability to address the needs of their residents and has afforded access to SNAP for working families across the country as they seek to increase income and build assets while also having resources necessary to [feed their children](#).

6. **Preserving the entitlement structure in SNAP.** As the recent COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic downturn demonstrated, the structure of SNAP is effective in rapidly responding to crises. Any changes to the entitlement structure of SNAP would threaten the health and well-being of families with low incomes, especially during times of disaster, recession, and crisis.

Improve the SNAP benefit to reflect the real costs of a healthy diet and basic living expenses by:

7. **Increasing SNAP benefits by basing the calculation on the Low Cost Food Plan.** While the evidence-based re-evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan increased SNAP benefits nationwide, research still consistently shows the current SNAP allotment does not reflect the [real cost of a healthy diet](#). Switching the base benefit calculation from the Thrifty Food Plan to the Low Cost Food Plan would put a healthy diet within reach for the millions of people participating in SNAP without adding further stigma associated with food restrictions or barriers associated with incentive models.
8. **Lifting the shelter deduction cap.** The current SNAP calculation limits the deduction families can take for their shelter costs leading to an inaccurate accounting of the support families need. By removing the cap on shelter costs the SNAP calculation would provide a more accurate calculation of families' real expenses, especially in areas with high housing costs.
9. **Allowing all families with excess medical expenses to claim the medical deduction.** Households participating in SNAP who have a family member receiving federal or state disability benefits or elders can deduct the monthly medical expenses over \$35 when calculating net income for SNAP benefits. Allowing all families, particularly those of children with special health care needs whose needs are above average but do not necessarily rise to the level of disability benefit qualification, to qualify for the medical deduction would increase their monthly benefit. A higher benefit would help to offset some of the additional costs faced by families that have member with special health care needs and [promote food security](#).
10. **Retaining the current structure and benefits of the Heat and Eat program.** Particularly given sharp increases in utility expenses, ensuring that families can afford utilities and put food on the table year-round is [critical for health](#). Retaining Heat and Eat for the states currently participating in the program will continue to provide important supports for families with low incomes and create more efficiency for state and local administrative offices.
11. **Allowing for a more gradual decline in benefits as families increase income.** While SNAP has a logical phase-down of benefits as income increases, there is still evidence that when people [abruptly lose SNAP benefits or have them reduced because of small increases in income](#), they do not have enough time to adapt to new income realities and may report experiencing food insecurity despite higher wages. Congress should allow states to offer all households with increasing income the ability to receive SNAP benefits at the pre-existing level for a period time of necessary to reduce financial resource volatility and support families with economic mobility.

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