

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Evidence and Policy Implications

Overview

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation's largest nutrition assistance program, reduces hunger, improves food security, supports vulnerable populations, and boosts local economies.

Recent Policy Proposals

Federal proposals may tighten eligibility through expanded work requirements, reduced state waiver flexibility, capped benefits and fewer deductions, while some states seek to restrict purchases of sugary drinks and candy.

Key Benefits

Food Security: SNAP participation lowers the risk of very low food security by ~20%

Economic Impact: SNAP can reduce health care costs by up to \$1,400/year/low-income adult

Flexibility and Dignity: Participants can choose food based on personal and cultural preferences, pre-serving autonomy

Challenges and Opportunities

Diet Quality: While SNAP improves access to food, diet quality may not improve.

Policy Levers: Evidence suggests mixed results from purchase restrictions (e.g., on sugary drinks) and financial incentives (e.g., for fruits and vegetables). Combined strategies of subsidizing healthy foods while limiting unhealthy items may improve diet quality, but these approaches come with substantial barriers.

SNAP-Ed: The nutrition education arm of SNAP reaches over 1.2 million people annually and has demonstrated improvements in food security, dietary behaviors, and youth physical activity.

Conclusion

SNAP is a cost-effective, essential program that reduces food insecurity and supports public health. Policy approaches that preserve access, enhance nutrition and respect participant autonomy are most likely to yield sustainable improvements in health outcomes.

The Academy's Evidence-Based Policy Recommendations:

1. **Protect food access.** Maintain SNAP's role in reducing hunger.
2. **Promote healthy choices.** Pair incentives for healthy foods with targeted restrictions to improve diet quality without undermining choice.
3. **Support nutrition education.** Sustain and expand SNAP-Ed to build skills and change environments.
4. **Avoid harmful reductions.** Ensure eligibility and benefit adjustments do not increase food insecurity.
5. **Ground changes in research.** Policy shifts should be informed by rigorous evidence and the lived experiences of participants.