

SNAP's Role in Keeping America Unhealthy

THE ISSUE: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has been a nationwide program since 1974.

- It was created to provide supplemental nutrition by making food more affordable to low-income families.
- Nearly 13% of Americans (42 million) use SNAP benefits, an increase of more than 50% since 2000.

SNAP benefits can be used for almost any food product: The starting premise, until recently, has been that all food was nutritious, even if some foods were more nutritious and others less so.

- Today, an individual can use SNAP to buy not only fruits and vegetables but also “snack foods and non-alcoholic beverages.”
- In practice, this means that nearly 23% (\$1.49 billion) of SNAP funds are spent on counterproductive, unhealthy foods such as sugary drinks and highly processed snacks.
- Recipients can also use their SNAP benefits to purchase fast food at select restaurants such as Taco Bell, Papa John's, and McDonald's.

Twelve states have now passed SNAP waivers, amending the statutory definition of food for purchase and ending the

subsidization of popular types of junk food beginning in 2026. Limitations differ from state to state.

THE CONCERNS:

Taxpayer-funded SNAP benefits are being used to purchase food and drinks that contribute to chronic disease rather than to health.

- Studies show that those in the SNAP program have a **higher tendency** to purchase sweetened beverages, such as soda, than non-SNAP shoppers.
- A **2017 study** found that individuals with SNAP benefits spent more on sugary drinks and cheap, heavily processed foods than on healthy foods.
- A year later, a **U.S. Department of Agriculture study**, comparing the food purchases of SNAP-benefit households to non-SNAP-benefit households with similar income levels, found that SNAP households purchased:
 - ❑ **31%** fewer vegetables;
 - ❑ **40%** fewer dark green vegetables and beans;
 - ❑ **24%** fewer fresh, whole fruits;
 - ❑ **20%** fewer whole grains; and
 - ❑ **27%** less lean proteins (plant, seafood).

THE RISKS:

Limiting how SNAP benefits can be used could inadvertently reduce the availability of groceries and food more broadly in lower-income areas that already struggle with access.

- Junk food and soda tend to be higher profit items for grocery and convenience stores.
- One would hope that limiting SNAP eligibility would encourage stores to stock and feature more healthy, SNAP-eligible items.
- However, there is a risk that **some will go out of business**.

SOLUTIONS: SNAP benefits should be limited to nutritious foods only. There is no reason for taxpayers to pay for junk food.

- The U.S. HHS should enact a pilot program in select states and cities to see how limiting SNAP-eligible purchases affects participants' purchasing behavior and the availability of groceries.
- Policymakers could test reward mechanisms to incentivize families to use more of their SNAP benefits on healthy food.
 - For example, if a certain percentage of their benefits is used on healthy products like produce, they receive a small bump the next month in their assistance payments.

SOURCES:

[A Short History of SNAP | Food and Nutrition Service](#)

[Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program | USDA](#)

[Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program May 2023 Baseline Projection | Congressional Budget Office](#)

[Policy Basics: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\) | Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)

[Foods Typically Purchased by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\) Households | Food and Nutrition Service Office of Policy Support](#)

[Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Wants to Change How SNAP Benefits Are Used | Newsweek](#)

[SNAP: High Costs, Low Nutrition | CATO Institute](#)

[Transactions at a Northeastern Supermarket Chain: Differences by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Use | American Journal of Preventive Medicine](#)

[Millions of Low-Income Households Would Lose Food Aid Under Proposed House Republican SNAP Cuts | Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)

[SNAP Food Restriction Waivers | USDA](#)