



Policy Snapshot

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

KEY FACTS

- SNAP, formerly the food stamp program, is a federally funded program that helps eligible low-income children and families afford food.
- A little over one in four children (or their families), in the District of Columbia, receive SNAP. Even with its modest food benefit, at about \$1.44 per person per meal, SNAP reduces food insecurity, improves school performance and children's health, and improves long-term outcomes for families.
- While the District has fared well in reaching eligible children and families for SNAP, participation has decreased over the past several years and there are opportunities to reverse that trend and strengthen the program more broadly. For example, by continuing the online application it launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, and by ensuring that households get all of the deductions for which they qualify.

What is SNAP?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the food stamp program, provides nutrition assistance to eligible individuals and households with low incomes. SNAP is the nation's largest nutrition assistance program, helping more than 35 million children and families in low income households afford food.

SNAP is a federally funded program that operates in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and Native reservations/tribes.¹ SNAP is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). SNAP benefits are 100 percent funded by USDA and states share 50 percent of the administration costs with USDA. In the District, SNAP is administered by the Department of Human Services Economic Security Administration (ESA). While the District has been successful in reaching those who are eligible, with a SNAP participation rate of 96%², opportunities exist for the District to strengthen

policies and procedures to better link families to SNAP and better serve and retain families who participate.

Who is SNAP intended to help?

SNAP provides food assistance to individuals who meet both financial and nonfinancial eligibility requirements without other safety net programs' restrictions around age (e.g. children or seniors), disability, or family structure. Due to the legacy of discrimination and racism, program participants are disproportionately Black and Latinx. According to the most recent Census estimates, the median income for the District's white households is almost four times that of Black households and more than twice that of Latinx households (\$215,719 vs \$55,301 and \$85,737), with even bigger gaps for households with children. Given that disparity, the District's Black residents are more than four times and Latinx residents are twice as likely as white residents to live in poverty (25.6% and 12% vs. 5.9%).³

SNAP benefits are an entitlement, which means that anyone who qualifies under the program's rules can receive benefits. This funding structure enables SNAP to respond quickly and effectively to support families and communities during times of economic downturn and increased need. This was seen most recently by the inclusion of SNAP benefit supplements and policy changes during the COVID-19⁴ pandemic in 2020 and the Great Recession of 2007⁵. To receive SNAP in the District, applicants must be residents and be either U.S. citizens or fall within certain categories of immigrants.⁶ To meet the financial requirements for SNAP, households must have no more than 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) in gross income and no more than 100% of the FPL on income after deductions for expenses. SNAP allows deductions for 20 percent of wages plus an additional standard deduction based on income and family size;⁷ out-of-pocket dependent care costs, including any costs for child care or disabled adult care that a household pays; certain medical expenses; and shelter expenses (e.g. rent, mortgage, utility costs) up to a certain amount.⁸ So, for example, based on their specific housing and child care costs, a family with two adults and one child earning \$2,500 a month in gross income can deduct \$500 (20% of wages) plus another \$755 for the standard deduction and child care and housing expenses, making their net income \$1245 and their monthly SNAP amount \$137. If their application information didn't allow them to include the child care deduction, though, their net income would seem higher and they would only get \$41 per month in SNAP benefits, making it important to correctly calculate each family's deductions.

Why is SNAP so important?

In the District, SNAP is one tool among many to help counter the effects of historic and ongoing racial inequity. SNAP is one of the core nutrition and income support programs that reaches the most children

and families and its value is well-documented. Even with its modest food benefit, at about \$1.44 per person per meal,⁹ SNAP reduces food insecurity, improves school performance and children's health, and improves long-term outcomes for participants.

- Reducing food insecurity: SNAP reduces food insecurity for children by enabling their families to spend more money on food than their limited budgets would otherwise allow. Food insecurity, as defined by USDA, is the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.¹⁰ Food insecurity among children is linked to increased risk of poor diet; chronic health conditions, including asthma, cognitive and behavioral problems, anxiety and depression; and poorer general health compared to their food-secure peers.¹¹ The largest and most rigorous examination of the relationship between SNAP participants and food security found that food insecurity among children fell by roughly one-third after their families received SNAP benefits for six months.¹²
- Improving children's school performance: Children need nutritious food to grow, learn, and thrive. Research suggests that SNAP participation can lead to improvements in reading and mathematics skills among elementary children, especially young girls,¹³ and increases the chances of graduating from high school by as much as 18 percentage points.¹⁴
- Improving children's health: Insights from Children's Health Watch have shown that children receiving SNAP are less likely than non-participants with low incomes to be in fair or poor health or underweight, and their families are less likely to make trade offs between paying for health care and paying for other basic needs such as food, housing, and electricity.¹⁵
- Improving long-term outcomes for participants: When children have access to SNAP, from birth through early childhood, their risk of developing high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and other poor health outcomes later in life greatly decreases.¹¹ Women who had access to SNAP as young children reported improved economic self-sufficiency (increases in educational attainment, earnings, income, and decreases in welfare participation).¹⁵

SNAP is also a complement to other nutrition safety net programs for children, particularly the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC). Participation in SNAP enables WIC applicants to become income-eligible for WIC, which creates a more streamlined process for those families.¹⁶ Participation in SNAP provides school-age children with the ability to participate in the NSLP without requiring families to complete an additional application.¹⁷ These direct linkages are critical to ensure that children receive all of the nutrition assistance they need during this vital time of growth and development.

How does SNAP work?

SNAP is a food assistance program that seeks to provide supplemental food benefits to individuals who customarily purchase and prepare meals together, which SNAP considers a household.¹⁸ To apply for SNAP, the household must complete an application. The District now uses both paper and online applications (the former is available at an ESA service center).¹⁹ After completing the application, the household must participate in an interview with an ESA caseworker and provide proof of the information provided in the application.²⁰ Once those steps are complete, ESA determines eligibility.

Separate from the eligibility determination, SNAP does a benefit calculation to determine how much money a household has available, after paying household expenses (e.g. shelter, child care, medical), to purchase food. SNAP benefits are calculated to cover approximately 70% of a family's food budget, with the family expected to spend 30% of their net income on food.²¹ The amount of SNAP benefits an eligible household can receive is based on USDA's Thrifty Food Plan,²² household income, and the number of eligible members in the household. In the District in fiscal year 2018, the average monthly benefit for SNAP households was \$211 for all households and \$382 for households with children.²³

Households are eligible for SNAP for a set period of time, called a certification period, after which they have to recertify, which essentially includes completing the entire application process again; including filling out an application or recertification form, submitting verifications, and participating in an interview. Most households in the District have a 12-month certification period, unless the household includes an older adult (60+) or individual with a disability. Those households have a 24-month certification period.²⁴

Once determined eligible, a household will receive their SNAP benefits on an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card to purchase food at approved retail locations. In the District, SNAP benefits are deposited onto the family's Capital Access EBT card on a staggered schedule from the first of the month through the tenth.²⁵ As a food benefit program, SNAP can be used to purchase certain food items and seeds that will produce food²⁶ from approved retailers. In the District, there are approximately 400 approved retailers where SNAP participants can use their EBT to purchase food.²⁷

Who benefits from SNAP in the District?

How many participants are enrolled in the District's SNAP?

According to the most recent data available (fiscal year 2018), 110,000 District residents participated in SNAP, which is about 16 percent of the District population.²⁸ Of those 110,000 participants, 37,000 -one-third - were children under age 18 (with about one-third of those children being age four and

under).²⁹ That means that around 27 percent of the District's children receive SNAP³⁰ or a little more than 1 in 4. This is a striking decrease from a few years prior, when nearly half of the District's children were enrolled in SNAP. Due to the legacy of discrimination and racism, the District's Black children are far more likely to be living in poverty as white children (31% vs. less than 1%). SNAP is a vital program for making sure children - particularly those in Black and brown communities - don't go to bed hungry.³¹ As a result of the intersection of racism and socioeconomic status, 93 percent of the people enrolled in SNAP in the District are Black.³² However, while Latinx families also face many hurdles to reaching economic stability, only 3% of SNAP recipients in DC are Latinx, even though Latinx make up 11 percent of District residents.

What portion of eligible families participate?

The SNAP participation rate is the percentage of eligible people in the United States who actually participate in the program. This is one way to see how successful a state is in reaching eligible families. SNAP participation rates vary among the states, ranging from 56 percent to 100 percent, with the national average at 85 percent. The District is one of the top states when it comes to participation with about a 96 percent participation rate for fiscal year 2017, which is down from an estimated 100 percent in fiscal year 2015.^{33a} However, as noted above, participation by children decreased by almost a third from 2013 to 2018.^{33b}

Recommendations to improve the reach of SNAP in the District

While the overall SNAP participation rate in the District is high, the reduction in children enrolled is concerning. There are policies and strategies the District could employ to ensure families receive the benefits they need, and to enhance the agency's ability to reach and retain District families with low incomes and link them to much needed assistance. Below are a few strategies that DHS could try to broaden its reach to eligible families.

Continue to Streamline Access

Online applications

To help reach eligible families in the District, DHS must continue the online application it launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to that launch, the District was only one of four states that did not have an online application for SNAP benefits.³⁴ Online applications, in addition to being more convenient for applicants, can enable individuals to get the process started earlier, which is essential as eligible applicants receive benefits back to the date of their application; and states have 30 days to

process the application.³⁵ It is unclear, however, if the District's online application will continue to be available in the long-term.³⁶

Electronic signature

During the public health emergency the District began using telephonic signatures, which was a helpful option and one we encourage DHS to continue.

Customer support

Relatedly, even once the pandemic ends economic recovery will be slow, and thus DHS should fund additional customer support to continue assisting applicants with phone applications.

Public charge

With the changes to the Public Charge rule over the past few years³⁷ mixed immigration status families may be less likely to apply for benefits. DHS must be aware of this concern and provide clear and consistent information on eligibility rules for the programs so as to not deter participation.

Online purchases

The District also added the option of online purchasing using SNAP, which has been a relief for many families during the pandemic. We recommend this option continue, particularly for those living in food deserts.

P-EBT

The federal government passed a law amending the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 on October 1, the P-EBT Program was authorized only through September 30, 2020 to provide temporary food assistance to families of children who were eligible to receive meals under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

P-EBT benefits are meant to replace breakfast and lunch that children who received free or reduced-price meals would normally receive during distance learning due to the COVID-19 public health emergency. P-EBT benefits for the 2019-2020 school year were valued at \$5.70 per child per school day or \$28.50 per child per week. P-EBT benefits for the 2020-2021 school year were valued at \$5.86 per child per school day, or \$29.30 per child per week.

On October 1, the federal government passed an amendment to the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020, introducing the possibility to extend P-EBT benefits under qualifying conditions. OSSE and

DHS are working together to develop a plan to continue to provide benefits to all eligible children. We encourage transparency in the plan's development to ensure the needs of families with children are met.

Leverage Data to Connect Families to Programs

Another key strategy that the District should use to reach families with low incomes is leveraging data to connect families with all public benefits for which they may be eligible. The District is doing well overall in reaching residents eligible for SNAP - better than it is in reaching residents eligible for some other programs. SNAP regulations give states' the option to use or disclose SNAP applicant or recipient information to support the administration of other federally assisted and state programs that serve low income individuals.³⁸ The Food and Nutrition Act requires the state agency to establish safeguards that permit the disclosure of applicant household information to persons directly connected with the administration of other "federal assistance programs."³⁹ DHS should work with other state agencies, including the Department of Health, Office of the State Superintendent of Education, and the State Board of Education to connect families to the suite of benefits for which they may be eligible. For example, some state SNAP agencies have partnered with local WIC agencies to find infants and children who are enrolled in only one program to connect those families to both benefits. This makes it easier on the applicant household but also on the state agency because they can use much of the information already verified from the other program to make a decision. The low-income families in the District who have completed the application and eligibility process for one safety-net program, especially SNAP—which has a comprehensive application and eligibility process--should be provided with more direct avenues to other safety net programs (not just the ones administered by DHS) they may be eligible for without having to complete the entire application process and provide the same verifications multiple times. The District should also look more closely into declining child enrollment in SNAP to better understand the causes?

Use Flexibility in Program Operations

While SNAP is a federal program, states are afforded flexibility within the program on how it is administered in the state. FNS provides states with the ability to request waivers from federal rules as well as offering states options they can implement to make SNAP work better for their residents.⁴⁰ With fresh memories from the 2007 Great Recession, the government shutdown in 2019 that caused SNAP benefit payments to be made early, and the 2020/2021 COVID-19 pandemic, the District could take some time to think about what policies to put into place in the near future to make the agency better equipped for the next crisis. For example, on-demand interviews⁴¹, more mobile technology,⁴² and online case management⁴³ would reduce how much households need to come into the office and free up caseworkers in the office to handle more complicated matters.

One policy that the District could focus on without needing a waiver is how it ensures that applicants qualify for all deductions for living expenses (as described above) for which they are eligible. That calculation estimates how much money households have available to purchase food and therefore how much money in SNAP benefits they're entitled to. The first step is to determine how many eligible people are currently receiving deductions in DC. Analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities of 2018 SNAP Quality Control Characteristics data showed that nationally small shares of all SNAP households claimed deductions, with only 3% claiming the dependent care (e.g. child care) deduction.⁴⁴ With the high cost of child care in the District, it is important to make sure that families on SNAP are able to count their out-of-pocket dependent care costs during the SNAP eligibility determination.

Endnotes

1. Some Native American tribes and/or Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) operate a program called the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) instead of SNAP.
2. Reaching Those in Need: Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2017: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/Reaching2017-1.pdf>
3. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/9764-median-family-income-by-race-ethnicity?loc=10&loct=3#detailed/3/any/false/37,871,870/2159,3498,2161,5929,3499,3306,3307,2160/19032>;
<https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/8782-median-family-income-among-households-with-children-by-race-and-ethnicity?loc=10&loct=3#detailed/3/any/false/37,871,870,573,869,36,133,35,16/4038,4040,4039,2638,2597,4758,1353/17618>; and
<https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/9765-poverty-by-race-ethnicity?loc=10&loct=3#detailed/3/any/false/37,871,870/2159,3498,2161,2157,3306,3307,3499,2160/19034,19033>
4. In response to the covid-19 pandemic, Congress passed the “Families First Coronavirus Response Act” which provided USDA with authority to allow states to modify procedures to make it easier for families to continue participating in SNAP. One option for states was to provide a temporary increase in SNAP benefits to meet immediate rising needs. See: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/COVID-19> and <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/most-states-are-easing-snap-participation-rules-many-have-opted-to-provide>
5. As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 also known as the stimulus or recovery package to help families after the Great Recession, Congress increased benefits for SNAP participants. USDA Under Secretary Kevin Concannon stated, “By injecting immediate revenue streams into local business, SNAP helps accomplish another primary goal of ARRA by stimulating the American economy.” <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pressrelease/fns-0001>
6. An immigrant must have one of the immigrant statuses that makes him or her a “qualified immigrant” to be eligible. These include certain Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), refugees, asylees, granted withholding of removal, parolee for a year or more, domestic violence victims and their parents or children, and victims of severe forms of trafficking in persons. 7 C.F.R. 273.4.
7. The standard deduction is based on household size and is usually updated once a year. For FY 2021, a standard deduction of \$167 for household sizes of 1 to 3 people and \$181 for a household size of 4 (higher for some larger households and for households in Alaska, Hawaii, and Guam). Family size calculations are based on the number of citizens or those with a certain limited number of immigration statuses. Mixed status households are eligible for SNAP, but some members of the household may not be counted in the calculation determining benefit amounts.
8. There are a few deductions for SNAP see <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility>. There are rules around each deduction and what applicants need to show proof of expense. For a basic overview of deductions see: https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_academy_webinar_1-7-15.pdf
9. This estimate is as of July 2020 data at <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNAPsummary-7.pdf>
10. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>
11. USDA Economic Research Service Food Insecurity in Households with Children: Prevalence, Severity, and Household Characteristics, 2010–11, 2013,
12. USDA: Measuring the Effect of SNAP Participation on Food Security <https://www.fns.usda.gov/measuring-effect-snap-participation-food-security-0>
13. Edward Frongillo, Diana F. Jyoti, and Sonya J. Jones, Food Stamp Program Participation is Associated with Better Academic Learning among School Children, *Journal of Nutrition* , 136(4): 2006, 1077–80,
14. Hilary Hoynes, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Douglas Almond, Long-Run Impacts of Childhood Access to the Safety Net,” *American Economic Review* , 106(4): 2016, 903–934. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w18535>

15. Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, et al., "The SNAP Vaccine: Boosting Children's Health," Children's HealthWatch, February 2012, https://childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/snapvaccine_report_feb12.pdf
16. Adjunctive eligibility enables WIC applicants to establish their income eligibility by showing proof that they participate in SNAP, TANF, or Medicaid. See DC Action Snapshot WIC.
17. Through direct certification, school districts that participate in the school lunch program match the names of children living in households that receive benefits from SNAP or TANF with school enrollment records.
18. 7 C.F.R. 273.1(a).
19. <https://dhs.dc.gov/service/apply-benefits>
20. Due to covid-19, the interview can be delayed if identity can be verified or it can be done telephonically, per DC's approved waiver request at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/COVID-19/district-of-columbia#snap>.
21. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility>
22. The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) is one of four USDA-designed food plans specifying foods and amounts of foods to provide adequate nutrition. It is the cheapest food plan and is calculated monthly using data collected from the consumer price index (CPI). <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cnpp/usda-food-plans-cost-food-reports>
23. CBPP District of Columbia SNAP State Fact Sheet: https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/a-closer-look-at-who-benefits-from-snap-state-by-state-fact-sheets#District_of_Columbia
24. <https://www.freshebt.com/state/washington-dc/#renew>. Re-certification was waived during the COVID-19 pandemic - see <https://coronavirus.dc.gov/food>.
25. <https://www.freshebt.com/state/washington-dc/>
26. SNAP cannot be used to purchase alcohol, tobacco products, vitamins, live animals, prepared foods, or any non-food household items.
27. <https://www.freshebt.com/state/washington-dc/>
28. USDA Characteristics of SNAP Households Fiscal Year 2018: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/characteristics-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-households-fiscal-year-2018> CBPP SNAP State Fact sheets: https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/a-closer-look-at-who-benefits-from-snap-state-by-state-fact-sheets#District_of_Columbia
29. USDA Characteristics of SNAP Households Fiscal Year 2018: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/characteristics-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-households-fiscal-year-2018>
30. The estimates of state population data comes are as of July 1, 2019 2018 census data <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/101-child-population-by-age-group?loc=10&loct=3#detailed/3/any/false/37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133,38/62,63,64,6,4693/419,420> and the estimates of children on SNAP are for FY 2018 data.
31. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/8447-children-in-poverty-100-by-age-group-and-race-and-ethnicity?loc=10&loct=3#detailed/3/any/false/37,871,870,573,869,36,133,35,16/2757,4087,3654,3301,2322,3307,2664|140/17079,17080>
32. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/Characteristics2018.pdf>
- 33a. https://frac.org/research/resource-library/state-of-the-states-profiles?post_type=resource&p=4483&state=District%20of%20Columbia

33b. The number of children enrolled pulls from the FNS annual Characteristics of SNAP Households reports. To approximate the number of children eligible we used the number of children below 200% of the federal poverty line as reported in the Kids Count data center (which draws on American Community Survey table B17024).

34. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, SNAP Online: A Review of State Government State Websites, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-online-a-review-of-state-government-snap-websites>

35. 7 C.F.R. 273.2(a) & (c)(1)(iv)

36. <https://twitter.com/DCHunger/status/1250153522450006018>

37. Historically, the “public charge” inadmissibility test was designed to identify people who may depend on the government as their primary source of support. If the government determines that a person is “likely at any time to become a public charge” in the future, it can deny a person admission to the U.S. or lawful permanent residence (or “green card” status). (Immigration and Naturalization Act section 212(a)(4), 8 USC 1182(a)(4)) Revised public charge regulations published by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the U.S. State Department that went into effect on February 24, 2020, redefine a “public charge” as a non-citizen who receives or is likely to receive one or more of the specified public benefits for more than 12 months in the aggregate within any 36-month period (such that, for instance, receipt of two benefits in one month counts as two months). The benefits considered are cash assistance for income maintenance from any level of government, SNAP (formerly Food Stamps), public housing, Section 8 housing assistance, and Medicaid (with exceptions for persons under age 21, women during pregnancy and for 60 days after the pregnancy ends and emergency services). This is much broader than the original test for public charge. For more information see: <https://protectingimmigrantfamilies.org/analysis-research/>. On Feb. 2, 2021 the Biden administration reversed this broadening, however many families may still be still confused or afraid.

38. 7 CFR 272.1(c)(1).

39. The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 7 U.S.C § 2020(e)(8)(A)(i)

40. USDA State Options Report <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/waivers/state-options-report>

41. Where the state agency conducts interviews by allowing clients to contact a call center within a specified range of ranges or times; the interview is not scheduled. See <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/admin/workload-management-matrix>

42. Mobile technologies include the use of text messaging, a mobile app., and mobile document upload. The use of mobile technology enables procedural changes that streamline the enrollment process, facilitate verification, and reporting requirements. Through the use of mobile technologies, the agency can provide better service and more readily reach populations that lack access to a personal computer, enhancing access for those who would otherwise be limited in their ability to access information and complete the application process. See USDA State Options Report: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/waivers/state-options-report>

43. Online case management allows households to perform a variety of routine tasks related to their SNAP case through a web-based portal. Online case management can ease State administrative burden by reducing the time staff spends on routine client inquiries. According to the most recent USDA State Options Report, 40 state websites allow clients to perform some case management tasks online, including viewing case information and/or notices, reporting changes in factors that affect eligibility or benefit level, and/or uploading documents. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/waivers/state-options-report>

44. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, A Quick Guide to SNAP Eligibility and Benefits, available at <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/a-quick-guide-to-snap-eligibility-and-benefits>