



ISSUE BRIEF – Updated August 2023

SNAP Matters During the First 1,000 Days

About 1,000 Days

1,000 Days leads the fight to ensure women and children everywhere have the healthiest first 1,000 days. The 1,000 days from pregnancy to age two offer a crucial window of opportunity to create brighter futures. As an initiative of FHI Solutions, our mission is to make the well-being families a policy and funding priority globally.

The Issue

The 1,000 days between a woman's pregnancy and her child's 2nd birthday offers a unique window of opportunity to build healthier and more prosperous futures. This is when a child's brain begins to grow and develop and the foundations for their lifelong health are built. Access to healthy, affordable food is critical to support the health and well-being of women and children during the first 1,000 days and beyond.

Unfortunately, millions of young children in the United States lack consistent access to good nutrition. More than 1 in 6 infants and toddlers in America lives in poverty,¹ and almost 16.5 million children live in households that struggle to put enough food on the table.² Striking racial/ethnic disparities in rates of food insecurity indicate that the burden falls harder on some communities than others: for example, about 6.5% of white households with children experienced food insecurity, compared to almost 16% of Hispanic households with children and almost 20% of Black households with children.³

When moms and babies lack the nutrition they need during the 1,000-day window, it puts their health and well-being at risk. Poor diets during pregnancy can increase the risk for birth defects, anemia, low birthweight, and preterm birth. During childhood, living in a food-insecure household is linked to insufficient consumption of certain nutrients, delays in cognitive development, behavioral problems, and poor health.⁴ Additionally, childhood food insecurity is associated with lower health status, more frequent colds and stomach aches, asthma, mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, and poor educational performance and achievement⁵ – all of which can have both short- and long-term effects. There is even evidence that the health effects

¹ [Percent of children under the age of 6 in poverty - USAFacts](#)

² [USDA ERS - Key Statistics & Graphics](#)

³ [NCHS Data Brief, Number 432, February 2022 \(cdc.gov\)](#)

⁴ [Food Accessibility, Insecurity and Health Outcomes \(nih.gov\)](#)

⁵ [hunger-health-impact-poverty-food-insecurity-health-well-being.pdf \(frac.org\)](#)

of poor nutrition and adverse experiences early in life can pass from one generation to the next. Together, all of this means that too many young children lack the opportunity to thrive.

Evidence-based, proven programs that reach low-income families with nutrition assistance are a critical investment in the health and well-being of moms and babies. One such program is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

About SNAP

SNAP is a federal program that helps U.S. families buy the food they need. It provides nutrition assistance to over 21⁶ million households with over 41 million individuals – including almost 16 million children⁷ – making it the largest anti-hunger program in the nation. SNAP benefits are delivered monthly and are used to purchase groceries at authorized retailers nationwide.

- Nearly one-quarter (24%) of all young children ages 0-4 in the U.S. participate in SNAP.
- SNAP serves almost 2 million infants and toddlers under age 2.⁸
- The majority of households with young children who receive SNAP benefits have incomes below 100% of poverty. Almost half have incomes below 50% of the federal poverty level.⁹

SNAP's Impact

SNAP is a highly-effective investment in the nutrition, health, and well-being of moms, babies, and their families.

SNAP has been proven to improve families' access to the nutrition they need to thrive. When families receive nutrition assistance through SNAP, they have higher food spending, less food insecurity and higher diet quality.¹⁰ One recent study found that participation in SNAP reduced food insecurity by up to 30%.¹¹ Among young children, those whose families consistently receive SNAP benefits are more likely to have regular access to food than those whose families lose their benefits. And beyond simply providing access to food, SNAP can lead to healthier, more nutritious diets. According to national food consumption data, each additional SNAP dollar increases a household's diet quality score on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Health Eating Index.

A large body of evidence shows that moms and babies who receive nutrition assistance from SNAP also benefit from improved health and well-being. When women participate in SNAP during pregnancy, their infants have improved birthweights;¹² in turn, a healthier birthweight can lead to improved cognitive outcomes, better health, higher future wages, and other positive outcomes. Young children whose families consistently receive SNAP benefits are also more likely to be in good health and are at lower risk of developmental delays. Once they reach adulthood, young children served by SNAP have a reduced incidence of indicators of metabolic syndrome (including obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes) and increased reports of good health.¹³ SNAP access in early life also improves educational and economic outcomes. Children served by

⁶ [SNAP: NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS PARTICIPATING \(azureedge.us\)](https://azureedge.us)

⁷ [Characteristics of SNAP Households: FY 2019 | Food and Nutrition Service \(usda.gov\)](https://www.usda.gov/food-nutrition-service)

⁸ [Characteristics of SNAP Households: FY 2019 | Food and Nutrition Service \(usda.gov\)](https://www.usda.gov/food-nutrition-service)

⁹ [Food Support Programs And Their Impacts On Very Young Children | Health Affairs](https://www.hhs.gov/health-affairs)

¹⁰ [SNAP and Obesity: The Facts and Fictions of SNAP Nutrition | Snap To Health](https://www.snaptohealth.org)

¹¹ [SNAP Is Linked with Improved Nutritional Outcomes and Lower Health Care Costs | Center on Budget and Policy Priorities \(cbpp.org\)](https://www.cbpp.org)

¹² [SNAP Helps Millions of Children | Center on Budget and Policy Priorities \(cbpp.org\)](https://www.cbpp.org)

¹³ [Food Support Programs And Their Impacts On Very Young Children | Health Affairs](https://www.hhs.gov/health-affairs)

SNAP perform measurably better in school and have improved educational attainment.¹⁴ The importance of SNAP to young children cannot be overstated. The greatest lifelong gains from SNAP come when children benefit from benefits starting in utero up to age 5.¹⁵

SNAP also improves the well-being of women, children, and their families by helping to lift them out of poverty. When families receive assistance with buying groceries, they are better able to meet their other needs for housing, electricity, and medical care. In 2017, SNAP raised the incomes of 3.4 million people above the poverty line, including 1.5 million children.¹⁶ SNAP is one of the nation's most important anti-poverty programs.

Challenges

Despite the SNAP program's success, SNAP is at risk for funding cuts and structural changes that would limit its reach and effectiveness. Such changes would jeopardize the program's ability to reach all families who need it and would have profound, adverse impacts on the health and well-being of our nation's moms and babies.

Additionally, although the program provides a critical safety net for American families, it is clear that SNAP benefits fall short of what many participants need. Around half of all participating households are still food insecure, and even those who are food secure may still find it difficult to afford healthy foods or make their benefits last for the entire month. Increasing the SNAP benefit allotment would be an important step to reduce food insecurity and ensure that families can access nutritious foods all month long. The Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) supports increased purchase of fruits and vegetables by providing incentives at the point of purchase among SNAP participants but is not available for all participants and at all locations, reaching about 146,000 participants monthly.

Expanded SNAP benefits and program flexibility implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic have ended or are being rolled back by Congress. Leveraging some of the successes during the pandemic, such as increasing access to online purchasing and streamlined processing of applications, could help more eligible households benefit from the SNAP program.

Solutions We Support

Going forward, 1,000 Days calls on Congress and the Administration to protect and strengthen SNAP to help ensure all moms, babies, and families have access to the food they need to thrive. 1,000 Days supports changes that would better ensure the program meets the needs of today's families:

- Increase SNAP participation among the ~15% of income-eligible individuals and families who do not participate.
- Increase SNAP benefits to ensure families can meet their food needs all month long and afford healthy, nutritious foods, including but not limited to increased funding for GusNIP.
- Continue implementing, evaluating, and scaling innovative ways to improve SNAP and meet the needs of program participants (e.g., healthy food incentives, alternative benefit disbursement schedules, and alternative delivery mechanisms such as online).

¹⁴ [SNAP Works for America's Children | Center on Budget and Policy Priorities \(cbpp.org\)](https://www.cbpp.org/2017/06/20-snap-works-for-americas-children)

¹⁵ [SNAP-policy-research-brief-Schanzenbach.pdf \(northwestern.edu\)](https://www.northwestern.edu/policy-research/briefs/schanzenbach.pdf)

¹⁶ [Nutrition Assistance Program Lifts 3.4 Million Out of Poverty \(census.gov\)](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/snap/pubs/2017/01.html)

In the Words of SNAP Participants

SNAP benefits helped Andrika Harmon buy healthy food while she was working, finishing college, and caring for her 9-month old son Zion.

“[Because of the SNAP program] I was able to keep up on fresh produce. Produce is very expensive. Tomatoes are like \$4.39 a pound for fresh, organic tomatoes. So with the SNAP benefits I’m able to buy fresh vegetables and fresh fruit that’s high in nutrients for breastfeeding moms [like me]. Also, baby food is extremely expensive, so I use my SNAP to buy him baby food... A lot of women out there are afraid of what people will think of them, and I feel like that shouldn’t be an issue because if you need it, then you just need it. You don’t have to get it to live off of the rest of your life; just get it to get on your feet, and you can go from there.”

SNAP helped Jennifer Wells-Marshall make ends meet while in college and raising her young daughter.

“In college I was trying to figure out a way to make sure that I could make sure that I could take care of my daughter. I still had to work because I couldn’t stay on campus because I had a child, so I lived in an apartment, and so I still needed to cover my rent, utility bills, Pampers, clothes. So I worked every single day of the week, but it wasn’t enough money to do all of it. So by having SNAP benefits, I didn’t have to worry about food, so that she would be okay.”

Source: <https://stateofchildhoodobesity.org/snap-stories/>