Definition

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides financial assistance to eligible low-income people to purchase food. It was formerly known as the Food Stamp program.

Description

SNAP provides monthly benefits to people on low incomes who are eligible to participate. SNAP bases the amount an individual or family receives on net income. Instead of receiving cash, participants receive an account, typically in the form of an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card. The card or a voucher contains the approved amount of money to exchange for certain foods from approved retailers. The categories of food are:

- vegetables or fruit
- meat, fish, and poultry
- dairy products
- bread and cereal
- seeds or plants that produce household food

Allotments from SNAP vary depending on the cost of food and the age of the person receiving the benefits. The location in which a family lives also can affect the family's allotment under the program. SNAP does not pay for all food, but supplements food purchases. The program will not pay for purchase of alcohol, tobacco products, and some foods eaten while in a store. To continue promoting local commodities, SNAP includes provisions such as support of using EBT cards at farmers' markets to encourage its participants to buy and eat local grown fresh produce.

To become eligible for SNAP, a household must pass two measures for income and two measures for assets. For example, income is set based on measures of U.S. poverty level. Asset tests measure how much cash, savings, or vehicles a family owns. Retailers that accept SNAP benefits must continuously offer foods designed to be prepared and eaten at home that fall into the approved food categories.

History

The precursor to SNAP, the Food Stamp Program, was enacted in 1939. The original purpose was to help poor families find affordable food, which was in surplus, as the United States recovered from the Great Depression. This served the double purpose of making sure surplus food was purchased and eaten and helping unemployed people feed their families. The program ended in 1943 when World War II began; there was no longer a surplus of food and plenty of jobs.
In the 1960s, the Food Stamp Program was back in force. President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) expanded food distribution in 1961, and pilot programs began around the country. President Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–1973) signed the program into permanent order in 1964. Throughout the 1970s states amended how they ran their programs and national eligibility criteria were revised. More households became eligible. Legislators were concerned in the 1980s about the cost of the Food Stamp Program, and they made some changes to adjustments in cost of living allotments for eligible participants. In 1996, the Welfare Reform Act included changes to the Food Stamp Program. In 2008, the program officially changed from food stamps to SNAP.

### Statistics
More than 46 million people participated in SNAP in 2012, for a total cost of more than $75 billion. About half of all SNAP participants are households in which children live. In 2014, state agencies provided nearly $70 billion in SNAP benefits. In 2015, the USDA recorded a nearly 610% increase in redemptions of SNAP dollars at farmers’ markets compared with 2008. In 2015, however, participation in the program dropped slightly, about 2%. This means the program served about 45.8 million people. Studies have shown that the average time in which an individual participates in SNAP is 10 months.

### Evaluation
Part of SNAP is education about eating healthier, a program called SNAP-Ed. The goal is to teach people how to choose fresh fruits and vegetables, for instance, on a limited budget. SNAP-Ed also encourages physical activity and following USDA *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, including MyPlate, which advises on portions and balance in the diet. A 2012 evaluation of the educational component from four sample projects in states showed that more fruits and vegetables were available in homes following SNAP-Ed efforts but that there was no significant increase in eating fresh produce among targeted children.

Any program that offers allotments is sure to receive criticism from those who are against incomesupporting programs. Still, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities praised the program in 2013 for meeting the needs of low-income Americans and making accurate allotment of funds. The report said that the program had responded well to the economic recession and reached more people than food stamps. In general, research has shown that SNAP meets its goal of improving access for healthy food, but that the program’s effect of diet quality is minor. Some states are addressing these concerns by offering additional incentives to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. Debate was expected to continue on whether SNAP should more heavily emphasize income maintenance or nutrition and on how allotments are calculated.

As with any large program, SNAP and its participants are vulnerable to scams. The USDA has placed warning on its Website about possible scams aimed at families receiving SNAP benefits and retail stores carrying groceries.

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Legislation and regulation

As of 2016, SNAP laws did not ban any food products other than alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and ready-to-eat hot food products such as those often found in convenience stores. Some states have sought exemptions to the law to ban other foods, such as sugary sodas, from their state's participants. SNAP eligibility follows requirements set forth in the Food Stamp Act of 1977 and its amendments. Although the federal government funds all benefits, administering the program is the shared responsibility of the federal government and each state government. Changes to food stamps and SNAP were made as part of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act and the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. States received more control of program administration in the late 1990s. The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 is the basis for defining what foods are eligible under SNAP.

Resources

BOOKS


WEBSITES


ORGANIZATIONS


Teresa G. Odle

APA

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