

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Analysis of Program Administration and Food Law Definitions

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Under the current version of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), participants can purchase virtually any food or beverage (collectively, food). Research indicates that SNAP recipients may have worse dietary quality than income-eligible nonparticipants. Policymakers have urged the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to pilot SNAP purchasing restrictions intended to support a healthier diet, and state legislators have proposed similar bills. The USDA rejected these invitations, stating that it would be administratively and logistically difficult to differentiate among products, amid other concerns. However, the USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) do just that. Further, state governments define and differentiate among foods and beverages for tax purposes. This paper reviews several factors intended to inform future policy decisions: the science indicating that SNAP recipients have poorer diet quality than income-eligible nonparticipants; the public's support for revising the SNAP program; federal, state, and city legislators' formal proposals to amend SNAP based on nutrition criteria and the USDA's public position in opposition to these proposals; state bills to amend eligible foods purchasable with SNAP benefits; state retail food tax laws; and the retail administration and program requirements for both WIC and SNAP. The paper finds that the government has a clear ability to align SNAP benefits with nutrition science and operationalize this into law.

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Introduction

Formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the nation's largest food assistance program, serving approximately 47 million people.¹ SNAP is administered jointly by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and state governments. The program began as a pilot to assist food insecure people following the Great Depression and aligned benefits with farm surpluses.² In 1964, the permanent program was enacted; the House version would have prohibited the purchase of soft drinks and "luxury foods," but these limitations were not incorporated.³ Participants can

purchase any food or beverage (collectively, food) except for prepared foods (unless they participate in a special program); alcohol; and dietary supplements.⁴ SNAP allotments are based on the "Thrifty Food Plan" model, which anticipates participants can access ingredients and a place and time to cook.²

SNAP is reauthorized pursuant to the Farm Bill. In 2008, Congress changed the program's name to SNAP; it declared that SNAP's purpose is to "permit low-income households to obtain a more nutritious diet" to raise their "levels of nutrition" and alleviate "hunger and malnutrition."⁵ Congress reiterated the goal of providing eligible households an "opportunity to obtain a more nutritious diet" in the text of the law.⁶ Despite Congress's declarations, there are no nutrition standards accompanying the redemption of SNAP benefits. Thus, there is significant debate over whether the program should be one of true nutrition assistance or function as an in-kind cash transfer.^{7,8}

In 2008, Congress also authorized the USDA to pilot SNAP incentive programs. The USDA created the Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP), which provided financial incentives to purchase targeted fruits and vegetables,

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resulting in increased produce purchases among HIP participants.⁹ The USDA also permits jurisdictions to more permanently provide extra dollars for produce purchased at farmers' markets^{10,11} and grocery stores.¹² However, more restrictive options have been posited and are the subject of this paper, including revising SNAP to align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs),¹³ removing certain food items from coverage,^{14–16} and modeling SNAP after the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).^{17,18}

Policy makers have urged the USDA to pilot programs with purchasing restrictions to support a healthier diet.^{13,19} The USDA rejected these invitations, arguing, among other concerns discussed below, that doing so would pose substantial administrative challenges.^{20–22} The federal government, however, currently designates foods as nutritious for WIC, and many states distinguish among food items for taxation purposes. Further, legislators have proposed bills that would designate specific foods as ineligible for purchase with SNAP benefits.²³ This legislative history is rich with workable definitions and administrative achievements that can provide a basis for SNAP classifications among foods.

This paper reviews several factors that could inform future policy decisions: the science indicating that SNAP recipients have poorer diet quality than income-eligible nonparticipants; public support for revising the SNAP program; federal, state, and city legislators' formal proposals to amend SNAP based on nutrition criteria and the USDA's position in opposition; state bills to amend SNAP; state retail food tax laws; and the retail administration and program requirements for both WIC and SNAP. The paper finds that the government has a clear ability to align SNAP benefits with nutrition science and operationalize this into law.

SNAP Recipients' Diet Quality

Diet quality is often a function of SES,²⁴ but individuals who participate in SNAP have a different diet quality than income-eligible nonparticipants. Public health studies indicate that SNAP participation is associated with the purchase of less-healthy food. Food insecurity advocates, most notably the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), disagree with this conclusion⁸; however, there is agreement that among children, SNAP recipients are not more obese and do consume more of several micronutrients than nonparticipants.^{8,25}

Nationally representative studies using National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey data are informative. Child SNAP recipients consume more

sugary beverages, processed meats, and high-fat dairy products but fewer nuts, seeds, and legumes than income-eligible nonparticipants.²⁵ Similarly, adult SNAP recipients consume more fruit juice, potatoes, red meat, and sugary beverages but fewer whole grains than income-eligible nonparticipants.²⁶ In another study,²⁷ SNAP participants had lower dietary quality scores overall and consumed significantly fewer fruits, vegetables, seafood, and plant proteins but significantly more added sugar than income-eligible nonparticipants.

Studies analyzing specific regions and smaller populations have come to similar conclusions. In one study²⁸ comparing the grocery store purchases of SNAP and WIC households in New England, SNAP households purchased more than double the amount of sugary beverages per month (399 ounces) than WIC households (169 ounces), 72% of which were paid for with SNAP dollars. In a 3-month study,²⁹ new SNAP participants significantly increased their consumption of refined grains compared with low-income people who did not join. In a study³⁰ of Hispanic Texan women, SNAP participants consumed 26% more sugary beverages and 38% more sweets and desserts than low-income nonparticipants.

It is unclear what drives the differences in diet between SNAP participants, as opposed to income-eligible nonparticipants and other low-income nonparticipants. These differences may not be caused by SNAP participation. Nonetheless, these studies^{31,32} indicate that SNAP is not successfully raising the food quality purchased by participants.

Public Support

The public has indicated support for program restructuring. In one survey³³ of more than 3,000 adults, 69% of the public and 54% of SNAP participants supported removing sugary drinks from SNAP eligibility. In another survey³⁴ of 522 SNAP stakeholders, 78% of respondents agreed that soda and 74% agreed that "foods of low nutritional value" such as candy and sugar-sweetened fruit drinks should not be eligible for purchase with benefits. Seventy-seven percent of respondents believed that SNAP benefits should be consistent with the DGAs, and 54% thought that SNAP should be reformulated into a defined food package similar to WIC.³⁴

Formal Proposals to Amend SNAP and the USDA's Position

Several policymakers have requested that the USDA permit trials differentiating between healthy and unhealthy food under SNAP. Minnesota requested a waiver for

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