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# Gender and Racial Justice in SNAP

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Women, particularly women of color, women with disabilities, older women, LGBTQ individuals, and immigrant women, disproportionately face economic insecurity. In general, women of color face both gender and racial discrimination in hiring and wages. Women are overrepresented in the low-paid workforce and in sectors that are consistently devalued, such as domestic and care work. Overall, women make up 64 percent of the workforce in the 40 lowest paying jobs.<sup>1</sup> In addition to inadequate pay, these jobs often have unpredictable schedules and few worker protections, limiting access to vital benefits such as paid family and medical leave.<sup>2</sup> These long-standing structural inequities inhibit economic mobility for women, making them more susceptible to food insecurity.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the gender and racial inequities in economic security for women and their families, and even more for women of color. The economic downturn resulting from the pandemic has been dubbed a “she-cession” as there has been a disparate job loss in female-dominated sectors, especially for women of color. Since February 2020, women have lost over 8 million jobs, accounting for 55 percent of all overall net job losses since the pandemic began. Fourteen percent of Black women and 15.3 percent of Latinas ages 20 and older were unemployed in June. While there have been some gains in employment, in June, unemployment rates for Black women and Latinas were three times higher than their pre-pandemic unemployment rates.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, women of color make up a majority of what are now being considered as essential workers as they are on the frontlines of the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

**The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) is a critical program in providing women, children, and families with the food assistance needed to better support their wellbeing.** In Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, SNAP served more than 35.7 million people in 17.9 million households on average each month.<sup>5</sup> In May 2020, that number increased to serve 43.1 million people as SNAP expanded meet need during the period of economic downturn.<sup>6</sup> However, even with its extensive reach, critical gaps still exist in the adequacy and administration of SNAP for a multitude of women, especially women facing multiple forms of discrimination. Additionally, the attacks on SNAP in recent years have demonstrated just how much work we have left to make sure it can serve all women, children, and families whose circumstances make it hard to put food on their table.

Prior to the pandemic, essential workers were nearly twice as likely to use SNAP.<sup>7</sup> As even more workers lose their source of income or have their hours reduced, workers need SNAP to support them and their families now more than ever. People in households that experienced a loss of employment income (17.5

percent) were nearly three times more likely than those in households who did not lose income (6.3 percent) to report food insufficiency.<sup>8</sup> On top of this, mass school closures means families with low incomes must try to provide two more meals a day to their children. In households with children, there were disparities by race: 10.5 percent of white, non-Hispanic, 12.3 percent of Asian, non-Hispanic, 21 percent of Latinx, and 24.6 percent of Black, non-Hispanic folks in households with kids reported food insufficiency in week 12 of the Census Household Pulse Survey.<sup>9</sup> In response, food banks have been overwhelmed.<sup>10</sup> This shows the immense need for strong intervention for food insecurity during the pandemic and subsequent recovery.

## SNAP Participation Rates for Women, Children, and Families

SNAP serves a diverse group of women, children, and families, including:

- In FY 2018, women were about 63 percent of nonelderly adult SNAP recipients.<sup>11</sup>
- Over six in ten (61 percent) of SNAP households with children were headed by a single adult, 91 percent of which were headed by women.<sup>12</sup>
- One in three (33 percent) adult SNAP recipients was a woman of color in 2018.<sup>13</sup>
- SNAP serves over 11 million people with disabilities.<sup>14</sup>
- In a national survey, 26.1 percent of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) women survey respondents and 41.2 percent of disabled LGBTQ survey respondents reported receiving SNAP.<sup>15</sup>
- SNAP serves over 17 million children, including 5 million children age four or younger.<sup>16</sup> Households with children make up 41 percent of all households receiving SNAP benefits.<sup>17</sup>
- In 2016, children were 11 percent of noncitizen recipients of SNAP, and women were almost 48 percent of noncitizen recipients of SNAP.<sup>18</sup>

## SNAP's Impacts on Women, Children, and Families

### SNAP and Health

Food insecurity has a direct correlation with physical and mental health. SNAP helps families put food on their table, increasing participants' food security, and consequently, serves as a critical health intervention for women, children, and families.

- **SNAP promotes better nutrition, reducing the risk of diet-related diseases.** Food insecurity is linked to an increase in the prevalence and severity of diseases such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and some cancers.<sup>19</sup>
- **SNAP frees up money in family budgets to spend on medical costs and other necessary care.**<sup>20</sup> Because of limited financial resources, those who are food insecure may attempt to stretch budgets by using strategies that can be harmful to their health, such as underusing or postponing medication because of cost,<sup>21</sup> postponing or forgoing preventive or needed medical care,<sup>22</sup> and forgoing the foods needed for special medical diets (e.g., diabetic diets).<sup>23</sup> People of color forgo care and medications at a higher rate due to lack of affordability and under- or un-insurance.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, by providing SNAP, families have more room in their budgets to pay for prescriptions, premiums, copays, and other vital health expenditures.
- **Receiving SNAP can reduce stress levels and improve mental health.** As financial strain often manifests itself as physical stress, studies have shown that food insecurity increases the risk of depressive symptoms or diagnosis. This is especially dangerous for groups of women already facing a higher risk of depression, anxiety and stress, such as women who have been exposed to violence or substance use disorder, women at risk of experiencing homelessness, refugees, pregnant women, and mothers.<sup>25</sup>
- **Obtaining food assistance benefits maternal and infant health.** Studies have demonstrated an association between food insecurity and complications of pregnancy, particularly second-trimester anemia, pregnancy-induced hypertension and gestational diabetes mellitus, and maternal pre-pregnancy weight, and gestational weight.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, higher food insecurity was associated with increased risk of birth defects, including cleft palate, spina bifida, and anencephaly.<sup>27</sup>
- **Seniors, a population at high risk of experiencing chronic medical conditions, have had improved health outcomes while receiving SNAP.** Senior SNAP participants were found to be 5 percentage points less likely to cut back on their medications because of cost than eligible nonparticipants.<sup>28</sup> A longitudinal study of seniors with low incomes eligible for Medicaid and Medicare found that participation in SNAP reduced the incidence of two very costly types of care – hospitalization and long term care.<sup>29</sup>

## SNAP and Education

Food assistance ensures that students in grades K-12 and college, including parenting students, do not have to focus on where their next meal is coming from more than their studies. Research shows that SNAP helps improve children's performance in elementary school and beyond.

- **For students in their critical years of development, SNAP can positively affect performance in school.** Children who experience hunger are seven times more likely than their counterparts to engage in physical altercations,<sup>30</sup> likely due to negative changes in mood related to hunger.<sup>31</sup> Lower levels of self-control in early childhood resulting from hunger lead to higher levels of behavioral issues as they grow, compared to their food-secure peers.<sup>32</sup> Studies have shown that students participating in SNAP have lower rates of disciplinary issues in the earlier part of the month, compared to later in the month when SNAP benefits usually run out.<sup>33</sup>
- **SNAP adapts to fit the needs of the modern college student.** Not all college students today are childless—many students, especially those in community college, are parenting students. Thirty-nine percent of parenting students, who are more likely to be women, receive SNAP.<sup>34</sup>
- **SNAP's impacts on students in post-secondary school reach beyond hunger alleviation.** The benefits of receiving a college education are extensive, with each level of postsecondary education correlated to improved social and economic outcomes.<sup>35</sup> On almost every measure of economic well-being and career attainment, college graduates fare better than their peers with less education.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, by providing basic food assistance for students, SNAP also supports employment stability and wage growth.<sup>37</sup>

## SNAP and the Economy

SNAP not only aids the economic security of individuals but stimulates the economy as whole, especially in times of economic crisis.

- **SNAP helps mitigate the impacts of a recession.** During periods of high employment, SNAP serves as an automatic stabilizer, expanding to cover households as they become eligible and decreasing when the economy improves. As a part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, a 13.6 percent increase<sup>38</sup> in SNAP benefits helped augment food expenditures by 5.4 percent between 2008-2009 during the Great Recession.<sup>39</sup>

- **SNAP helps the economy and businesses.** Studies estimate that \$1 of SNAP benefits generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in total economic activity during a recession.<sup>40</sup> In 2011, a total of \$71 billion was spent at SNAP authorized retailers, supporting small and mid-sized grocers.<sup>41</sup>
- **SNAP is directly correlated with job creation and support.** Every \$10,000 of SNAP created 1.0 jobs in rural areas and 0.4 jobs in urban areas, compared to 0.2 pre-recession.<sup>42</sup> As recently as 2018, SNAP supported 782,600 jobs.<sup>43</sup>

## General Barriers to SNAP Eligibility and Access

Some statutory and administrative rules either purposefully or inadvertently make SNAP more difficult for eligible applicants and current recipients to access benefits. While some of these barriers have persisted in the program for years, others are recent changes that have been instituted or proposed by the Trump administration to take SNAP away from families, discourage applicants, or render them ineligible altogether, thus reducing the ability for SNAP to help families with low incomes put food on their tables.

### Gross Income Test

**Generally, to be eligible for SNAP, households must have gross incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL).** For a family of four, this amounts to \$2,838 a month or \$34,060 a year.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, in order to be eligible to receive assistance, households must have extremely low incomes. However, states have some flexibilities with the gross income eligibility threshold.

- Broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE) allows states to lift the income eligibility threshold up to 200% of the FPL and phase out benefits more gradually, rather than recipients immediately losing benefits by falling off the “benefit cliff”, while also simplifying the application process.
- Higher income guidelines are especially helpful for families in states with higher costs of living, including high child care, housing, and health costs that consume large portions of family budgets and leave little left for buying food.
- Despite this, only 18 states set the threshold at 200% of the FPL, while 17 states have the threshold set at 150% of the FPL or below.<sup>45</sup>

## Asset Limits

**Currently, SNAP's eligibility criteria provide for a very low asset limit** (\$2,250 for most families and individuals or \$3,500 for households with elderly or disabled members). This asset limit discourages families with low incomes from saving enough to make it through a financial emergency, such as a sudden loss of a job, a medical bill, or an unexpected car repair bill.<sup>46</sup> This inability to build a financial cushion especially harmed families when the COVID-19 recession hit.

- States using BBCE can help women and families build modest savings to prepare for financial shocks without losing critical food assistance needed to keep them afloat.
- Today, 63 percent of U.S. children live in families that are asset poor—meaning their families could not afford to stay afloat after losing income for three months.<sup>47</sup> BBCE helps families with children build savings, rather than penalizing them for trying to build up the resources they need for economic self-sufficiency.
- Research has demonstrated that BBCE increases savings by families with low incomes. Households in states that utilize BBCE are eight percent more likely to have at least \$500 saved up, and five percent more likely to have a bank account.<sup>48</sup>
- While the vast majority of states (43) utilize BBCE to help families receiving SNAP build savings, three states only raise the asset limit to \$5,000, which does not provide much of a cushion in case of losing a job, and seven states do not use BBCE to raise the asset limit.<sup>49</sup>

## Lengthy and Complicated Application Processes

**Extensive application processes and other burdensome administrative requirements can impose unnecessary barriers for people in need of nutrition assistance.**

- Depending on the state, SNAP applications can range from 8-30 pages in length.<sup>50</sup>
- Multiple verification documents may be required as well, as applicants must provide proof of identity, residence, immigration status, all forms of income and resources, and medical expenses for deduction (for those who are age 60 or older or have disabilities).<sup>51</sup> This presents difficulties for applicants with limited English proficiency, applicants with disabilities,<sup>52</sup> seniors, and survivors of gender-based violence.
- Additionally, recertification periods to continue benefits vary from as little as one month to two years.<sup>53</sup>

- If households have a change in any of their initial application materials, they may have to provide additional paperwork to update their file and continue to receive benefits.<sup>54</sup>

## Time Limits

**Federal law generally limits SNAP eligibility for non-exempt adults, without dependent children, age 18 through 49 to just three months out of every three years unless they obtain, maintain, and document an average of 20 hours a week of employment.**<sup>55</sup> This provision denies people with low incomes food assistance when they most need it, and it does nothing to increase employment. Rather, harsh time limits shift the cost of providing food to states, cities, and local charities, which are less equipped to respond to a rise in need, and may result in higher rates of food insecurity among unemployed or under-employed individuals and their families.

- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, women faced structural barriers to consistently working (and reporting) 20 hours of work per week, such as overrepresentation in low-paid jobs with unpredictable schedules; discrimination and harassment at work, including retaliation, such as lost hours or job loss; and disproportionately bearing caregiving duties without paid family leave.<sup>56</sup>
- During the COVID-19 recession, families have lost jobs and hours of work and may be struggling to meet SNAP's work reporting requirements. Unfortunately, high unemployment will likely last into 2021 and 2022, and the structural barriers to meeting these requirements for women and other groups facing discrimination may persist even as the overall unemployment rate goes down. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act ("Families First") temporarily suspended the underlying work reporting requirement.<sup>57</sup>
- While states have some flexibilities to ameliorate the impact of the time limit, they do not fully address the structural issues that exist.

## Insufficient Benefit Amounts

**SNAP benefits allotments are calculated based on the Thrifty Food Plan, an outdated, inadequate measure of what it costs for households to maintain a nutritious diet.**

The USDA used national consumption data from 2001 to calculate actual consumption, food prices, and current dietary recommendations in creating weekly SNAP benefit allotments (called "market baskets"). However, the market baskets for the Thrifty Food Plan were based on reported consumption by low-income households, many of whom



have inadequate diets because of resource constraints. Using the Thrifty Food Plan unnecessarily limits households receiving SNAP benefits.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the current measure has not been revised since 2006 and adjusting the outdated measure for inflation is insufficient to adjust the benefit amounts to reflect current food prices.<sup>59</sup>

- While the national average cost per meal is \$3.03,<sup>60</sup> the average SNAP benefit is \$1.44 per meal. Therefore, families with low incomes are receiving less than half the SNAP benefits they need to cover their meal costs.
- The Thrifty Food Plan does not take into account the time cost to prepare meals; however, studies have found that the Thrifty Food Plan may require households with low incomes to devote more time than they have available to make meals from scratch.<sup>61</sup>
- In order to achieve the lowest cost possible, the Thrifty Food Plan makes assumptions about dietary patterns that greatly deviate from actual consumption and do not adequately reflect the reality of how households eat.<sup>62</sup> For example, the weekly market basket for a family of four contains approximately 0.64 ounces of “frozen or refrigerated entrees” and 2.1 ounces of “all cheese.” This translates to about two-thirds of a fish stick and two slices of cheese, for the whole family for a week.<sup>63</sup>
- The Thrifty Food Plan also is not adjusted for geographic variations in cost of food, despite a 2013 report from the Institute of Medicine stating that benefit design should be revisited to address the failure in accounting for geographic cost, among other things.<sup>64</sup> A 2018 report by the Urban Institute found that this shortfall is a widespread problem—the SNAP per meal benefit does not cover the cost of a low-cost meal in 99 percent of counties in the United States and Washington, DC.<sup>65</sup>

### *Lack of Supports to Meet Eligibility and Program Requirements*

**The budgets of many women with low incomes, especially women of color, are further strained because they disproportionately lack access to affordable, high-quality child care, transportation, housing, and other family supports.**

- In segregated neighborhoods especially, lack of transportation can hinder people from getting to public benefit offices to apply and comply with SNAP requirements, such as the time limit requirements.
- Households typically have a 45-day period for recertification, which is a small window of time for families with busy schedules.<sup>66</sup> If recertification requires

an in-person office visit, parents without child care and/or paid leave may be at risk of losing SNAP because of their caregiving responsibilities.

*COVID-19 has especially exemplified the need for changes to SNAP to ease use for families and individuals, including:*

- **Prohibition against purchasing hot- and ready-made foods.** Currently, ready-made and hot foods are excluded from the types of foods that can be purchased with electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards. Hot-and-ready meals not only help people spend less time in the grocery store amid COVID-19, but they may also provide participants with the most “bang for their buck”. While the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) allows states to apply for waivers to avoid this limitation, only Washington, D.C. and Tennessee have requested such a waiver.<sup>67</sup>
- **SNAP online purchasing.** Prior to COVID-19, only seven states were approved to utilize EBT cards for online grocery purchases. At the onset of the pandemic, as more states took interest in participating in the online purchasing pilot, some states reported that it could take up to six months or longer to implement the program due to the way in which EBT funds are processed and the lack of capability that stores had to accept payment online.<sup>68</sup> This delay was particularly harmful to seniors and people with disabilities who are at an increased risk for contracting COVID-19 in places with large crowds. Although the USDA was responsive to the immediate need of states, only 36 states and Washington, D.C. have been approved to participate in the pilot, forcing nearly 10 percent of SNAP recipients to use their SNAP benefits in a store.<sup>69</sup>

### **Population-Specific Barriers to SNAP Eligibility and Access**

Some SNAP administrative and legal requirements present specific barriers for populations that already face multiple forms of discrimination. This can make obtaining SNAP a difficult, and sometimes impossible, endeavor for populations that already experience economic insecurity at higher rates – and therefore especially need nutrition assistance.

#### *Barriers for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color*

**Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) are at the center of oppression in the United States** and face unique challenges because of the compounded effects

of various systems of power. Trauma stemming from historical race-based violence such as Native genocide and displacement, the enslavement of Black people, and the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II has undermined the trust BIPOC have in the federal government.<sup>70</sup>

**False race- and gender-based narratives have been used to demonize and shame women of color, especially Black women, for accessing public benefits** – including SNAP. In an economic system that disadvantages women generally and especially women of color, the need for SNAP and other public benefits to meet everyday needs is inevitable.

- Contrary to these false narratives, most people accessing public benefits like SNAP do work, but are concentrated in jobs that lack robust protections for workers where employers pay low wages, provide few benefits, and offer unstable work schedules.
- Policymakers have used these false narratives to support a scarcity approach to funding public benefits, in an attempt to justify austerity and redirect funds in the budget toward corporations rather than people.
- Combined, the stigma of receiving public benefits and the use of false narratives to justify underfunding have further discouraged eligible recipients from applying for public benefits.
- The prohibition against using benefits from the Food Distribution on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) and SNAP during the same month forces Indigenous households to choose which set of inadequate benefits to utilize – rather than providing an added layer of needed support.<sup>71</sup>
- Indigenous communities have long been stripped of food sovereignty due to forced displacement by the government.
  - o Federal programs like SNAP and FDPIR reduce tribal self-governance because tribal leaders are usually excluded from federal decision-making about nutrition assistance.
  - o This prevents tribes from administering the program in ways that meet the unique needs of their communities.
- Lack of trust in the government within BIPOC communities because of historic and present-day systemic racism can discourage eligible households from applying for assistance.

## *Barriers for Undocumented and Immigrant Families*

**On top of facing barriers to work due to citizenship status and racial discrimination in the job market and workplace, undocumented and immigrant families are often excluded from federal programs such as SNAP.** Even when eligible, immigrant and undocumented families may be unable to access these federal programs due to inadequate outreach.

- The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) created two categories of immigrants for purposes of determining public benefit eligibility. “Qualified immigrants” include refugees, lawful permanent residents (LPRs), and some other protected immigrant statuses.<sup>72</sup> “Non-qualified immigrants” include students and tourists, immigrants with temporary protected status, asylum applicants, and undocumented immigrants<sup>73</sup> and are generally ineligible for federal public benefits, including SNAP.<sup>74</sup>
- Qualified immigrants, excluding children, face a 5-year waiting period before receiving public benefits.<sup>75</sup>
- SNAP applications vary state by state, so depending on the capacity of the state agency, applications may not be available in a multitude of languages. Lack of state funding or capacity for translation services and outreach to immigrant households restricts the amount of people that know they are eligible, or that can apply even if eligible.

## *Barriers for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals*

**Incarcerated individuals and their families face health, economic, and social obstacles both during their incarceration and after they are released.** Access to programs like SNAP provides support as reentering individuals regain their footing; however, PRWORA drastically reduced access to these programs for formerly incarcerated people.<sup>76</sup>

- For people who were convicted of a drug felony:
  - o Guam and South Carolina still impose a lifetime ban on receiving SNAP and TANF, rendering thousands of people ineligible to receive benefits.<sup>77</sup>
  - o Many states restrict SNAP eligibility, such as by requiring drug testing or participation in a drug treatment program.<sup>78</sup> These requirements can create unnecessary financial barriers for people who are already experiencing economic hardship and may not be feasible for families with caregiving responsibilities.

- o Some states may opt to impose a two-year temporary disqualification period for people who violate parole.<sup>79</sup> This modification is especially harmful to people of color, as over-policing and underfunding of Black and Brown communities makes them more susceptible to recidivism.

### *Barriers for LGBTQ people*

Despite survey evidence that shows higher poverty rates for LGBTQ individuals, government poverty and hunger data often do not capture sexual orientation and gender identity. Surveys conducted by non-profits and academics often are not administered as frequently as government data is updated.<sup>80</sup>

This data discrepancy makes it harder to detect underlying gaps that exist in SNAP eligibility and benefits for the LGBTQ community. Additionally, **LGBTQ people are susceptible to discrimination in both the application process and during benefit use, creating unique challenges.**

- Transgender people, particularly trans people of color and trans people experiencing poverty and/or homelessness, participate in informal economies (e.g., sex work) at higher rates.<sup>81</sup> Stigma associated with these jobs can discourage individuals from applying for federal programs such as SNAP, which may entail reporting such income.<sup>82</sup>
- Lack of anti-bias training among government employees leads to microaggressions or discrimination, discouraging LGBTQ individuals from interacting with state agencies and utilizing them as a resource.<sup>83</sup> In-person interviews can be onerous and may lead to more gender-disaffirming and anti-LGBTQ conversations.
- The patchwork of state rules around gender identity and changing official government IDs, particularly in states that require gender affirmation/confirmation surgeries first, can make it difficult for transgender and gender-nonbinary people to have IDs that match their gender identity. Without accurate documentation, trans and gender-nonbinary people may have difficulty applying for SNAP.
- Even if an application is approved, identification requirements may also present barriers for LGBTQ people. While most states only require a pin number for security purposes, two states, Massachusetts and Missouri, require that photo identification be included on EBT cards.<sup>84</sup> This may exacerbate or revive

gender dysphoria and make recipients susceptible to discrimination at retailers in the event that their gender markers do not reflect their gender identity.

### *Barriers for Survivors of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault*

Women living in poverty experience domestic violence at twice the rate of those who do not, and the violence perpetrated against them can make it impossible to climb out of poverty.<sup>85</sup> Women who have experienced food insecurity in a 12-month period also face higher prevalence of stalking and physical violence from a partner compared to women who were not food insecure.<sup>86</sup>

#### **Survivor advocates agree: SNAP helps survivors of domestic violence establish their safety and stability.**<sup>87</sup>

- Survivors attempting to leave an abuser have reported administrative issues that prolong periods of food insecurity such as:<sup>88</sup>
  - o Trouble separating cases where both the abuser and survivor were receiving SNAP in the same household in a timely manner;
  - o Challenges qualifying for emergency or expedited SNAP when domestic violence and sexual assault (DV/SA) is indicated; and
  - o Delays in receiving EBT cards.
- In order to exercise control over their partners, abusers often actively prevent their partner from attaining economic independence by sabotaging their partner's economic stability. For example, an abuser may impede a survivor's access to financial resources, housing, child care, or health care; interfere with their education or employment; engage in reproductive coercion; ruin the survivor's credit; leave the survivor with tax debt; and more.
  - o These forms of abuse can make it hard for survivors to provide the documents they need for verification in the application process.<sup>89</sup> Survivors may also be asked to provide documentation identifying themselves as a survivor of DV/SA, including protection orders, court documents, police reports, etc., which may subject survivors to more trauma at the hands of the police or other state employees.<sup>90</sup> If survivors cannot obtain the required documents on their own, they may need to come back in contact with their abuser in order to obtain legal documents, subjecting them to further abuse.

- o DV/SA survivors may face challenges obtaining and maintaining 20 hours of employment per week because of abuse, instability in child care for noncustodial children or housing, or needing to take time off work to attend court hearings, which would make it harder to meet work reporting requirements.
- Survivors have also reported dissatisfaction in screening and referrals to resources, including, but not limited to:<sup>91</sup>
  - o Inconsistent/non-existent screening for DV/SA during the application process;
  - o Lack of screening for disability and other work barriers for DV/SA survivors;
  - o Lack of referrals to job or employment services; and
  - o Dependent care and child support deductions not being used to the best extent in benefit amount determinations.

### *Barriers for People With Disabilities*

People with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty and face food insecurity.<sup>92</sup> **Too often, people with disabilities face discrimination in employment as well as misconceptions about their ability to work.**<sup>93</sup> In addition, people with disabilities may need additional supports and services to obtain and keep jobs, which are often difficult to access.

- SNAP’s time limits harm many working-age adults, including people with disabilities.
  - o Many people with disabilities can work but are unable to meet the 20 hours per week work reporting requirements because of employment discrimination, including lack of accommodations. So they may lose access to SNAP after three months through no fault of their own.
  - o Some people with disabilities cannot work, but their SNAP offices do not help them with the exemption process from SNAP time’s limit and so they lose their benefits.
- To qualify for SNAP’s exceptions for people with disabilities, such as the higher asset limit, people with disabilities must receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), or other disability benefits.<sup>94</sup> Many people with disabilities have applied for such benefits, but have been waiting months or years for their applications to be accepted. Other disabled people do not meet the strict eligibility requirements for SSI or SSDI, yet face economic insecurity and would benefit from SNAP’s exceptions

for people with disabilities. Further, the USDA’s narrow definition of “disability” fails to count many people with disabilities from its participation statistics reporting.

### *Barriers for Older Adults*

Older women have higher poverty rates,<sup>95</sup> are more likely to live alone,<sup>96</sup> and are more likely to be food insecure than older men.<sup>97</sup> **Eligible older adults have historically participated in SNAP at very low rates, even pre-pandemic.** Additionally, adults age 50-64 who don’t yet receive Medicare, Social Security, or other public benefits for seniors have the highest rates of food insecurity for older adults.<sup>98</sup>

- Older adults age 50-59 are not exempt from time limits yet may face challenges in finding and keeping employment, especially during tight job markets, because of age-based discrimination.
- Despite being more likely to live on fixed incomes, many older adults only get the minimum weekly SNAP benefit of \$16. It is virtually impossible to meet complex dietary needs, including special diets based on medical conditions, on the minimum benefit amount.
  - o Adults over 60 are eligible for higher SNAP benefits by deducting their medical expenses. However, many are not aware of this option.<sup>99</sup>
  - o Even when they are aware, finding physical documentation of expenses can be burdensome, especially for older adults with mobility difficulties and cognitive decline.
- States can opt to participate in the Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP), a demonstration project designed to streamline enrollment in SNAP for seniors with very low incomes. However, only eight states participate in ESAP.<sup>100</sup>

### *Barriers for Young People and College Students*

Young people and college students are one of the fastest growing food insecure populations. A report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that 71 percent of undergraduate students now have at least one characteristic that complicates their ability to attend classes, such as being financially independent.<sup>101</sup> When students have to support themselves, they risk lower retention and graduation rates compared to their “traditional” counterparts. More robust and diverse supports can help mitigate that risk. Unfortunately, nationwide, 82 percent of college students who qualify for SNAP benefits do not receive them, translating to an average of \$1,500 in missed food assistance a year per student.<sup>102</sup>



- Most college students are not eligible for SNAP unless they work twenty hours per week or receive a federal work study grant. However, a reported 39 percent of all undergraduate students have a household income at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line,<sup>103</sup> which would allow them to receive SNAP benefits as a member of a SNAP-eligible family. Additionally, about half of low-income students also work at least twenty hours per week, and thus meet both eligibility requirements.<sup>104</sup>
- Due to lack of outreach on college campuses, many students aren't even aware that SNAP is an option for them. And, unhelpfully, the official USDA website immediately discourages able-bodied adults enrolled in colleges from applying for SNAP.<sup>105</sup>
- Low-income students, especially those who live on college campuses and don't have transportation to travel to larger grocery stores and supermarkets, may lack access to retailers that accept SNAP.

## The Trump administration has taken further action to reduce or take away SNAP from women, children, and families.

As if the barriers described above were not enough, the Trump administration has engaged in rulemaking and consideration of changes to how the government measures poverty. These harmful attacks on SNAP would reduce access to food or take food away from women, children, and families.

### *Executive Order 13828: Reducing Poverty in America by Promoting Opportunity and Economic Mobility*

**In April 2018, Trump signed an executive order to encourage agencies to explore ways of restricting or cutting public assistance programs, including identifying ways to add work reporting requirements.**<sup>106</sup>

This perpetuates racial and gender-based stereotypes and does nothing to address the inadequacies of our employment system to provide equal opportunity to every person seeking a job, a living wage, paid family and medical leave, and other benefits that promote economic stability for workers.

### *Public Charge*

Under the original "public charge" test, in an attempt to limit the number of green card and visa holders, when an immigrant seeks to enter the U.S or become a permanent resident, immigration officials considered whether the

individual receives the majority of their financial support from federal cash assistance or long-term institutional care.<sup>107</sup> Unfortunately, **in February 2020, the Department of Homeland Security drastically changed the already draconian public charge test through a regulation that counts the receipt of SNAP benefits against eligible families applying for entry or legal permanent residence.** Public charge is antithetical to the economic security of immigrant families, and this rulemaking created a chilling effect in which many immigrant households avoided utilizing public benefits in fear of risking their eligibility for permanent residence.<sup>108</sup>

### *Harsher SNAP Time Limits*

As mentioned above, non-exempt adults age 18 through 49 without dependent children are limited to receiving SNAP for just three months unless they obtain, maintain, and document 20 hours of work a week. While states can request a waiver of the time limit for areas with insufficient jobs for the population subject to the time limits, **the Trump administration finalized a rule that would make it harder for states to qualify for, obtain, and implement area waivers.**

- The final rule also limits the ability of states to carryover unused individual exemptions. These individual exemptions are vital for women who live in areas not covered by a state waiver but face challenges in meeting the 20-hour weekly work reporting requirement, such as women facing employment discrimination, domestic violence survivors, and former foster youth.<sup>109</sup>
- In 2019, USDA estimated that this rule would take SNAP away from 755,000 people.<sup>110</sup> The long recovery from the she-cession could create harsher consequences.
- While a district court temporarily blocked the rule, the USDA appealed that decision, even though we are in the midst of a recession.

### *Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility*

As noted above, BBCE provides states with flexibility to moderately alleviate SNAP's gross income and asset limits. BBCE is especially helpful for addressing child hunger: all school-aged children in households receiving SNAP are directly certified to receive free school meals.

**A 2019 proposed rule would drastically limit BBCE's effectiveness by restricting the types of benefits that would grant people categorical eligibility to participate in SNAP.**<sup>111</sup>

- In total, the USDA estimates that this rule would take SNAP away from 3.1 million individuals in 1.7 million households.<sup>112</sup>
- The USDA estimated that the proposed rule would threaten access to school meal programs for nearly 1 million children,<sup>113</sup> and the Urban Institute estimated it would jeopardize school meals for about 1.05 million students whose schools could lose community eligibility.<sup>114</sup>

### *Changes to Standard Heating and Utility Deductions*

Another 2019 proposed rule would eliminate states' flexibilities to set their Standard Utility Allowances (SUAs) with state-specific factors that affect the costs of utilities.<sup>115</sup>

- The proposed rule undermines the purpose of the SUA, which recognizes the burden that energy costs place on low-income households.
- The proposed rule threatens a SNAP benefit cut for an estimated 7 million people in 3 million households, amounting to a total \$1 billion reduction in benefits per year.<sup>116</sup>

### *Threat of Using a Slower Measure of Inflation to Adjust the Official Poverty Measure*

**In 2019, the Office of Management and Budget requested comments on whether the government should use a slower inflation index to make annual inflation adjustments to the Official Poverty Measure (OPM).** The current index already inadequately measures inflation as it does not account for higher rates of inflation that families with low incomes experience compared to the population as a whole,<sup>117</sup> and using a slower inflation index would lead to hundreds of thousands of people losing SNAP.<sup>118</sup>

## Recommendations

Advocates and policymakers can overcome these persistent barriers and Trump administration attacks and improve SNAP so no person goes hungry. Such improvements include:

- **Withdrawing harmful administrative actions**, including Executive Order 13828 and the public charge, SNAP time limits, Broad Based Categorial Eligibility, and Standard Heating and Cooling/Utility Deductions rulemakings.
- **Expanding eligibility to reach more families struggling to put food on their table**, such as by creating a more accurate measure of poverty and removing all eligibility limitations for formerly incarcerated people, immigrants, college students, and Indigenous people.

- **Increasing benefits so they last the full month**, such as by shifting from the Thrifty Food Plan to the Low Cost Food Plan, permanently boosting the minimum and maximum monthly benefits, establishing standardized excess medical deductions<sup>119</sup> for older adults and people with disabilities, and considering additional changes to the benefit calculation method to better acknowledge hefty child care, housing, and medical expenses.
- **Improving application processes**, such as by permanently adopting administrative flexibilities allowed by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, implementing the Elderly Simplified Application Project nationwide, modernizing SNAP platforms in all states to include online applications and recertifications, and improving training to screen for DV/SA and the exemptions and extensions available to survivors. Promote timely access to benefits for individuals who are leaving incarceration by accepting applications, completing phone interviews, and accessing their EBT cards prior to release.<sup>120</sup>
- **Improving outreach efforts**, such as by increasing language and interpreting services for non-native English speakers and people with disabilities; funding and improving targeted messaging for LGBTQ individuals, immigrant families, and young people, especially college students; and aligning information collected through financial aid offices to connect potentially eligible students.
- **Increasing race and gender justice** by giving more autonomy for Tribes, facilitating better inclusion of BIPOC in the policymaking process, and discontinuing the state option to require photos on EBT cards and simplifying the process for changing names on cards to prevent sex discrimination against transgender people.
- **Improving data collection on SNAP participation** by allowing people to self-identify as having a disability and adding sexual orientation and gender identity voluntary demographic questions to better understand food insecurity and SNAP participation rates.<sup>121</sup>

SNAP is integral to the economic security and well-being of women, children, and families – especially those facing multiple forms of discrimination. SNAP improves health, employment, and educational outcomes for individuals and families while supporting the economy as a whole. It is imperative to increase SNAP benefits and streamline eligibility and access so that all women and families can put food on the table.

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