

SNAP Time Limits Harm Women, LGBTQIA+ People, and Families

SNAP is critical for millions of women, LGBTQIA+ people, and their families across the country.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps millions of families put food on the table. It is a critical program in providing women, LGBTQIA+ people, and their families with the nutrition assistance needed to support their health and well-being. SNAP not only promotes better nutrition and reduces food insecurity, it also frees up money for those struggling to make ends meet to spend on other necessary costs, like medical care.

In January 2023, more than 42.6 million people received SNAP,¹ demonstrating the continued need for nutrition assistance even as the economy is recovering. Recent data on participation show that women, people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, and people with disabilities were more likely to participate in SNAP:

- From October 2019 to February 2020, women were more than six in 10 (63 percent) of adult SNAP recipients.
- About one in three (33.0 percent) non-elderly adult SNAP recipients was a woman of color in 2020.
- From June 2020 through September 2020, over six in 10 (64 percent) of SNAP households with children were headed by a single adult, 92 percent of which were headed by women.
- In 2020, 29 percent of LGBTQ women and 28 percent of nonbinary/genderqueer individuals reported that they, their partner, or their children received SNAP benefits in the past year.
- In 2015, SNAP served over 11 million people with disabilities.²

SNAP promotes health and economic security and must be protected and strengthened.

In 2021, SNAP moved about 2.8 million people out of poverty, including nearly 1.2 million women (316,000 of whom are Black, 293,000 of whom are Latina, 46,000 of whom are Asian, and 500,000 of whom are white, non-Hispanic).³ In addition, SNAP leads to improved health outcomes for families, as well as

improved education, economic self-sufficiency, and other positive outcomes for children who grow up in families with low incomes.⁴

Policy makers must strengthen and expand SNAP, including by eliminating existing program restrictions that make it more difficult for women, LGBTQIA+ people, and their families to access SNAP benefits. Instead, some Members of Congress want to expand these harmful restrictions, particularly time limits.

Time limits in SNAP harm women, LGBTQIA+ people, and their families.

Currently, the SNAP program imposes cruel and unnecessary time limits on program eligibility. Calling the SNAP time limits “work requirements” is a misnomer, as a person’s willingness to work or conduct an active job search does not suffice to protect them against being cut off from SNAP.⁵ Individuals ages 18 to 50 who are not students, pregnant, caring for a child or incapacitated person, and do not have a disability cannot receive SNAP for more than three months in a 36-month period if they cannot document sufficient work hours or participate in a work training program for at least 20 hours a week. These requirements are outdated and rooted in racist stereotypes about many SNAP recipients. The majority of adult SNAP recipients who can work, do work.⁶ States can currently waive these time limits for recipients in high unemployment areas.

Since 1996 when the time limit provisions were instituted, the negative impacts have been harsh, taking food benefits away from a person whether or not they are actively searching for a job or performing some hours of work.⁷ It is already challenging for many unemployed or underemployed workers to meet SNAP’s current time limits. Women are overrepresented in the low-wage workforce, which is plagued by unstable and unpredictable work schedules, nonstandard hours, part-time work, and few benefits like paid sick leave.⁸ Women are also more likely to face discrimination and harassment at work, which can result in lost hours or job loss.⁹ Moreover, many unemployed or underemployed adults subject to SNAP’s time limits face considerable barriers to employment.

The United States has a jobs deficit. There are not enough jobs with full-time hours and living wages. Even among those who had jobs in July 2023, 4.0 million were “part-time for economic reasons,” half (50.1 percent) of whom were women.¹⁰ As Bureau of Labor Statistics explained, “These individuals, who would have preferred full-time employment, were working part time because their hours had been reduced or they were unable to find full-time jobs.”¹¹

In July 2023, 5.8 million people were unemployed but looking for work.¹² Many of them were unemployed for substantially longer than three months. Indeed, the average (mean) jobless spell in July 2023 was 20.6 weeks.¹³ Those unemployed 15 weeks or more accounted for more than one in three unemployed job seekers (36.9 percent) and those out of work for 27 weeks or more accounted for nearly one in five unemployed people (19.9 percent).¹⁴

Jobless rates also vary by demographic group. In July 2023, the unemployment rate for Black people (5.8 percent) in the United States was nearly two times that for white people (3.1 percent).¹⁵ The unemployment rate for women ages 20 years and over was 3.1 percent, compared to 3.3 percent for adult men.¹⁶

In May 2023, Members of Congress committed to rolling back SNAP and other critical programs used an unrelated bill to expand SNAP’s existing time limits with the passage of the Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA).¹⁷ These provisions threaten the food security and well-being of nearly 750,000 people across the country.

In July 2023, with the end of the Public Health Emergency (PHE), SNAP time limits went into effect again, with impacts varying, depending on states’ policies and operations. Changes that go into effect in September 2023 include temporarily expanding SNAP time limits to those who are 50 years old.¹⁸ In October 2023, the SNAP time limit age range will increase further to include those who are 51 years old. By October 1, 2024, the age range will increase to subject those who are 52, 53, and 54 years of age.¹⁹

While the FRA did institute explicit exceptions to time limits for people who are homeless, veterans, or young adults aging out of foster care, they are temporary.²⁰ Moreover, as the disability community has shown, often the harm of time limits has spilled over to populations not technically subject to the time limits, including people with a disability who were not properly screened for their “fitness” for work.²¹

As if the FRA’s expansion of time limits is not harmful enough, additional proposals to expand SNAP’s harsh work time limits to more people would take SNAP away from even more women, LGBTQIA+ people, and families:

- Expanding the age limit to include people ages 50 to 59 in the time limits: This would be particularly harmful for older women, who face longer periods of unemployment. In July 2023, 16.9 percent of unemployed women ages 45 to 54 years and 23.5 percent of unemployed women ages 55 to 64 years had been unemployed for six months or more (compared to 18.8 percent for unemployed women ages 20 to 44 years old).²²
- Subjecting parents with children ages 6 and older to the time limits: Some proposals would change the exception to the time limits for parents, exempting only parents caring for a child under age six from SNAP’s time limits. But parents with school-aged children also have significant caregiving responsibilities, including during after-school hours and school vacations. The conditions of low-wage work, combined with caregiving and shortages of quality, affordable child care, can make it challenging for parents with school-aged children to consistently meet SNAP’s work requirements. Imposing time limits on parents of school-aged children will ensure that families with children will lose food assistance, which will negatively impact children’s development and health.
- Rolling back improvements to SNAP: The estimated average Fiscal Year 2023 SNAP benefit for a one-person household is about \$195 per month, which is higher than the average benefit before the pandemic because of U.S. Department of Agriculture’s recent update to the Thrifty Food Plan based on the directive in the 2018 Farm Bill.²³ However, policymakers have threatened to roll back these provisions and reduce the rate each family receives.

Congress should protect and strengthen SNAP.

Taking away nutrition assistance will not help women and LGBTQIA+ people find jobs any faster; it will just increase hunger. As a nation, we should fight hunger by helping families struggling to make ends meet put food on the table. Congress should increase SNAP benefits so fewer families have to choose between food and shelter or other necessities and reduce inequities in SNAP that prevent many women, LGBTQIA+ people, and their families from accessing this critical program. SNAP needs to be protected and strengthened.

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- 12 Ibid.
- 13 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “The Employment Situation—July 2023” (August 4, 2023), https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/empsit_08042023.htm, Table A-12.
- 14 National Women’s Law Center calculations based on U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “The Employment Situation—July 2023” (August 4, 2023), https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/empsit_08042023.htm, Table A-12.
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- 17 Catherine Buhrig, “Implementing SNAP Provisions in the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023” (USDA, June 30, 2023), <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/Fiscal-Responsibility-Act-of-2023-Implementation-Memo.pdf>.
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