

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): History, Politics, and Public Health Implications

This commentary introduces a special section of *AJPH* on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the US government's largest antihunger program and third-largest anti-poverty program. SNAP demonstrably lifts adults, children, and families out of poverty, thereby constituting a vital component of this nation's public health safety net.

Despite its well-documented benefits, SNAP is under political and budgetary siege, mainly from congressional representatives and lobbying groups opposed to a federal role in welfare. In part, SNAP is protected from total annihilation by its unusual authorizing legislation—the Farm Bill.

This commentary provides a brief overview of the political history of SNAP and its Farm Bill location as background to the deeper analyses provided in this series of articles. (*Am J Public Health*. 2019;109:1631–1635. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2019.305361)

Marion Nestle, PhD, MPH



See also the *AJPH* Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program section, pp. 1636–1677.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, is by far the largest antihunger program in the United States and, therefore, is a vital component of the welfare safety net for low-income Americans. SNAP is demonstrably effective in reducing hunger, food insecurity, and poverty, thereby reducing the effects of these conditions on public health (see Table 1 for definitions). In 2017, SNAP alone is said to have lifted 3.4 million people out of poverty, nearly half of them children, and it ranks third only to Social Security and Earned Income Tax Credits in its effectiveness in reducing poverty.¹ It also benefits the economy with a multiplier effect that makes every \$1 billion in SNAP benefits worth \$1.5 billion in gross domestic product.²

Despite the evident value of SNAP to public health and to the economy, it is the target of critics across the political spectrum. Antihunger and public health supporters of SNAP want the program to do more and better: to increase enrollments and benefits and improve diet quality.³ But opponents of government-supported welfare want SNAP to do less. They view the program as too bloated and expensive, and they charge that it encourages idleness, dependency, and fraud.⁴ Although these charges do not hold up under scrutiny, opponents of

SNAP control the power in today's political environment. Even so, the program is protected against total destruction by the peculiar location of its authorizing legislation—in the Farm Bill (Pub L 115–334), the law principally designed to protect the interests of agribusiness. Congress cannot get the votes to pass agricultural supports unless it simultaneously authorizes SNAP.

But before exploring the history of SNAP and its contested politics, it is worth reviewing some basic facts. SNAP is indeed large and expensive: in 2018, it provided 40.3 million adults and children (one in eight Americans) with an average benefit of \$125 per month—at a total cost of \$60.8 billion in benefits and \$4.4 billion in administrative expenses.⁵ SNAP is administered by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) but dominates expenditures; it accounts for about 65% of the agency's budget—and nearly 80% of total Farm Bill expenditures. SNAP is an entitlement; anyone who qualifies on the basis of income and assets can obtain benefits, and enrollments rise and fall with changes in the poverty rate.⁶ Participants receive

SNAP benefits via Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) debit cards administered through contracts between USDA and banks.

SNAP is relatively permissive: participants may use EBT cards to buy any food, beverage, or food seed or plant but may not use those funds to buy alcoholic beverages, tobacco products, pet foods, dietary supplements, hot foods, or nonfood items (they can buy these items with their own money). The USDA requires retailers authorized to sell foods to SNAP participants to stock specific categories and amounts of staple foods.⁷ Most SNAP funds (82%) are spent at supermarkets or superstores, making retailers the program's greatest beneficiaries and defenders of the status quo.⁸ A smaller percentage (15%) is spent at convenience or small grocery stores and, despite substantial promotion and incentive efforts, only 0.02% is spent at farmers markets.⁹ In 2019, a USDA pilot project permitted New York State participants to use SNAP benefits to shop online through Amazon, Walmart, and ShopRite; other states and online retailers are expected to follow.¹⁰

SNAP unquestionably reaches the poor and vulnerable. In 2017,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marion Nestle is with the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, New York University, New York, NY.

Correspondence should be sent to Marion Nestle, Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, 411 Lafayette, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10003-7035 (e-mail: marion.nestle@nyu.edu). Reprints can be ordered at <http://www.ajph.org> by clicking the "Reprints" link.

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TABLE 1—Basic Definitions of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Policy Terms

Term	Definition
Hunger	The highly unpleasant sensation elicited by acute or chronic lack of sufficient food.
Malnutrition	The longer-term physiological or cognitive signs of chronically deficient intake of energy or nutrients.
Food insecurity	Inadequate access to reliable sources of food or to resources to obtain food. By this definition, people are considered food insecure even when they have enough but acquired it through food banks, private charity, or means that are socially unacceptable or illegal.
Poverty	The lack of resources to obtain food, clothing, housing, and other necessities of life. In 2017, the United States defined the poverty threshold as \$12 488 for an individual and \$25 094 for a household of four people (http://bit.ly/2lVcHRn).
Public health consequences of poverty and food insecurity	Children and adolescents: higher risk of low birth weight, short stature, poor oral health, asthma, developmental delays, learning disabilities, behavioral and emotional problems, high-risk behaviors. Adults: higher risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, depression, disability, poor oral health, reduced life expectancy (http://bit.ly/2kJPzot).

the average SNAP household income was just 63% of the poverty line. SNAP households include children (43.5%), the elderly (13%), and the disabled (11%). SNAP participants are 36% White (compared with 61% of the general population¹¹), 25% African American (compared with 13%), and 16.5% Hispanic (compared with 18%). Able-bodied adults without dependents are required to work or to be enrolled in employment programs for at least 20 hours per week; otherwise, they cannot receive more than 3 months of benefits in a 36-month period (some states have waived these requirements). In 2017, 25% of SNAP recipients worked, although these jobs did not raise their incomes high enough to disqualify them for benefits.¹²

To introduce the series of articles about SNAP in this issue of *AJPH*, this commentary deals with how this program, which started out in the Great Depression of the 1930s as a means to alleviate hunger while also helping farmers, evolved to become the primary means of US food assistance, embedded in the

Farm Bill, and the flash point for political battles about whether and how to deal with American poverty. Current efforts to “re-form” SNAP (in quotes because the term is often a euphemism for budget cuts, enrollment reductions, work requirements, and, these days, keeping even legal immigrants off the rolls), are deeply rooted in this country’s history of welfare, food assistance, and policy compromise.

WELFARE HISTORY: ATTITUDES TOWARD THE POOR

To anyone who has studied the English Poor Laws dating back to the 1600s, the current rationale for opposition to SNAP sounds remarkably familiar. Those laws derived from views of the poor as inherently unworthy, and of poverty as a matter of personal choice—not as the result of misfortune or a rapidly industrializing economic system. Through public taxes, the Poor Laws authorized local provision of benefits. Out of fear of

inducing dependency, the laws kept benefits at levels barely adequate to prevent overt starvation or rebellion. They required recipients to work and to be punished for not working; they created poorhouses, authorized imprisonment, and encouraged child labor. Although their ostensible purpose was to relieve hunger, they also had underlying political goals: to maintain public order, control the poor, and maintain a low-wage work force, and, for politicians, to gain power.¹³

The punitive nature of these laws and their failure to relieve poverty are well known from the writings of Charles Dickens and others. Nevertheless, the colonists brought them to America where they have influenced policy ever since. As in England, local governments could not keep up with the demands, even when supplemented by churches, fraternal orders, and private charities. A federal role in poor relief only became possible in 1913 when Congress passed the income tax law. Federal involvement in food assistance began later, in the 1930s, when

massive unemployment and devastating poverty became a political problem that could not be ignored.¹⁴

Then and now, government interventions elicited fierce debates. How should societies balance compassion for the poor against fears that tax-supported relief measures would induce dependency? What level of benefit is appropriate? Should benefits be provided in the form of cash or ways that enable agencies to control what beneficiaries can buy? Should benefits be tied to work requirements? It is fair to say that positions on these arguments have far more to do with politics than public health.

FOOD ASSISTANCE HISTORY: SURPLUSES VS HUNGER

SNAP may be the third-largest welfare program in the United States, but it is by far the largest of the USDA’s food assistance programs.¹⁵ Table 2 summarizes key events in its history. The origins of SNAP date back to the unemployment-induced poverty of the Great Depression, when farmers were producing surplus food but masses of people could not afford to buy it. Some farmers went bankrupt, but others deliberately destroyed their animals, grains, or fruit. That so many people were relying on soup kitchens or breadlines while farmers—and sometimes the government—destroyed unsold food created a political crisis. The government’s win-win solution: distribute surplus commodities to the poor while also—and politically more important—paying farmers a fair price for what they produced.¹⁶

TABLE 2—Selected Events in the History of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): United States, 1939–2019

Date	Event
1939–1943	USDA’s first food stamp program. People on relief can buy orange stamps to exchange for food at participating retail stores; for each dollar stamp purchased, USDA provides a blue stamp worth 50 cents for surplus commodity foods at those stores.
1961–1964	Pilot food stamp programs. Participants in 22 states can buy subsidized stamps to exchange for eligible foods and beverages at retail stores.
1964	Food Stamp Act authorizes recipients to purchase subsidized stamps usable for eligible retail foods and beverages.
1973	Farm Bill: Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act amends the Food Stamp Act of 1964 to require state plans for food stamp programs; adds imported foods and food-producing seeds and plants to SNAP-eligible items.
1977	Farm Bill: Food and Agriculture Act incorporates the Food Stamp Act of 1977 as Title XIII; eliminates purchase requirements for the stamps.
1990	Mickey Leland Memorial Domestic Hunger Relief Act authorizes use of EBT cards.
1996	Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act restricts food stamp eligibility, reduces benefits, tightens work requirements, and expands penalties.
2008	Farm Bill: Food, Conservation, and Energy Act. Title IV Nutrition renames the program SNAP.
2014	Farm Bill: Agricultural Act. Title IV Nutrition tightens SNAP eligibility and verification requirements.
2018	Farm Bill: Agriculture Improvement Act. Despite attempts to introduce more stringent work requirements, Title IV Nutrition remains relatively unchanged. Department of Homeland Security proposes to refuse admission to the United States of aliens likely to use public benefits, including food assistance. White House proposes to introduce “harvest boxes” of commodities to replace some SNAP benefits and to eliminate state waivers for SNAP work requirements.
2019	USDA implements congressionally mandated pilot projects for online purchases; finalizes “public charge” measures to discourage immigrants from using SNAP and other services. Supreme Court rules that retailers do not have to reveal data on in-store SNAP purchases. Administration proposes to end categorical eligibility for participants qualifying for other federal and state assistance.

Notes. EBT = Electronic Benefit Transfer; USDA = US Department of Agriculture.

The USDA’s food distribution programs did indeed help farmers more than the poor. They also excluded food retailers and wholesalers, who lobbied for the first food stamp program in 1939. The USDA sold orange stamps that low-income participants could exchange at retail stores for any food except alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and items eaten on premises (soft drinks were added to the exclusions in 1941, but later reinstated). For each dollar spent on orange stamps, the USDA gave participants blue stamps worth 50 cents that had to be spent on surplus commodities—beans, eggs, and fruit, for example. During the 4 years of its

existence, this program reached 4 million people. Food stamps converted participants into consumers. It was popular with retail grocers and with participants who had enough money to invest in the stamps. It ended in 1943 during World War II when unemployment declined along with agricultural surpluses.¹⁷

Poverty and hunger continued after the war, but attempts to reinstate food stamps failed until 1961 when President John F. Kennedy initiated pilot programs in several states. Participants still had to buy the stamps but did not have to use the bonus stamps for surplus commodities. This change further entrenched food stamps as a consumer program

with benefits for retailers and the makers of processed foods. By 1964, 370 000 participants in 22 states were participating in pilot programs at an annual cost of \$30.5 million.¹⁸

POLITICAL LOGROLLING: SNAP IN THE FARM BILL

SNAP may be critical to the health of participants, but it has always been subject to rules and funding set by congressional agriculture committees whose primary mandate is to promote agribusiness. This odd situation is attributable in part to SNAP’s

origins in USDA-managed food distribution programs but also to the program’s increasing integration into Farm Bills.

From 1954 to 1964, members of Congress introduced legislation for national food stamp programs. These bills were largely supported by urban Democrats who viewed food stamps as public welfare, distinct from commodity agriculture. The bills were largely opposed by Republicans and Southern Democrats uncomfortable with their cost and lack of benefit to farmers, but also politically opposed to fostering dependency, expanding USDA’s mission, and promoting civil rights for Southern participants.

Although Congress passed food stamp legislation in 1959, the program was not implemented until 1964 when President Lyndon B. Johnson orchestrated classic political “logrolling.” Urban Democrats agreed to vote for wheat and cotton legislation only if rural Democrats would agree to vote for food stamps (Republicans generally disapproved of both measures).¹⁹ As passed, the purpose of the Food Stamp Act of 1964 (Pub L 88–525) was to permit low-income households to “receive a greater share of the Nation’s food abundance.” The act eliminated the surplus commodity requirement, excluded imported foods, and required participants to use the stamps only at qualified grocery stores at prevailing retail prices—a loss for farmers, but a win for retailers.

After 1964, as the program grew in coverage and cost, Congress responded by introducing tighter eligibility standards, work requirements, penalties for nonworking participants, and measures to ensure accountability and prevent fraud. Congress also increasingly

embedded food stamps in Farm Bills. The 1973 Farm Bill amended the 1964 Food Stamp Act, adding imported foods to the list of eligible items. The 1977 bill incorporated the entire Food Stamp Act as a separate title for “raising levels of nutrition among low-income households,” and the 2008 bill renamed the program SNAP in view of its nutritional purpose and the replacement of stamps by EBT cards.

During the 1970s, budget reductions and more restrictive welfare policies reduced program participation. In the early 1980s, local communities and states began to document the failure of both the federal safety net and private charity to meet the income and food needs of the poor.²⁰ The program grew again and, by 1994, more than 27 million people were enrolled. Two years later, President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (Pub L 104–193) to “end welfare as we know it.”²¹ This act further restricted program eligibility, tightened work requirements, reduced benefits, and expanded penalties. Food stamp enrollments fell, setting a precedent for how such measures could be used to weaken the program.

SNAP UNDER SIEGE: “REFORM” VS SAFETY NET

Although food insecurity has now declined from peak levels, it still affects 12% of the population.²² Public health advocates continue to urge improvement of SNAP’s outreach, eligibility, and benefits. They also call for efforts to promote healthier diets among SNAP participants and urge the USDA to release store data on

SNAP food purchases. Although limited information from one retailer suggests that SNAP participants use their benefits to buy more highly processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages than does the general population,²³ most retailers have refused to disclose this information. The USDA says it cannot compel retailers to share such data without a congressional mandate, and, as discussed by Jennifer Pomeranz in this issue (p. 1659), the Supreme Court has ruled that retailers do not have to disclose this information. The USDA did establish an obesity-prevention grant program in 2016²⁴ but has rejected attempts by cities and states to conduct pilot projects to remove sugary drinks and other highly processed (“junk”) foods from SNAP purchase eligibility.

In the current political climate, concerns about cost and dependency far outweigh concerns about the nutritional health of the poor. Thus, the government’s recent “reform” efforts have included more stringent work requirements, a proposal to partially replace SNAP benefits with “harvest boxes” of surplus commodities, enforcement of “public charge” measures to deny admissibility or deport immigrants—even those legally admitted—who use federal food assistance, a requirement that sponsors of immigrants reimburse the costs of public assistance, and a proposal to eliminate automatic SNAP eligibility for people who qualify for other federal and state benefits. USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue justifies such measures as promoting personal responsibility: “government dependency has never been the American dream.”²⁵ As was their true purpose, these measures have succeeded in reducing SNAP enrollments.

The articles in this special section of *AJPH* address these issues head on. They begin with analyses of SNAP’s overall importance and accomplishments (Keith-Jennings et al., p. 1636) in settings both rural (Harnack et al., p. 1641) and urban (Cohen, p. 1646) and, in a relatively new development, among college students (Freudenberg et al., p. 1652). Pomeranz (p. 1659) provides an analysis of why SNAP expenditure data are essential for effective advocacy for program improvements. As for alternative ways to address poverty, Gaines-Turner et al. (p. 1664) explore how SNAP participants themselves view program and policy needs, and Fernald and Gosliner (p. 1668) examine how other countries have chosen to address poverty and food insecurity, often more effectively than in the United States.

Together, these articles comprise a textbook case study of a food assistance program that could do far more to address both poverty and food insecurity—if only it were not blocked by partisan politics. Similarly blocked are other policies known to reduce poverty and its public health consequences: adequate minimum wages, tax credits, subsidies for housing, health care, child care, job training. Objections that the costs of food assistance and other public health antipoverty policies are too high are clearly not based on resource availability but rather derive from dismissive attitudes toward the poor, politics, and lack of political will, as the articles in this *AJPH* section so clearly demonstrate. **AJPH**

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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