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Get the Facts About SNAP

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) served more than 46 million Americans in 2014 (as of November 2014). Enrollment in the program almost doubled in the wake of the recession as more people struggled to provide for their families.

Here are some key facts about SNAP:

SNAP works exactly as it's supposed to. SNAP was designed to respond quickly and efficiently to increases in poverty and unemployment. When those conditions spiked in 2008, 2009, and 2010, so did SNAP participation. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimates that participation will go down to pre-recession levels as the economy recovers.¹

SNAP reaches exactly whom it's supposed to. The average SNAP household has a gross monthly income of \$758 and countable resources, or assets, of \$451. This is well below the strict national income and asset limits. Eighty-three percent of SNAP households have incomes below the poverty line, which is \$23,624 for a family of four. Additionally, 75 percent of all SNAP benefits go to the most vulnerable households—those with children, elderly, or disabled people.²

SNAP participation has increased mainly due to the poor economy. The largest increases in SNAP participation came on the heels of the recession (see above). Additionally, many more eligible Americans accessed SNAP in the last decade. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 83 percent of eligible Americans participated in the program in 2012 (the latest year for which we have data) compared to 56.7 percent in 2000.³

SNAP doesn't create dependency. Data show that 3 out of 4 new SNAP participants leave the program within 2 years, and half receive benefits for 10 months or fewer.⁴ In 42 percent of households receiving SNAP benefits, at least one adult is working but still cannot



Laura Elizabeth Pohl for Bread for the World

SNAP is a lifeline for millions of hungry Americans. Congress must create a circle of protection around SNAP.

afford to put food on the table. In a family budget, food is the most easily squeezed line item. SNAP helps fill the food budget gap for households struggling with unemployment or underemployment.⁵

SNAP has the lowest fraud and error rates on record. Increased oversight and transparency at the USDA has led to better enforcement.⁶ The big picture shows that fraud and errors are exceptions. The USDA tracks two types of SNAP fraud data: trafficking and error rate.

1. SNAP trafficking is the illegal, intentional exchange of SNAP benefits for cash. *Trafficking has dropped from about 4 cents on the dollar to about 1 cent.*
2. SNAP's error rate, which accounts for both underpayment and overpayment of benefits, remains at a

record low of 3.2 percent. *The majority of SNAP payment errors are a result of administrative errors, not intentional fraud*, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

Charity alone can't feed everyone. Our federal nutrition programs deliver more than 19 times the amount of food assistance as private charitable sources. All food programs have been stretched thin by our economic downturn. Food bank demand has increased nearly 50 percent since 2006⁷ and 34 percent of Americans admit that they've cut back on donations to congregations and houses of worship,⁸ making the role of federal programs even more crucial.

With budgets and spending at the forefront of national discourse, it's easy to put a target on a program that's grown as much as SNAP. But it's dishonest to say SNAP is out of control spending when the facts show that it's a temporary increase in a program meant to expand when people are struggling.



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Endnotes

¹ Congressional Budget Office. *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Baseline Projections*. January 2015. <http://www.cbo.gov/publication/44211>

² USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis. *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2013*. December 2014. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/ops/Characteristics2013.pdf>

³ USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. *Reaching Those In Need: Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2012*. February 2015. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/ops/Reaching2012.pdf>

⁴ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. *Building a Healthy America: A Profile of SNAP*. April 2012.

⁵ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. *Policy Basics: Introduction to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)*. Updated July 9, 2012. <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=222>.

⁶ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. *Fighting SNAP Fraud*. Last modified May 24, 2012. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/fraud.htm>.

⁷ Feeding America. *Hunger and Poverty Statistics*. <http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-facts/hunger-and-poverty-statistics.aspx>.

⁸ Barna Group. *The Economy Continues to Squeeze Americans' Charitable Giving*. June 28, 2012. <http://www.barna.org/donorscause-articles/571-the-economy-continues-to-squeeze-americans-charitable-giving>.