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SNAP Benefit Boost Would Get Needed Food Aid to the Poorest Participants, Who Have Been Left Out

By Stacy Dean, Lauren Hall, Brynne Keith-Jennings, and Dottie Rosenbaum

Congress may head home at the end of September without passing needed additional stimulus measures to respond to the alarming numbers of families that are struggling to put enough food on the table and facing other economic hardships due to COVID-19. A top priority for lawmakers this month should be raising SNAP (food stamp) benefits as a way of mitigating hardship and injecting fast, high “bang-for-the-buck” stimulus into the economy. We estimate that this would help more than 16 million people, including 7 million children, who live in households that participate in SNAP and who have not received extra SNAP COVID-emergency benefits.

We’ve recommended increasing the SNAP maximum allotment by 15 percent until economic measures show that unemployment is no longer significantly elevated. That would amount to about \$25 more per person per month, or just under \$100 per month in food assistance for a family of four. The House-passed Heroes Act includes a time-limited 15 percent bump in SNAP benefits. This increase would ensure that the poorest SNAP households receive additional help from SNAP at a time when many households face severe hardship.¹ The relief proposals offered by the White House and Senate Republican leadership, however, have been inadequate and include no additional food assistance.²

SNAP Boost Would Alleviate High Levels of Food Hardship

The Census’ Household Pulse Survey (collected over recent months and through late August) and other surveys reveal an ongoing and urgent crisis,³ with millions struggling to pay for food, housing,

¹ CBPP, “Tracking the COVID-19 Recession’s Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships,” September 11, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and>; and Brynne Keith-Jennings, “Food Need Very High Compared to Pre-Pandemic Levels, Making Relief Imperative,” CBPP, September 10, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/food-need-very-high-compared-to-pre-pandemic-levels-making-relief-imperative>.

² Sharon Parrott, “With Millions Facing Serious Hardship, McConnell Plan Doesn’t Meet Nation’s Needs,” CBPP, September 8, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/with-millions-facing-serious-hardship-mcconnell-plan-doesnt-meet-nations-needs>.

³ Michael Karpman *et al.*, “The COVID-19 Pandemic Is Straining Families’ Abilities to Afford Basic Needs,” Urban Institute, April 28, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/covid-19-pandemic-straining-families-abilities>.

and other basic needs.⁴ About 10 percent of all adults reported that their household sometimes or often didn't have enough to eat in the last seven days, according to the latest data, collected August 19 through 31. While not directly comparable, this figure shows how high food needs are compared to pre-pandemic times: about 3.7 percent of adults reported that their household had "not enough to eat" sometimes or often in the 12 months of 2019, CBPP analysis of Department of Agriculture (USDA) data show.

The hardship figures reported in the Household Pulse data are even higher for Black and Latino adults, with 19 percent of Black and 17 percent of Latino adults reporting that their household sometimes or often didn't have enough to eat in the last seven days, compared to 7 percent of white adults.⁵ These disproportionate impacts reflect harsh, longstanding inequities, often stemming from structural racism. For example, Black and Latino people disproportionately work in low-paying industries that have incurred deep job losses during this recession.

Also alarming, 9 to 14 percent of adults with children reported that their children sometimes or often didn't eat enough in the last seven days because they couldn't afford it, the data show. That translates into millions of children. These figures have also risen sharply, with about 1 percent of adults with children in 2019 USDA data reporting that children were sometimes or often not eating enough at some point in the last 30 days, compared to up to 14 percent reporting this problem within the last seven days in the Pulse data. (Note that the most recent Pulse survey results are not comparable to data from prior weeks due to some methodological issues.) As we've written, children not getting enough to eat is especially concerning because it can lead to worse developmental, health, and even economic outcomes for them later in life.⁶

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act of March included an important provision to let states give SNAP households temporary emergency allotments up to the maximum benefit that a SNAP household can receive. (See box, "Emergency Allotments Leave Out Millions.") These allotments help boost benefits for millions of households, but they do not help the poorest SNAP households, including about 1 in 3 SNAP families with children, which include at least 5 million children. Children who live in households with monthly disposable income below 15 percent of the poverty line (about \$266 for a family of three) are not helped at all by the SNAP emergency allotments. Another 2 to 3 million children receive less than about \$25 per person per month, the amount they would receive under a 15 percent increase to SNAP maximum benefits.

This group is missing out on much-needed food assistance at a time when food needs have risen at an alarming rate, particularly among households with children and people of color.

[afford-basic-needs](#); and Lauren Bauer, "The COVID-19 crisis has already left too many children hungry in America," Brookings Institution, May 6, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/05/06/the-covid-19-crisis-has-already-left-too-many-children-hungry-in-america/#cancel>.

⁴ CBPP, "Tracking the COVID-19 Recession's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships," updated September 11, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and>.

⁵ Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey for August 19-31, September 9, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/hhp/hhp13.html>.

⁶ Brynne Keith-Jennings, "Boosting SNAP: Benefit Increase Would Help Children in Short and Long Term," CBPP, July 30, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/boosting-snap-benefit-increase-would-help-children-in-short-and-long-term>.

Emergency Allotments Leave Out Millions

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act provided several temporary but important flexibilities and benefit changes to supplement SNAP's existing abilities to address the short-term public health emergency. For SNAP benefits, the Families First Act provided authority for USDA to approve state waiver requests to temporarily raise SNAP allotments to address increased food needs.

USDA interpreted the new authority as allowing states to increase household benefits to the level of the SNAP maximum allotment for those households that don't otherwise receive the maximum allotment. All states used the authority to increase benefits to the maximum amount for each household size. While these SNAP emergency allotments are providing a measure of economic stimulus and alleviating hardship for the households receiving them, nearly 40 percent of SNAP households already receive the SNAP maximum benefit and thus cannot receive any additional resources for food under this provision. As a result, the benefit increase is not well targeted to those with the lowest incomes and the greatest needs.

These SNAP households are, by definition, the SNAP households with the lowest incomes; they receive the maximum benefit because they have no disposable income available to purchase food under the SNAP benefit calculation rules. (Some of these households likely received or will receive additional benefits through the Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) program, through which states are providing school meal replacement benefits. But these benefits are compensating families for lost food assistance; they are not providing any additional support to address rising food costs or increased hardship, and these benefits are set to expire at the end of September without congressional action.)

The emergency allotments are available only while federal and state emergency or disaster declarations are in effect and only for as long as USDA chooses to approve them. USDA is approving the waivers on a month-by-month basis at this time. It has approved all states that requested it to issue emergency allotments as long as the state has a state emergency declaration order in place. All states with such an order, except Nebraska, have sought the emergency allotments for every month of the pandemic. Nebraska recently reported that it will not seek a waiver for September.^a

^a CBPP, "States Are Using Much-Needed Temporary Flexibility in SNAP to Respond to COVID-19 Challenges," updated September 15, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/states-are-using-much-needed-temporary-flexibility-in-snap-to-respond-to>.

Table 1 below provides information for each state on the children in SNAP households who are not being helped by the current emergency allotments. These estimates are based on the number of households in each state before the pandemic (specifically, December 2019 to February 2020) and the SNAP Household Characteristics data for fiscal year 2018, the most recent detailed information about SNAP recipients. These estimates are almost certainly too low, as they do not take into account additional households that are now participating in SNAP as a result of the economic crisis.⁷

⁷ Available data suggest that from February to June 2020, the number of SNAP participants grew by 17 percent nationally, an increase of about 6-7 million people. See CBPP, "Tracking the COVID-19 Recession's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships," updated September 11, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and>.

Table 2 shows the same information for SNAP participants of all ages. These estimates show that nearly 12 million individuals did not receive an increase in benefits because they were already at the maximum allotment. More than 16 million people would receive more assistance through the 15 percent increase than they have under the emergency allotments. These figures include children, adults in households with children, and adult-only households.

Children missing out on additional SNAP benefits is concerning, especially given the high rates of food hardship and the serious long-term consequences for children who miss out on basic nutrition; these should spur policymakers to respond immediately. While the risk is greatest for children who chronically lack sufficient food, the shock of becoming food insecure may itself affect children's behavior,⁸ and living in a household that's even temporarily food insecure is linked with negative development among toddlers, some research suggests.⁹

Boosting SNAP benefits can be done in addition to the emergency allotments, and both are important complementary boosts. Congress can provide the 15 percent increase to maximum benefits while states continue to provide emergency allotments, expanding the reach of food assistance to the very needy. Emergency allotments will phase out as states end their public health emergency declarations or when Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar determines that there is no longer a federal public health emergency. When emergency allotments end, a 15 percent benefit boost could continue to mitigate against food insecurity as well as help support the economy.

The severity of food hardship is clear, and policymakers must address this problem in the next economic relief package. Evidence shows that raising SNAP benefits and offering other nutrition supports, such as P-EBT, reduce hardship and provide economic stimulus by putting more money in the hands of those who will likely spend it the fastest.

⁸ Rachel Tolbert Kimbro and Justin T. Denney, "Transitions Into Food Insecurity Associated With Behavioral Problems And Worse Overall Health Among Children," *Health Affairs*, November 2015, <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.2015.0626>.

⁹ Daphne C. Hernandez and Alison Jackowitz, "Transient, but not persistent, adult food insecurity influences toddler development," *Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 139, No.8, August 2009, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19535426/>.

TABLE 1

Millions of Children in SNAP Households Not Helped by SNAP Emergency Allotments

State	Estimated number of children participating in SNAP pre-pandemic (Dec 2019-Feb 2020) (in 000s)	Number of children in households not helped by emergency allotments (in 000s)	Share of children not helped at all because their families already receive SNAP's maximum benefit	Number of children not helped or helped by less than they would receive under a 15% increase to maximum benefits (in 000s)	Share of children not helped or helped by less than they would receive under a 15 percent increase to maximum benefits
United States	16,145	4,726	29%	7,357	46%
Alabama	328	96	29%	149	46%
Alaska	33	11	33%	14	42%
Arizona	369	117	32%	175	47%
Arkansas	162	41	25%	62	38%
California	2,000	546	27%	1,026	51%
Colorado	198	58	29%	86	43%
Connecticut	129	40	31%	58	45%
Delaware	52	15	29%	20	38%
District of Columbia	37	13	35%	21	57%
Florida	1,084	296	27%	486	45%
Georgia	642	246	38%	335	52%
Guam	24	7	29%	9	38%
Hawai'i	59	11	19%	16	27%
Idaho	69	17	25%	25	36%
Illinois	765	214	28%	316	41%
Indiana	268	76	28%	113	42%
Iowa	128	28	22%	41	32%
Kansas	86	27	31%	36	41%
Kentucky	194	53	27%	80	41%
Louisiana	367	131	36%	191	52%
Maine	54	8	15%	14	26%
Maryland	237	70	30%	95	40%
Massachusetts	266	81	30%	118	44%
Michigan	439	139	32%	193	44%
Minnesota	175	16	9%	68	39%
Mississippi	208	60	29%	89	43%
Missouri	299	113	38%	149	50%

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Montana	41	10	24%	15	37%
Nebraska	75	22	29%	30	39%
Nevada	176	43	24%	66	38%
New Hampshire	30	4	13%	7	23%
New Jersey	295	64	22%	103	35%
New Mexico	190	40	21%	74	39%
New York	951	209	22%	442	46%
North Carolina	501	258	51%	351	70%
North Dakota	21	6	30%	9	45%
Ohio	571	182	32%	255	45%
Oklahoma	266	90	34%	131	49%
Oregon	189	48	25%	75	40%
Pennsylvania	608	183	30%	265	44%
Rhode Island	48	19	40%	25	52%
South Carolina	268	95	35%	135	50%
South Dakota	38	15	39%	18	47%
Tennessee	372	129	35%	203	55%
Texas	1,740	498	29%	758	44%
Utah	85	18	21%	32	38%
Vermont	22	4	18%	7	32%
Virgin Islands	9	3	33%	5	56%
Virginia	312	94	30%	149	48%
Washington	273	70	26%	101	37%
West Virginia	109	38	35%	55	50%
Wisconsin	247	56	23%	80	32%
Wyoming	12	4	33%	5	42%

Note: The estimates do not take into account additional households that the state has certified as a result of the economic crisis.

Sources: CBPP calculations from USDA program data and fiscal year 2018 SNAP Household Characteristics data.

TABLE 2

15% Benefit Increase Would Help 16 Million People Who Are Left Out of SNAP Emergency Allotments

State	Estimated number of SNAP participants pre-pandemic (Dec 2019-Feb 2020) (in 000s)	Number of participants not helped by emergency allotments (in 000s)	Share of participants not helped at all because their families already receive SNAP's maximum benefit	Number of participants not helped or helped by less than \$25 per person per month (in 000s)	Share of participants not helped or helped by less than they would receive under a 15 percent increase to maximum benefits
United States	37,071	11,807	32%	16,516	45%
Alabama	707	198	28%	291	41%
Alaska	80	30	38%	36	45%
Arizona	780	272	35%	363	47%
Arkansas	344	85	25%	121	35%
California	4,045	1,523	38%	2,236	55%
Colorado	434	137	32%	195	45%
Connecticut	360	146	41%	184	51%
Delaware	118	35	30%	44	37%
District of Columbia	109	49	45%	63	58%
Florida	2,683	747	28%	1,100	41%
Georgia	1,344	490	36%	639	48%
Guam	42	14	33%	17	40%
Hawai'i	153	32	21%	41	27%
Idaho	146	35	24%	48	33%
Illinois	1,768	590	33%	790	45%
Indiana	563	157	28%	227	40%
Iowa	296	75	25%	99	33%
Kansas	192	56	29%	74	39%
Kentucky	486	140	29%	190	39%
Louisiana	784	274	35%	380	48%
Maine	154	31	20%	49	32%
Maryland	598	172	29%	232	39%
Massachusetts	762	264	35%	357	47%
Michigan	1,166	406	35%	528	45%
Minnesota	392	64	16%	150	38%

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Mississippi	427	120	28%	167	39%
Missouri	660	219	33%	290	44%
Montana	105	29	28%	39	37%
Nebraska	154	45	29%	59	38%
Nevada	414	134	32%	171	41%
New Hampshire	72	14	19%	20	28%
New Jersey	670	160	24%	232	35%
New Mexico	446	117	26%	175	39%
New York	2,567	902	35%	1,338	52%
North Carolina	1,219	579	47%	746	61%
North Dakota	48	16	33%	22	46%
Ohio	1,372	449	33%	600	44%
Oklahoma	573	191	33%	262	46%
Oregon	582	190	33%	250	43%
Pennsylvania	1,727	536	31%	710	41%
Rhode Island	146	58	40%	74	51%
South Carolina	572	183	32%	252	44%
South Dakota	78	30	38%	39	50%
Tennessee	854	287	34%	410	48%
Texas	3,214	846	26%	1,254	39%
Utah	164	41	25%	64	39%
Vermont	68	22	32%	30	44%
Virgin Islands	21	7	33%	11	52%
Virginia	686	198	29%	292	43%
Washington	796	246	31%	331	42%
West Virginia	305	99	32%	129	42%
Wisconsin	600	149	25%	200	33%
Wyoming	26	8	31%	10	38%

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Sources: CBPP calculations from USDA program data and fiscal year 2018 SNAP Household Characteristics data.