

FACT SHEET: POLICY ISSUE

Addressing Diet Quality in the Farm Bill



Overview

The farm bill is comprehensive legislation that addresses nutrition and agriculture policy. It is typically renewed every five years. The American Heart Association has long worked to prioritize improving food and nutrition security in the farm bill.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which constitutes the largest funding share of any program in the farm bill, plays an important role in addressing health and hunger among families with low incomes, and the American Heart Association supports SNAP access and funding to address food insecurity and improve health.

However, unlike other federal nutrition assistance programs, SNAP does not focus on diet quality. Consumers using SNAP can buy almost any food or beverage with their benefits. For this reason, the American Heart Association supports policy changes to SNAP aimed at improving diet quality, including increasing healthy food purchases and removing sugary drinks. The American Heart Association also encourages robust evaluation to assess whether policies that remove sugary drinks reduce consumption and continues to support pilot programs in SNAP to test and evaluate approaches that incentivize fruit and vegetable purchases and remove sugary drinks.

SNAP and Food Insecurity

For more than 50 years, SNAP has been vital in addressing food insecurity in the U.S. In 2024, an average of 41.7 million people participated in SNAP monthly, serving as an essential safety net during the pandemic and economic downturn.¹ The majority of SNAP benefits go to households with children, older adults, or those with disabilities.²

Food insecurity and poor nutrition remain problems for millions of U.S. households. The quick response of the federal government and states to increase appropriations for the program and access to SNAP benefits is in part why food insecurity did not worsen during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the boost in benefits during the pandemic ended, food insecurity has increased from 12.8% in 2022 to 13.7% of U.S. households in 2024.³ Research shows that SNAP benefits are often not adequate to last a family the entire month and nearly 80% of benefits are exhausted by mid-month.^{4,5} A recent study found that 61% of SNAP participants viewed the cost of healthy food as a barrier to the adequacy of SNAP benefits.⁶

Current or Past Programs Addressing Diet Quality in SNAP

Making changes to the SNAP program could lead to a spillover effect that improves diet quality for all people in the U.S. due to the role SNAP plays in determining what is marketed and sold in the retail environment. Programs authorized in the current or past farm bills have helped ensure that families can access healthy foods through SNAP.

- **Nutrition Incentives** – authorized in the 2008 farm bill, the **Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP) Program** established pilot projects to evaluate health and nutrition promotion in SNAP to

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determine if incentives provided to SNAP participants and at point-of-sale increased the purchase of fruits and vegetables. In the 2014 farm bill, the **Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives (FINI) Program** provided grants to eligible organizations to design and implement projects to increase produce purchases among families with low incomes who participated in SNAP by providing incentives at the point of purchase. The 2018 farm bill expanded FINI, making it mandatory and renamed it the **Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP)**, authorizing funds for nutrition incentive and produce prescription programs. An evaluation of the fifth year of GusNIP shows that the program has been successful in increasing produce consumption through nutrition incentives and produce prescriptions among participants.⁷

- **Nutrition Education (e.g., SNAP-Ed)** –created in 1992, SNAP-Ed addressed nutrition education, physical activity, and obesity prevention. Unfortunately, H.R. 1 (119th Congress) eliminated SNAP-Ed, significantly compromising the ability to deliver nutrition and healthy living education in local communities. The federal government should reimagine and reinvest in this education across all its programs.

SNAP and Diet Quality

Diet quality has been steadily improving in the U.S. during the past two decades; however, data indicate that there is still a significant opportunity to enhance these gains.⁸

Although SNAP participants have lower total healthy diet scores (as measured by the Healthy Eating Index) than non-participants, all people in the U.S. fall short of meeting national dietary guidelines. Data shows that SNAP participants consume less fruits and vegetables and more added sugars than income-eligible nonparticipants. However, they consume more refined grains and lower sodium intake.⁹ Time and money constraints that complicate the task of making healthy food choices, as well as proximity to healthy food environments, are important drivers of dietary quality for both SNAP participants and nonparticipants.¹⁰

Sugary drinks are the leading source of added sugars in the U.S. diet and are widely consumed by children and adults, despite recommendations from the American Heart Association and others that children avoid them.¹¹⁻¹³ In both SNAP and SNAP-eligible households, more money is spent on sugary beverages than any other food commodity.^{14,15} One study found that sugary beverages accounted for approximately 12% of total daily caloric intake (258 kcal) among SNAP participants.¹⁶ Removing sugary beverages from the program is one important way to address lowering consumption of these unhealthy products.

A growing body of evidence indicates that modifying SNAP to restrict sugary drink purchase – alone or in combination with incentives for healthier foods – is feasible, publicly supported, and likely to improve diet quality and health outcomes. Multiple studies show that restricting sugary drinks reduces their purchase and consumption,^{17,18} with one study estimating a reduction of 112.5 grams (approximately 4 fluid ounces) per person per day among children.¹⁷ Another modeling study projected that removing sugary drinks and incentivizing fruit and vegetable purchases could prevent 797,900 cardiovascular disease events, gain 2.11 million quality-adjusted life years, and save \$39.16 billion in lifetime health

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care costs.¹⁹ Survey data show that a majority of SNAP participants support removing sugary drinks, particularly when paired with additional benefits for healthful foods.²⁰ Collectively, this evidence suggests that improving SNAP's nutritional standards could enhance diet quality for program participants.

Continued research and robust evaluation are needed to assess the impact of policies to improve diet quality in SNAP. This includes evaluating the health of SNAP participants and participation in the program.

Sustainability in the Farm Bill

The sustainability of diets is influenced both by the foods comprising the diet and the way foods are produced, including levels of food waste across the supply chain. When food is wasted, all the resources used to grow the food (e.g., pesticides, fertilizers, irrigation, water, and energy in the form of transportation) are wasted as well. This is a particular concern given the number of people who do not have access to healthy, affordable food. In addition, the nutrient density of staple crops due to current agricultural practices and climate change is declining. This decline coupled with current dietary patterns means that a significant portion of the U.S. population is deficient in key micronutrients.²¹ The U.S. needs to provide significant investment and support to new and existing policies and programs that incorporate sustainable agricultural practices across the food system and ensure access to healthy, affordable food for all.

The Association Advocates

The American Heart Association advocates for priorities in the farm bill that will improve the nutritional quality of food, diet quality, and ultimately health of all. Specifically:

SNAP

- Preserve, protect, and provide increases in SNAP benefits to align with low-cost food plan to ensure adequate benefit levels.
- Support policy changes to SNAP aimed at improving diet quality. This includes increasing healthy food purchases and removing sugary drinks.
- Support robust evaluation to assess whether policies that remove sugary drinks reduce consumption.
- Continue to support pilot programs in SNAP to test and evaluate approaches that incentivize fruit and vegetable purchases, remove sugary drinks, or a combination of the two, with accompanying evaluation to assess the effects on consumer purchasing, healthy food and beverage consumption, and retailer implementation.
- Reinvest in nutrition education.
- Increase funding for and modernize the SNAP online purchasing program.

GusNIP

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- Expand baseline funding to further test the GusNIP program design and capitalize on current and future investments into organizational capacity.
- Explore options to decrease the burden of the match requirement including eliminating the match requirement altogether, reducing the match requirement for a maximum of 10 percent, or considering other federal sources of funding.
- Require improvements to the application process and expanded technical assistance resources to improve program access for all.
- Develop a new mechanism for funding successful programs as they scale state-wide or regionally.

Sustainability

- Leverage agricultural commodity subsidies to support the cultivation of diverse, nutritious food that promotes healthier and more sustainable production and consumption.
- Increase funding for existing programs that focus on sustainability and health.
- Develop and support a food redistribution program to decrease food loss and waste.
- Include policies and programs, such as incentives, that focus on conservation and expand and strengthen sustainable, biodiversity-friendly agriculture practices.

For more information and resources from the American Heart Association’s policy research department, please visit www.heart.org/en/about-us/policy-research.

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