

Recommendations to Promote Racial Equity within SNAP and Alternative Programs

Promoting Racial Equity Helps End Hunger

While hunger and food insecurity rates have decreased in the United States, rates are still far too high. People of color are at much greater risk of hunger and poverty than the overall U.S. population because of the impacts of structural racism. Applying a racial equity lens—a concept and practice that focuses on achieving equality for people of color—can help us reduce the impact of structural racism and begin to dismantle it.

In the anti-hunger context, racial equity means that people of color are no more likely to be food insecure than their white counterparts and that they reach optimal nutritional outcomes. While many anti-hunger programs have improved food security and nutrition for U.S. residents, there are still significant opportunities to achieve racial equity and reduce the risk of hunger among people of color.

How SNAP Promotes Equity

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides benefits to enable people with a lower income to buy the groceries they need. Every month, at least 40 million people participate in SNAP. They live in households that struggle to put food on the table.¹

Currently, SNAP is equitable because it is an “entitlement” program, meaning that anyone who meets the eligibility criteria may participate. Funding expands to meet the needs of communities facing high rates of hunger—disproportionately households of color.

Several SNAP policies seek to make it more equitable:

1. **Benefits increase with family size.**
2. **Use of Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards,** making it easier for participants to access benefits.

Two alternatives to SNAP are the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR),² which distributes monthly food commodities to households on reservations, and the Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP),³ which serves Puerto Rico and some U.S. territories that do not offer SNAP.

Recommendations: Promoting Racial Equity in SNAP and SNAP-Alternative Programs

SNAP and SNAP alternative programs could further reduce racial inequalities and hunger by using a racial equity lens:

Recommendation #1: Increase monthly SNAP benefits. Congress should pass legislation to increase the benefit because: (1) benefits run out before the end of the month, (2) healthier food is more expensive, and (3) the current Thrifty Food Plan assumes recipients have between 9 and 16 hours per week⁴ to cook when most recipients only have 40 minutes each day.⁵ These factors disproportionately hurt communities of color. For instance, low-income families report needing to spend an additional \$50 to \$85 per person per month,⁶ and African Americans are more likely to report needing additional money to cover food needs.⁷ The benefits formula should be changed to provide more support to households with fewer assets, since the households with the fewest assets are also more likely to be households of color.⁸

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

Alaskan Natives face prices of up to **\$25 a gallon for milk?** The national average is \$3.25 a gallon.

Americans and one in six Latino/as live in high-poverty areas, compared with one in 13 whites.⁹ Of Indigenous people who live in counties with high Indigenous populations, one in two live in high-poverty areas.¹⁰ These areas lack affordable and accessible access to quality healthier food. Congress should (1) direct USDA to ensure that federal grant programs such as the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program¹¹ are targeted to areas of concentrated poverty;



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(2) increase funding for successful programs such as the Healthy Food Finance Initiative (HFFI)¹² to enable additional full-service grocery stores that stock healthy foods to operate in areas of concentrated poverty; (3) encourage healthcare providers to ask patients about food insecurity and refer them to resources such as SNAP applications, and (4) provide more fresh fruit and vegetable options and fewer canned goods in FDPIR, the SNAP alternative program for Indigenous reservations.

Recommendation #3: Eliminate policies that exclude or disproportionately harm people of color. Not everyone who needs SNAP and is eligible based on income qualifies. Restrictions affect people of color disproportionately—for example, exclusion of people who are returning from incarceration, or less access to resources for people who live in U.S. territories. Congress should (1) extend SNAP benefits and qualifications to all U.S. territories, (2) pass legislation that universally prevents states from widening inequity in food insecurity, particularly among people of color, such as the option to opt-in to full or partial federal bans for some returning citizens, and (3) support efforts to promote the practice of self-determination in the FDPIR by increasing the number of regional-specific traditional foods, and empowering Indigenous participants to inform the design and implementation stages of the program.

Recommendation #4: Improve equity by removing barriers to access.

Several barriers make it difficult for SNAP recipients to use their benefits, including inadequate benefits available to finance a healthy diet, discrimination, and limited time, transportation, internet, and telephone use. To make it easier for people of color to use SNAP, Congress should (1) require states to offer options to access benefits online, in person, and by phone, while not scaling back current services, (2) encourage implementers to establish partnerships with grocery stores so that SNAP participants may have groceries delivered, (3) require USDA to provide co-located services where recipients can access multiple services at one location, and (4) offer incentives to states to expand transportation subsidies for low-income residents.

To read the methodology used to analyze how SNAP and alternative programs could promote racial equity, go to bread.org/racialequitymethodology.

Recommendation #5: Strengthen hiring, training, and accountability of frontline staff.

SNAP participants experience racial discrimination on the part of both SNAP caseworkers and grocery store clerks. Caseworkers should be required to have training on anti-racism and implicit bias, strengthened mechanisms of accountability should be put in place, and policies to support hiring current or former participants of color as caseworkers and hiring staff who reflect the racial and ethnic demographics of the communities they serve should be established.

Recommendation #6: Establish a process to ensure equitable beneficiary participation in program design, implementation, and evaluation. Many program changes are made without consulting beneficiaries. Local offices should create an ambassador program with current recipients of color who are paid a living wage for time spent providing detailed feedback of their experiences, expertise, and recommendations in the design, implementation, and evaluation stages.

Recommendation #7: Strengthen the collection and disaggregation of SNAP data. Data for food insecurity is disaggregated by race and in other ways, but the categories are not fully inclusive. For example, there is no data specifically on black Latinos/Latinas. Also, some groups are at higher risk of being significantly undercounted or missed altogether—for example, people returning from jail or prison.

Endnotes

¹ Household Food Security in the United States in 2017. USDA. ERS. September 2018.

² “Tribal Food Assistance: A Comparison of FDPIR and SNAP.” Urban Institute. November 2009.

³ Nutrition Assistance Block Grants (NABG). USDA. https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/NABGP_Quick_Facts.pdf

⁴ “Who has time to Cook: How Family Resources Influence Food Preparation.” USDA. ERS. Report Number 40. May 2007.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Policy Brief: Boosting SNAP Benefits Would Improve Diets of Low-Income Households.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. June 2016.

⁷ “Electronic Summer Benefit Transfer for Children Demonstration: Summer Report 2011-2014 (Summary).” USDA, FNS. May 2016.

⁸ To learn more about the racial wealth divide, see bread.org/simulation.

⁹ “Fragile Environments, Resilient Communities.” Bread for the World Institute. Hunger Report 2017.

¹⁰ Bread analysis. See report for more details. 2012-2016 ACS 5-Year Estimates. Table B17001C.

¹¹ Formerly known as FINI (Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive). Source: Wholesome Wave. <https://www.wholesomewave.org/news/congress-approved-farm-bill-honors-wholesome-wave-co-founder-gus-schumacher>

¹² 2018 Farm Bill HFFI Legislative Summary & Outline. Policy Link, Reinvestment Fund and the Food Trust. January 2018.