



Rejecting SNAP Food Bans:

Why Restricting Food Choice Harms Families and Fails to Improve Health

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest anti-hunger program in the United States, supporting millions of veterans, older adults and working families. While some policymakers advocate for restrictions on the types of food SNAP recipients can purchase, research and expert analysis suggest such limitations would be counterproductive.

Nearly 20 years ago, the U.S. Department of Agriculture issued a report questioning the rationale for proposed limitations on choice in SNAP and the feasibility of implementing such changes.

Restricting choice does not make healthy food more affordable or accessible

- Multiple studies indicate that SNAP recipients purchase food at rates comparable to non-recipients, suggesting the program does not disproportionately contribute to poor dietary habits.
- Ultraprocessed foods are prevalent in grocery stores and are, on average, less costly than alternative, minimally processed foods.

Administrative red tape doesn't feed families—it slows down access and shuts out local grocers

- The complexity and cost of implementing food restrictions would significantly increase administrative complexity and costs for both retailers and state agencies that administer the program.
- Enforcing restrictions on certain food items would require extensive system modifications, training, and compliance monitoring.
- These changes would place additional burdens on grocery stores, particularly small retailers who may lack the technology to efficiently differentiate between eligible and ineligible items at the point of sale.
- It is likely that retailers would abandon the program, further reducing already limited access in many areas.

Hunger remains the most pressing nutritional challenge for low-income Americans

1 in 5 California households are facing hunger.

SNAP benefits are the strongest defense against hunger - but are already too low to cover the cost of healthy food at each meal.

Research indicates that a majority of food items carried in major grocery stores are considered “ultraprocessed.”

Economic constraints, lack of access to affordable, healthier food options, and marketing practices play a larger role in shaping food choices than federal nutrition support.

We urge Congress to protect the dignity of SNAP and the freedom to choose—by rejecting food bans and ensuring benefits reflect the real cost of healthy food.

Solutions that Respect Choice and Improve Health through SNAP

Rather than imposing restrictive policies, research-backed alternatives should be pursued to enhance the program's nutritional impact.

At an Individual or Household level, potential changes include:

- **Benefit Adequacy:** Enabling SNAP users to afford nutritious foods would enable them to make healthier choices without restrictive mandates.
- **Remove Access Barriers:** Eliminate time limits tied to paperwork requirements and improve SNAP access for families working their way up the economic ladder.
- **Enhance Eligibility:** Eliminate outdated and unfair restrictions for college students and broaden reach for lawfully present immigrants.
- **Expand Access to Food:** Allowing SNAP recipients to purchase hot foods and ready-made meals will increase access to nutritious meals for people with limited preparation space or other limitations.
- **Support-Based Approaches:** Programs like USDA's GusNIP and Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP) boost fruit and vegetable purchases, supporting health and reducing food insecurity. Expanding these bonus programs makes healthy food more affordable and helps SNAP benefits go further.

Key Systemic Changes needed to improve food access include:

- **Support Grocery Stores and Farmers Markets:** Subsidies and tax incentives can help more stores open in underserved areas. Many states support SNAP use at farmers' markets by helping fund POS technology and incentivizing purchases through Market Match programs that give extra SNAP benefits to use at the market.
- **Improve Transportation:** Many SNAP recipients rely on public transportation, which may not provide convenient access to full-service grocery stores. Expanding transportation options, such as shuttle services or mobile markets, and affordable grocery delivery options can address this barrier.
- **Enhance Local Food Production and Distribution:** Supporting community gardens, urban farming initiatives, and regional food hubs can increase access to fresh, locally sourced food at lower costs.
- **Raise the Minimum Wage:** Higher earnings enable more SNAP recipients to supplement their benefits with additional food purchases.