

CSPI's Public Health Vision for SNAP

The Center for Science in the Public Interest envisions a healthy nation with reduced impact and burden of preventable diseases and an equitable food system that makes healthy, sustainable food accessible to all.

Our current food system perpetuates preventable disease. Poor diet quality is a [leading contributor](#) to death and disability, and food insecurity is [associated with](#) diabetes, heart disease, depression, and numerous poor maternal, infant, and child health outcomes.

The food system maximizes profits by pushing cheap, unhealthy calories. And too many people lack sufficient resources to access nutritious foods, in particular people from marginalized racial backgrounds that have long been impacted by biased policies that exacerbate food insecurity. Individuals should not have to fight an upstream battle alone against the many factors that conspire to serve food industry profit over our health.

CSPI works across the food system to improve nutrition in restaurants, grocery stores, school meals, correctional facilities, and other settings. We also protect access to and strengthen federal programs to help people in need put adequate food on the table.

Our work on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) touches both facets. As the nation's largest federal nutrition assistance program with more than 240,000 participating retailers, SNAP is well-positioned to help tens of millions of people afford nutritious food and leverage the food environment to support healthy eating for all.

As a top priority, CSPI is supporting the efforts of anti-hunger and anti-poverty organizations to push for a SNAP benefit increase and help people in need access SNAP, including by [opposing regulatory threats](#) to access and [advocating for increased benefits](#) during the [pandemic and economic downturn](#). We are also engaging with community-based organizations, SNAP participants, and other stakeholders to explore strategies for strengthening the program's public health impacts.

What do we know about SNAP and public health?

There is compelling evidence that [SNAP alleviates food insecurity](#), especially when participants are provided adequate benefits. We also know that too many people face barriers to accessing the program. Increasing SNAP participation would [reduce poverty, food insecurity, and health care burden](#) and increasing benefit levels would help to [reflect the time and resources needed to purchase and prepare nutritious foods](#).

Evidence of SNAP's effect on diet quality is [mixed](#) (see research [here](#) and [here](#)), and emerging strategies to strengthen SNAP's public health impact in this area are worth testing. In addition to lacking sufficient resources, SNAP participants and other low-income individuals also face targeted food industry marketing and [deficient food environments](#). A New York-based study found that sugary drink marketing [spiked during the time of the month that SNAP benefits were issued](#).

Research points to [promising strategies to regulate food marketing through SNAP](#) to promote healthy eating. USDA could require SNAP authorized stores to meet healthy marketing standards and could support retailers in meeting these standards. We have engaged with community groups and SNAP participants in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Iowa, and North Carolina, and in every state, stakeholders voiced interest in using price, placement, and promotion tactics to highlight healthy foods in stores and online.

[Modeling studies](#) and a [randomized controlled trial](#) find that combining SNAP incentivizes for healthy foods and disincentives for sugary beverages (a top source of calories) could significantly improve diets and health. And these program nudges could also encourage SNAP retailers to stock healthier choices, thereby leveraging a healthier food system for all.

Importantly, this combined incentive, disincentive approach is [widely supported](#) among SNAP participants and the general public, as evidenced through polling and CSPI state convenings. SNAP participants and stakeholders have also offered valuable insight into mitigating potential barriers to implementation, including updating point-of-sale systems and ensuring integration into EBT cards.

Given the high consumption of sugary drinks across all income levels, excise taxes on sugary drinks – which would also apply to SNAP purchases – merit consideration. Doctors and public health experts believe that taxes on sugary drinks save lives and improve entire communities. For example, when Philadelphia enacted a sugary drink tax, [consumption decreased by 38%](#), and in Berkeley, a sugary drink tax resulted in a [10% decrease in soda sales and a 16% increase in water sales](#). State SSB taxes could also earmark revenue for SNAP healthy food incentive programs and a national SSB tax could earmark revenue for healthy school foods, healthy incentive programs or a SNAP benefit increase.

What new SNAP strategies should be explored?

More research is needed to test the public health impact of many of these promising strategies, and we are engaging with community organizations and SNAP participants to lead this process.

USDA has encouraged research related to healthy marketing strategies, but more studies are needed that examine approaches among SNAP participants in large store settings where most benefits are redeemed.

USDA waivers could test combined incentive, disincentive options among SNAP participants. These waivers should evaluate the strategy's impact on diet quality, food security and health, and assess commonly raised concerns related to disincentives, including stigma, consequences of noncompliance, and burden on retailers.

Additional innovative approaches to improve public health through SNAP merit consideration. As the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot rapidly grows, strategies are needed to ensure participants can afford and access online SNAP delivery, and to encourage healthy online retail environments and other innovative delivery models.

Coordinating SNAP, Medicaid, and other wellness programs to improve nutrition and health could also have far-reaching impacts. And with Congressional authority, states could pilot a twice monthly benefit issuance cycle, which holds promise for improving food insecurity and health.

CSPI is continuing to engage with communities on these strategies and more. We are funding organizations to build consensus and pass policies focused on promoting health through SNAP in their state and localities, and we also have seed funding to support policies to align SNAP with other public health programs, expand access to the program, and explore other innovative ideas.

To learn more about our work to transform the food environment and ensure healthy foods are widely available, affordable, and accessible for all, check out the following resources:

CSPI Resources:

- Research and Strategies to Strengthen Nutrition in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). 2020. <https://bit.ly/3fhsLEt>
- Scroll and Shop: Food Marketing Migrates Online. 2020. <https://bit.ly/3pNwq22>
- Congress: how long will you let children and families go hungry? The Hill. 2020. <https://bit.ly/3nFKFUI>
- Strengthening SNAP is the most effective way to address the growing hunger crisis. The Hill. 2020. <https://bit.ly/38WuBtl>
- Recommendations for a Healthy Eating SNAP Pilot in Pennsylvania. 2018. <https://bit.ly/2Hgv5iA>
- Temptation at Checkout. 2015. <https://bit.ly/2UHIPXX>

Other:

- Bleich et al. *Strengthening the Public Health Impacts of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Through Policy*. 2020. <https://bit.ly/35Ni5KE>
- Healthy Eating Research. *A National Research Agenda to Support Healthy Eating through Retail Strategies*. 2020. <https://bit.ly/36422s8>
- Bipartisan Policy Center. *Leading with Nutrition: Leveraging Federal Programs for Better Health*. 2018. <https://bit.ly/32XLyje>