KEY FACTS

- SNAP, formerly the food stamp program, is a federally funded program that helps eligible low-income children and families afford food.

- A little over one in four DC children (or their families) receive SNAP. Even with its modest food benefit, at about $1.40 per person per meal, SNAP reduces food insecurity, improves school performance and children’s health, and improves long-term outcomes for families.

- While DC has been pretty successful in reaching eligible children and families for SNAP, there are opportunities to strengthen the program. For example, by continuing the online application it launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, and by ensuring that households get all of the deductions for which they qualify.

What is SNAP?

The **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**, formerly the food stamp program, provides nutrition assistance to eligible individuals and households with low incomes. SNAP is the nation’s largest nutrition assistance program, helping more than 40 million children and families in low income households afford food.

SNAP is a federally funded program that operates in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and Native reservations/tribes.\(^1\) At the federal level, SNAP is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). SNAP benefits are 100 percent funded by USDA and states share 50 percent of the administration costs with USDA. In the District, SNAP is administered by the Department of Human Services Economic Security Administration (ESA). While the District has been successful in reaching those who are eligible with a SNAP participation
rate around 95%\(^2\), opportunities exist for the District to strengthen policies and procedures to better link families to SNAP and better serve and retain families who receive SNAP.

## Who is SNAP Intended to Help?

SNAP provides food assistance to most individuals who meet both financial and nonfinancial eligibility requirements without other safety net programs’ restrictions around age (e.g. children or seniors), disability, or family structure. Because of the impact of historic and current racism, in DC program participants are disproportionately Black and Latino. According to the most recent Census estimates, the average income for DC’s white households is almost four times that of Black households and three times that of Latino households ($208,622 vs $54,778 and $73,053), with even bigger gaps for households with children. Given that disparity, DC’s Black residents are almost four times and Latino DC residents are more than twice as likely as white residents to live in poverty (25.7 and 14.1 percent vs. 6.3 percent).\(^3\)

SNAP benefits are an entitlement, which means that anyone who qualifies under the program’s rules can receive benefits. This funding structure enables SNAP to respond quickly and effectively to support families and communities during times of economic downturn and increased need. This was seen most recently by the inclusion of SNAP benefit supplements and policy changes during the COVID-19\(^4\) pandemic in 2020 and the Great Recession of 2007\(^5\). To receive SNAP in the District, applicants must be residents and be either U.S. citizens or fall within certain categories of immigrants.\(^6\) To meet the financial requirements for SNAP, households must have no more than 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) in gross income and no more than 100% of the FPL on income after deductions for expenses. SNAP allows deductions for 20 percent of wages plus an additional standard deduction based on income and family size;\(^7\) out-of-pocket dependent care costs, including any costs for child care or disabled adult care that a household pays; certain medical expenses; and shelter expenses (e.g. rent, mortgage, utility costs) up to a certain amount.\(^8\) So, for example, based on their specific housing and child care costs, a family with two adults and one child earning $2,500 a month in gross income can deduct $500 (20% of wages) plus another $755 for the standard deduction and child care and housing expenses, making their net income $1245 and their monthly SNAP amount $137. If their application information didn’t allow them to include the child care deduction, though, their net income would seem higher and they would only get $41 per month in SNAP benefits, making it important to correctly calculate each family’s deductions.

## Why SNAP is so Important

In DC, SNAP is one tool among many to help counter the effects of historic and ongoing racial inequity. SNAP is one of the core nutrition and income support programs that reaches the most children and families and its value is well-documented. Even with its modest food benefit, at about $1.40 per person per meal,\(^9\) SNAP reduces food insecurity, improves school performance and children’s health, and improves long-term outcomes for participants.
• **Reducing food insecurity:** SNAP reduces food insecurity for children by enabling their families to spend more money on food than their limited budgets would otherwise allow. Food insecurity, as defined by USDA, is the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.\(^{10}\) Food insecurity among children is linked to increased risk of poor diet; chronic health conditions, including asthma, cognitive and behavioral problems, anxiety and depression; and poorer general health compared to their food-secure peers.\(^{11}\) The largest and most rigorous examination of the relationship between SNAP participants and food security found that food insecurity among children fell by roughly one-third after their families received SNAP benefits for six months.\(^{12}\)

• **Improving children’s school performance:** Children need nutritious food to grow, learn, and thrive. Research suggests that SNAP participation can lead to improvements in reading and mathematics skills among elementary children, especially young girls,\(^{13}\) and increases the chances of graduating from high school by as much as 18 percentage points.\(^{14}\)

• **Improving children’s health:** Insights from Children’s Health Watch have shown that children receiving SNAP are less likely than non-participants with low incomes to be in fair or poor health or underweight, and their families are less likely to make trade offs between paying for health care and paying for other basic needs such as food, housing, and electricity.\(^{15}\)

• **Improving long-term outcomes for participants:** When children have access to SNAP, from birth through early childhood, their risk of developing high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and other poor health outcomes later in life greatly decreases.\(^{11}\) Women who had access to SNAP as young children reported improved economic self-sufficiency (increases in educational attainment, earnings, income, and decreases in welfare participation).\(^{15}\)

SNAP is also a complement to other nutrition safety net programs for children, particularly the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC). Participation in SNAP enables WIC applicants to become income-eligible for WIC, which creates a more streamlined process for those families.\(^{16}\) Participation in SNAP provides school-age children with the ability to participate in the NSLP without requiring families to complete an additional application.\(^{17}\) These direct linkages are critical to ensure that children receive all of the nutrition assistance they need during this vital time of growth and development.

**How Does SNAP Work?**

SNAP is a food assistance program that seeks to provide supplemental food benefits to individuals who customarily purchase and prepare meals together, which SNAP considers a household.\(^{18}\) To apply for SNAP, the household must complete an application. The District uses a paper application that is available online or at an ESA service center.\(^{19}\) After completing the application, the household must participate in an interview with an ESA caseworker and provide proof of the information provided in the application.\(^{20}\) Once those steps are complete, ESA determines eligibility.
Separate from the eligibility determination, SNAP does a benefit calculation to determine how much money a household has available, after paying household expenses (e.g. shelter, child care, medical), to purchase food. SNAP benefits are calculated to cover approximately 70% of a family’s food budget, with the family expected to spend 30% of their net income on food. The amount of SNAP benefits an eligible household can receive is based on USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan, household income, and the number of eligible members in the household. In the District, the average monthly benefit for SNAP households was $211 for all households and $383 for households with children.

The amount of SNAP benefits an eligible household can receive is based on USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan, household income, and the number of eligible members in the household. In the District, the average monthly benefit for SNAP households was $211 for all households and $383 for households with children.

Households are eligible for SNAP for a set period of time, called a certification period, after which they have to recertify, which essentially includes completing the entire application process again; including filling out an application or recertification form, submitting verifications, and participating in an interview. Most households in the District have a 12-month certification period, unless the household includes an older adult (60+) or individual with a disability. Those households have a 24-month certification period.

Once determined eligible, a household will receive their SNAP benefits on an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card to purchase food at approved retail locations. In the District, SNAP benefits are deposited onto the family’s Capital Access EBT card on a staggered schedule from the first of the month through the tenth. As a food benefit program, SNAP can be used to purchase certain food items and seeds that will produce food from approved retailers. In the District, there are approximately 400 approved retailers where SNAP participants can use their EBT to purchase food.

Who Benefits From SNAP in DC?

How many participants?

According to the most recent data available (fiscal year 2019), 94,000 District residents participated in SNAP, which is about 13 percent of the District population. Of those 94,000 participants, 37,000 - just over one-third - were children under age 18 (with about one-third of those children being age four and under). That means that around 29% of the District’s children receive SNAP or a little more than 1 in 4. Due to historic discrimination and racism, Black children in DC are 10 times as likely as white children to be living in poverty (36 vs. 3 percent), SNAP is a vital program for making sure children - particularly those in historically underserved communities - don’t go to bed hungry. As a result of to the intersection of racism and socioeconomic status, 93 percent of the people enrolled in SNAP in DC are Black. However, while Latino families also face many hurdles to reaching economic stability, only 2.5 percent of SNAP recipients in DC are Latino, even though Latinos make up 11% of DC residents. The barriers to Latino families participating in SNAP may increase because of the recent “Public Charge” rule (see below).
What portion of eligible families participate?

The SNAP participation rate is the percentage of eligible people in the United States who actually participate in the program. This is one way to see how successful a state is in reaching eligible families. SNAP participation rates vary among the states, ranging from 56% to 100%, with the national average at 85%. The District is one of the top states when it comes to participation with about a 95% participation rate for fiscal year 2016, which is down from an estimated 100% in fiscal year 2015.\(^{33}\)

Recommendations to Improve the Reach of DC SNAP

While the SNAP participation rate in the District is high, there are policies and strategies the District could employ to ensure families receive the benefits they need, and to enhance the agency’s ability to reach and retain District families with low incomes and link them to much needed assistance. Below are a few strategies that DHS could try to broaden its reach to eligible families.

Streamline Access – Develop Online Application for Benefits

To help reach low-income families in the District, DHS must continue and improve the online application it launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to that launch, to apply for SNAP, residents had to print an application online and then either take the signed application to a DHS service center or mail the application to an ESA Service center. Both of these options required households to take additional steps in order to apply for essential food assistance. The District was only one of four states that did not have an online application for SNAP benefits.\(^{34}\) Online applications allow applicants to apply for SNAP at a convenient time and place. Also, online applications can enable individuals to get the process started earlier, which is essential as eligible applicants receive benefits back to the date of their application and states have 30 days to process the application.\(^{35}\) In April 2020, possibly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the District added an online application. It is unclear, however, if online access will continue to be available in the long-term.\(^{36}\) While an online application became necessary during the public health-related closures, the hope is that the online application will stay around and become a more comprehensive pathway to benefits for low-income families in the District. The form could also be more user friendly by being dynamic rather than a static PDF version of the printed application.

The District must review the SNAP application to make sure that its language does not deter eligible families from applying. With the recent changes to the Public Charge rule,\(^ {37}\) mixed immigration status families are less likely to apply for benefits even for those who may be eligible. DHS must be aware of this concern and provide clear and consistent information on eligibility rules for the programs so as to not deter participation.
Leverage Data to Connect Families to Programs

Another key strategy that the District should use to reach families with low incomes is leveraging data to connect families with all public benefits for which they may be eligible. DC is doing well in reaching residents eligible for SNAP—better than it is in reaching residents eligible for some other programs. SNAP regulations give states the option to use or disclose SNAP applicant or recipient information to support the administration of other federally assisted and state programs that serve low income individuals.\textsuperscript{38} The Food and Nutrition Act requires the state agency to establish safeguards that permit the disclosure of applicant household information to persons directly connected with the administration of other “federal assistance programs.”\textsuperscript{39} DHS should work with other state agencies, including the Department of Health, Office of the State Superintendent of Education, and the State Board of Education to connect families to the suite of benefits for which they may be eligible. For example, some state SNAP agencies have partnered with local WIC agencies to find infants and children who are enrolled in only one program to connect those families to both benefits. This makes it easier on the applicant household but also on the state agency because they can use much of the information already verified from the other program to make a decision. The low-income families in the District who have completed the application and eligibility process for one safety-net program, especially SNAP—which has a comprehensive application and eligibility process—should be provided with more direct avenues to other safety net programs (not just the ones administered by DHS) they may be eligible for without having to complete the entire application process and provide the same verifications multiple times.

Use Flexibility in Program Operations

While SNAP is a federal program, states are afforded flexibility within the program on how it is administered in the state. FNS provides states with the ability to request waivers from federal rules as well as offering states options they can implement to make SNAP work better for their residents.\textsuperscript{40} With fresh memories from the 2007 Great Recession, the government shutdown in 2019 that caused SNAP benefit payments to be made early, and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the District could take some time to think about what policies to put into place in the near future to make the agency better equipped for the next crisis. For example, on-demand interviews\textsuperscript{41}, more mobile technology,\textsuperscript{42} and online case management\textsuperscript{43} would reduce how much households need to come into the office and free up caseworkers in the office to handle more complicated matters.

One policy that the District could focus on without needing a waiver is how it ensures that applicants qualify for all deductions for living expenses (as described above) for which they are eligible. That calculation estimates how much money households have available to purchase food and therefore how much money in SNAP benefits they’re entitled to. The first step is to determine how many eligible people are currently receiving deductions in DC. Analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities of 2018 SNAP Quality Control Characteristics data showed that nationally small shares of all SNAP households claimed deductions, with only 3% claiming the dependent care (e.g. child care) deduction.\textsuperscript{44}
With the high cost of child care in the District, it is important to make sure that families on SNAP are able to count their out-of-pocket dependent care costs during the SNAP eligibility determination.
1. Some Native American tribes and/or Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) operate a program called the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) instead of SNAP.


4. In response to the covid-19 pandemic, Congress passed the “Families First Coronavirus Response Act” which provided USDA with authority to allow states to modify procedures to make it easier for families to continue participating in SNAP. One option for states was to provide a temporary increase in SNAP benefits to meet immediate rising needs. See: https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/COVID-19 and https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/most-states-are-easing-snap-participation-rules-many-have-opted-to-provide

5. As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 also known as the stimulus or recovery package to help families after the Great Recession, Congress increased benefits for SNAP participants. USDA Under Secretary Kevin Concannon stated, “By injecting immediate revenue streams into local business, SNAP helps accomplish another primary goal of ARRA by stimulating the American economy.” https://www.fns.usda.gov/pressrelease/fns-0001

6. An immigrant must have one of the immigrant statuses that makes him or her a “qualified immigrant” to be eligible. These include certain Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), refugees, asylees, granted withholding of removal, parolee for a year or more, domestic violence victims and their parents or children, and victims of severe forms of trafficking in persons. 7 C.F.R. 273.4.

7. The standard deduction is based on household size and is usually updated once a year. For FY 2020, a standard deduction of $167 for household sizes of 1 to 3 people and $178 for a household size of 4 (higher for some larger households and for households in Alaska, Hawaii, and Guam). Family size calculations are based on the number of citizens or those with a certain limited number of immigration statuses. Mixed status households are eligible for SNAP, but some members of the household may not be counted in the calculation determining benefit amounts.

8. There are a few deductions for SNAP see https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility. There are rules around each deduction and what applicants need to show proof of expense. For a basic overview of deductions see: https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_academy_webinar_1-7-15.pdf


16. Adjunctive eligibility enables WIC applicants to establish their income eligibility by showing proof that they participate in SNAP, TANF, or Medicaid. See DC Action Snapshot WIC.

17. Through direct certification, school districts that participate in the school lunch program match the names of children living in households that receive benefits from SNAP or TANF with school enrollment records.

18. 7 C.F.R. 273.1(a).


20. Due to covid-19, the interview can be delayed if identity can be verified or it can be done telephonically, per DC’s approved waiver request at https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/pandemic/COVID-19/district-of-columbia#snap.


22. The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) is one of four USDA-designed food plans specifying foods and amounts of foods to provide adequate nutrition. It is the cheapest food plan and is calculated monthly using data collected from the consumer price index (CPI). https://www.fns.usda.gov/cnpp/usda-food-plans-cost-food-reports


26. SNAP cannot be used to purchase alcohol, tobacco products, vitamins, live animals, prepared foods, or any non-food household items.


35. 7 C.F.R. 273.2(a) & (c)(1)(iv)
36. https://twitter.com/DCHunger/status/1250153522450006018

37. Historically, the “public charge” inadmissibility test was designed to identify people who may depend on the government as their primary source of support. If the government determines that a person is “likely at any time to become a public charge” in the future, it can deny a person admission to the U.S. or lawful permanent residence (or “green card” status). (Immigration and Naturalization Act section 212(a)(4), 8 USC 1182(a)(4)) Revised public charge regulations published by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the U.S. State Department that went into effect on February 24, 2020, redefine a “public charge” as a non-citizen who receives or is likely to receive one or more of the specified public benefits for more than 12 months in the aggregate within any 36-month period (such that, for instance, receipt of two benefits in one month counts as two months). The benefits considered are cash assistance for income maintenance from any level of government, SNAP (formerly Food Stamps), public housing, Section 8 housing assistance, and Medicaid (with exceptions for persons under age 21, women during pregnancy and for 60 days after the pregnancy ends and emergency services). This is much broader than the original test for public charge. For more information see: https://protectingimmigrantfamilies.org/analysis-research/

38. 7 CFR 272.1(c)(1).


41. Where the state agency conducts interviews by allowing clients to contact a call center within a specified range of ranges or times; the interview is not scheduled. See https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/admin/workload-management-matrix

42. Mobile technologies include the use of text messaging, a mobile app., and mobile document upload. The use of mobile technology enables procedural changes that streamline the enrollment process, facilitate verification, and reporting requirements. Through the use of mobile technologies, the agency can provide better service and more readily reach populations that lack access to a personal computer, enhancing access for those who would otherwise be limited in their ability to access information and complete the application process. See USDA State Options Report: https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/waivers/state-options-report

43. Online case management allows households to perform a variety of routine tasks related to their SNAP case through a web-based portal. Online case management can ease State administrative burden by reducing the time staff spends on routine client inquiries. According to the most recent USDA State Options Report, 40 state websites allow clients to perform some case management tasks online, including viewing case information and/or notices, reporting changes in factors that affect eligibility or benefit level, and/or uploading documents. https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/waivers/state-options-report