

POSITION STATEMENT:

# SBM Recommends Increased Access To Federal Food Assistance During And After The Covid-19 Pandemic

(SEPTEMBER 2020) Sabrina K. Young, PhD, MA, University of Illinois at Chicago; Saied Toossi, PhD, MA, Syracuse University; Jordan W. Jones, PhD, MA, Georgia State University; Alicia Atwood, PhD, MPH, Vassar College; Joanna Buscemi, PhD, DePaul University; Marian L. Fitzgibbon, PhD, University of Illinois at Chicago

## SUMMARY STATEMENT

To support food security, SBM recommends increased access to federal food assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Pandemic EBT, and the National School Lunch Program during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

## INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity – consisting of phenomena ranging from worrying about not having enough money to buy food to going hungry for a full day – is an ongoing issue in the United States, with more than 10 percent of households experiencing food insecurity in 2018.<sup>1</sup> Food insecurity is associated with a number of poor health outcomes, including anemia and low bone mineral density in children<sup>2</sup> and diabetes, lung disease,<sup>2</sup> and heart disease<sup>3,4</sup> in adults. Food insecurity has also been linked to poor mental health in both children and adults.<sup>2</sup>

Food assistance programs, the largest being the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), are proven to reduce food insecurity and may alleviate some of the poor health outcomes. However, these programs are designed only to supplement household food needs. For example, SNAP provides an average of only \$1.40 per meal.<sup>5</sup>

## THE PROBLEM

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of households experiencing food insecurity has nearly doubled. According to a nationally representative survey during the week of May 21, almost 10 percent of all U.S. households reported not having enough to eat during the past week at least some of the time. This percentage is higher among Black households (21 percent) and Hispanic/Latinx households (16 percent).<sup>2</sup> Households with children under 12 appear to be especially at-risk of food insecurity during the pandemic. In these households, food insecurity increased by 461 percent during the pandemic (17.4 percent in April 2020 compared with 3.1 percent in 2018).<sup>3</sup> Of households with children that had no difficulty getting enough food at the start of the pandemic, 11.4 percent



are now experiencing food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> Food insecurity increases during COVID-19 are partially attributable to the following:

1. Unemployment. Unemployment is causally linked with food insecurity<sup>6</sup> and has greatly increased during the pandemic, with the rate in July 2020 at 10.2 percent.<sup>4</sup> There have been significant delays in receiving Unemployment Insurance (UI),<sup>7,8</sup> and increased UI benefits expired at the end of July. At the start of the pandemic, most hourly workers with children had only enough savings to feed their families for 2.5 months.<sup>9</sup>
2. Reduced access. Access to regular food stores has been reduced in many local areas during the COVID-19 pandemic. While grocery stores remain open, households in food deserts without access to personal transportation are at a disadvantage (see, e.g., Illinois).<sup>10</sup> Public transportation access has also been reduced in many cities, further complicating access to food stores. Low-income households in these areas would further struggle to afford food delivery, if available, though non-metropolitan areas may also not have availability.
3. Food bank limitations. Food banks have also been hit by the pandemic. Challenges to food bank provisions include increased demand, reduced donations, and lack of volunteers, as well as challenges to normal supply and operating procedures.

4. Interruptions in the school meal program. Many children rely on the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and/or the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) for meals during the school year. Food insecurity already increases during the summer months, when children are not in school – especially in states that do not provide the Summer Food Service Program.<sup>11</sup> Further, a demonstration of a Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer program decreased food insecurity rates among children.<sup>12</sup>

## CURRENT POLICIES

1. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) authorized the U.S. Department of Agriculture (responsible for food assistance programs) to make temporary changes to support food security during the pandemic, including the following primary government activities:
  - Emergency SNAP allotments - allowing states to increase benefits up to the maximum monthly benefit until the federal or state emergency or disaster declaration expires.<sup>5</sup> (Note that households already receiving the maximum are unable to receive additional benefits.) Currently, 46 states and the District of Columbia currently have acknowledged extensions through August.<sup>6</sup>
  - Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) - allowing states to provide the value of school meals for families with children eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.
2. Other COVID-19 food supports include:
  - a nationwide waiver extending the Summer Food Service Program and the National School Lunch Program's Seamless Summer Option, offering free meals during summer months to students in areas that are not economically disadvantaged through August 31, 2020;
  - waivers of certain types of SNAP administrative processing requirements, such as interview requirements and telephonic signature (see, e.g., Illinois);<sup>6</sup>
  - waivers to allow parents and guardians to pick up school meals for children;
  - school district provision of meals to the community (in addition to students) (see, e.g., in New York);<sup>12,13</sup>
  - the public-private partnership Meals To You which provides meals to children in rural areas; and
  - expansion of the SNAP online purchasing pilot program in 38 states.<sup>14</sup> Online ordering is available in most states through only Amazon and Walmart.

As states begin to reopen their economies, many of these supports will dissipate since they are tied to government emergency or disaster declarations. However, many of the challenges to food insecurity, such as unemployment, show little sign of lessening.

The Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act (H.R. 6800), passed by the U.S. House of Representatives on May 15 would further expand these supports. Of note in this bill are:

- increases in the maximum and minimum household SNAP allotments as well as the Cash Value Voucher (CVV) provided by the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC);
- allowing the use of SNAP benefits for purchasing hot, prepared food products;
- expansion of SNAP eligibility timelines for households out of work, specifically for able-bodied adults without children (ABAWDs); and
- funding for The Emergency Food Assistance Program.<sup>15,16</sup>

As of writing this brief, the Senate has not yet scheduled a vote on this or similar legislation.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Senate should pass legislation with the provisions included in the House-approved HEROES Act described above, to quickly provide additional food supports to households currently experiencing hardship. Increased maximum SNAP benefits, in particular, will support some of the most at-risk households (those with net income below \$0). Further, the most recent estimate of the economic impact of \$1 in government spending on SNAP during an economic downturn is \$1.50 increase in GD.<sup>14</sup> Boosting food assistance can therefore have a secondary positive effect on the economy.
2. Policymakers should extend waivers of the ABAWD work requirements beyond the pandemic. April 1 would have been the onset date of removal of the state option to waive ABAWD work requirements.<sup>17</sup> Rather than allow this policy change to take effect after the public health emergency declaration is lifted, policymakers should pass waivers of the work requirement based on economic conditions through the Extended Benefits to Unemployment Insurance (EB) qualification.<sup>18</sup>
3. Policymakers should continue to support child food security by providing free school meals to students in all school districts after August 31st. This policy would continue support for children not in economically disadvantaged areas that may be experiencing food insecurity due to the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic, and for whom establishing eligibility for free or reduced price meals may be logistically or administratively difficult. It would also reduce the need for person-to-person exchange of money to maintain social distancing in school meal provision.
4. States that have not yet adopted Pandemic EBT benefits or have not extended emergency SNAP allotments should do so to support households at risk of food insecurity.



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