

**Testimony of
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on the subject of “The Power of Work: Expanding Opportunity through SNAP”
before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture
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Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Craig, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today at this hearing on SNAP.

My name is Diane Schanzenbach, I am the Margaret Walker Alexander Professor of Human Development and Social Policy at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. For more than two decades, I have conducted and published numerous peer-reviewed research studies and book chapters on SNAP and other safety net programs, and their impacts on employment, consumption and well-being. I am also a member of the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine. My testimony today draws primarily from research that I have conducted or reviewed that considers the role of SNAP and other influences on employment and economic well-being.

As a labor economist, I am deeply concerned about the long-term decline in our nation’s labor force participation rate, and study the causes, consequences and remedies to this long-term trend that is occurring in the U.S. and in many other advanced economies. Improving employment rates and job opportunities is a goal we all share. However, increasing SNAP mandatory work requirements will not improve employment outcomes.

SNAP Mandatory Work Requirements Do Not Help, but Cause Harm

SNAP has three kinds of work requirements or work tests. The first is the general SNAP work requirement that applies to most SNAP participants aged 16-59, unless they meet an exemption such as people with disabilities. These requirements include accepting a suitable job offer and not quitting a job or voluntarily reducing their weekly hours below 30. Second, states create SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) programs designed to be responsive to local conditions and needs. They refer SNAP participants to the state’s SNAP E&T program, which can include training, job search, workfare, or other components. These programs can be compulsory and result in the loss of food benefits if individuals do not comply. SNAP work programs can also be designed and offered to individuals who want to participate, typically skill-based training or education programs. Most states do not have enough slots to provide services to all SNAP participants subject to the work requirement and therefore target their programming on individuals and services that are of high priority to the state (Bauer & East, 2025).

There is third additional work requirement that applies to “able-bodied adults without dependents,” or ABAWDs, ages 18 to 54. Those subject to the ABAWD work requirements lose their SNAP benefits if they are not working at least 20 hours per week. Research evidence indicates that neither type of work requirement is effective at improving employment outcomes.

In fact, new research evidence shows that if SNAP applicants are denied SNAP, they have worse earnings and employment in the medium run than if they are granted benefits. In most of the testimony that follows, I will focus on the ABAWD work requirement which currently is receiving more policy attention.

About 6 percent of individuals receiving SNAP are ABAWDs. They are typically—but not always—living in one-person households. About half are women, and over one-third report a disability that affects their ability to work but does not classify them as disabled according to SNAP (Bauer, Hardy & Howard, 2025). ABAWDs are eligible for modest benefits, with a maximum benefit amount of \$292 per month and average benefits of approximately \$199 per month, or \$6.50 per day. If an individual's only resources come from SNAP, the maximum benefit level allows them to consume at a level equal to 21 percent of the poverty threshold. In most of the United States, SNAP is the only safety net program available to ABAWDs (Rosenbaum, 2013). Many of those subject to the time limit face substantial barriers to employment, including low levels of education and criminal records (Bolen & Dean, 2018).

Research evidence does not find that work requirements improve employment outcomes

SNAP can serve to identify and connect those in need of career assistance to job training, placement, and other forms of help, but this should be done in a way that preserves their access to food support. Using punitive work requirements in SNAP as leverage to compel unemployed or underemployed participants to work does not help with the problems faced by low-wage workers. Work requirements do not address their barriers to work, and penalize the unemployed.

In normal economic times, the ABAWD work requirement means that they are allowed only three months of eligibility for SNAP unless they are employed for at least 20 hours per week or is engaged in a workfare or training activity. Job search does not count toward this 20-hour requirement. The ABAWD work requirements can be waived for certain geographic areas under some circumstances when there is a weak labor market. As a result, there has been variation in exposure to work requirements that researchers have used to estimate the impact of these policies. There have been a number of recent, high-quality studies using comprehensive administrative data, which I summarize in Table 1, below. These new studies have found that SNAP work requirements have no positive impact on work-related outcomes, as measured by employment, earnings, or hours worked. On the other hand, they substantially reduce the likelihood that an individual receives SNAP.

Table 1. Summary of Recent High-Quality Studies of SNAP Work Requirements

Study	Setting	Impact on SNAP participation	Impact on Labor Market Outcomes
Studies using Administrative Data			
Cook & East (2024)	SNAP general work requirements in Western Mountain state	56% decline in months on SNAP	No impact on employment or earnings.
Gray et al. (2023)	ABAWDS in Virginia	53% decline in SNAP participation	No improvement in earnings or employment after 18 months.
Stacy, Scherpf & Jo (2018)	ABAWDs nationally	15% decline in SNAP participation	No impact on employment or hours worked.
Studies using Survey Data			
Han (2022)	American Community Survey; ABAWDs nationally	9% decline	No impact on employment or full-time work. Less than 1 hour decline in usual hours worked/week.
Harris (2021)	American Community Survey; ABAWDs nationally; 2010-17	10% decline	1.5% increase in employment.
Cuffey, Beatty & Mykerezzi (2021)	Current Population Survey; ABAWDs nationally; high school dropouts only	Not estimated	Implied increase in employment from 34% to 47%, likelihood of working 20+ hours/week up from 30% to 43%.

Other studies using survey data tend to find similar impacts: work requirements result in sharp declines in SNAP participation, and little to no impact on employment outcomes. One exception is a 2021 study limited to high school dropouts which finds more sizeable impacts on employment among this narrow group with low likelihoods of employment.

Earlier research on the impact of SNAP on employment found effects ranging from zero to modest negative effects (Hoynes & Schanzenbach, 2012; East, 2018). That research studied effects for people receiving benefits between the 1960s and the 1990s. The labor market, and employment among groups like women overall and single mothers has increased dramatically since then (Black, Schanzenbach & Breitwieser, 2017). Fortunately, we have more contemporary evidence for today's SNAP population and low-wage labor market, as described in Table 1 above.

Why do SNAP work requirements fail to improve employment outcomes? They do not address the problems these individuals can have in obtaining stable employment. They often have limited education, health problems, and other challenges that make it difficult for them to find and maintain consistently 20 hours a week of employment. Taking away their food benefits makes these challenges worse, not better.

A better approach is engaging SNAP participants who need help finding employment in high-quality, evidence-based SNAP E&T programs without the threat of benefit loss. The evidence supports this approach. For example, a pilot program of SNAP E&T work-based learning programs found that, after three years, participants were five percentage points more likely to be employed, they worked more hours and had higher earnings. Other evaluations of SNAP E&T pilot programs have built evidence on the characteristics of program success, such as partnering with community colleges and providing support services to help address individuals' barriers to steady employment. These lessons are being shared across states to continue to improve SNAP E&T.

Proposals to expand work requirements would cause harm

There have been proposals to expand the three-month time limit work requirement to all parents, or to parents of school-aged children. These proposals would apply work requirements to individuals, so for example both parents of a seven-year-old would each have to meet a work requirement or be subject to sanction. Like other punitive work requirements, this approach would likely remove participants from SNAP without improving their employment prospects. It would also harm children.

To put a human face on this, I would like to share the story of Veronica Cox, age 37, who was interviewed by a colleague of mine when she visited the Chosen Tabernacle food pantry in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago. Veronica has three children, ages 15, 9 and 7, and is a single mom. For 10 years she worked in security but had to stop due to debilitating pain in her hips that was only recently diagnosed as a “deformity” that has been there since birth. She cannot stand or sit for long periods of time without pain and needs to regularly stretch and do other treatments to keep the pain manageable. So far, her claims for disability benefits have been denied, but she has another hearing next month. She and her kids lived in a shelter for a while but recently moved into an apartment thanks to a program she was connected to through the shelter.

Her only income is child support and SNAP, and she says that on such a tight budget it takes a lot of planning and portion control to get through the month. She says that “SNAP plays a huge role in me being able to feed my children.” If she lost SNAP benefits because she was unable to meet the work requirement, she says: “Honestly, I don’t know what I’d do. It definitely would hurt. It would cause damage.” She has been looking for at-home jobs but has not yet had success. She is also brainstorming any other work she can possibly do given her standing and sitting limitations. “It bothers me not being able to support my family. I had a game plan. I went to college.” (She has a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice.) “I didn’t want this.”

Imposing a work requirement to receive SNAP on Veronica or others like her will not make them try harder to find a job. It will, however, raise the likelihood that they lose access to an important source of support used to buy food.

The Low-Wage Labor Market is Volatile

Those who count on SNAP to help afford their groceries tend to be engaged in the low-wage labor market, and the jobs in this sector are different than those that are typically held by middle-class workers. SNAP participants generally work low-wage jobs, in occupations with higher unemployment rates and more common job displacements (Butcher & Schanzenbach, 2017; Bauer, East & Howard, 2025). The jobs are more likely to be seasonal. Workers in these occupations experience a lot of volatility in employment and earnings across months and years. These jobs have seen little real wage growth in recent decades, and do not tend to lead to a career ladder with better job titles and higher future earnings. Even when workers are engaged in what I would term “substantial” employment—working more than 30 hours per week for at least half of the year—nearly 3 in 10 do not earn enough to be above the poverty line.

There are some important recent studies that investigate the dynamics surrounding new spells of SNAP participation or falling into poverty. Immediately prior to applying to SNAP, applicants generally have experienced a sharp decrease in their likelihood of employment or their earnings. In other words, they apply for SNAP precisely because they have experienced an economic shock like a job loss, or a divorce or death in the family (Cook & East 2023; Blank et al. 2024). SNAP helps them get back on their feet. New evidence finds that within a year, SNAP recipients are more likely to be employed and have higher earnings than they would have had without help from the program (Cook & East 2023).

In summary, the low-wage labor market is unstable—you might even call it “broken.” But SNAP did not cause this, and SNAP cannot fix it. Instead, SNAP helps soften the blow when workers in the low-wage sector see their hours cut back or lose their jobs. When facing both a work requirement and the reality of their job markets, many SNAP recipients simply cannot meet stringent work requirements due to the nature of their jobs, not due to a shortcoming of their own efforts (Bauer, Schanzenbach & Shambaugh, 2018). Unfortunately, the system is set up so that if they miss three months of employment, they will be barred from receiving SNAP for the next three years. Imagine the harmful consequences if such an approach were extended to families with children. This policy is not effective for those currently facing SNAP work requirements, and expanding the requirements to more cover SNAP participants would harm even more people.

SNAP is a Vital Economic Stabilizer

SNAP benefits the wider economy by ensuring that recipients remain able to purchase enough food when they experience economic hardships. By doing so, it provides a highly effective economic stimulus during economic downturns. Under the design it has had for more than 50 years, SNAP can very quickly adapt to economic recessions. As more households become eligible for the program—for example, due to job loss—they can be quickly enrolled, with total program outlays essentially automatically increasing to respond to increased need. SNAP funds are then spent rapidly, with 80% of benefits spent within two weeks of receipt and 97% spent

within a month (Bernstein & Spielberg, 2016). This spending helps the economy in their local community, including the retail, wholesale, and transportation systems that deliver the groceries purchased. According to the Congressional Budget Office, SNAP is one of the three programs (along with unemployment insurance and Medicaid) that provide most of the automatic stabilization from federal spending (Russek & Kowalewski, 2015). SNAP's entitlement structure, therefore, is one of its greatest strengths as a crucial economic stabilizer.

Figure 1. SNAP Participation and the Unemployment Rate, 1980-2024

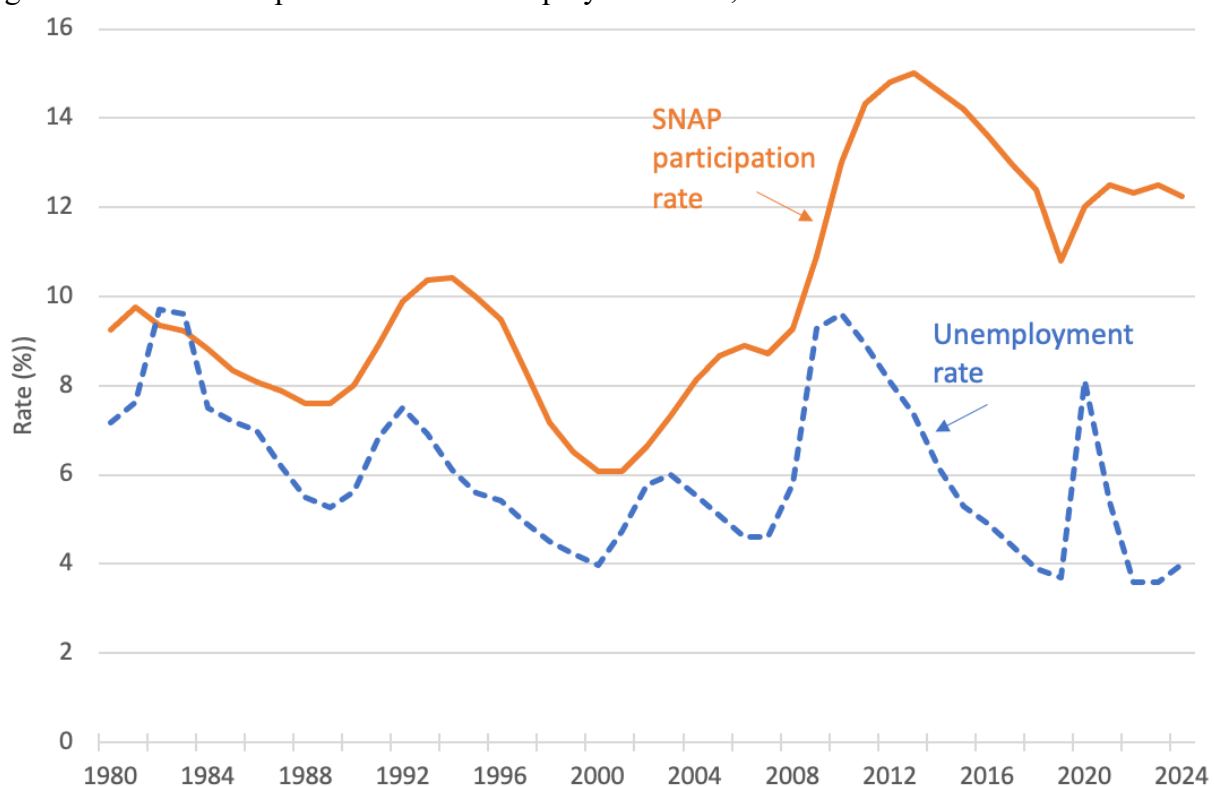


Figure 1, above, shows SNAP participation (as a share of the population) and the unemployment rate since 1980. Consistent with its role as an economic stabilizer, SNAP participation tends to increase rapidly when the unemployment rate rises. During periods of economic recovery, SNAP participation falls more slowly than the overall unemployment rate, in part reflecting the fact that employment among workers with lower levels of education recovers more slowly. The Congressional Budget Office's projections indicate that the SNAP participation rate will fall by another 2 percentage points over the next decade under their January 2025 baseline projections.

Although SNAP has been a vital economic stabilizer during economic downturns, some recent proposals would undermine SNAP's effectiveness during recessions. During this time, as analysts are predicting an increasing likelihood of a recession in the coming months, we should be shoring up our tools to fight recessions, not undercutting them.

It is critical to the American economy and American workers that work requirements are suspended or waived when there are not enough jobs available—during recessions and their aftermath. Congress deserves substantial credit for having suspended work requirements during

the past two recessions on a bipartisan basis. Further, states have been able to request waivers under a range of criteria that indicate an area has a cyclically weak labor market. A recent study confirms that SNAP work requirement waiver usage is countercyclical (Burkhauser et al., 2024). I have previously proposed that Congress adopt an automatic trigger to immediately suspend SNAP work requirements without delay when certain economic conditions occur, indicating the onset of a recession (Hoynes and Schanzenbach, 2019). Some have proposed policies that would move in the opposite direction—that is, to weaken SNAP’s response during an economic downturn, such as eliminating or further limiting the ability to waive SNAP work requirements. This would be a mistake, especially now as analysts report an increasing probability of a recession in coming months, we should not hamper SNAP’s ability to help people and stabilize the economy in the event of a recession.

Another deeply concerning proposal would be the notion of introducing a cost-sharing provision with states for SNAP benefits (as some have proposed) would fundamentally undermine its stabilizing impact on the macro-economy. During and after recessions, state governments experience declines in tax revenues and increases in demand for programs. But because states typically are required to balance their budgets each year, these forces pressure states to raise taxes, cut programs, or both (Fiedler, Furman & Powell, 2019). If a portion of SNAP benefits were newly moved to state budgets, it would exacerbate this existing problem, reduce SNAP’s counter-cyclical responsiveness, and increase the severity of economic downturns.

SNAP is Effective

SNAP is a highly efficient and effective program. It supplements a family’s cash resources, so that between SNAP and their other income they can afford to buy a sufficient diet. Average monthly benefits in 2024 amounted to \$187.54 per person—or about \$6.15 per person per day. SNAP kept at least 3.4 million people out of poverty in 2023 (the most recent data available), including 1.3 million children (Shrider, 2024). SNAP is targeted to families who need benefits the most, reduces the likelihood that families have trouble affording food, and serves as crucial automatic fiscal stabilizer in times of economic downturns. And there are better ways to promote employment outcomes than terminating SNAP benefits for those who cannot find adequate work.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions you have.

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