

**Testimony of
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**on the subject of “The Future of SNAP: Moving Past the Pandemic”
before the U.S. House of Representatives Agriculture Committee
Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations**

May 26, 2021

Chair Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee this afternoon.

My name is Dr. Lauren Lowenstein Bauer, and I am a Fellow in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution where I am affiliated with The Hamilton Project. I conduct research on issues of economic and public concern, including human capital development and safety net programs. One of my areas of expertise is federal nutrition assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly known as the Food Stamp Program).

In my testimony today I will describe the state of food insecurity in the United States, assess how federal nutrition assistance programs have supported families and the economy over the past year, and apply evidence toward making recommendations on the future of SNAP.

Food insecurity, especially when experienced by children, has been an acute and persistent problem in the United States over the past year. Congress took vitally important action centered on enhancing SNAP and providing resources to purchase food to families with children, which prevented even greater hardship. Although SNAP is already a highly effective program, there are modest but important steps that Congress can take to improve the program. These reforms include (i) automatically increasing benefits levels and ensuring that the program expands during a recession, (ii) adopting a timely and efficient process for waiving or ending SNAP work requirements, and (iii) adjusting the SNAP benefit formula to increase benefit adequacy and support work.

Food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic

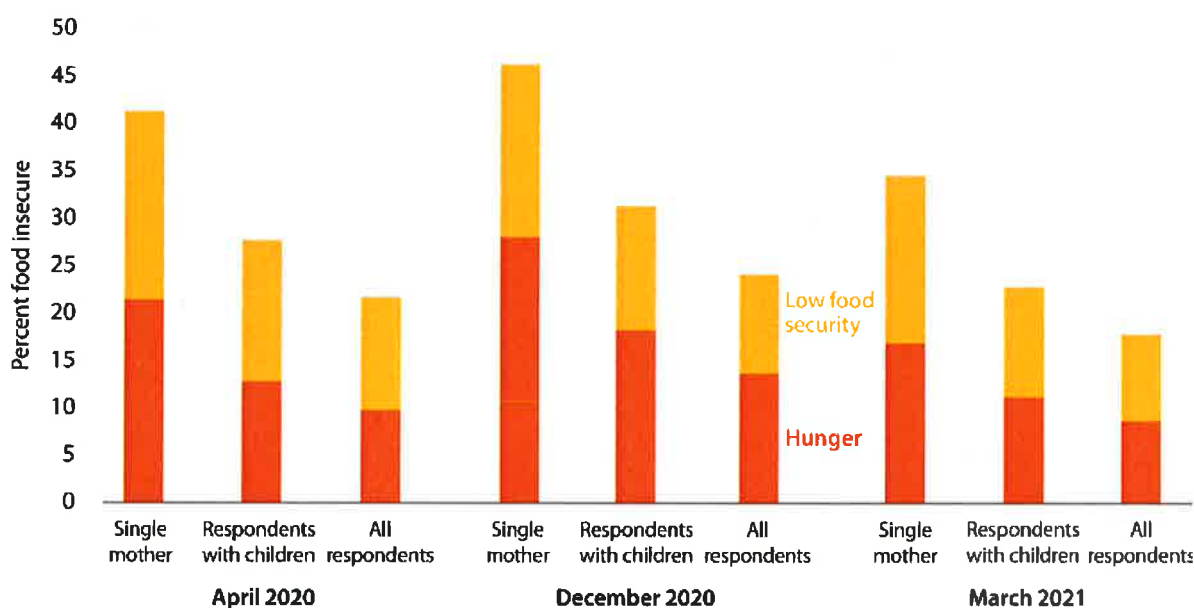
Food insecurity increases during economic downturns and tend to remain elevated long after the official end to a recession because the economic recovery of low-income households typically lags higher-income groups. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, about 11 percent of households were food insecure and about 4 percent of households reported very low food security in 2019.ⁱ

Early in the pandemic, nationally representative surveys consistently found overall rates of household food insecurity above 20 percent and that more than one in three households with children were experiencing food insecurity. In fact, during the course of 2020, food insecurity rates remained elevated, peaking for most groups in December 2020. These elevated levels are illustrative of how food insecurity has been a crisis within the larger crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.ⁱⁱ Starting in January 2021, food insecurity rates started to decline but remain far above pre-COVID levels. In the most recently available data from the Census Household Pulse Survey, fielded from April 28 to May 10, 2021, about 16.6

percent of households were food insecure and about 22 percent of households with children were food insecure.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nevertheless, families with children, and specifically single mother households, have experienced especially high levels of material hardship over the past year. Figure 1 shows the share of adult respondents to the Census Household Pulse Survey who reported food insecurity at key points over the past year, divided by hunger (very low food security) and low food security. As of late March 2021, single mothers had a higher rate of food insecurity (almost 35 percent) than respondents with children or all households had at any point during the pandemic.

Figure 1
Food Insecurity among Different Types of Families, April 2020,
December 2020, March 2021

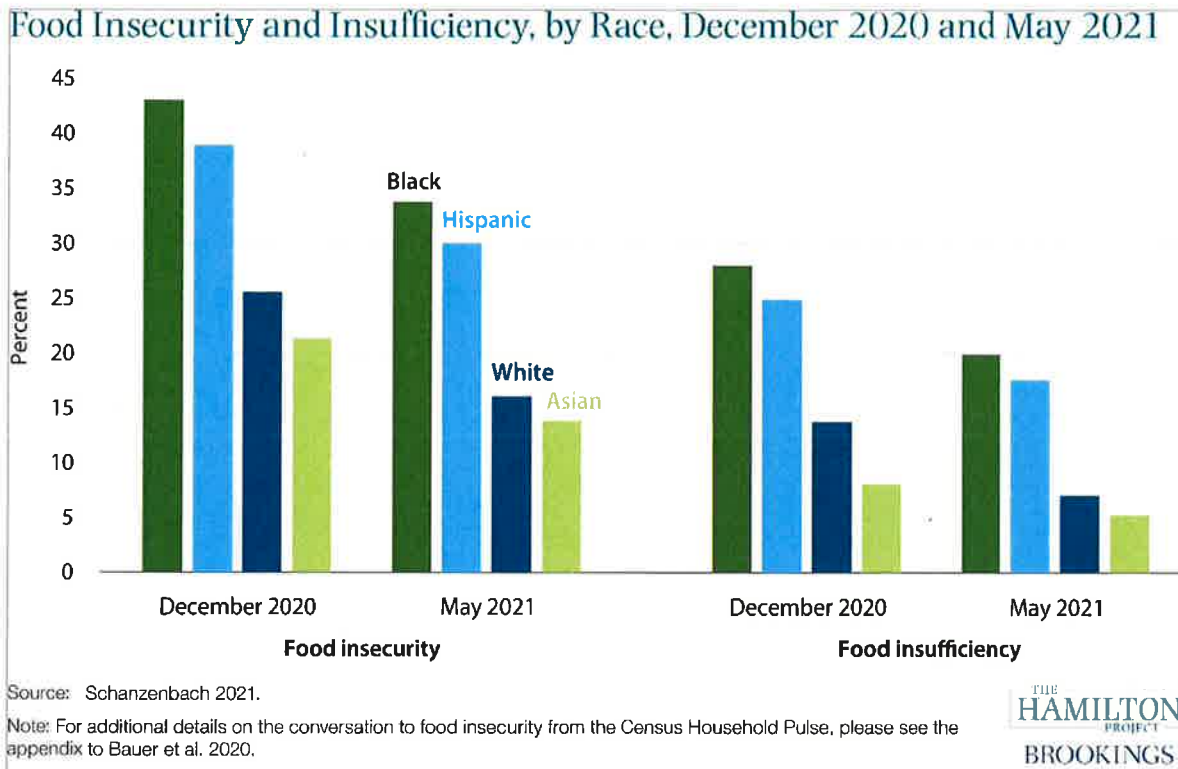


Source: Pitts and Schanzenbach 2021 (Census Household Pulse Survey; Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement); correspondence with author.

Note: Household Pulse Survey weeks 1, 21, and 27 are shown. For additional details, please see the Pitts and Schanzenbach 2020.

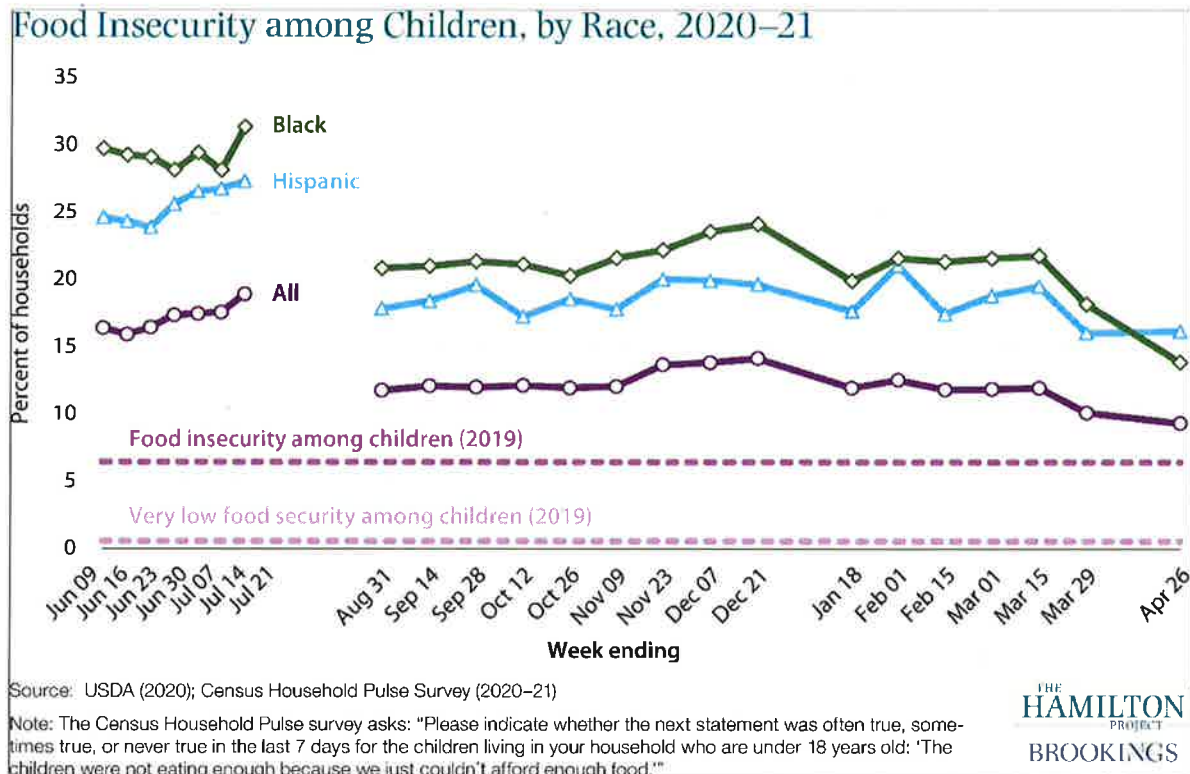
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Rates of food insecurity and insufficiency (reporting sometimes or often not having enough food) also have been particularly elevated among Black and Hispanic families with children (figure 2). While rates of food insecurity and food insufficiency are substantially lower for all groups in May 2021 relative to December 2020, they are still about double among Black and Hispanic families with children over white families with children.

Figure 2

Food insecurity affects the entire household but within food insecure households, adults will go to great lengths to protect their children from experiencing hunger.^{iv} Over the past year, there is evidence of a substantial increase in the food insecurity of children.^v Figure 3 shows the share of parents (all, Black, and Hispanic) who responded that it was sometime or often the case that in the past week “the children in my household were not eating enough because we just couldn’t afford enough food.” As illustrated in the figure below, this marks a significant increase from 2019 annual rates, whether food insecurity or very low food security among children (dashed lines).

Figure 3



Elevated rates of food insecurity are associated with worse contemporaneous health and academic outcomes and indicate that a household is facing more general economic challenges; in the long term, children's exposure to adverse economic shocks has persistent negative health and economic consequences.^{vi} Therefore, the food insecurity patterns we observe today will not only affect well-being and economic security in the short term, but will reverberate for decades to come. Encouragingly, research evidence, including from the past year, suggests that providing additional nutrition assistance can counteract some of the rise in food insecurity.

The importance of federal nutrition assistance programs to the economy

The goals of safety net programs are to provide insurance protection to those who are experiencing poor economic outcomes and to support those who are trying to improve their situation. SNAP achieves these goals by leveraging powerful forces—public investment, the private sector, and choice—to ensure that eligible participants and families have food when they have no or low income. Evidence shows that SNAP reduces food insecurity, increases health and economic security among families in the short term, economic self-sufficiency in the long term, and that we all benefit from its effect on the economy.^{viii}

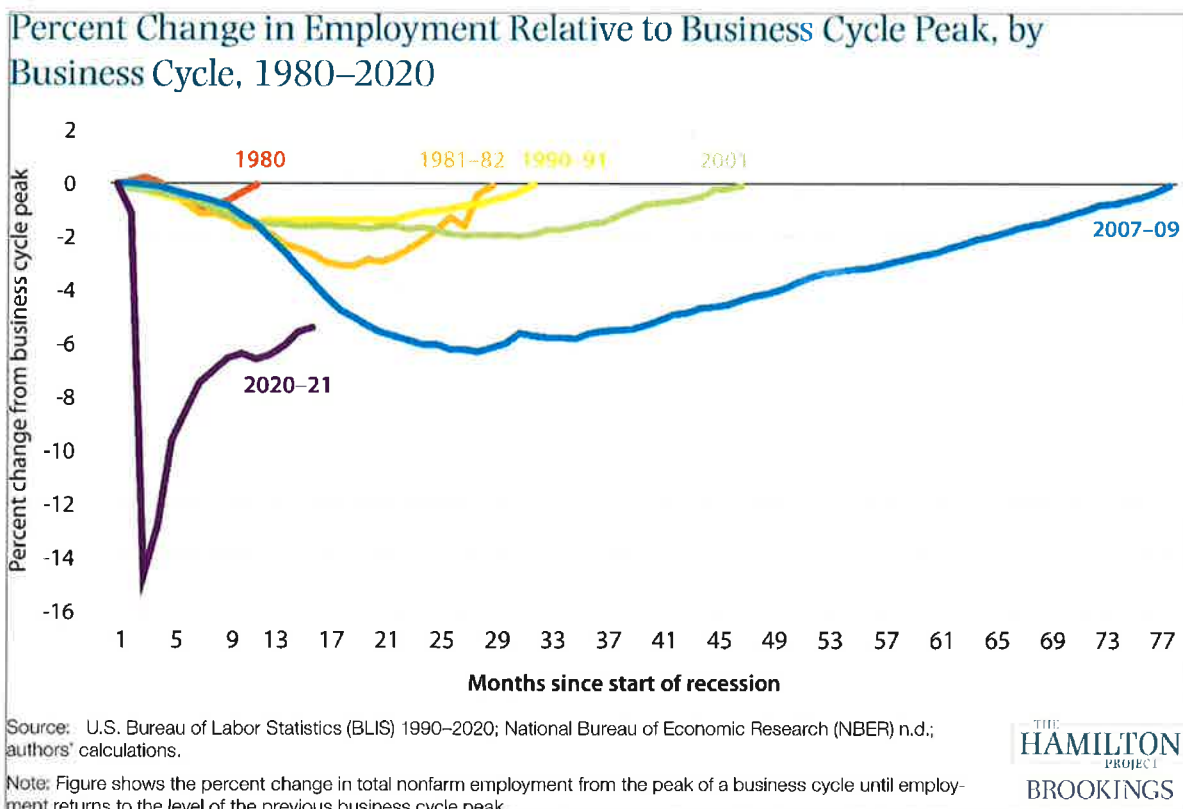
Food insecurity and economic hardship typically increase in recessions and decrease in economic expansions. The safety net plays an important role in mitigating the negative effects in recessions, partly by automatically expanding during economic downturns as income-based eligibility for safety net programs increases, and partly through Congressional actions that increase the generosity of and eligibility for safety net programs.^{vii}

Congress has a track record of taking action to preserve and improve SNAP's ability to turn the tide on economic downturns. During the Great Recession, the statutory increase to the SNAP maximum benefit reduced food insecurity and improved economic conditions within the household, keeping a million people out of poverty in 2010.^{viii} Studies show that when SNAP payments increase to a local area in response to an economic downturn, they serve as stimulus; for example, every \$1.00 in new SNAP benefits spurred \$1.74 in economic activity in the first quarter of 2009, and spurred \$1.22 even as late as the first quarter of 2015. Indeed, additional SNAP benefits had the highest multiplier of any of the policies adopted during the Great Recession.^{ix}

COVID-19 recession and Congressional response

It is difficult to overstate the extent of economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The onset of the COVID-19 recession was swifter and the nadir deeper than the Great Recession.^x Figure 4 shows the percent change in employment relative to business cycle peaks. Job losses resulting from COVID-19 wiped out 113 straight months of job growth, with total non-farm employment falling by 20.5 million jobs in April 2020.^{xi} Based on the most recent employment report, employment is still more than 5 percent below its February 2020 level. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic shutdown affected all workers, but the impact was harshest for women, non-white workers, lower-wage earners, and those with less education.^{xii}

Figure 4



Deteriorating economic conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have made it even more difficult for many low-income households, including those with children, to afford groceries. Families responded to these challenges by relying on community resources and safety net programs.

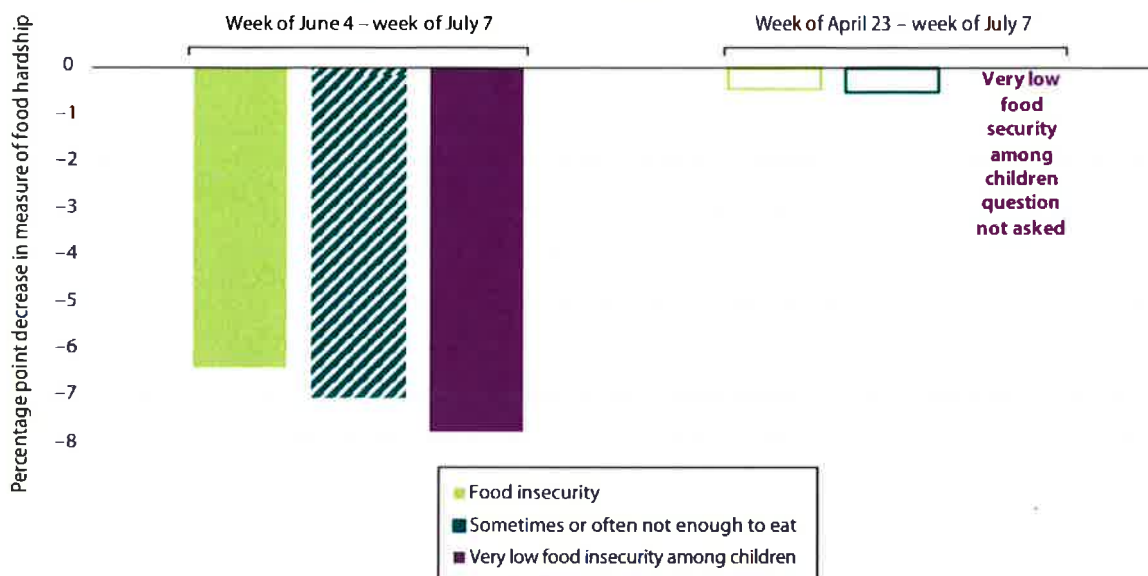
Food banks have reported consistent increases in demand throughout 2020, with more people availing themselves of food pantries or receiving other forms of direct food assistance from a community or religious organization than at any point since at least 2014.^{xiii} Reported use of charitable food increased 50 percent between December 2019 and December 2020: in December 2020, 20 percent of adults reported that in the past year their household had received charitable food.^{xiv} Charitable food assistance has helped families during the COVID-19 recession, but these alternative sources of food are not adequate to meet demand.^{xv}

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated recession have led, both automatically and through Congressional and Executive action, to an expansion in eligibility for and generosity of nutrition assistance programs in the United States. Through SNAP, additional resources for existing programs including SNAP, WIC, child nutrition programs (National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and Summer Food Service Program), and new programs like Pandemic EBT and Farmers to Families boxes, Congress has supported millions of eligible households with vouchers to purchase food as well as commodities and meals.

In addition to taking action to increase SNAP enrollment during the course of the past year, Congress authorized two pieces of legislation that increased the value of SNAP benefits: SNAP Emergency Allotments (EAs; beginning April 2020) and a 15 percent SNAP maximum benefit increase (beginning January 2021). The maximum benefit increase affected the benefit generosity for all participating households; until last month, only households not receiving the SNAP maximum benefit were eligible for EAs. In combination, these additional resources prevented greater food hardship than otherwise would have been experienced over the course of the past year and allowed families to use their non-SNAP financial resources on other necessities.

Because school meal programs are integral to addressing child food insecurity in the United States, many entities, including Congress, the USDA, states, and schools, took action in response to COVID-19-related school closures to reconstitute the food safety net for children. My colleagues and I (Abigail Pitts, Krista Ruffini, and Diane Schanzenbach) evaluated the impact of one of the planks: the initial rollout of Pandemic EBT during the summer of 2020.^{xvi} As shown in figure 5, during the first week after Pandemic EBT benefits are paid, the rate of children not getting enough to eat declines by about 8 percentage points (30 percent). Evidence of the effect of Pandemic EBT during its rollout in the summer of 2020 is consistent with prior evidence on the effect of Summer EBT.^{xvii}

Figure 5
Effect of Pandemic EBT on Measures of Food Hardship



Source: Census Household Pulse Survey 2020; Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement 2008, 2018; authors' calculations.

Note: Hollow bars indicate results that are not statistically significant at the 10 percent level. The striped bar indicates results are significant at the 10 percent level. Solid bars indicate results are significant at the 1 or 5 percent level. Please refer to the technical appendix for additional details.

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While the COVID-19 recession is ongoing, SNAP is an integral part of the economic recovery. SNAP is designed to support work and to ensure food consumption during spells of unemployment or when a person is unable to work or work consistently. SNAP addresses work disincentives through an earnings disregard of 20 percent and a gradual benefit reduction schedule. This means that when a person moves from being a labor force nonparticipant to working while on SNAP, total household resources will increase; as a beneficiary's earnings approach the eligibility threshold, total household resources continue to increase.^{xviii}

Work requirements in SNAP are intended to increase labor force participation and hours worked among program participants. However, evidence suggest that SNAP work requirements do not increase employment and penalize workers who are eligible for SNAP. During the Food Stamp Program's introduction in the 1960s and 1970s, reductions in employment and hours worked were observed, particularly among female-headed households.^{xix} But in general and in the modern era, there is little evidence that SNAP receipt itself depresses work effort.^{xx}

Work requirements make SNAP a less-effective automatic stabilizer by preventing newly eligible people from maintaining access to the program during economic downturns.^{xxi} The law provides for a safety valve—work requirement waivers—that allows states to apply for exemptions where there is evidence of a lack of sufficient jobs. These standing criteria have not substituted for Congressional action; during both the Great Recession and the COVID-19 Recession, Congress acted to suspend SNAP work requirements nationwide.

Reforms to improve countercyclicality in SNAP

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hilary Hoynes (University of California – Berkeley) and Diane Schanzenbach (Northwestern University) proposed policies to leverage SNAP to counter economic downturns. In their piece, they argue for tying a 15 percent maximum benefit increase and a nationwide work requirement suspension to economic indicators that signal a recession has started.^{xxii} This proposal provides a base for reforms to improve the countercyclicality of SNAP, in addition to codifying some of the measures that Congress took over the past year.

In response to pandemic conditions, USDA approved state waivers to extend certification periods, reduce paperwork and interview burdens, and allow for telephonic signatures – all of which made it easier for eligible individuals to enroll in and stay on SNAP.^{xxiii} While easing administrative barriers should be a part of reform more generally, it is particularly important to put in place mechanisms to do so automatically when the economy is contracting and the rolls of means-tested programs should expand. In December 2020, income from Unemployment Insurance became newly disregarded as part of the SNAP benefit calculation. Given evidence that SNAP participation increases when households lose jobs and income and decreases as participants earn more, extending this provision would provide greater public insurance to workers.^{xxiv}

Reforms to promote work in SNAP

To augment work incentives in the SNAP program rules, Congress could increase the earnings disregard. This would provide a larger incentive to program participants to work and earn more. A Hamilton Project proposal from Diane Schanzenbach (Northwestern University) recommends increasing the earnings disregard to 30 percent.^{xxv} Similarly, military families should not be prevented from accessing SNAP because of the ways in which their work is compensated; a basic needs allowance is a sensible solution to increase food security among servicemembers and their families.

Another way to increase work incentives in SNAP is to increase the value of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for childless adults. Prior to the American Rescue Plan (ARP), the EITC for households with no children was about \$540. The ARP increased the value of the EITC for this group to about \$1,500 and expanded who qualified. The EITC is pro-work on its own and would make SNAP more pro-work because EITC is not counted in the SNAP benefit formula.

SNAP's fundamental role as an automatic stabilizer and safety net should guide reform. I do not believe that there is evidence to justify time limits on SNAP program participation, in good economic times or ill; SNAP work requirements should be eliminated. In the event of their continuation, work requirement waivers should be tied to additional responsive economic triggers and SNAP Employment and Training slots should be more widely available.

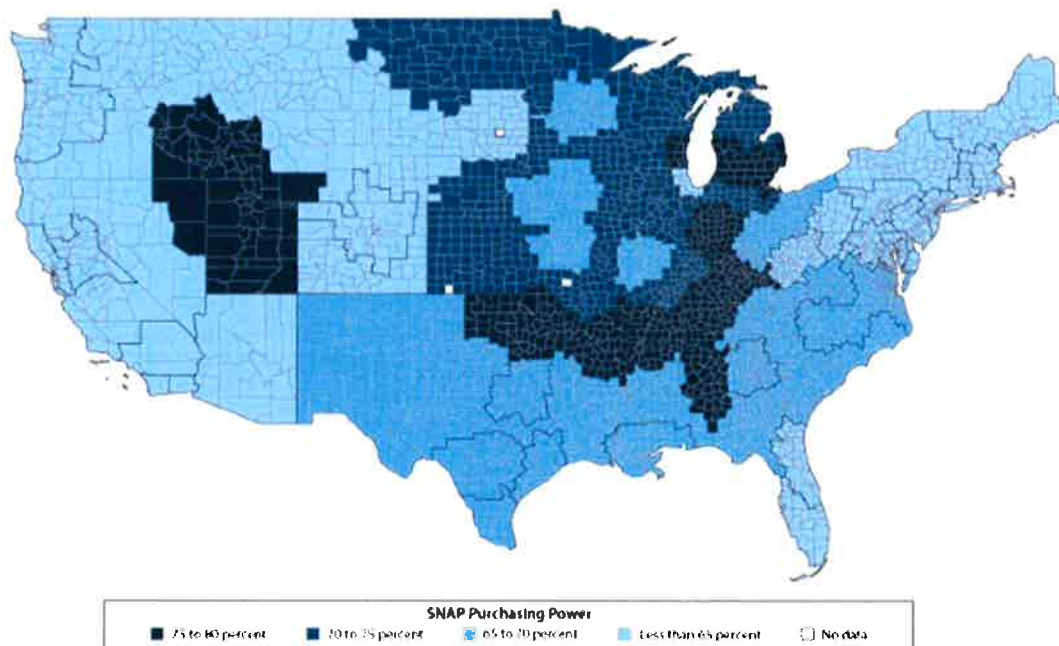
Addressing food insecurity through SNAP

The value of SNAP benefits that a household receives are the function of three factors: how much USDA determines it minimally costs to achieve a healthy diet i.e. The Thrifty Food Plan (the Thrifty), how much money a household has available to purchase groceries, and what share of that available money does the government expect a household to spend on groceries. Because households who have no resources to contribute to the purchase of groceries receive the maximum benefit, the purchasing power of the

Thrifty should meet their food needs.

The value of the SNAP maximum benefit is not sufficient to provide adequate nutrition assistance for eligible households. The value of the Thrifty varies widely across different locations; in no market area does SNAP purchasing power cover more than 80 percent of the price of the Thrifty and in high cost areas, it covers less than 65 percent (figure 6).^{xxvi} But even in more local areas with lower relative food costs to others, the Thrifty is not adequate: in 2018, the SNAP maximum benefit per meal did not cover the cost of a Thrifty-tied meal in 99 percent of counties in the US.^{xxvii} In places with higher food prices, rates of household, adult, and child food insecurity are higher.^{xxviii}

Figure 6
SNAP Purchasing Power by Market Group, 2010



Source: Branchetti, Christensen, and Heynes 2018

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Furthermore, evidence suggests that SNAP purchasing power has decreased even more since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher food prices, increasing demand for food to be prepared at home and shelf-stable nutritious foods, competition among retailers and food banks, reduced low-price food given demand, day-over-day disruptions that result in empty shelves, and restricted ability to comparison shop all contribute to lower SNAP purchasing power and exacerbate even further the inadequacy of the maximum SNAP benefit.^{xxix} This contributes to rising food insecurity and household financial instability, which have detrimental near- and long-term effects.

Reforms to address SNAP benefit adequacy

In order to increase the adequacy of SNAP benefits for participating households to reduce food insecurity and improve nutrition, benefit calculations and allowable purchases need modernization. For

The Hamilton Project, James Ziliak (University of Kentucky) summarized the evidence and proposed mechanisms for updating the calculation of the Thrifty Food Plan, focusing on accounting for the cost of time.^{xxx} There are additional levers throughout the benefit formula and through the calculation of the Thrifty itself that would more closely align benefits with the needs of families. While additional benefits alone spur the purchase of healthy foods, direct incentives to purchase fruits and vegetables and allowing for the purchase of certain low-cost, high-value hot items (like rotisserie chickens) would reduce food insecurity and improve diet quality.^{xxxi}

The fact that many who receive benefits remain food insecure does not imply that the programs are ineffective, as families most in need of food assistance are most likely to enroll in nutrition programs. I believe that ending hunger in America is possible – and it starts with increasing SNAP purchasing power. While the Thrifty was previously recalculated infrequently and on an ad hoc basis, Congress now mandates regular updates to the Thrifty Food Plan: every five years starting in 2022. I understand that USDA is currently in the process of responding to this Congressional mandate.

To reduce food insecurity and support America’s economic recovery, sensible reforms to SNAP include (i) automatically increasing benefits levels and ensuring that the program expands during a recession, (ii) adopting a timely and efficient process for waiving or ending SNAP work requirements, and (iii) adjusting the SNAP benefit formula to increase benefit adequacy and support work.

Endnotes

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ⁱⁱ Waxman, Elaine. 2020. “Many Families Are Struggling to Put Food on the Table. We Have to Do More.” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, Washington, DC.; Bauer, Lauren. 2020. “The COVID-19 Crisis Has Already Left Too Many Children Hungry in America.” Blog. The Hamilton Project, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC; Schanzenbach, Diane, and Abigail Pitts. 2020. “Estimates of Food Insecurity During the COVID-19 Crisis.” Institute for Policy Research Rapid Research Report, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.; Schanzenbach, Diane and Abigail Pitts. 2020. “Food Insecurity in the Census Household Pulse Survey Data Tables.” Institute for Policy Research Rapid Research Report, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL. When comparing similar populations across these (overall, families with children, and mothers of young children) response rates to food insecurity questions were statistically indistinguishable.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Census Household Pulse Survey (HPS) asks respondents whether, in the past seven days, its household was able to consume the quantity and types of food it wanted; was able to consume enough, but not of the type of food it wanted; sometimes was not able to eat enough; or often was not able to eat enough. This question is identical to that asked in the Current Population Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS, December supplement). Since the HPS does not ask the full battery of food security questions, Schanzenbach and Pitts map CPS-FSS food insufficiency and food insecurity to the HPS food insufficiency question, following the approach in Bitler et al. (2020). They take the CPS-FSS from 2015 through 2019 and calculate the share of food insecure households (overall, with children, single mothers) in each food insufficiency category by state, then multiply these rates for the HPS responses in order to obtain a state-by-week level measure of food insecurity. As shown in Bitler et al. (2020), 92 percent of the increase in household food insecurity from pre-COVID to transformed food insecurity post-COVID can be explained by an increase in unemployment, while only 65 percent of the increase in household food insecurity among households with children can be similarly explained. Their work both validates the technique of transforming the HPS questions into the food insecurity concept and affirms that the loss of school meals and disproportionate loss of employment among women explain a higher share of elevated food insecurity among these families. Bitler, Marianne P., Hilary W. Hoynes, and Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach. 2020. “The Social Safety Net in the Wake of COVID-19.” Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC; Schanzenbach, Diane, and Abigail Pitts. 2020. “How Much Has Food Insecurity Risen? Evidence from the Census Household Pulse Survey.” Institute for Policy Rapid Research Report, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.

^{iv} The USDA defines a household as food insecure if it reports that it had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all of its members due to a lack of resources. This broad measure of food insecurity includes households that report a reduction in the quality, variety, and desirability of diet but little or no reduction in food intake, as well as households that experience very low food security—that is, who report disruptions in eating patterns and reductions in food intake.

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