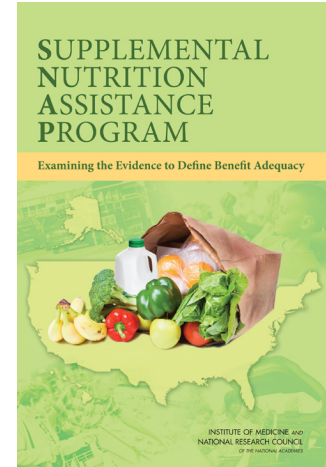


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# Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

## Examining the Evidence to Define Benefit Adequacy



**The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** is the largest nutrition assistance program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), serving more than 46 million low-income Americans per year, at a cost of more than \$75 billion. SNAP's goals are straightforward: To improve participants' food security and their access to a healthy diet.

The USDA asked the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the National Research Council (NRC) to consider whether it is feasible to objectively define the adequacy of SNAP allotments and, if so, to outline the data and analyses needed to support an evidence-based assessment of SNAP adequacy.

In its report, *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Examining the Evidence to Define Benefit Adequacy*, the IOM/NRC committee concludes that the adequacy of the SNAP allotment can be defined, but doing so requires identifying the factors that affect SNAP participants' ability to meet the program goals. The committee recommends factors that the USDA should consider in defining the adequacy of SNAP allotments and ways to approach monitoring the ability of SNAP participants to meet program goals with their allotment.

**In its report, the Institute of Medicine/National Research Council committee concludes that the adequacy of the SNAP allotment can be defined, but doing so requires identifying the factors that affect SNAP participants' ability to meet the program goals.**

### Defining SNAP Adequacy

Based on its review of the evidence, the IOM/NRC committee developed a framework to identify the range of factors most likely to affect a definition of the adequacy of SNAP allotments, given the program goals of food security and access to a healthy diet. (See Figure.) This range of factors include

- total resources, individual and household factors, and environmental fac-

tors that affect how SNAP participants purchase and consume foods; and

- characteristics of the SNAP program that influence the process through which participants may or may not meet program goals.

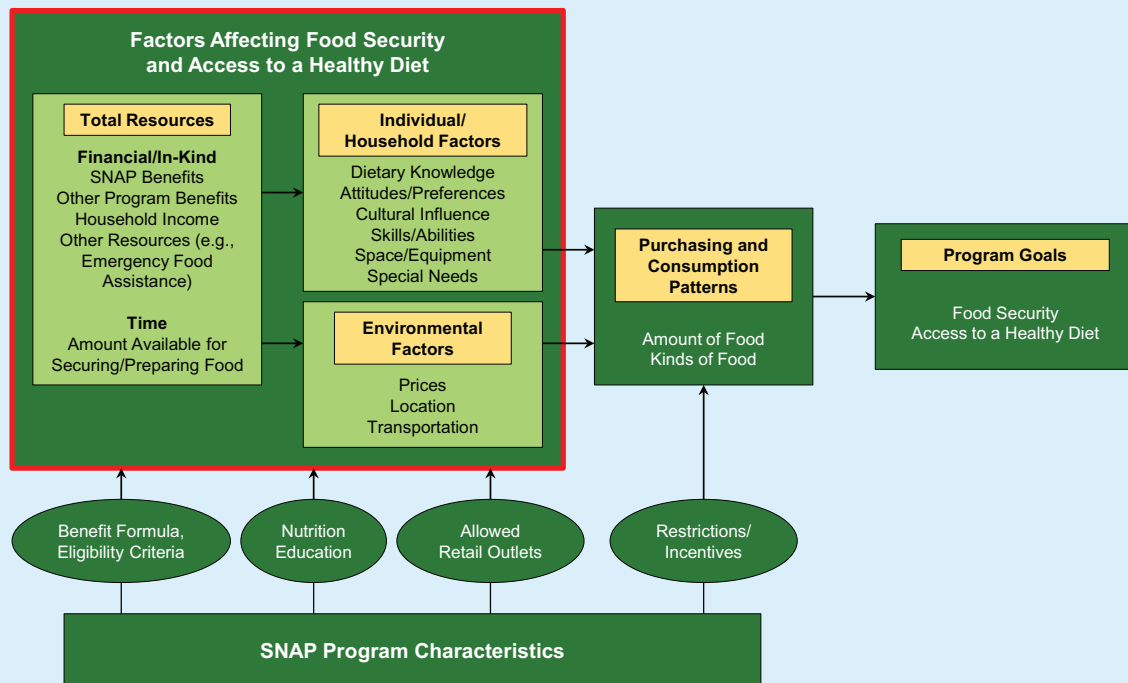
The maximum SNAP allotment is based on the Thrifty Food Plan, a model market basket of food that represents a nutritious diet at minimal cost. The plan assumes that participants primarily will purchase less expensive, unprocessed ingredients—such as vegetables and meat to make a stew—and fewer prepared or partially prepared products, which requires more time than U.S. households now devote to meal preparation.

The committee finds that the adequacy of a household’s SNAP allotment may be influenced by certain individual, household, and environmental factors, such as the availability of time to purchase and prepare meals, geographic variability in food prices, and barriers to accessing food outlets. This means that a SNAP allotment that is adequate for

a household with sufficient time and skill to purchase and prepare many meals from scratch, with easy access to food stores, and living in a relatively low cost part of the country, may be inadequate for a household without these attributes.

The committee also finds that the influence of several SNAP program characteristics should be evaluated in defining allotment adequacy. First, research data suggest that factors, such as the value of time to purchase and prepare foods and variability in the cost of food, affect the purchasing power of the SNAP benefit. Second, assumptions about how families today spend their household dollars on food as well as the amount they spend are factors that affect the definition of an adequate allotment. Third, the cost for housing and medical care, along with the cost of other living expenses for SNAP households, can vary by region. More information is needed on how those expenses affect the purchasing power of the SNAP allotment.

**FIGURE: Framework to Determine the Feasibility of Defining SNAP Adequacy**



**The committee finds that the adequacy of a household's SNAP allotment may be influenced by certain individual, household, and environmental factors, such as the availability of time to purchase and prepare meals, geographic variability in food prices, and barriers to accessing food outlets.**

## **Incorporating Key Factors into Defining SNAP Allotment Adequacy**

The committee concludes that the adequacy of the SNAP allotment can be defined and has identified the critical factors and characteristics in its framework. The committee recommends that the USDA investigate a number of approaches to incorporate individual, household, and environmental factors into the definition of adequate SNAP allotments. Three factors are key to defining the adequacy of SNAP allotments.

The first is the assumption that SNAP participants have sufficient time to produce healthy meals from scratch, which is out of sync with the practices of most U.S. households today. Additional preparation time is required when using basic, unprocessed foods to prepare meals. Second are the food prices faced by SNAP participants that vary across the country, and between urban and rural areas. SNAP participants who live in locales with higher food prices find it difficult to meet their needs with the current benefit. Third are the limitations experienced by low-income households in getting to supermarkets and other food stores that offer a variety of healthy foods at a lower cost. Low-income minority populations are more likely than others to have limited access to stores selling a variety of healthy foods at a reasonable cost.

The committee also recommends that the USDA evaluate how several program characteristics influence defining an adequate SNAP allotment. Specifically, the USDA should examine whether permitting SNAP participants to pur-

chase partially or fully prepared food would offset their need to devote a disproportionate amount of time turning basic ingredients into healthy meals. It also should evaluate the portion of household income that SNAP participants are expected to devote to food purchases to more closely align its calculations with their actual purchases.

The USDA should examine possible approaches to account for geographic variations in food prices, for example by adjusting the maximum benefit amount to account for price adjustments in high- and low-cost regions of the nation. The committee also recommends ways to monitor and assess the ability of SNAP participants to use their allotments to become more food secure, and to purchase and prepare healthy foods.

The committee recommends that the USDA investigate the potential of nutrition education opportunities to increase the purchasing power of SNAP allotments and the resource management skills that would enable participants to use their benefit to make healthier food choices.

## **Conclusion**

SNAP touches the lives of millions of people in the United States. One in seven people in the United States currently receives SNAP benefits, which underscores the importance of assessing the science and evidence base for defining the adequacy of allotments.

The IOM/NRC committee's recommendations for defining, measuring, and monitoring the adequacy of SNAP allotments are designed to



**Committee on Examination of the Adequacy of Food Resources and SNAP Allotments**

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**Julie A. Caswell** (Chair)  
Professor, Department of Resource Economics, University of Massachusetts Amherst

**Sara N. Bleich**  
Assistant Professor, Department of Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, Maryland

**Noel Chávez**  
Associate Professor, School of Public Health, University of Illinois at Chicago

**Jamie Dollahite**  
Associate Professor, Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

**Philip Gleason**  
Senior Fellow, Mathematica Policy Research, Geneva, New York

**Barbara A. Laraia**  
Associate Professor, School of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley

**Sheila Mammen**  
Professor, Department of Resource Economics, University of Massachusetts Amherst

**Mary K. Muth**  
Director, Food and Nutrition Policy Research Program, RTI International, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina

**Bonny O'Neil**  
Retired, USDA Food and Nutrition Service, Alexandria, Virginia

**Diane W. Schanzenbach**  
Associate Professor, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois

**James P. Ziliak**  
Professor and Carol Martin Gatton Endowed Chair in Microeconomics, Department of Economics, University of Kentucky

**Study Staff**

---

**Ann L. Yaktine**  
Study Director

**Julia Hoglund**  
Research Associate

**Anton Bandy**  
Financial Officer

**Geraldine Kennedo**  
Administrative Assistant

**Gooloo S. Wunderlich**  
Senior Program Officer (Committee on National Statistics)

**Linda D. Meyers**  
Director, Board on Food and Nutrition

**Study Sponsor**

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture

assist the USDA in establishing an objective definition of the adequacy of SNAP allotments, and to identify specific data and analysis requirements to support an evidence-based assessment of allotment adequacy.

Ultimately, this effort could help to provide SNAP participants with greater opportunities to become more food secure and to have access to a healthy diet. 🍌

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Washington, DC 20001

TEL 202.334.2352

FAX 202.334.1412

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