

Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP

Evidence Review Findings: Effective / Roadmap Strategy


State policies related to the administration of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) have a significant impact on participation rates among eligible households. The most effective policies to increase participation in SNAP are longer recertification intervals and implementing combinations of policies that reduce the administrative burden related to enrollment and recertification for the program, such as recertification intervals of 12 months, simplified reporting for all families, and online case management services. However, although the evidence is clear that lower administrative burdens increase enrollment in SNAP among those who are eligible, the evidence base does not provide clear guidance on the optimal combination of policies.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, is a federally funded program that provides food vouchers to households with low income. States can adjust aspects of program administration, including policies that affect the administrative burden associated with program participation. Administrative burden refers to the barriers that increase the costs (e.g., time, money, and psychological distress) of applying for and maintaining enrollment in SNAP, and these barriers may reduce participation among households eligible for the program. SNAP receipt is associated with improved birth outcomes, reduced childhood food insecurity, and improved child health, therefore it is critical that eligible families have access to the program.

State policies vary in many ways that can influence participation in SNAP, including how frequently states require beneficiaries to recertify their eligibility, interview requirements, income reporting requirements, availability of online applications, and providing call centers for application assistance, among others. The policies that have been shown to have positive impacts on SNAP participation include reducing how frequently beneficiaries need to recertify their eligibility (longer recertification intervals), waiving the in-person interview requirement, and implementing a combination of low-burden policies to reduce administrative burden.

Decades of research in the field of child development have made clear the conditions necessary for young children and their families to thrive.¹ These conditions are represented by our eight policy goals, shown in Table 1. The goals positively impacted by reduced administrative burden for SNAP are indicated with a filled circle.

Table 1: Impacts of Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP on Policy Goals

Positive Impact	Policy Goal	Overall Findings
	Access to Needed Services	Positive impacts for longer recertification intervals, removal of the in-person interview, and a combination of low-burden policies
	Parents' Ability to Work	<i>(Policy goal outside the scope of this review)</i>
	Sufficient Household Resources ⁱ	<i>(Policy goal outside the scope of this review)</i>
	Healthy and Equitable Births	<i>(Policy goal outside the scope of this review)</i>
	Parental Health and Emotional Wellbeing	<i>(Policy goal outside the scope of this review)</i>
	Nurturing and Responsive Child-Parent Relationships	<i>(Policy goal outside the scope of this review)</i>
	Nurturing and Responsive Child Care in Safe Settings	<i>(Policy goal outside the scope of this review)</i>
	Optimal Child Health and Development	<i>(Policy goal outside the scope of this review)</i>

What Is Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP?

SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as the “Food Stamp Program”ⁱⁱⁱ) is an entitlement in-kind benefitⁱⁱⁱ transfer program that provides individuals and families who have low incomes with vouchers that can be spent only on food. The federal Food Stamp Program (FSP) originated in 1939 but lasted only 4 years, because the economic conditions that led to its introduction improved. Between 1943 and 1961, several legislators introduced legislation to revive the program, but the legislation did not pass. In 1959, PL 86-341 authorized a pilot food stamp program, to be implemented from 1961 through 1962. President Johnson made the FSP permanent through the Food Stamp Act of 1964. Among other provisions, this act established eligibility (for both program recipients and purchased foods) and state implementation.

ⁱ Although many studies have established the connection between SNAP benefits and sufficient household resources, our primary focus is on SNAP participation. Therefore, we restrict this review to focus on the effect of state SNAP policy on access to needed services.

ⁱⁱ Although the Food Stamp Program was renamed as “SNAP” in 2008, some of the studies included in this review evaluated the program under its former name. We use whichever program title was appropriate at the time of study.

ⁱⁱⁱ In-kind benefit is defined as any income other than money or cash. In the case of SNAP, the government benefit is non-taxable income.

The Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 aimed to simplify administration through several changes to eligibility rules (e.g., allowed use of mail, telephone, or home visits for certification). Although the early 1980s saw reduced funding for the FSP, the Food Stamp Act of 1985 eliminated sales tax on food stamp purchases and increased household resource limits. The Hunger Prevention Act of 1988 introduced electronic benefits transfer (EBT) cards, which function similar to a debit card and were intended to increase ease of use for beneficiaries and retailers, and address concerns about fraudulent transfer of benefits.

During the 1990s welfare reform, regressive legislation limited the FSP generosity (e.g., reductions in maximum benefits) and participation declined. However, the 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act reversed many reforms (e.g., restored eligibility for non-US citizens meeting certain requirements). Participation hit new highs in 2008 when, in an effort to fight stigma, the FSP was renamed SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).²

SNAP benefit levels are determined by the proportion of the cost of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Thrifty Food Plan that a household can afford to pay without assistance; the maximum benefit is given to households with no income, and the benefit size decreases gradually as household income increases.⁵ Although benefit levels and general eligibility criteria are set at the federal level, states have discretion and authority to adjust eligibility requirements and program administration, affecting the administrative burden experienced by program participants.

Administrative burden is defined here as barriers that increase the costs (e.g., time, money, and psychological distress) of applying for benefits and maintaining eligibility. The burden manifests in three types of costs for individuals and families.⁶

- Learning costs are the burdens of knowing you are eligible for the program, as well as understanding how to navigate complex government systems and processes.
- Compliance costs are the “time taxes” that result from applying for and maintaining benefits (paperwork, interviews, travel, etc.)
- Psychological costs are the emotional repercussions of applying for and maintaining eligibility in public assistance programs, such as the stigma associated with government assistance receipt.

The 1980 Paperwork Reduction Act was the first major attempt by the federal government to reduce administrative burden across government agencies. The Act mandated agencies perform information activities efficiently, effectively, and economically. In addition, the 1995 amendment required every federal agency to obtain approval from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) before using identical questions to collect information.⁷ Despite some progress, administrative burden remains a challenge. It is estimated that in fiscal year 2017, Americans collectively spent an estimated 11.5 billion hours completing paperwork requirements from federal agencies.⁸ In 2021, President Biden issued an executive order that direct federal agencies to identify opportunities to reduce administrative burdens for individuals and families and specifically urged the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to pursue opportunities that simplify enrollment and recertification for SNAP.⁹

Two categories of policies may affect SNAP participation: policies that change program eligibility requirements to make more or fewer individuals eligible and policies that influence how burdensome it is for eligible participants to apply, enroll, and remain enrolled in SNAP. Although a few policies affect both eligibility and burden (e.g., excluding vehicles from asset tests), this summary focuses on examining the latter, the state administrative policies and processes that affect the participation capabilities of eligible families under current SNAP eligibility rules.

Who Is Affected by SNAP Administrative Burden?

Administrative burden can deter eligible individuals and families from applying for, enrolling in, or recertifying for SNAP, a program that has been shown to support healthy development during the prenatal-to-3 period.³ Cumbersome application or recertification processes for public programs can also affect state employees, who must spend additional time on paperwork, which may reduce efficiency and delay benefits for participants.

SNAP is available to households with gross incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, net income less than or equal to the Federal Poverty Level, and assets below \$2,750 for households without an elderly individual or person with a disability.^{iv,19} SNAP is not targeted toward a particular subpopulation, although the majority of SNAP recipients are in households with children.⁴ In 2019, nearly one-quarter of all children under age 3 (22.2%) were living in households that reported receiving SNAP in the prior 12 months—totaling almost 2.5 million children.^v As of June 2023, over 22 million households were enrolled in SNAP, covering approximately 42 million people.¹⁰ Participation in SNAP among those eligible, based on federal eligibility rules, rose in recent years from 53 percent in 2001 to 82 percent in fiscal year 2018, but varies considerably by state.¹¹

What Are the Funding Options for Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP?

States can use a variety of funding sources, including state and federal funds, to reduce the administrative burden associated with SNAP participation. Whereas the federal government pays for 100 percent of SNAP in-kind benefits,^{vi} the federal Food and Nutrition Service only reimburses states for 50 percent of most administrative costs.¹² Research shows that states may reduce costs by eliminating burdensome policies¹² (see the section: Has the Return on Investment for Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP Been Studied?), and administrative costs range from \$10 to \$34 per case, according to a 2016 federal audit report.¹³

Why Should Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP Be Expected to Impact the Prenatal-to-3 Period?

Reducing the administrative burden associated with applying for and maintaining enrollment in public benefit programs can help more caregivers and children access the assistance and benefits they need to keep their families healthy.

^{iv} The asset limit for households that include a disabled person or a person over 60 years old is \$4,250.

^v Calculations were done by the Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center using the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS), Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS).

^{vi} In-kind benefit is defined as any income other than money or cash. In the case of SNAP, the government benefit is non-taxable income.

Research has shown that SNAP receipt is associated with improved birth outcomes,¹⁴ reduced childhood food insecurity (by up to 36%),³ increased health care use among children,¹⁵ and improved long-term child health.¹⁶ One analysis found that exposure to SNAP between conception and age 5 was associated with later-in-life increases in human capital, economic self-sufficiency, and neighborhood quality, as well as an increase in life expectancy and a decrease in the likelihood of incarceration.²⁵ State policies aiming to increase SNAP participation among eligible households may have a positive impact on child and family wellbeing during the prenatal-to-3 period and beyond.

SNAP caseloads are expected to be cyclical, increasing during economic downturns to assist more families in need and decreasing as the economy recovers and family financial wellbeing strengthens. However, recent research has found that macroeconomic changes do not fully explain variation in SNAP caseloads over time; changes in public policy also play a role in SNAP participation.^H

Policies that make it more burdensome to apply for or maintain enrollment in SNAP may decrease program participation. For example, short intervals between in-person eligibility recertifications may require participants to more frequently take time off of work and find transportation or child care, increasing the time and monetary costs associated with participation. Policies such as simplified income reporting,^{vii} longer recertification intervals, and online services may reduce the administrative burden and therefore increase participation among those eligible for SNAP.

What Impact Does Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP Have, and for Whom?

Overall, evidence suggests that more burdensome administrative policies can reduce participation in SNAP. Studies have evaluated the impact of a variety of policies to alleviate the administrative burden of SNAP enrollment, including simplified reporting, changes to recertification intervals, online applications, waiving face-to-face interviews, timing interviews differently, and improving outreach. In this review, longer recertification intervals were found to be the most effective individual policy to improve SNAP participation, but no single policy was found to be as consistently effective as a set of low-burden policies implemented together. Most studies that examine a combination of low-burden policies include recertification periods, simplified income reporting, and online applications in their analyses, so we provide data on state implementation of these three policies in Table 3.

Of the 16 causal studies that examined the length of recertification intervals, the majority examined the impact of intervals less than or greater than 3 months, and one studied the impact of intervals greater than 12 months.^E However, the research base has been outpaced by state policy progress; as of October 1, 2023, 16 states^{viii} assign at least a 12-month recertification interval for all households with children under age 18.^{ix} Given that the evidence shows that longer intervals lead to greater SNAP participation among eligible households, states aiming to increase SNAP participation may find that longer intervals, those of 12 months or more, are most effective for providing access to SNAP among those eligible.

^{vii} Simplified income reporting requires SNAP participants to report income changes only if the change raises their income above eligibility levels. In contrast, states without simplified reporting require participants to report all changes to income, greatly increasing the cost of maintaining eligibility among those with variable work schedules or employment.

^{viii} State counts include the District of Columbia.

^{ix} Data on 12-month recertification and simplified reporting assignments are as of 2023 from State SNAP Manuals.

The research discussed here meets our standards of evidence for being methodologically strong and allowing for causal inference, unless otherwise noted. Each strong causal study reviewed has been assigned a letter, and a complete list of causal studies can be found at the end of this review, along with more details about our standards of evidence and review method. The findings from each strong causal study reviewed align with one of our eight policy goals from Table 1. Although many studies explore the relationship between SNAP receipt and sufficient household resources, parental health and emotional wellbeing, or optimal child health and development, we restrict this review to the relationship between state SNAP policy and access to needed services. The Evidence of Effectiveness table below displays the findings associated with SNAP administrative policies (beneficial, null,^x or detrimental) for each of the strong studies (A through P) in the causal studies reference list. The assessment of the overall impact for each studied policy goal weighs the timing of publication and relative strength of each study, as well as the size and direction of all measured indicators.

Of the 16 causal studies included in this review, none examined how outcomes differed by race or ethnicity (beyond simply presenting summary statistics or controlling for race/ethnicity). A rigorous evaluation of a policy's effectiveness should consider whether the policy has equitable impacts and should assess the extent to which a policy reduces or exacerbates pre-existing disparities in economic and social wellbeing.

Table 2: Evidence of Effectiveness for Reduced Administrative Burden by Policy Goal

Policy Goal	Indicator	Beneficial Impacts	Null Impacts	Detrimental Impacts	Overall Impact on Goal
Access to Needed Services	Combination of Low-Burden Policies	A, B, H, K, M, O			Positive
	Longer Recertification Intervals	A, B, E, F, G, I, J, K, O	D, H		Positive
	Removal of In-Person Interview Requirement	B	O		Mixed
	Casebanking ^{xi}		N		Trending Null*
	Flexible Unscheduled Interview	P			Trending Positive*
	Interview Timing (Earlier in Recertification Month)	L			Trending Positive*
	Simplified Income Reporting	A, D, H	B, E, I, N, O		Mixed

^x An impact is considered statistically significant if $p \leq 0.05$. Results with p -values above this threshold are considered null or nonsignificant.

^{xi} Casebanking is defined as allowing SNAP participants to conduct their recertification application and interview with the first available caseworker instead of caseworkers being assigned at the beginning of the certification period.

Table 2: Evidence of Effectiveness for Reduced Administrative Burden by Policy Goal (Continued)

Policy Goal	Indicator	Beneficial Impacts	Null Impacts	Detrimental Impacts	Overall Impact on Goal
Access to Needed Services	Online Case Management/Applications	C	A, B, H, N, O		Mostly Null
	Call Centers	B, O	H		Mixed
	Outreach		A, D, E, G, H	O	Mostly Null
	Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility	A, G, H, K, O	D, E		Mostly Positive
	Fingerprinting Not Required	E, H	D, O	A	Mixed
	Vehicle Exclusion from Asset Test		A, D, E, H, I, K, O		Null

*Trending indicates that the evidence is from fewer than two strong causal studies or multiple studies that include only one location, author, or data set.

Note. Letters included in both the combination of low-burden policies and individual policies were estimated separately in the studies.

Access to Needed Services

Research shows that implementing a combination of policies to reduce administrative burden has a significant positive effect on SNAP participation and increases families' access to nutrition assistance. However, the evidence base does not provide clear guidance on which combination of policies is most effective. Evidence supporting the impact of a combination of policies, as well as each individual policy examined in the research, is presented below.

Combination of Low-Burden Policies

A large national study concluded that changes in SNAP administrative policies explained 28.5 percent of the increase in SNAP participation between 2007 and 2011 (the caseload rose 68.7 percent over that period).¹¹ Using another study's effect sizes,^A the authors of a 2018 USDA research brief created a weighted index of policies related to SNAP eligibility and administration (including transaction costs^{xii}, stigma, and outreach).²⁴ The report, in which results cannot imply causality, concluded that the index as a whole better explained state variation in SNAP participation than the effects of each individual policy, and suggests that policies to reduce administrative burden may be more effective when implemented together.

Another study similarly found that implementing a combination of multiple state SNAP policies^{xiii} increased SNAP enrollment by 20.4 percent, twice the effect size on participation of any individual

^{xii} Transaction costs included the frequency with which working households are required to recertify for SNAP, whether the state has adopted simplified income reporting, and the availability of online applications.

^{xiii} Policies included simplified income reporting, longer recertification intervals, phone interviews, call centers, online applications, Supplemental Security Income interfacing, vehicle exemptions from asset tests, and broad-based categorical eligibility.

policy.^B A simulation study found that changes toward more accommodative^{xiv} SNAP policies explained 16 percent of the increase in the SNAP caseload between 2000 and 2009 (the caseload rose by 93 percent over this period, which included the beginning of the Great Recession), whereas changes to welfare policies explained an additional 6 percent.^K

Another study estimated that if all states had implemented the most accommodative policies regarding eligibility, transaction costs, outreach, and stigma,^{xv} the total SNAP caseload would have been 10.5 percent higher in 2016.^A When the authors examined transaction costs and stigma separately from eligibility policies, they found that policy changes affecting transaction costs and stigma explained 14.2 percent of the SNAP caseload increase from 2000 to 2016. A 2020 study found that a combination of state SNAP policies^{xvi} designed to reduce transaction costs was associated with a 19 percent increase in the odds of a SNAP-eligible household taking up the program when compared to other states.^M

A 2022 study somewhat reinforced the effectiveness of combining policies. Reductions in learning costs resulted in approximately 6 percent higher participation rates over time (measured by the number of people in the state enrolled in the program). However, results for compliance and psychological costs did not result in higher participation.^O Effects are presented for each SNAP administrative policy discussed in the research in the following sections.

Longer Recertification Intervals

Evidence suggests that longer recertification intervals can increase SNAP participation significantly; this is the SNAP policy best supported by the evidence as contributing to higher participation among eligible households. One study estimated that recertification intervals greater than 12 months increased participation in SNAP among eligible households with children by 11 percentage points as compared to recertification intervals shorter than 12 months.^E Another study, which examined states that implemented recertification intervals longer than 3 months, found that such policies were associated with an 11 percent increase in SNAP enrollment when compared to states requiring recertification at 3 months.^B A large national study found that policies lengthening recertification intervals to greater than 3 months were associated with a 5.8 percent increase in SNAP participation from 2000 to 2009.^K

Seven studies have examined the impact of short recertification intervals, defined as recertification required every 3 months or more frequently, and found overall that short intervals decrease SNAP participation. One of the studies found that for each 10 percentage point increase in the number of working households with recertification intervals of 3 months or shorter, the SNAP caseload decreased by up to 2.1 percent.^A Another study estimated that a 10 percentage point increase in the

^{xiv} Policies included vehicle exemptions from the SNAP asset test, increasing the proportion of benefits provided through EBT, simplified income reporting for households with earned income, expanded simplified income reporting for some or all households, participation-based categorical eligibility or information-based categorical eligibility, and short recertification periods.

^{xv} These accommodative policies include online applications, increasing the proportion of benefits provided through EBT, exempting one or all vehicles from SNAP asset test, providing transitional SNAP benefits to TANF leavers, broad-based categorical eligibility, increased per capita state outreach spending, and airing federally funded TV or radio ads for SNAP.

^{xvi} Policies included short recertification periods (1 – 3 months), simplified reporting for households with earnings, and the availability of an online application.

proportion of households subject to 3-month recertification intervals (compared to 6 months or longer) was associated with a 0.9 percentage point decrease in SNAP participation for two-parent households and a 0.5 percentage point decrease for single-parent families.^I A third study found that a 10 percentage point increase in short recertification intervals was associated with a 0.2 percentage point reduction in SNAP participation rates, and estimated that 10 percent of the decline in SNAP participation from 1994 to 2000 can be explained by short recertification intervals alone.^J Another national analysis found that a 1 percentage point increase in the share of SNAP-enrolled households with short recertification intervals (of 1 to 3 months) led to a decline in participation of 0.3 percent.^G

Another study, published in 2022 and that relied on national data from 2000 through 2016, found that any reduction in the frequency of recertification was associated with approximately 7 percent higher SNAP participation rates. One study, with a sample limited to South Carolina, found that shorter recertification intervals (quarterly versus semiannual and annual intervals) were significantly associated with transitions off of food stamps among eligible participants.^F In contrast, after the state lengthened its recertification intervals for households with earnings in 2002, the median length of participation increased by 3 months, and the caseload rose by 8 percent.^F

Of the studies looking at the impact of recertification intervals, two found null results. One national study found no statistically significant effect of 3-month recertification periods on biennial SNAP participation after controlling for economic factors and the presence of simplified reporting, fingerprinting requirements, and other SNAP administrative policies.^D A study on the role of demographic characteristics, policy changes, and the economy on participation between 1980 and 2011 found no statistically significant impact of 3-month recertification periods on participation.^H

Removal of In-Person Interview Requirements

One study examined the impact of waiving in-person interview requirements and found beneficial effects. The study found that policies that waive face-to-face interviews in favor of phone interviews were associated with a 7 percent increase in SNAP enrollment.^B

Casebanking

One study of Massachusetts examined the impact of casebanking, which allows SNAP participants to conduct their recertification applications and interviews with the first available caseworker instead of caseworkers being assigned at the beginning of the certification period and found mainly insignificant effects. The 2022 study found that the length of churn episodes, defined as the loss of SNAP benefits after a deadline for eligibility recertification followed by receiving benefits again within 30 days, decreased by 0.3 days per month after introduction of casebanking. However, there was no significant change in the probability of experiencing a churn episode in the short- or long-term.^N

Flexible Unscheduled Interview

One study examined the effects of a pilot program that offered the option of unscheduled interviews for individuals who submitted SNAP applications and found a beneficial impact. The 2023 randomized control trial (RCT) studied a program piloted in 2020 in Los Angeles where the county staffed a line for applicants to call and complete an unscheduled interview at a time that worked for them. Among applicants with access to these flexible interviews, approval rates were 6.23 percentage points higher,

which represents a 12.7 percent increase in the approval rate relative to the control group mean of 48.9 percent.^P

Timing of Interviews

A study of recertification in California's SNAP program found that the timing of randomly assigned interview dates had a significant effect on the success of participants' recertification.^L The authors found that SNAP recipients who were assigned a recertification interview toward the end of the month (using the 28th day as a benchmark) were 10.6 percentage points less likely to successfully recertify than those whose interviews were assigned closer to the beginning of the recertification month. Each day delay in interview date was associated with an approximately 0.38 percentage point decrease in the likelihood of completing the recertification process. The authors suggested that later interview dates meant that applicants had fewer options for successfully rescheduling if the first assigned date did not work, and they had less time after the interview to successfully gather needed documents and meet the recertification deadline at the end of the month.

Simplified Income Reporting

Evidence on the effectiveness of simplified income reporting, whereby SNAP participants are required to report income changes only if the change raises their income above eligibility levels, is mixed based on which dataset is used to examine SNAP participation. Three studies using national data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation found no significant effect of simplified or quarterly income reporting on SNAP participation.^{B,E,I} However, one study that examined national data from the USDA found simplified income reporting was associated with a 4.5 percent increase in SNAP participation^A whereas another study found no significant effect.^O A national study using data from the Current Population Survey found that simplified income reporting was associated with a 0.7 to 0.8 percentage point increase in SNAP participation.^H Another study using the Current Population Survey found that the adoption of simplified income reporting was associated with an approximately 1.3 percentage point increase in biennial SNAP participation for all families and an approximately 5.8 and 3.7 percentage point increase in two-year SNAP participation for families with low levels of income and education, respectively.^D One study limited to data from Massachusetts found that simplified income reporting was associated with a 0.7 percentage point decline in the likelihood of a churn episode, losing SNAP benefits after a deadline for eligibility recertification followed by receiving benefits again within 30 days, however was also associated with an increase in the length of the churn episode (0.5 additional days per month).^N

Online Case Management and Applications

Evidence of the impact of online case management is also mixed. A study of Michigan's SNAP program found that the rollout of an online case management tool reduced program exit at recertification by 12 percent (representing almost 2 percentage points).^C The online tool allows participants to apply, renew, view the status of benefits, view correspondence from the state agency, and find their caseworker's contact information. Four other national studies^{A,B,H,O} and one Massachusetts study^N, however, found no significant impact of online applications on overall SNAP participation.

Call Centers

Two national studies found beneficial impacts of the implementation of call centers, which aim to provide quick and direct assistance for SNAP applicants. One study found call centers to be associated with a 5 percent increase in overall SNAP enrollment.^B The second study found call centers to be associated with a 1 percent increase in SNAP participation.^O Another study, however, found no significant impact of call centers on SNAP participation.^H

Outreach

Five studies have found insignificant effects of outreach on SNAP.^{A,D,E,G,H} However, unexpectedly, one study that examined national data from the USDA found outreach associated with lower participation. Each \$1,000 in nominal dollars spent on outreach reduced participation by approximately 1 percent.^O

Policies Impacting Administrative Burden and Eligibility

Several policies, including broad-based categorical eligibility,^{xvii} eliminating fingerprinting requirements, and excluding vehicles from asset tests, affect both eligibility requirements and how burdensome it is for eligible participants to apply, enroll, and remain enrolled in SNAP.

Five studies have found beneficial impacts of broad-based categorical eligibility, a policy in which individuals eligible for other benefit programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) become categorically eligible for SNAP.^{A,G,H,K,O} A national analysis found that states offering broad-based categorical eligibility have 6.4 percent higher participation rates per capita in single adult households with children compared to other states.^G However, two studies found insignificant effects of the policy.^{D,E} Evidence on the effectiveness of eliminating fingerprinting requirements in increasing SNAP participation is mixed. Two studies^{E,H} found that requiring fingerprinting restricted access to benefits. A national study using data from the Current Population Survey found that states requiring fingerprinting had participation rates 0.6 to 0.8 percentage points higher compared to states without the requirement.^H However, two studies^{D,O} found an insignificant impact and one study^A found a detrimental impact. Several studies have found that excluding vehicles from asset tests does not significantly impact SNAP participation.^{A,D,E,H,I,K,O}

The simultaneous implementation of multiple policies in a short timeframe may have contributed to the null findings of study I. The authors of study O reported that limited access to consistent data over time for policies designed to reduce administrative burden may explain the insignificant findings, as the specific effects of one policy were challenging to isolate among others. Lastly, changes in SNAP caseloads and uptake are largely dependent on economic and labor market trends. State implementation of policies to reduce SNAP administrative burden have coincided with economic downturns, which makes isolating policy effects on SNAP uptake challenging.^{A,G}

Evidence has shown that implementing multiple low-burden policies is the most effective way to increase SNAP participation among eligible families. Recertification intervals of at least 12 months is

^{xvii} Broad-based categorical eligibility is a policy allowing households or individuals to automatically qualify for SNAP if they have already been deemed eligible for other means-tested public programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

the most promising individual policy that states can adopt. States can also choose to remove in-person interview requirements, implement casebanking, change the timing of SNAP interviews or increase timing flexibility, implement simplified income reporting, allow online applications, or invest in call centers and outreach, but more research is needed to understand the effectiveness of these policies on their own.

Is There Evidence That Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP Reduces Disparities?

The evidence to date does not examine the disparate impacts of administrative burden by race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status for families already eligible for SNAP benefits.

Evidence from two studies examining effects on participation in other public assistance programs (Medicaid and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC) suggests that the administrative burden of public safety net programs falls disproportionately on communities of color and communities with low levels of income, and policies that reduce the administrative burden can have a positive impact on their enrollment rates in programs that support health and nutrition.^{21,22} These findings would likely be applicable to SNAP participation as well, but more research specific to the disparate impact of SNAP administrative burden would be necessary to understand the effect of such policies.

Has the Return on Investment for Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP Been Studied?

The studies included in the evidence review of administrative policies that affect SNAP participation did not examine the return on investment generated by the program, but other research has examined the economic impacts of SNAP and of reduced administrative burden. A USDA report found that states that implemented more streamlined administrative policies decreased their per-case costs.¹² For example, adoption of policies such as broad-based categorical eligibility and simplified income reporting lowered state administrative costs by up to 14 percent (7% per policy). Overall, states that implemented a set of low-burden policies saw lower administrative costs than states that adopted individual policies. A correlational analysis also found that states with higher access (greater SNAP participation rates among those eligible) benefited from lower per-case administrative costs, and states with lower participation rates saw higher per-case costs.¹² This study found that, on average, a 1.7 percentage point increase in the SNAP participation rate was associated with a 10 percent decrease in per-case costs.

Beyond lower administrative costs, greater SNAP participation can also have positive economic effects. For example, an analysis found that every \$1 increase in SNAP benefits in 2009 (during the recession) spurred \$1.70 in economic activity.²³ SNAP benefits allow families with low incomes to spend earned income on other necessities besides food, further stimulating the economy and ensuring families have access to needed resources. SNAP benefits are also well-targeted to reach families with very low levels of income; research has found that 92 percent of SNAP benefits are provided to households at or below the poverty line and 55 percent of benefits are provided to those at or below 50 percent of the poverty line.²³ The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports that 97 percent of SNAP dollars are spent within a month, which allows the benefits to flow back into the economy quickly.²³

A more comprehensive analysis of the return on investment is forthcoming.

What Do We Know, and What Do We Not Know?

The evidence shows that state decisions related to the administration of SNAP have a significant impact on participation rates among eligible individuals, over and above macroeconomic factors. Some state administrative policies that increase administrative burden (for example, short recertification intervals) are associated with significantly lower SNAP participation rates, whereas others (like longer recertification intervals and bundles of accommodative policies) are associated with significantly higher participation rates. The effect sizes of most individual policies are relatively small, and the evidence suggests that a bundle of policies is more impactful on participation than any one policy alone.

Future research is needed to assess which combination(s) of policies have the largest impact on enrollment and take-up of benefits among eligible SNAP participants. More recent administrative practices, such as the use of mobile technology, online applications, and customer service call centers, vary widely in their adoption across states and should continue to be assessed as more states implement them.

Additional research is also needed to assess the disparate impact of administrative burden on families of color, as research on other programs, including WIC and Medicaid, suggests that the burden may fall disproportionately on families who are already economically and socially marginalized.^{21,22}

Further understanding on reducing administrative burden to maximize benefits claimants are entitled to is also necessary. A 2022 study examining California's SNAP program found that claimants often fail to select into the "self-employed" category where appropriate and when it would be more beneficial to do so. The authors found that alternative, more intuitive ways of presenting information in online applications can have significant positive impacts on the value of benefits received.²⁶

Is Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP an Effective Strategy for Improving Prenatal-to-3 Outcomes?

The evidence base for SNAP administrative policies demonstrates that state decisions, which make it easier or more difficult for eligible households to apply and maintain enrollment in the SNAP program, affect program participation rates. The most effective policies to increase participation in SNAP are longer recertification intervals and implementing a combination of low-burden policies together. Whereas most of the research has examined intervals greater than 3 months, showing longer intervals to be an effective policy for increasing SNAP uptake among eligible households, all states now have median recertification intervals of 6 months or greater for households with children, and more than half of states have median recertification intervals of 12 months or greater for households with children.

How Does the SNAP Administrative Burden Vary Across the States?^{xviii}

Individual states have flexibility to alter the SNAP federal eligibility guidelines and to administer the program in different ways, contributing to variation in SNAP participation rates across states. For example, states can adjust the costs associated with establishing and maintaining eligibility by setting the interval of time required between recertifications of program eligibility and by deciding what types of income changes participants must report and how frequently.¹⁷ As of October 1, 2023, 16 states assign a 12-month recertification interval to all households with children, 32 states allow simplified reporting for all households with children, and 38 states provide online case management. See Table 3 for additional details by state.

A recent report from the USDA assigned a policy index score to each state to reflect how accommodative states are in their SNAP administration.²³ Those states with the lowest overall burden were given the highest scores out of 10 possible points. The average score across states was 9.2, with scores ranging from 8.2 to 9.6, indicating overall that states have adopted many accommodative policies to reduce the administrative burden for potential SNAP participants. However, income reporting and recertification requirements still vary substantially across states. States also offer different tools on their websites to help potential applicants understand the program and their eligibility status.¹⁸

Beyond variation in administrative burden, states may allow optional deductions to the SNAP income eligibility calculation that create variation in benefit generosity across states.^{19,20} Deductions to the SNAP income eligibility calculation are decided at the federal level and, with the exception of three optional SNAP deductions, are applied across all states and territories. Optional deductions include the child support deduction, homeless shelter deductions, and standard utility allowances.²⁰ While states may allow these deductions, they do not have the power to create their own SNAP deductions.

^{xviii} For details on state progress implementing reduced administrative burden for SNAP, see the reduced administrative burden for SNAP section of the US Prenatal-to-3 State Policy Roadmap: <https://pn3policy.org/pn-3-state-policy-roadmap-2023/us/admin-burden>

Table 3: State Variation for Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP

State Assigns 12-Month Recertification and Simplified Reporting to All Eligible Families With Children, and Offers Online Case Management			
State	State assigns 12-month recertification to families with children	State assigns simplified reporting to families with children	Online Case Management
Alabama	Yes	Yes	Yes
Alaska	No	Yes	No
Arizona	Yes	Yes	Yes
Arkansas	No	Yes	Yes
California	No	No	Yes
Colorado	No	Yes	Yes
Connecticut	Yes	Yes	Yes
Delaware	No	No	Yes
District of Columbia	No	No	Yes
Florida	No	Yes	Yes
Georgia	No	Yes	Yes
Hawaii	No	No	No
Idaho	No	Yes	No
Illinois	Yes	No	Yes
Indiana	Yes	Yes	Yes
Iowa	No	Yes	No
Kansas	No	Yes	Yes
Kentucky	Yes	Yes	Yes
Louisiana	Yes	Yes	Yes
Maine	Yes	Yes	Yes
Maryland	No	Yes	Yes
Massachusetts	No	No	Yes
Michigan	No	No	Yes
Minnesota	No	No	No
Mississippi	No	No	Yes
Missouri	Yes	Yes	No
Montana	Yes	No	No
Nebraska	No	Yes	Yes
Nevada	No	No	Yes
New Hampshire	No	No	Yes
New Jersey	No	No	No
New Mexico	Yes	Yes	Yes
New York	No	No	Yes
North Carolina	No	Yes	No

Table 3: State Variation for Reduced Administrative Burden for SNAP (Continued)

State Assigns 12-Month Recertification and Simplified Reporting to All Eligible Families With Children, and Offers Online Case Management			
State	State assigns 12-month recertification to families with children	State assigns simplified reporting to families with children	Online Case Management
North Dakota	No	Yes	Yes
Oklahoma	Yes	Yes	Yes
Oregon	No	No	Yes
Pennsylvania	No	Yes	Yes
Rhode Island	Yes	No	Yes
South Carolina	No	Yes	Yes
South Dakota	No	Yes	No
Tennessee	No	No	Yes
Texas	No	No	Yes
Utah	No	Yes	Yes
Vermont	Yes	Yes	No
Virginia	No	No	Yes
Washington	Yes	Yes	No
West Virginia	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wisconsin	No	Yes	Yes
Wyoming	No	Yes	No
State Count	16	32	38

Data on online services, recertification intervals, and simplified income reporting were collected through state-specific research in SNAP manuals and on program websites, as well as from the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.¹⁸ All data are from 2023. For additional source and calculation information, please refer to the Methods and Sources section of pn3policy.org.

How Did We Reach Our Conclusions?

Method of Review

This evidence review began with a broad search of all literature related to the policy and its impacts on child and family wellbeing during the prenatal-to-3 period. First, we identified and collected relevant peer-reviewed academic studies as well as research briefs, government reports, and working papers, using predefined search parameters, keywords, and trusted search engines. From this large body of work, we then singled out for more careful review those studies that endeavored to identify causal links between the policy and our outcomes of interest, taking into consideration characteristics such as the research designs put in place, the analytic methods used, and the relevance of the populations and outcomes studied. We then subjected this literature to an in-depth critique and chose only the most methodologically rigorous research to inform our conclusions about policy effectiveness. All studies considered to date for this review were released on or before May 31, 2023.

Standards of Strong Causal Evidence

When conducting a policy review, we consider only the strongest studies to be part of the evidence base for accurately assessing policy effectiveness. A strong study has a sufficiently large, representative sample, has been subjected to methodologically rigorous analyses, and has a well-executed research design allowing for causal inference—in other words, it demonstrates that changes in the outcome of interest were likely caused by the policy being studied.

The study design considered most reliable for establishing causality is a randomized controlled trial (RCT), an approach in which an intervention is applied to a randomly assigned subset of people. This approach is rare in policy evaluation because policies typically affect entire populations; application of a policy only to a subset of people is ethically and logistically prohibitive under most circumstances. However, when available, RCTs are an integral part of a policy's evidence base and an invaluable resource for understanding policy effectiveness.

The strongest designs typically used for studying policy impacts are quasi-experimental designs (QEDs) and longitudinal studies with adequate controls for internal validity (for example, using statistical methods to ensure that the policy, rather than some other variable, is the most likely cause of any changes in the outcomes of interest). Our conclusions are informed largely by these types of studies, which employ sophisticated techniques to identify causal relationships between policies and outcomes. Rigorous meta-analyses with sufficient numbers of studies, when available, also inform our conclusions.

Studies That Meet Standards of Strong Causal Evidence

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