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## How Does the Reauthorization of the Farm Bill Impact SNAP?

Colleen Heflin and Camille Barbin

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) receives funding authorization and programmatic stipulations through the Farm Bill, a multi-year federal omnibus bill that provides agriculture and nutrition program funding. The 2018 Farm Bill expired on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024. While funding for SNAP has been extended through a Continuing Resolution, program reauthorization is needed.

Since 2021, the cost of living has increased at a higher rate than the historic 30-year average.<sup>1</sup> Food inflation has been especially high with a 19.6% increase in average annual food prices between 2021 and 2023.<sup>2</sup> As can be seen in Figure 1, food insecurity has also increased. Prevalence of food insecurity rose from 10.2% to 12.8% of U.S. households in 2022 and increased again to 13.5% in 2023.<sup>3</sup>

The past two years of negotiations on a new Farm Bill have included SNAP proposals to limit state discretion on work requirements during periods of low job availability, indefinitely freeze the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, and lift the ban on prepared meals. This brief analyzes how proposed legislation could increase food insecurity and discusses what is needed in the new Farm Bill to adequately serve the nutritional needs of low-income households.

### High Food Costs Prevent SNAP Participants from Eating Healthy

A 2021 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) study on the barriers to SNAP effectiveness reported that 61% of participants cited the high cost of healthy foods as their top constraint to proper nutrition.<sup>4</sup>

### KEY FINDINGS



Food insecurity has risen from 10.2% in 2021 to 13.5% in 2023, and food inflation has risen by nearly 20%.



Efforts to freeze the value of the Thrifty Food plan should be rejected.



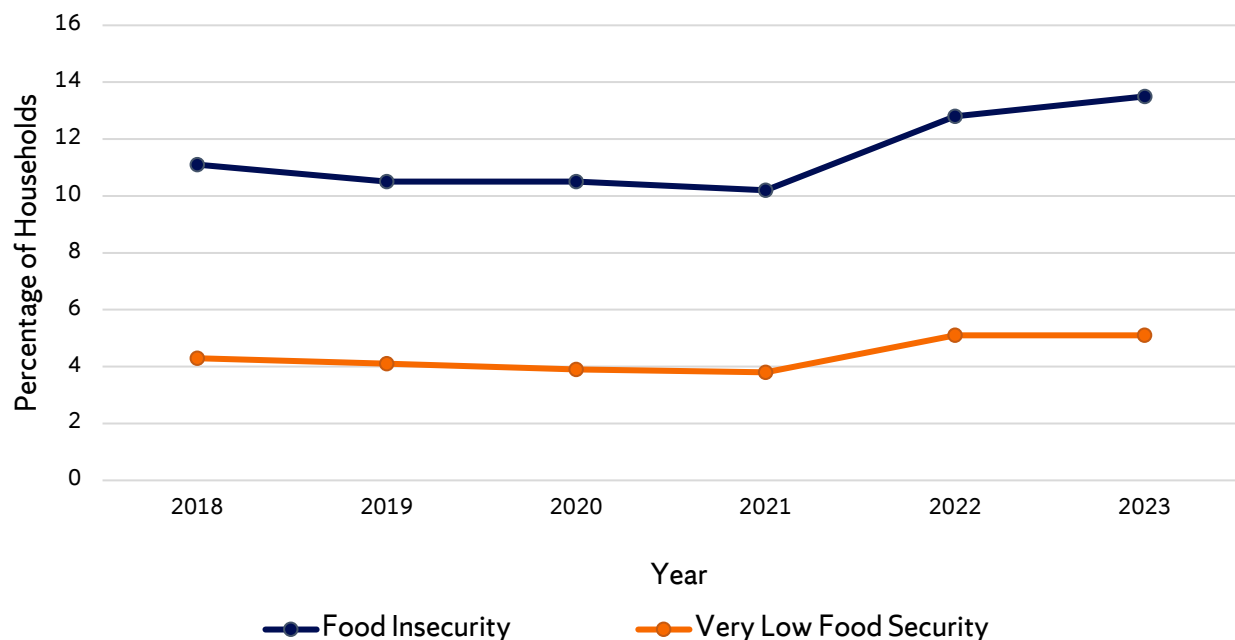
The new Farm Bill should continue to allow states to lift work requirements when local economic conditions warrant it.



The restriction on prepared meals from grocery stores should be lifted.

The 2018 Farm Bill requires USDA to reevaluate the Thrifty Food Plan every five years based on scientific guidance for the cost of a healthy and attainable diet. The Thrifty Food Plan serves as the basis for SNAP determinations, and the first reevaluation took place in 2021. Recent proposals from the House Agricultural Committee would eliminate these updates, freezing the Thrifty Food Plan amount and relying solely on annual inflation adjustments. This would reduce SNAP benefits by an expected \$30 billion over the next decade.<sup>5</sup>

The Thrifty Food Plan currently allots an average of \$6.20 per person per day in SNAP benefits.<sup>5</sup> Any reductions in the cost estimation of the Thrifty Food Plan would reduce SNAP's effectiveness at decreasing food insecurity.



**Figure 1: Trend in the Rates of Food Insecurity and Very Low Food Security, 2018 - 2023**

Data Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture *Trends in the prevalence of food insecurity and very low food security in U.S. households, 2018-2023*.

### **SNAP Stimulates Local Economies and Protects Food Security During Economic Downturns**

SNAP benefits for certain unemployed and underemployed individuals are limited to three months within a three-year period. Currently, this limitation applies to able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWD), aged 18-54.<sup>6</sup> A recent proposal from Republican lawmakers would extend the ABAWD employment requirement to parents of children aged 7+ and to adults under the age of 65.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the House Agriculture Committee Farm Bill proposal would strictly limit state discretion in waiving employment requirements during periods of low job availability.<sup>8</sup>

SNAP is designed as a countercyclical policy to provide economic support during periods of high unemployment. SNAP benefits help unemployed families avoid food insecurity, and because benefits are spent locally at

community food retailers, SNAP also helps stimulate local economies.

The new Farm Bill should trust states to know when local employment conditions warrant lifting the work requirements.

### **Disabled, Elderly, and Homeless Individuals Struggle to Effectively Use Their SNAP Benefits**

SNAP is designed to support the purchase of food items that are cooked and consumed at home. SNAP benefits may not be used to purchase prepared meals or hot food from grocery stores.

The same 2021 USDA report indicates that 30% of SNAP recipients lack the time to prepare meals from scratch and 15% have a physical disability preventing their ability to cook at home. Additionally, 11% and 14% of SNAP recipients respectively lack the necessary kitchen equipment or storage to prepare meals at home.<sup>4</sup> The ability to purchase

hot and/or prepared meals would increase access to healthy foods for elderly, disabled, and homeless individuals.

A recent proposal from Democratic lawmakers would remove this restriction.<sup>9</sup> Currently, states can opt into the Restaurant Meal Program, which allows older adults, individuals with disabilities, homeless individuals, and their spouses to use benefits at approved

restaurants. However, only nine U.S. states currently participate in this program.<sup>10</sup>

The restriction on prepared meals from grocery stores should be lifted. The Restaurant Meals Program should be evaluated to determine the impact on reducing food insecurity for elderly, disabled, and homeless beneficiaries. If found to be effective, more state should be encouraged to opt in to this program.

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