

# Policy At A Glance:

## Policy Changes Addressing Food Security During the COVID-19 Pandemic

*In response to the threats to food security caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States government made provisions for temporary changes to its food assistance programs.*

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the US economy, threatening the financial security of the most vulnerable members of our society. One critical aspect of the financial repercussions of the pandemic is food security, which is the state of having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. In 2018, 14.7% of US households with children under the age of 18 were described as food insecure.<sup>1</sup> In late April 2020, when the pandemic was beginning to have economic repercussions, a survey using the exact same questions revealed that this percentage had increased to 34.5%.<sup>2</sup>

To address this issue, the federal government authorized temporary changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; previously known as the Food Stamp Program). Most of these changes were authorized by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA). Among other things, the FFCRA allowed the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to provide waivers and other flexibilities for states in administering SNAP during the pandemic. This policy brief reviews some of the key changes that help address food security during these unprecedented times.

### *Important Dates for Food Security During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

- March 13, 2020**, President Trump declares COVID-19 a National Emergency
- March 18, 2020**, FFCRA is signed into law
- March 30, 2020**, Emergency allotments are initially approved for April and May
- April 23, 2020**, Pandemic-EBT is initially approved in California
- May 15, 2020**, The House passes the HEROES Act with measures to extend SNAP benefits but encounters resistance in the Senate

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## Emergency Allotments

The FFCRA allows state SNAP agencies to apply to the USDA for waivers to provide emergency allotments to increase SNAP benefits for households not yet receiving the maximum benefit allowable under federal law. Typically, the amount a household is eligible for SNAP is based on a sliding scale such that a family with no income receives the maximum benefit and the benefit amount becomes progressively less as income increases. With these waivers, families with some income but still meeting criteria for program eligibility would be able to receive an increase in benefits to the maximum amount for their household size, but families already receiving the maximum monthly allowance will not see an increase from these waivers.<sup>3</sup>

The waivers allow the state agencies to issue emergency allotments based on the declaration of a public health emergency by the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), provided the state has also issued an emergency or disaster declaration. Initially, the benefits were approved only for April and May given shortages in funding allocation, but these have been extended each month since then as more funds have become available for this purpose. All 50 states have taken advantage of this opportunity.<sup>3</sup>

One potential drawback of this emergency aid is that 7 million families (nearly 40% of total SNAP families) were already receiving the maximum monthly benefit prior to the pandemic, thereby not receiving any additional benefit despite facing greater financial challenges during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

## Changes for the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program

The WIC program is the nutrition supplementation program for pregnant women and families with young children. Many changes have been made to allow for continued access to WIC benefits through the unique challenges of the pandemic. Some of these changes include<sup>5</sup>:

- Waivers of several in-person requirements which vary by state but generally reduce unnecessary risk of exposure to groups of people
- Minimum stock requirements for WIC vendors
- Flexibility in specific items provided to allow for some disruption of flow in supply chains
- Certification extension for some groups



# Pandemic EBT

## What is it?

Another important extension of benefits is the “Pandemic EBT” or “P-EBT” which aims to cover the additional cost to families during this crisis and provide adequate nutrition for children who are eligible for reduced cost or free school meals. Families will get up to \$365 per eligible child on their P-EBT card to use on groceries. In California, families with children who get CalFresh (California’s SNAP), Medi-Cal (government health insurance for low-income households in CA) or foster care will not even need to apply but are automatically sent the P-EBT card in the mail, ready for use. For families not already enrolled in these programs, there is an additional application required in the state of California. Benefits may be granted retroactively.<sup>6</sup>

## What is the cost?

The overall cost of additional government sponsored support during this pandemic already totals hundreds of billions of dollars, but the cost of these efforts targeting food security is comparatively small. For example, the State of California calculates monthly benefits for each eligible child in the household to be equal to the daily reimbursement for free breakfast and lunch (\$5.70) multiplied by the average number of days school was canceled in the month. The state estimates that it will issue \$1.4 billion to 3,823,197 children for school

closures extending from March 16, 2020, through June 12, 2020, a total of 64 days.<sup>7</sup>

## Shortcomings

Many states chose to use automated methods such as providing information about families eligible for free or reduced cost school meals directly to the SNAP agencies to ensure that all eligible families received their benefits, but seventeen states (including CA) chose to have an additional application for these families with registration closing on July 15<sup>th</sup>, potentially leaving a considerable amount of federal funds on the table.<sup>8</sup> One state (Idaho) did not even take advantage of the P-EBT. Also, in several states, some people reported receiving their P-EBT benefits later than the expected timeframe.

# ABAWD Extension

Able bodied adults without dependents (ABAWD) were previously limited to three months of EBT benefits during times of unemployment. Beginning on April 1, however, this limit was waived during the pandemic as a part of the FFCRA due to an expected decrease in employment opportunities during these difficult financial times. In fact, the number of unemployed Americans increased by more than 14 million, from 6.2 million in February to 20.5 million in May 2020. The U.S. unemployment rate skyrocketed from 3.8% in February to 13.0% in May, making this provision critical. All 50 states implemented this waiver.<sup>9,13</sup>

## Have We Done Enough?

Emergency allotments, Pandemic EBT, WIC accommodations and extension of benefits for unemployed adults are important steps in addressing food insecurity during these unprecedented times. However, the question remains whether or not these efforts are sufficient in easing the burden felt by American families. Food pantries continue to report increased strain on resources, and some Americans remain concerned about how they will put food on the table.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, expansion of these benefits passed by the House of Representatives in May as a part of the HEROES Act remains locked in partisan debates in the Senate. Food security is a vital part of health, especially for young children who are still developing, and it will be important for state and federal policies to adequately address threats to food security during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond to ensure a healthier future for our country.<sup>10</sup>

## References

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## Did you know?

The Congressional Budget Office estimated that the total cost of the FFCRA would be about \$192 billion. The proportion attributable to the increase in SNAP benefits only accounts for \$18.5 billion (9.6% of the total cost of the bill).<sup>11</sup>



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