

SNAP POLICY CHANGES DURING COVID-19

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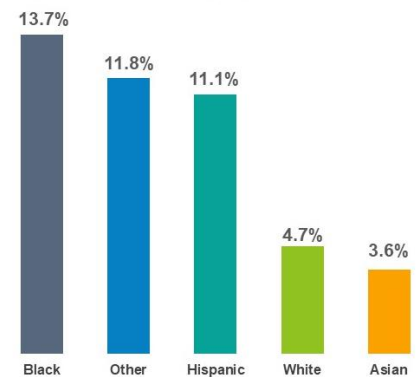
Summary

Policy makers made several changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to mitigate rising food insecurity related to economic and social challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief outlines the various policy changes as well as their timeline and impact, and also highlights specific racial inequities and disparities related to food insecurity and SNAP programming. I completed this brief as part of my capstone project for my community partner, United Way of King County (UWKC).

Key Takeaways

- SNAP participation increased by more than 20% since 2019, in tandem with increases in unemployment rates during the pandemic¹
- Monthly SNAP benefits increased between 2019-2020 due to a number of policy changes, although some households will experience a sizable decrease in SNAP support when emergency allotments end²
- Online SNAP purchasing programs expanded to almost all states, including Washington, during the pandemic and show promising initial results³
- Despite the contribution that SNAP made to preventing even higher rates of food insecurity during the pandemic, communities of color, and black communities in particular, continue to be disproportionately affected by food insecurity⁴

Figure 1: Overall Food Insecurity Rates by Race/Ethnicity (Sept. 2020 – Oct. 2020)



Source: Urban Institute, 2020, Census Pulse Survey Data

Timeline of Policy Changes

January 2020 (pre-COVID-19 lockdowns) SNAP Online Purchasing Launched in Washington State

- ✓ Qualifying SNAP food items can be ordered online with SNAP benefits for delivery (program launched as a result of the 2014 Farm Bill and the USDA has since expanded eligibility and seen participation from almost all states)
- ✓ Participating stores in Washington State include Walmart, Amazon, some A&J Markets,⁵ and some Safeway and Albertson stores⁶

March 2020 Families First Coronavirus Response Act

- ✓ Added “emergency allotments” to SNAP monthly benefits for those not receiving the maximum benefit level
- ✓ Temporarily suspended the 3-month SNAP limit for adults >50yrs without children
- ✓ Created the Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) program for children
- ✓ Increased administrative flexibility by waiving the reapplication requirement for continuation of benefits

December 2020 COVID Relief Package

- ✓ Increased SNAP maximum benefits by 15% (began in January 2021 and end in September 2021)

August 2021 Thrifty Food Plan Revised

- ✓ Increased benefit levels by 21% and went into effect on October 2021 (resulted from the revision of the Thrifty Food Plan, upon which SNAP maximum benefit levels are based, directed by the 2018 Farm Bill and expedited by the Biden Administration)

¹ [Meeting the Moment: Policy Changes to Strengthen SNAP and Improve Health, Wolfson et al, 2021](#)

² [The Thrifty Food Plan and Pandemic Changes to SNAP: A Guide for Advocates, 2021](#)

³ [An Analysis of the Newly Expanded SNAP Online Purchasing Program, 2021](#)

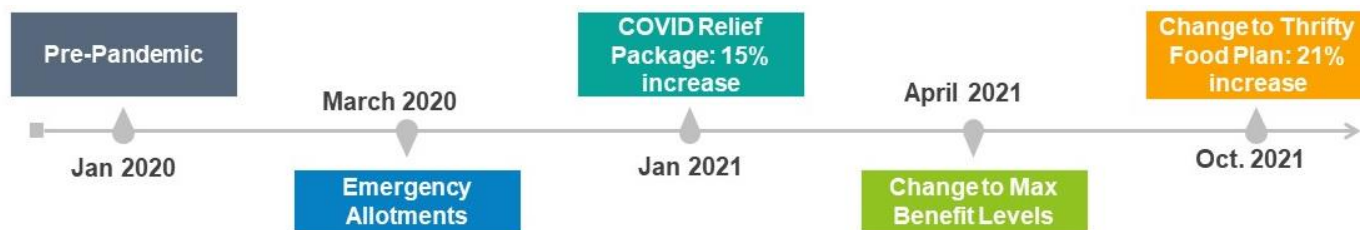
⁴ [Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Food Insecurity Persist during the Pandemic, Feng et al, 2020](#)

⁵ [FNS Launches the Online Purchasing Pilot](#)

⁶ [Safeway Online Shopping FAQs](#)

Changes to Monthly Benefit Amounts

Table 1 shows the overall changes in maximum monthly allotment per household size before and during the pandemic. A snapshot and a detailed timeline for these changes is outlined below.



As shown in Table 1, there were few policy changes in the year 2020. Maximum benefit amounts per household were already fairly low in January 2020.⁷ Following initial COVID-19 lock downs, in March 2020, households began receiving “emergency allotments” *if they were not already receiving* monthly maximum benefits. This brought all households to maximum benefit levels. However, this policy change left out a vulnerable population as households that had received maximum benefit levels pre-COVID-19 had the lowest income levels.⁸

In 2021, additional policy changes raised benefit levels substantially. The national COVID-19 Relief Package passed in December 2020 raised the baseline monthly benefit level by 15%. This resulted in an increase to the monthly baseline amount by January 2021.⁹ In April 2021, low-income households that had not received emergency allotments due to received max benefit levels pre-COVID-19 became eligible for increased allotments of a max of \$95 per month.¹⁰ In October 2021, a new monthly benefit amount was instated due to updates to the Thrifty Food Plan. These changes resulted in a discontinuation of the previous 15% increase and was replaced by a 21% increase of the pre-pandemic benefit level. This created in an overall increase in monthly benefits amount in addition to the emergency allotments.¹¹

Table 1 shows the monthly benefit amount anticipated for 2022 without the emergency allotments. Some states have already phased out their emergency allotments, which have not yet been ended by the federal government but are anticipated to end in September 2022 (end of the 2021-2022 fiscal year). As discussed below, some families already are, or will be, severely affected by an end to SNAP emergency allotments. Washington State has continued to provide the emergency allotments.¹²

Table 1: Maximum Monthly SNAP Benefit Changes by Household Size 2020-2022

Household Size	Jan 2020*	Mar 2020**	Jan 2021	April 2021	Oct 2021	Jan 2022**
1	\$194	\$194	\$234	\$234 +\$95	\$250 +\$95	\$250
2	\$355	\$355	\$430	\$430 +\$95	\$459 +\$95	\$549
3	\$509	\$509	\$616	\$616 +\$95	\$658 +\$95	\$658
4	\$646	\$646	\$782	\$782 +\$95	\$835 +\$95	\$835
5	\$768	\$768	\$929	\$929 +\$95	\$992 +\$95	\$992

*Monthly maximum benefit level

**No change if already receiving max monthly benefit level. If household had not received max benefit levels prior to COVID-19, emergency allotments brought them to max levels

***Anticipated monthly max level without emergency allotments, which has not yet been ended by the federal government

⁷ [USDA SNAP Fiscal Year 2020 Cost-of-Living Adjustments Memo](#)

⁸ [WA DSHS Emergency Food Benefits FAQ 2021](#)

⁹ [USDA SNAP Temporary Increase in Maximum Allotments due to COVID-19, 2020](#)

¹⁰ [The Thrifty Food Plan and Pandemic Changes to SNAP: A Guide for Advocates, 2021](#)

¹¹ [USDA SNAP Fiscal Year 2020 Maximum Allotments and Deductions](#)

¹² [CBPP A Quick Guide to SNAP Eligibility and Benefits, 2021](#)

Policy Changes and Outcomes

Issues on the Horizon Related to SNAP Benefit Level Changes

Concerns exist that the 21% increase to benefit levels from the Thrifty Food Plan still fall short: Prior to COVID-19, SNAP benefit levels were lower than they are now as a result of changes to the Thrifty Food Plan (permanent increase of 21%). However, even despite this increase, many argue that the SNAP benefit levels are not high enough to address food and nutrition insecurity.^{13, 14}

Concerns exist related to emergency benefits ending and impacts on food insecurity: While those receiving the maximum benefit levels pre-COVID-19 only received a monthly increase of \$95, some households experienced a significant boost in benefits levels. For example, a one-person household that received \$16 in SNAP benefits prior to COVID-19 received an additional \$250 in emergency allotments and adjustments from the Thrifty Food Plan. After the emergency allotments end, they will only receive \$20.¹⁵ This is referred to as the “SNAP Benefit Cliff” and will be a significant cut to their current SNAP support.

SNAP Administrative Waivers Reduced Barriers

Waivers that allowed states to alter enrollment and recertification processes reduced barriers: Prior to COVID-19, applicant signatures for the enrollment process had to be captured via audio. Waivers allowed for capturing signatures over the phone rather than via an audio recording. They also allowed for increased applicant interviews via phone rather than in-person, and waived interview requirements for very low-income households to expedite the process. These changes removed administrative barriers that can often make it difficult for people to obtain or maintain SNAP benefits. Advocates recommend incorporating learnings from easing administrative burden into standard SNAP processes and requirements.¹⁶

Online SNAP Purchasing Outcomes

SNAP online purchasing appeals to participants and learnings from initial years can help inform further growth: The use of online SNAP purchasing programs nationally increased during the pandemic. Data from 2020 show that those participating in SNAP online purchasing spent 34% of their SNAP benefits in online transactions. While there is not yet enough data to determine if SNAP online purchasing results in intake of more nutrient-rich foods, studies on online food shopping generally suggest there are many advantages to improving the nutritional profile of grocery orders online. Advocates call for increasing the number of retailers participating in SNAP online purchasing, making it easier for more stores to participate in the program, and increasing awareness of the online program among SNAP participants.^{17,18}

WA State SNAP online purchasing may benefit from central landing page: While conducting research for this brief, I found information on the Washington State SNAP online purchasing program to be somewhat sparse, decentralized, and inaccessible. From a SNAP participant perspective, it would be difficult to find comprehensive and straightforward information on this program in Washington State. A centralized online resource(s) may improve access as well as participation in this program.

¹³ [An Assessment of Recent SNAP Benefit Increases Allowing for Money and Time, You et al, 2021](#)

¹⁴ [Options to Improve the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Schanzenbach, 2021](#)

¹⁵ [The Thrifty Food Plan and Pandemic Changes to SNAP: A Guide for Advocates, 2021](#)

¹⁶ [SNAP Waivers and Adaptations During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Survey of State Agency Perspectives, 2021](#)

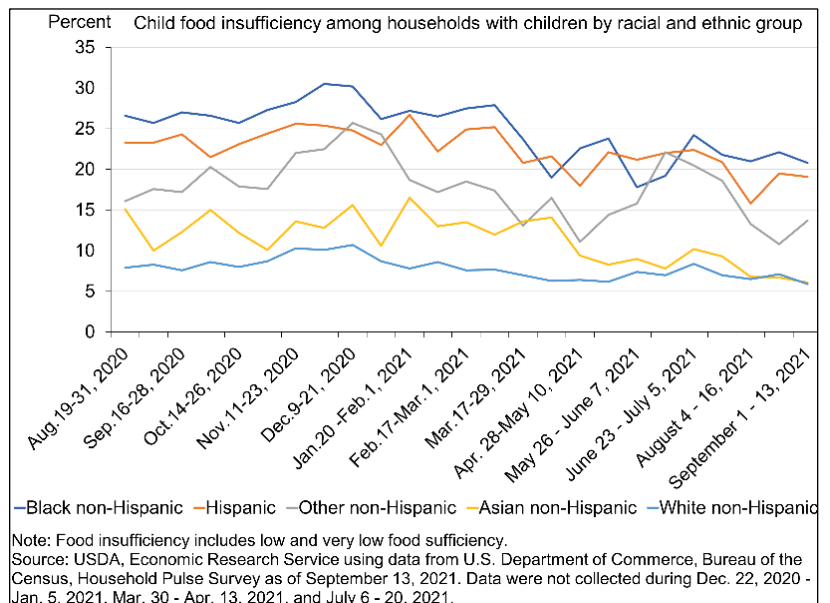
¹⁷ [Promoting Equitable Expansion of the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot, 2021](#)

¹⁸ [An Analysis of the Newly Expanded SNAP Online Purchasing Program, 2021](#)

Food Security Outcomes as a Result of SNAP Policy Changes

Black communities and communities of color continue to be adversely impacted by issues of food insecurity: Rates of food insecurity in the U.S. increased as a result of the pandemic. The USDA estimated that about 10.5% of people experienced food insufficiency in 2019 and 2020, with Black communities experience rates more than double that of White communities.¹⁹ Research also shows that economic and social impacts of COVID-19 have disproportionately impacted communities of color. Recent evidence showed that in one city, Black households that received SNAP prior to COVID-19 experienced increased food insecurity during the pandemic,²⁰ and communities of color overall were more likely to be food insecure during the first year of the pandemic.²¹ Additionally, as shown in Figure 2, Black and Hispanic households reported the highest rates of child food insufficiency.¹⁹

Figure 2: Child Food Insufficiency by Race/Ethnicity Aug 2020 – Sept. 2021



SNAP policy changes, including P-EBT, have been impactful in mitigating rising food insecurity rates during the pandemic: While data are not yet available for 2021, many researchers anticipate a rise in food security levels in 2021, particularly for children.²² Increased benefits and emergency allotments put into effect during the pandemic appeared to have an overall protective effect by mitigating food insecurity that could have hit even greater heights during the pandemic.²³ This is true for families with children as well as older adults.²⁴ The P-EBT program in particular helped to prevent greater food insecurity during the pandemic among families with children, with one study finding that P-EBT reduced the number of families with children who experienced very low food security by 17%.²⁵

Helpful Resources

1. Further Details on SNAP Policy Changes During COVID-19: [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Oct. 2021](#)
2. Thrifty Food Plan Changes to SNAP: [No Kid Hungry, Sept. 2021](#)
3. USDA Online Food Purchasing Pilot: [USDA SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot](#)
4. An Analysis of the Newly Expanded SNAP Online Purchasing Program: [UnBox Project, 2021](#)
5. Promoting Equitable Expansion of the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot: [Healthy Eating Research, 2021](#)
5. WA Online Purchasing Find a Participating Safeway/Albertson's Store: [Safeway SNAP EBT Find a Store](#)
6. WA Online Purchasing FAQ for Walmart: [Walmart EBT FAQ](#)
7. Online Purchasing FAQ for Amazon: [SNAP EBT FAQ](#)

¹⁹ [USDA Food Insufficiency During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

²⁰ [SNAP Participants and High Levels of Food Insecurity in the Early Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Siddiqi et al, 2021](#)

²¹ [Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Household Food Insecurity During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Nationally Representative Survey, Morales et al, 2020](#)

²² [Food Insecurity in the U.S. By the Numbers, Silva, NPR 2020](#)

²³ [Food Assistance in American Rescue Plan Act Will Reduce Hardship, Provide Economic Stimulus, Rosenbaum, 2021](#)

²⁴ [Enhanced SNAP Benefits Provided Better Food Security for Older Americans During the Pandemic, Gothro, 2021](#)

²⁵ [An Update on the Effect of Pandemic EBT on Measures of Food Hardship, Bauer et al, 2021](#)