

# Leveraging State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Policies to Prevent Maltreatment Among Infants and Toddlers

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## Executive Summary

Research suggests that access to nutrition assistance programs may be a beneficial component of a holistic approach to preventing child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement among very young children. While Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are largely set by federal guidelines, states have control over SNAP eligibility and accessibility. This guide highlights promising SNAP policies indicated by nonpartisan research to help lower rates of child maltreatment and welfare system involvement.

### Promising SNAP policies include:

- **Adopting Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE)** by eliminating asset tests and/or income limits and instead establishing SNAP eligibility for households that are eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).
- **Offering transitional SNAP benefits** for families leaving other support programs (e.g., TANF) due to circumstances like increases in income.
- **Promoting SNAP participation** by addressing stigma, implementing SNAP-related outreach, increasing administrative resources, modernizing SNAP operations, and simplifying reporting requirements.

**Take action!** State policymakers and their partners can use this information to develop goals and action plans and implement state policies aimed at strengthening SNAP access, operations, and use with the explicit goal of impacting child welfare outcomes. These actions may benefit families of very young children and have the potential to reduce rates of child maltreatment in your state.

**Need more information?** See the rest of this Primer and Action Guide for more details on the research behind these ideas and visit the Measuring Up website for more resources (<https://www.childtrends.org/project/measuring-up>).

# Primer and Action Guide

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Research shows a clear association between access to food and nutrition programs and lower odds of child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement. Emerging evidence suggests that various specific state policies related to SNAP might ultimately influence rates of maltreatment and child welfare system involvement among families with very young children.

This resource was created to support the work of:

- **State policymakers** interested in promoting child and family well-being and preventing maltreatment through SNAP-related policymaking
- **Advocates and partners** working with state-level legislative and agency policymakers and administrators

Through these connections, state leaders can explore how state SNAP policies might benefit child and family well-being in ways that ultimately help prevent maltreatment and child welfare system involvement among young children.

This document contains:

1. An **overview** of the research evidence on the intersection of child maltreatment and SNAP.
2. A summary of **state-level SNAP policy options** and research on the effect these policies have on child maltreatment.
3. **Discussion prompts** for use as part of intra- or inter-agency discussions, as well as dialogue with child welfare advocates.



# Part 1: Overview

This overview provides high-level information on child maltreatment, child welfare system involvement, and the SNAP program's influence on child and family food security and well-being.

## Maltreatment and child welfare system involvement among infants and toddlers

- In the United States, risk of maltreatment and child welfare system involvement is highest among infants and toddlers. In 2022, ~28 percent of child maltreatment victims were under 3 years old, and ~15 percent were under 1 year of age.<sup>1</sup>
- Importantly, reports to the child welfare system do not equate to child maltreatment victimization. In 2021, about half of reports did not receive a formal investigation after initial screening. Of the ~three million children who received an investigation or “alternative response” (e.g., resource provision), over the child welfare system, nearly two and a half million children were determined not to be victims of maltreatment,<sup>2</sup> but perhaps in need of other resources or erroneously reported.
- Experts increasingly advocate for a holistic public health approach to *preventing* child maltreatment<sup>3</sup> and promoting family well-being.<sup>4</sup> This approach acknowledges the complex needs and challenges of parents and families.<sup>5</sup>

## Food insecurity and child welfare

- In recent years, 76 percent of child welfare system reports allege neglect as a primary concern,<sup>1</sup> and neglect is cited as a primary reason for over 60 percent of child removals.<sup>6</sup>
- Neglect definitions vary between states,<sup>7</sup> but generally refer to a failure to meet a child's basic needs, including clothing, shelter, medical care, supervision, safety, and food.<sup>8</sup> States' laws vary with regard to differentiating between “financial inability to provide” and willful neglect.<sup>9</sup>
- Neglect is widely considered as deeply intertwined with (and often conflated with) poverty.<sup>10</sup> As such, many families coming into the child welfare system do so for reasons related to poverty, insufficient resources, or unmet needs of support or assistance.
- State- and county-level analyses indicate that zip codes with higher food insecurity levels also have higher rates of child maltreatment reporting.<sup>11</sup>
- One study of 96 percent of U.S. counties found that changes in food insecurity levels within a single community over time were associated with changes in child welfare report rates in that community (particularly in large urban areas).<sup>12</sup> This finding suggests a possible point of intervention.

## SNAP as a tool for preventing child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement

- SNAP is the primary food assistance program in the U.S., providing funding for groceries to about 1 in 8 U.S. residents each year.<sup>13</sup> Nearly half of SNAP recipients are children,<sup>14</sup> and 12 percent are under 5 years old.<sup>15</sup>
- Research indicates that policies expanding SNAP eligibility are associated with fewer child welfare investigations, substantiated maltreatment incidents, and foster care placements.<sup>16</sup>

- Analyses of national child maltreatment data from 2006-2019 found decreases in reports of child neglect in states that eliminated asset tests for SNAP eligibility and/or increased the income limit for eligibility. States that adopted both policy changes also saw decreases in reports of physical abuse.<sup>17</sup>

## Key contexts and considerations

The contextual information below may be helpful for state-level policymakers and administrators working collaboratively on SNAP-related policy.

### Rising food prices

- The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimated that food prices rose 11 percent between 2021 and 2022,<sup>18</sup> and another 3.7 percent in 2023,<sup>19</sup> up from the average annual increase of two percent.<sup>20</sup>
- Without significant increases to benefit levels, rising food prices diminish the impact of SNAP benefits for families in both urban and rural communities.<sup>21</sup>

### Intersection between SNAP and other economic supports

- Almost half (47%) of households receiving SNAP benefits also receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI).<sup>22</sup>
- In 2023, SSI benefits increased 8.7 percent due to a Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA).<sup>23</sup>
- Because SSI income is factored into SNAP eligibility and benefit amounts, individuals who receive both supports may have had decreases in SNAP benefit amounts or overall eligibility in 2023.
- Understanding fluctuations and interactions between SNAP benefits and other economic supports—as well as state policies allowing for certain income to be “disregarded” in eligibility assessments for supports like SNAP<sup>24</sup>—is important context to guide policymaking that will not result in unintended consequences that harm families who may be at risk of hunger, child maltreatment, and/or child welfare system involvement.

### Individuals with felony convictions

- Several states impose partial bans on SNAP benefits for individuals with certain felony criminal histories.<sup>25</sup> As of December 2023, South Carolina is the only state with a full ban for individuals with drug-related felonies, and 20 more states have partial bans that vary in restrictions and requirements.<sup>26</sup> These policies are thought to disproportionately impact individuals and families of color.<sup>27</sup>
- Recent research using nationally-representative data finds that formerly incarcerated individuals are at increased risk for food insecurity—partially attributed to lower incomes.<sup>28</sup>
- A recent study found that individuals who were given full eligibility for food assistance programs after incarceration were less likely to re-enter incarceration within a year—particularly individuals with drug-related offense histories.<sup>29</sup>
- A comparison of individuals with convictions before and after a 1996 ban on SNAP benefits in California found that those banned from SNAP were more likely to be re-arrested—and sooner—than individuals not banned from SNAP.<sup>30</sup>
- Given that approximately seven percent of all U.S. children experience parental incarceration,<sup>31</sup> we know that many children have parents with criminal records that may affect eligibility for assistance programs.

## Part II: State-Level SNAP Policy Options and Effects on Child Maltreatment

While SNAP benefit levels are largely set by federal guidelines,<sup>32</sup> state policies shape SNAP eligibility and accessibility.<sup>33</sup> This section summarizes nonpartisan research evidence on associations between specific state-level SNAP policy actions and state-level rates of child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement. It also discusses other promising options in need of research. This section can support child welfare administrators in understanding how these policy variations intersect with child welfare outcomes.

### Offering transitional SNAP benefits

- Transitional SNAP benefits are temporary benefits for families leaving other support programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), due to circumstances like recent increases in income.<sup>34</sup> Federal policy allows—but does not require—states to offer transitional (i.e., gradually reduced) benefits for up to five months for families ending their TANF receipt.
- Most recent national estimates suggest that 22 states and DC offer transitional benefits,<sup>35</sup> with more states considering and passing similar initiatives (e.g., MO in 2023).<sup>36</sup>
- One analysis of national child welfare system data from 2004-2016 found that states that implemented transitional SNAP benefits saw decreases in substantiated maltreatment reports (reduction of 188.8 reports per 100,000 children), and a decrease in substantiated neglect reports, specifically (reduction of 159.8 reports per 100,000 children).<sup>37</sup>

### Adopting Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE)

- BBCE<sup>38</sup> is an alternative to the traditional methods<sup>39</sup> of assessing household SNAP eligibility. Traditional methods generally include asset tests, consider gross and net income, and rely on a lower income threshold than BBCE. BBCE functionally eliminates asset tests and/or income limits, instead establishing SNAP eligibility for households that are eligible for TANF. Importantly, BBCE policies involve informing TANF-participating families of their SNAP eligibility via written notice.<sup>40</sup>
- As of January 2022, 41 states use BBCE (non-participating states include AK, AR, KS, MO, MS, SD, TN, UT, and WY).<sup>41</sup> Of these participating states, five (ID, IN, MI, NE, TX) still require asset tests for all households, and two (NH, NY) limit BBCE to certain household types.
- Analyses of national child maltreatment report data from 2006-2019 found decreases in reports of neglect in states that eliminated asset tests for SNAP eligibility and/or increased the income limit for eligibility. States that adopted both policy changes also saw decreases in reports of physical abuse.<sup>42</sup>
- Further, analysis of national child welfare system data from 2004-2016 found that states that implemented BBCE saw significant decreases in substantiated reports of child neglect (reduction of 88 substantiated reports per 100,000 children).<sup>43</sup>
- Taken together, available evidence suggests that BBCE policies may contribute to decreasing the number of child welfare system reports for both neglect and physical abuse, and to decreasing the number of substantiated cases of child neglect.

## Promoting SNAP participation

- Analysis of national child welfare system data in combination with information on state-level policies expanding SNAP eligibility from 2005-2017 suggest that states implementing one additional policy expanding eligibility had lower rates of maltreatment reports and substantiations.<sup>44</sup>
- Analysis of the mechanisms by which state SNAP policy changes may shape reductions in child welfare system reports and substantiated maltreatment finds that these policies largely work by increasing the number of families participating in SNAP.<sup>45</sup>
- As such, promoting SNAP participation may be one effective state-level option for preventing child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement. While the following specific approaches have not yet been examined as potential tools for reducing maltreatment specifically, they have been shown to promote SNAP participation.
- States can also promote participation in the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) for Children program, which provides eligible families with \$40 per child per month in the summer months when children are not receiving meals in school settings.<sup>46</sup>

## Simplifying reporting requirements

- Simplified reporting refers to less-restrictive requirements for SNAP recipients reporting of financial information to maintain eligibility. Some simplified reporting approaches reduce the number and types of income, assets, or employment changes that must be reported by SNAP recipients and limits the extent to which changes to those factors affect SNAP benefit amounts and eligibility.<sup>47</sup> Simplified reporting approaches also include lengthening the time between re-certification periods that require SNAP recipients to re-report their income, assets, and employment information.<sup>48</sup>
- In the years 2004-2016, states that implemented simplified reporting policies saw sizable decreases in the number of maltreatment reports accepted for investigation (reduction of 476.6 reports per 100,000 children).<sup>49</sup> States implementing simplified reporting also saw modest reductions in the number of children who were subjects of substantiated reports of maltreatment (reduction of 68.5 substantiated reports per 100,000 children) and substantiated reports of neglect, specifically (reduction of 30.9 substantiated reports per 100,000 children).

## Addressing stigma

Families experiencing economic instability have faced public shaming through intensive requirements around determining eligibility for assistance<sup>50</sup> or past experiences such as purchasing groceries with paper “food stamps”—a term still commonly used despite states being required to implement EBT in 2002<sup>51</sup> and achieving this by 2004.<sup>52</sup> To promote anti-stigmatizing practices, states can:

- Use online applications for benefits.<sup>53</sup>
- Remove policies banning individuals with criminal histories from accessing SNAP.

## Implementing SNAP-related outreach

Many families may not know they are eligible for SNAP benefits. To increase uptake and potentially improve indicators of child and family well-being, states can:

- Run television, radio, and social media ad campaigns to boost enrollment.

- Partner with community organizations or businesses to increase numbers of outlets accepting SNAP.
- Implement linkages across systems administering health insurance (i.e., Medicaid), public education, SNAP, and early care and education (e.g., HeadStart).

### **Modernizing SNAP operations**

Many states have used American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021 funding to “modernize” or update SNAP operations.<sup>54</sup> This includes implementing customer service resources for SNAP users (e.g., helplines or online resources related to troubleshooting SNAP access), making applications and forms “paperless” and mobile-friendly, and improving internal systems and technologies.

- Research suggests that modernizing SNAP operations is important for ensuring that SNAP’s intended benefits are realized for families in need.<sup>55</sup>
- States were given flexibility<sup>56</sup> to use ARPA funds in a way that works best for them, working with their regional SNAP offices,<sup>57</sup> as needed. As of December 2022, most states had reported ongoing or completed modernization projects.<sup>58</sup>
- In the fall of 2023, the federal government announced grants to support 17 state and local agencies in further SNAP transformations, including supporting fraud prevention, farmers markets, technology improvements, mobile payments, online shopping, income reporting processes, and data collection.<sup>59</sup>

### **Increasing administrative resources**

- Research finds that expansive SNAP policies increase SNAP caseloads.<sup>60</sup>
- Increased SNAP participation can increase states’ administrative burdens, expenses, and staffing requirements related to SNAP program operations.<sup>61</sup>
- In fiscal year 2022, the federal government spent an estimated \$113.9 billion on SNAP benefits, and another \$5.5 billion on associated administrative expenses.<sup>62</sup>
- While federal funds cover 100 percent of SNAP benefits to recipients, states must share in the administrative costs associated with administering the program in their states.

## Part III: Discussion Guide

This section offers prompts to help child welfare agency administrators partner with other policymakers, program administrators, and advocates around promoting families' access to food security through the SNAP program, which may in turn reduce incidences of child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement among very young children in your state. Questions are intended to spur inquiry, dialogue, and reflection to ensure that everyone has a common understanding of the scope and shape of problems, and to help inform action planning and next steps for increasing alignment between state-level policymakers and administrators across domains. This guide is designed to be flexible, so users can choose to focus on selected subtopics and question prompts, or the full guide, depending on the needs and priorities in your state. Child welfare leaders may also choose to work through the guide internally to support their own goal setting and planning. To access data and information that may help you think about answers to the questions below, see our Annotated Resource Compilation.

### Step 1: Gather information about your state.

#### Infant and toddler maltreatment

- What are the reasons that young children are being reported to our child welfare system?
- Who are the key players influencing policy and programming related to maltreatment of infants and toddlers in our state, and what are their perspectives and priorities?
- Are state legislators aware of child abuse and neglect trends and issues in our state?
- What are the trends in reported and confirmed abuse and neglect among infants and toddlers?
- Among young children being reported to Child Protective Services, what is the rate of “unsubstantiated” or unconfirmed allegations?

#### Hunger and food security

- What can data tell us about the prevalence of food insecurity in our state?
- What communities in our state are disproportionately affected by hunger and food insecurity?
- What are the key drivers of food insecurity in our state (e.g., food prices, SNAP access, transportation to food retailers, appropriate food options, etc.)?
- How effective has our state been at addressing food insecurity in recent years?
- Who are the key players influencing policy and programming related to food security in our state, and what are their perspectives and priorities?

#### The intersection: food insecurity and child maltreatment

- What do child welfare professionals observe related to hunger and food insecurity among the children and families they serve?
- Who in our state would be a partner in efforts to promote SNAP participation and food security among families at risk of child welfare system involvement?



## SNAP-related policies and practices

- What challenges exist for SNAP-eligible individuals or organizations offering SNAP resources across the state? For example:
  - Are funding levels adequate for the identified need?
  - Are the agencies responsible for implementation of state and federal policies and policy changes responding effectively?
  - How easy or difficult is it for clients to access SNAP benefits in our state?
  - What equity issues exist? For example, are challenges universal, or do they vary across regions or communities within our state?
- What, if any, SNAP-related policy changes are underway in our state?
- Who are key players on this issue and what are their positions on SNAP access and use?
- How did the COVID-19 pandemic-related changes to SNAP policies (e.g., emergency allotments, increase in benefit amounts) affect our state?
- What impending federal funding shifts might impact our state?

## Step 2: Reflect on nuances, challenges, and policy opportunities for your state.

This section lists specific aspects of SNAP-related policies and local contextual information, followed by topic-specific questions to help you understand the areas of opportunity in your community. Some questions below may offer opportunities to think about opportunities for improvement and potential barriers (e.g., *Is there room for improvement? If yes, what barriers and opportunities exist?*).

### Modernizing SNAP

- Has our state engaged in any efforts to modernize SNAP?
  - If yes, has our state evaluated those modernization efforts? If so, how are they working?
  - If no, is there currently a need to modernize SNAP in our state? How do we assess whether modernization is needed in the future?
- What resources or opportunities exist for us to fund modernization or improvements to SNAP operations in our state?
- What other states' modernization efforts can we learn from?

### Rising food prices

- How do we account for rising food prices when making and revisiting SNAP-related policy?
- What opportunities exist to address rising food prices in our state?

### **Intersection between SNAP and other economic supports**

- What were the effects of SSI benefit increases on SNAP eligibility and receipt in our state?
- What options exist to protect SNAP benefits when families experience changes to other benefits or procedures supporting their well-being, including SSI, tax credits, TANF, child care subsidies, and child support payments?

### **Felony convictions and SNAP**

- What are the criminal history-related restrictions on SNAP eligibility in our state?
- How are those restrictions affecting SNAP access for children and families in our state?
- How many children in our state live with parents who have criminal histories that limit SNAP eligibility?
- What are the opportunities to change these restrictions to increase SNAP access?

## **Step 3: Take action! Move from understanding to impact.**

After reflecting on the key topics and questions above, child welfare administrators and their partners can use this information to develop goals, action plans, and policies aimed at maintaining or strengthening SNAP access, use, and operations with the explicit goal of impacting child welfare outcomes. These actions may benefit families of very young children and have the potential to reduce rates of child maltreatment in your state. Users of this resource are encouraged to collect and monitor data on policy impacts over time to assess their success.

### **Action planning prompts**

- How do we define “successful” SNAP-related policymaking in our state?
- What data are collected that could be used to evaluate the impacts of SNAP-related policy change on rates of child maltreatment, child welfare system involvement, and child well-being? What pieces of information or data are needed?
- Who in our state should collect and analyze the necessary data? Do they have the appropriate authorizations and resources?
- How can we pivot if assessments indicate that changes are needed in our state?
- What questions remain about the status of SNAP access, use, and operations in our state?

### **Addressing agency administrative needs**

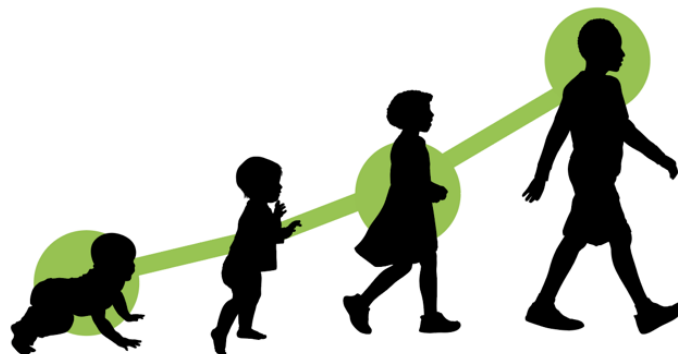
- Does the office administering SNAP in our state have sufficient resources? What evidence did we use when drawing this conclusion?
- When making SNAP-related policy, how do we consider the resources required by the agencies responsible for administering these benefits? How can we do this better as a state in the future?
- What levers in our state exist to advocate for adequate resources to administer the SNAP program in our state so it can reach more eligible families?

## Engaging SNAP clients in policymaking

- Has our state engaged SNAP clients in policymaking?
  - If yes, how are SNAP clients engaged? What is working well with this engagement, and could anything be improved?
  - If no, how could we engage SNAP clients in policymaking in our state?
- How can SNAP administrators work, or better work, to co-design SNAP program changes with those who use SNAP? How can policymakers support these co-design efforts?

For more information on our work and original analyses of SNAP policies and child welfare system data, see: <https://www.childtrends.org/project/measuring-up>

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