

The Farm Bill Must Improve SNAP

The U.S. farm bill sets policies and allocates funding for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to respond to hunger in the United States. The U.S. flagship nutrition program and main vehicle for reducing hunger under the bill is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which currently serves more than **41 million** people.

It was President Abraham Lincoln's goal, when USDA was established in 1862, in the midst of the Civil War, for the agency to serve all Americans. He called it the "**People's Department**" and said it was a necessity to help heal a nation torn apart by war.

Despite Lincoln's hopes, USDA has often fallen short of serving all the people. In fact, the effects of its policies include perpetuating longstanding inequities and biases against historically marginalized populations. This has allowed hunger to persist in the United States.

The reauthorization of the farm bill every five years presents one of the best opportunities to call for and win legislative reforms to problematic policies. Anti-hunger advocates are now preparing for the next reauthorization in 2023.

SNAP by itself cannot end hunger in the United States for good. But by the same token, it plays such an important role that improvements in the program are a virtual necessity to end hunger.

This is because millions of people at higher risk of hunger are not eligible to participate in SNAP.

Bread for the World believes that every human being, created in the image of God, has inherent dignity and should be able to access enough nutritious food for good health. This is why the farm bill should include the following solutions, demonstrating USDA's recommitment to equity.

End the Ban on Formerly Incarcerated Drug Offenders

The punishment for some crimes does not end when people complete their prison sentences. More than 20 states **restrict** access to SNAP for people who have served sen-



tences for drug-related offenses. Yet such returning citizens are among those at highest risk of hunger because finding a job is so difficult for people with criminal records.

One study found that **91 percent** of people recently released from prison were food insecure. Even apart from the core principle that all people deserve food, there are pragmatic reasons to end bans on SNAP participation as well. **Recidivism** is more likely when people can't afford to put food on the table for themselves or their families.

Expand Access to College Students

Food insecurity is widespread among students attending both two- and four-year colleges. See Figure 1. But only students who work at least 20 hours a week are eligible for SNAP, with exceptions for a few groups such as people with disabilities and parents of young children.

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Congress made all low-income students temporarily eligible for SNAP under COVID-19 public health emergency policies, but their eligibility ends when the emergency is lifted. It should instead be made permanent.

The eligibility rules for students are outdated. They were put in place more than 40 years ago, when most students were from white middle- and upper-class families. According to a study by the [Government Accountability Office](#), today nearly 40 percent of undergraduates come from families whose incomes qualify them for SNAP, meaning that they earn less than 130 percent of the poverty threshold, or about \$28,550 a year for a family of three in 2022. [Nearly half](#) of all undergraduates are students of color.

Allow Lawfully Present Immigrants to Participate

Lawfully present adult immigrants with fewer than five years of residency in the United States cannot participate in SNAP. Immigrants in the United States legally [start businesses](#) and are [employed](#) at higher rates than the native US population. The health and well-being of such immigrants should be considered no matter how long they have had residency.

Prior to 1996, lawfully present immigrants who were income-eligible to participate in SNAP (known then as the Food Stamp Program) [did not need to wait five years](#). "Welfare reform" laws in 1996 barred all immigrants from participating in federal assistance programs such as SNAP. The ban was partially reversed in 2003, when the eligibility of [children](#) in lawfully present immigrant families was reinstated. Children in these families continue to have low participation rates, however, in part due to the ineligibility of their parents.

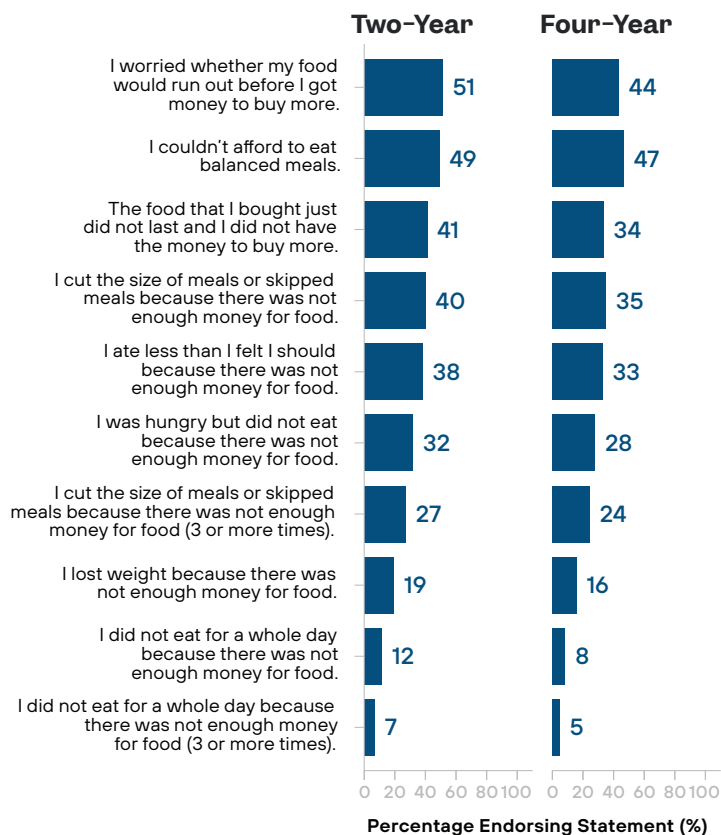
Respect Tribal Governments and U.S. Territories

Tribal governments have authority to administer some but not all federal nutrition programs. They do not have authority to administer SNAP, although SNAP [participation](#) is very high on reservations. Tribal governments have consistently sought this authority, [arguing](#) that they best understand the needs of their citizens and communities. Self-governance would help ensure that the program is administered in a culturally competent manner.

SNAP is not available to residents of the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. Instead, they have a weaker program called the Nu-

FIGURE 1

FOOD INSECURITY PERCENTAGES AMONG STUDENTS SURVEYED AT TWO- AND FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES



Source: #RealCollege survey, 2019; https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/HOPE_realcollege_National_report_digital.pdf

trition Assistance Program (NAP). NAP's budget is [capped](#), meaning that unlike SNAP, its budget does not expand to meet rising needs. When there is an economic downturn or natural disaster and more people need assistance, the program has to either stop accepting new applicants or reduce assistance to all participants in order to serve more people.

Root Out Racially Inequitable Policies

Research and lived experience make clear that SNAP policies have exacerbated racial inequities. For example, the War on Drugs disproportionately impacted people of color, particularly [Black men](#). Banning access to SNAP has made reentry much more difficult as a result.

For each of the policies discussed above, the most affected groups are largely people of color. Secretary of Agriculture [Tom Vilsack](#) has stated that USDA is taking bold, historic action to root out systemic racism that has plagued the agency for generations. Congress must do its part also and can take a stand against racism in SNAP by enacting reforms in the farm bill to undo these inequities.