

Replacing NAP with SNAP in Puerto Rico

Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States, but unlike citizens in the continental United States, Puerto Ricans do not have access to the Supplemental Assistance Nutrition Program (SNAP). Instead, Puerto Rico has the Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP), a lesser version of SNAP. SNAP benefits are more generous than benefits in NAP; for example, Puerto Ricans receive \$116 to \$307 dollars less per month in federal nutrition assistance than Americans living in the continental U.S., Hawaii, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam.

Hunger is a greater problem in Puerto Rico than elsewhere in the United States. As much as one-third of the population is food insecure in normal times. During emergencies, such as after Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, or during the pandemic, food insecurity rates skyrocket. There is no reason why Puerto Rico, as well as the other U.S. territories--American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands, should not be receiving SNAP.

Basic Facts About NAP

Puerto Rico participated in SNAP's predecessor, the Food Stamp Program until 1981. At that time, Congress and the Reagan administration decided to replace its food stamp program with NAP at funding levels set well below what Puerto Rico had been receiving under the Food Stamp Program. NAP is a block grant, meaning it has a fixed funding amount. Unlike SNAP, NAP is unable to expand when hunger increases and more people need assistance, even during emergencies such as hurricanes. Puerto Rico must set eligibility and benefit levels to keep the program's cost within the fixed funding limits, meaning these levels aren't solely based on need.

Because of the block grants' low, capped levels, these territories have more limited eligibility and/or benefit levels. SNAP eligibility levels are set based on poverty levels, and all eligible people who apply can receive benefits. NAP's eligibility levels must fit the confines of fixed funding. States that experience natural disasters can request disaster SNAP benefits from USDA. This process does not require congressional action, and the USDA approval process is straightforward and swift. In contrast, NAP does not have an automatic mechanism to provide disaster benefits. Following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, the Commonwealth government was required to submit a comprehensive plan to USDA before it could receive emergency funding. The hurricanes devastated the island in September 2017, and USDA approved this plan in February 2018.

NAP primarily benefits children, elderly, disabled, college students and working poor families. Under NAP, a parent of two children who lost a job and had no other income receives an average of about one-third less in monthly NAP benefits compared to a parent of two children who loses a job and has no other income and is receiving SNAP.

Reform Through the Farm Bill

To implement SNAP in Puerto Rico, the U.S. Congress would need to modify a statute to provide authority to the Government of Puerto Rico to operate SNAP. Specifically, Congress would need to amend or replace provisions of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, which governs the operation of SNAP and the NAP block grant for Puerto Rico. Congress should support the Puerto Rico Nutrition Fairness Act H.R. 253/S. 949 and the Closing the Meal Gap Act H.R. 3037/S.1336.

