

New poll shows US public supports continued investment in Federal Nutrition Assistance Program

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A new poll from researchers at Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) shows that the U.S. public broadly supports increasing or maintaining spending on the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program. The majority of Americans, including a majority of SNAP participants, also supported policies to improve the nutritional impact of SNAP by incentivizing the purchase of healthy foods and restricting the purchase of sugary drinks.

Congress is expected to debate changes, including potential cuts, to SNAP and other components of federal [nutrition policy](#) in the coming months as part of the stalled 2012 Farm Bill. More than one in seven Americans receives benefits from the SNAP program each month.

"This study provides decision-makers with a clear statement of public support for continued federal investment in preventing hunger and severe poverty through the SNAP program," said lead author Michael Long, a doctoral candidate at HSPH. "As Congress debates a new Farm Bill, these results show that SNAP participants and the broader public support innovative changes to the program that address the present [obesity epidemic](#) and the growing epidemic of diabetes and other diet-related diseases burdening so many of our nation's families."

The poll analysis appears on December 5, 2012 in an advance online edition of *Public Health Nutrition*.

U.S. adults reported widespread support (77%) across all political parties and [demographic groups](#) for increased or maintained federal spending on SNAP. Americans also supported a range of [policy proposals](#) intended to help SNAP participants improve their diets, including:

- Providing additional money to SNAP participants than can only be used to purchase fruits, vegetables, or other [healthful foods](#) (82%).
- Educating SNAP participants by providing nutrition or cooking classes (74%).
- Removing sugary drinks from the list of approved SNAP products (69%).
- Providing SNAP participants with more food stamp dollars to guarantee that they can afford a healthy diet (65%).

Concerns about stigmatizing SNAP participants have been raised as a barrier to removing sugary drinks from the program's list of permissible purchases. This is the first nationally representative poll to assess SNAP participants' support for the policy. The researchers found that a majority of SNAP participants (54%) who responded to this survey supported removing sugary drinks from SNAP benefits. Of the 46% of SNAP participants who when initially asked did not support removing sugary drinks, almost half (45%) subsequently supported removing [sugary drinks](#) when asked if they would support the policy if it also included additional benefits to purchase healthful foods.

The study's data were gathered from a nationally-representative random-digit-dialed landline telephone survey conducted by Harris Interactive between April 12 and April 22, 2012. The survey garnered responses from 3,024 adults, 418 of whom reported that their household had received SNAP benefits in the previous 12 months.

"The breadth of support for continued or increased funding for SNAP is gratifying; Americans really do want to extend a helping hand to those who are having difficulty putting food on their table," said Walter Willett, chair of the Department of Nutrition at HSPH and the paper's senior author. "However, the findings also clearly show that Americans want to do this in a way that supports, not undermines, the health of SNAP recipients, many of whom are children. The SNAP program clearly needs a tune-up to be sure that limited government resources are spent wisely."

More information: "Public Support for Policies to Improve the Nutritional Impact of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)," Michael W. Long, Cindy W. Leung, Lilian W.Y. Cheung, Susan J. Blumenthal, Walter C. Willett, Public Health Nutrition, online December 5, 2012

Provided by Harvard School of Public Health

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