

# Enrollment in SNAP does not substantially improve food security or dietary quality

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Millions of families in the United States struggle to provide nutritionally adequate meals due to insufficient money or other resources. To combat food security issues, over one in seven Americans currently rely upon the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the largest federal nutrition program, to provide monetary support for nutrition. In the past, SNAP has been shown to reduce poverty among the poorest Americans and generate economic activity. However, according to a new study from researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston, Massachusetts, SNAP benefits alone may not be enough to provide its beneficiaries with the long-term food security or dietary quality they need.

"After participating in SNAP for a few months, a substantial proportion of SNAP participants still reported marginal, low, or very low food security, which suggests that SNAP could do more to adequately address the problem of food insecurity," according to lead investigator, Dr. Eric Rimm, Associate Professor in Epidemiology and Nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health. "Although one might hypothesize that the provision of SNAP benefits would result in the purchase and consumption of healthy foods (i.e. fruits, vegetables, whole grains), there was no appreciable improvement in dietary quality among SNAP participants after the initiation of benefits."

The study included 107 low-income adults from Massachusetts, all of whom had requested SNAP application assistance from Project Bread, a non-profit statewide anti-hunger organization. New SNAP participants

were more likely to be non-White, normal weight, of lower household food security, and with lower dietary quality scores than low-income study participants who did not receive SNAP benefits. Dr. Rimm and his colleagues found a small improvement in [food security](#) for both SNAP participants and nonparticipants after the three-month study, but no significant differences between the two groups.

Likewise, consumption of fruits and vegetables was low among all participants in the study, but adults who received SNAP benefits increased their consumption of refined grains compared to those not receiving SNAP benefits. Increased refined grain consumption coupled with the low consumption of healthy foods led the study authors to conclude that "policies, programs, and nutrition education initiatives that improve the nutritional impact of SNAP should be implemented to enhance the program's influence on the diets and well-being of low-income Americans." For example, the majority of SNAP participants in the study supported the provision of financial incentives to purchase healthy foods (i.e. fruits and vegetables), more cooking or nutrition education classes, and restrictions for unhealthy foods, specifically soda, in order to help SNAP participants to eat better. These efforts should be based on further research to identify to the most effective ways to achieve the federal program's goals of reducing [food insecurity](#) and improving the nutritional quality of participants' diets.

**More information:** "Few Changes in Food Security and Dietary Intake From Short-term Participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Among Low-income Massachusetts Adults," by Cindy W. Leung, ScD, MPH; Sarah Cluggish, MBA; Eduardo Villamor, MD, DrPH; Paul J. Catalano, ScD; Walter C. Willett, MD, DrPH; Eric B. Rimm, ScD, has been published online in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* in advance of Volume 46, Issue 4 (June/July 2014)

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