

SNAP provides a model for ensuring a right to food

October 19 2019, by Marianne Stein

Alleviating food insecurity is often seen as one of the fundamental roles a country should fulfill. In some cases, this is encapsulated into a constitutionally formalized "right to food". In other cases, including the U.S., the right to food isn't formalized, but the U.S. government spends billions of dollars per year to help Americans obtain the food they need.

Craig Gundersen, distinguished professor of agricultural and consumer economics in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois says that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is effective in addressing the right to [food](#) in the U.S., and that the program can serve as an example for countries that struggle to provide food for all citizens.

Gundersen discusses how SNAP achieves a "right to food" in an article published in the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*.

"First, the right-to-food assistance must reach those in need. SNAP is targeted towards [low-income households](#), and it's inversely related to the income, so as the income increases the benefit level falls. In other words, the most [vulnerable people](#) receive more help," Gundersen explains.

Second, SNAP is an entitlement program, which means it expands and contracts automatically in response to changes in need. It is not dependent on the whims of legislative decisions or the state of the economy.

Third, there needs to be access to food for people who receive the benefits. SNAP is provided in the form of an electronic card (similar to a [credit card](#)) that can be used in 250,000 stores nationwide, ensuring that virtually everyone can use their benefits without having to go far from home.

Finally, the program must ensure participants' dignity and autonomy. Unlike other programs that may dictate what individuals can do with benefits, SNAP treats recipients with respect by allowing them to use benefits in stores alongside their neighbors to best meet the food demands of their families.

Gundersen points out that SNAP for over fifty years has served as a means to ensure individuals' right to food. He cautions against making any dramatic changes to the program, because it has a proven record of working well. If anything, it could be expanded in terms of benefit levels and to reach more of those who still fall through the cracks.

"SNAP works well in the U.S., and it could be used as a model for how to create a food assistance program for low- and middle-income nations that want to ensure all their citizens have a right to food," he says.

More information: Craig Gundersen, *The Right to Food in the United States: The Role of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)*, *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* (2019). [DOI: 10.1093/ajae/aaz040](https://doi.org/10.1093/ajae/aaz040)

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