SNAP work requirements put low-income Americans at risk

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When work requirements for a federal food safety-net program start again, many low-income Americans will lose benefits—and Black adults will be hardest hit, according to a study published today. In addition, some disabled people will lose these crucial food assistance benefits.

The authors point out that the loss of food assistance would damage the health of low-income people, who suffer from high rates of COVID-19 and other serious health conditions.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in record rates of unemployment. SNAP benefits are critical to help people who have lost work get the food they need," said lead author Erin Brantley, Ph.D., MPH, a senior research associate at the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health (Milken Institute SPH). "When work requirements for SNAP start again, history shows we can expect to see a disproportionate impact on black families."

Work requirements for Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly called the food stamp program, are temporarily paused under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act but are set to resume when the federal public health emergency ends. Separate from this action, the Trump administration issued a new rule to limit the ability that states traditionally have had to waive SNAP work requirements when unemployment is high, although a federal court has temporarily stopped implementation.

The study is the first to find that SNAP work requirements lead more Black adults to lose food assistance compared to white adults. It is also the first published research to show that SNAP work requirements cause disabled adults to lose benefits. Although SNAP work requirements exempt some people with disabilities, others may not qualify for an exemption, despite facing substantial health challenges. In some cases, disabled people may lose SNAP benefits because they cannot navigate the paperwork requirements, the authors point out.

Brantley and her colleagues at the Milken Institute SPH analyzed the impact of the requirement that low-income Americans prove that they are working—or lose SNAP benefits. The study examined what happened when many states put work requirements for SNAP into place between 2013 and 2017. The researchers found that:

- Food stamp work requirements for adults aged 18 to 49 led to a 21 percent drop in participation in the program overall;
- Black adults experienced a 23 percent loss in food assistance during that time, much larger than the 16 percent decline for white adults, likely because black workers have fewer work prospects;
- Even though the law exempts some with disabilities, there was a significant 7.8 percent drop in participation for these Americans.

The authors point out that although work requirements are paused during the public health emergency, the economic fall-out, high rates of unemployment and food insecurity could last long after the crisis is declared over.

"Our study suggests that even when the economy was strong such work requirements created disparities that harmed low-income people, especially in Black communities and people with disabilities," said Leighton Ku, director of the Center for Health Policy Research at Milken Institute SPH and co-author of the study. "The harm will be far worse when jobs are scarce during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, since high unemployment is expected to persist."

The findings also have implications for health insurance coverage. The Trump administration has
encouraged states to introduce work requirements to Medicaid. Although federal courts have blocked implementation of Medicaid work requirements in some states, several states have continued to develop plans for new policies.

SNAP provides an estimated 37 million Americans with electronic vouchers to help pay for groceries. Low-income people who receive SNAP benefits have improved food security and that leads to better health, Ku and Brantley say.

The paper, Association of Work Requirements with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation by Race/Ethnicity and Disability Status, 2013-2017, was published June 26 in the JAMA Network Open.