

The Number of People on Food Stamps is Falling. Here's Why

The number of Americans receiving benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly referred to as food stamps, continues to drop, according to the latest numbers released by the United States Department of Agriculture, which oversees the program.

As of July 7, 42.6 million Americans were receiving SNAP benefits during the current fiscal year, down from 44.2 million in 2016. The 2017 figure is the lowest since 2010, when 40.3 million people were on food stamps. The number peaked in 2013, at 47.6 million.

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An early version of SNAP began as legislation enacted in 1959. Two years later, President John F. Kennedy implemented a pilot version of the program. In 1964, new legislation made the program permanent. Under the program, working-age adults without children can receive benefits for three months in three years. After that time limit, they must work at least 80 hours per month or participate in an education or job training program for that same amount of time. States can temporarily waive the three-month time limit when unemployment rates rise, and many did so during the economic recession that started in the late 2000s.

As the economy has improved, states have had to drop those waivers, especially since 2016. On April 1, 2016, after the first three-month period passed, an estimated 500,000 to 1 million people in 22 states lost their benefits.

But analysts say that while reinstating work requirements has contributed to the drop in program participation, so has the better economy, since fewer people are in need. Data show that the share of the U.S. population participating in SNAP [tracks with](#) the share at or below the poverty line. So the lower number of recipients, says Melissa Boteach, vice president for the Poverty to Prosperity Program at the Center for American Progress, a nonprofit, is “a good thing if more people are finding jobs and finding higher wages. It’s a bad thing if people are living in areas where there’s no jobs or they have barriers to work and they’re not able to access nutrition assistance.” Both scenarios are playing out, she says.

The number of people receiving SNAP benefits has previously fallen, between 1981 and 1988 (a decline of 3.8 million people), and 1994 and 2000 (10.3 million fewer). Analysts say an improving economy contributed to the decreases in those periods too. In the decade leading up to the 2013 peak, the number of participants more than doubled.

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The number of Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program participants continues to fall as states reimplement work requirements. On June 13, 2013, activists rallied in Los Angeles, California, against a farm bill that would reduce spending on the program.

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But states that have reimplemented work requirement have generally [experienced greater drops](#) in SNAP participation than in other states, says Ed Bolen, senior policy analyst at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Alabama put its work requirement back in place on January 1. By May 1, SNAP participation in the state was down [85 percent in 13 counties](#).

In Kansas, the amount of people receiving benefits was [75 percent lower](#) around two years after its governor reinstated work requirements in 2013. In Georgia, [there was a 62 percent drop](#) on April 1, the deadline for recipients to find work under the reinstated rule.

Republican lawmakers have pushed for further limits on exemptions from the work requirement. “There are talented people across our country who aren’t pursuing the full potential of their capabilities, largely because government incentives make it more profitable in some cases to stay home and collect welfare than to pursue personal growth and responsibility through work,” Congressman Garrett Graves, a Republican from Louisiana, said in a statement in June. “Government needs to provide a safety net for the vulnerable, but it’s become a lifestyle for some to actively choose government assistance over work.”

More cuts to eligibility could come if the federal government approves proposals to trim the budget for SNAP. Republicans in the House of Representatives have proposed in their budget resolution cutting about \$150 billion from the program over the next decade. President Donald Trump, [long a critic](#) of SNAP, has proposed a budget that would cut \$193 billion to the program over 10 years. “We need people to go to work,” Mick Mulvaney, director of the Office of Management and Budget, [told reporters](#) in May. “If you’re on food stamps and you’re able-bodied, we need you to go to work. If you’re on disability insurance and you’re not supposed to be—if you’re not truly disabled—we need you to go back to work.”

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Those cuts must come from somewhere, and the solution could be decreasing eligibility for who can receive benefits. “There’s no way you get that much money without cutting benefits to people who qualify for the program,” says Bolen, of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. The Center for American Progress [has calculated](#) that Trump’s proposal could

eventually cut benefits to 8 million households per year.

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The number of SNAP participants is the lowest it has been in several years.
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

At least one study, by the Foundation for Government Accountability, a nonprofit that says it is nonpartisan, [found that](#) after Kansas reimplemented its work requirements in 2013, nearly 60 percent of people who had been removed from the program found employment within 12 months, and those people who had been removed saw their incomes rise on average by 127 percent per year.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities [disputes those](#) and other claims about how jobs increase when SNAP requires them. “I think some of the attempts to look at exactly what happened when the time limit came into effect ignored some of the things we know about SNAP, which is that many people work while they’re on SNAP,” Bolen says. “That doesn’t mean that the time limit got them the job.”

Boteach, of the Center for American Progress, says cutting benefits does not help people find work. “Taking away someone’s food isn’t going to help them find a job any faster,” she says. “If you want to help people connect to jobs, then you should focus on creating jobs and policies that raise wages and address barriers that people are facing,” such as issues finding childcare or with criminal records.

The Congressional Budget Office predicts participation will continue to fall over the next decade by about 1 to 2 percent annually. In 2027, there are expected to be 32 million people on the program, according to that office.

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