

# Nearly one-third of US food stamp recipients rely on food pantries

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Nearly one-third of US households on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) rely on food pantries to supplement their food budget, according to data highlighted this week by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), which administers SNAP.

The USDA reports that in 2014, 23 million American households received SNAP benefits, formerly known as food stamps. Of those households receiving SNAP benefits, 32 percent report they had visited a food pantry in the previous 30 days.

Households receiving other government food assistance also visited food pantries in significant numbers. Twenty-three percent of households using the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program visited a pantry, as did 23 percent of households where children are receiving free or reduced-price school lunches.

The average SNAP benefit per person is about \$125 per person a month, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. The USDA data shows that these paltry benefits are not enough to sustain many household food budgets, leading families to seek assistance from food pantries.

Despite these statistics, more than one million people across the US could lose their SNAP benefits in 2016 due to the return in many areas of a three-month limit on benefits for unemployed adults ages 18-49 who are not disabled or raising minor children. The cutoffs began March 1 in 21 states, prompting food pantries and soup kitchens to gear up for an influx of people seeking support.

Following the financial crisis in 2008, virtually all US states qualified for a waiver from the three-month limit for those classified as “Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents” (ABAWDs), imposed in 1996 under the welfare reform bill signed into law by President

Clinton. The harsh “work for food” requirements are now being restored in the face of US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data that shows that more than a quarter of the 7.9 million US unemployed have been jobless for more than six months.

According to the USDA, about 4.7 million SNAP recipients are deemed ABAWDs, and only one in four of these has any income from a job. USDA data shows these individuals have gross income averages of 17 percent of the official poverty line, or only about \$2,000 per year for a household of one in 2015. If these individuals fail to demonstrate that they work, volunteer, or attend job-training courses at least 80 hours a month, they will be cut off SNAP.

The assault on SNAP benefits is a bipartisan attack on the health and wellbeing of workers at a time when the government’s own figures show hunger growing across America. In 2014, President Obama signed a bill that included \$8.6 billion in cuts to SNAP. The temporary 14 percent increase in benefits passed by Congress in 2009 ended completely in November 2013.

Under these crisis conditions, Obama’s fiscal year 2016 budget proposal included only \$83.692 billion for SNAP, which presently serves an average caseload of 45.7 million Americans, almost 15 percent of the population. This compares to the more than \$600 billion a year officially expended on the military. If all military-related expenses are added—including from the CIA, Homeland Security, Energy, State departments, the Veterans Administration and debt payments for previous wars—the real figure is closer to \$1.3 trillion a year.

A USDA study showed that 14 percent of households (17.4 million households) were food insecure in 2014, meaning they did not have consistent, dependable access to enough food for an active, healthy life. In

2014, 5.6 percent of US households (6.9 million households) had very low food security, meaning that the food intake of some household members was reduced, and normal eating patterns disrupted, due to limited resources at times during the year.

A 2013 study of 3,300 SNAP households by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service found that "SNAP households experience ... financial strain that is eased but not alleviated by participation in the SNAP program." The study found that about 45 percent of SNAP clients limited food consumption, usually by skipping meals, to make it through the month.

NPR reports on other research that shows that hospital admissions for hypoglycemia—low blood sugar, which can be treated with a healthful diet—spike by 27 percent for low-income households during the last week of the month, when many government benefits run out. High-income households showed no similar trend.

A new review of 25 studies published between 2003 and 2014 that looked at the food spending and quality of diets of SNAP recipients showed that they ate on average about the same number of calories as those not receiving benefits, but consumed fewer fruits and vegetables and whole grains and more added sugars.

Tatiana Andreyeva, the study's lead author and researcher at the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut, said average food stamp recipients scored even worse than the average American on the Healthy Eating Index, a measure of how well diets meet the federal dietary guidelines.

While the average American received a failing grade, scoring just 58 out of 100 on the index, the average SNAP recipient scored just 47 out of 100 in one study, and 51 out of 100 in another. The study also found that both adults and children on SNAP were less likely to eat three meals a day than higher-income people not receiving benefits.



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