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Study: Food stamp benefits are already too low in 99 percent of U.S. counties

By **Caitlin Dewey** February 28

The Trump administration recently proposed [massive, across-the-board cuts to food stamps](#). But even without those cuts, a new analysis finds, current benefit amounts don't cover the full cost of meals for the vast majority of recipients.

[The report](#), released this week by researchers at the Urban Institute and the University of Illinois, compared the maximum, per-meal benefit allowed by the food-stamp program with the average cost of meals purchased by low-income households in the United States. The researchers found that in 99 percent of counties those meals regularly cost more than even the maximum benefit disbursed by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

In Manhattan, for instance — home to nearly a quarter-million food-stamp recipients — SNAP allows \$1.86 per meal, while the average meal costs \$3.96.

The reports add to a growing body of evidence that SNAP benefits may already be too small to fully prevent hunger and related health risks. In light of the Trump administration's calls to reduce spending in the program, advocates are pointing to studies like this to argue that the program cannot take further reductions.

"Benefits are already not meeting needs," said Elaine Waxman, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute and the lead author of this report. "I can't expect less funding would improve that situation."

Waxman and others say the issue appears to be twofold: Benefit amounts are stingy, to begin with. They're also not adjusted for regional food-cost differences.

It's a point that has been made before — most notably in [a 2016 Institute of Medicine review](#), which recommended the Agriculture Department raise its baseline benefit amount and grant more money to people living in expensive areas. But this new analysis goes a step further, attempting to identify those specific areas and quantify the size of the gap.

To do that, Waxman estimated the cost of an average, home-prepared meal in every county in the contiguous United States. While there isn't a single survey or database that contains that information, the researchers extrapolated it by adjusting national grocery-spending averages according to a county food-price index.

Once they had those figures, Waxman tallied the number of counties with average meal costs above \$1.86, the food-stamp program’s maximum per-meal benefit. This is the amount given to households with no net income: In other words, it’s intended to cover the family’s full grocery costs, not just supplement other funds that the family spends.

Despite that distinction, the researchers found that 22 counties in the entire country have food costs low enough to squeeze beneath the \$1.86 limit. On average, the cost of a meal is 27 percent higher than the maximum SNAP benefit.

In cities and remote rural counties, where food costs are higher, the gap is even greater: 136 percent in Crook County, Ore., and 113 percent in New York County, N.Y.

“The food budget shortfall has only been growing,” said Triada Stampas, vice president for research and public affairs at the Food Bank for New York City. “People who are food insecure are further today from being in a place of having enough food for themselves and their families.”

Like many other anti-hunger advocates, Stampas wasn’t particularly surprised at the scale, or the depth, of the SNAP shortfall. Food banks and pantries have warned of this for years.

In New York, the Food Bank for New York City estimates that the average SNAP benefit buys 14 days of food, forcing recipients to lean on their families, bus outside their neighborhoods to shop at cheaper stores and resort to soup kitchens and food pantries. The food bank reports that, since 2009, there has been a 30 percent increase in the gap between the amount of money hungry people need to afford groceries, and the amount of money they have to spend on them.

Stampas said she and other advocates have been pushing Congress to enact policies that would address the shortfall in SNAP benefits. On Tuesday, she joined hundreds of other anti-hunger advocates on Capitol Hill to ask legislators to sign onto the Closing the Meal Gap Act. The bill would raise the baseline benefit for all SNAP households and allocate more funds to those with large medical and housing expenses.

But it seems unlikely the legislation will advance now or that advocates will get many of the other fixes they have long wanted. Two weeks ago, as part of his 2018 budget proposal, President Trump proposed cutting SNAP by nearly 30 percent, a figure achieved by [halving most households’ cash benefits](#). One week later, USDA [kicked off the process to tighten eligibility](#) for the program.

For researchers and advocates, such moves are frustrating. If anything, Waxman writes in the conclusion of her report, the data shows that SNAP needs more money, not less.

“In a lot of cases we’re playing defense now,” Stampas said. “We’re just trying to protect the structure of SNAP and access to SNAP as it currently is.”


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