

Improving Maternal and Child Health Through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

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The 2023 Farm Bill presents an opportunity to strengthen food access for kids and parents in families affected by drug-related involvement with the criminal legal system.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): The largest federal nutrition program. Provides monthly benefits to families with low incomes to buy food.

Farm Bill: The main legislation impacting U.S. food systems. Authorizes certain nutrition programs like SNAP, farm subsidies and supports, and agricultural environmental conservation programs. Renewed about every five years.

Call to Action: Urge your members of Congress to include the Re-Entry Support Through Opportunities for Resources and Essentials (RESTORE) Act in the Farm Bill to ensure that families harmed by the war on drugs have access to SNAP benefits!



Hunger contributes to poor maternal and child health outcomes in the U.S.



In the last two decades, the number of American women who die giving birth each year has **nearly doubled.**

Source: Every Mother Counts

Black and Indigenous women are two to three times more likely to die of pregnancy-related complications than white women.



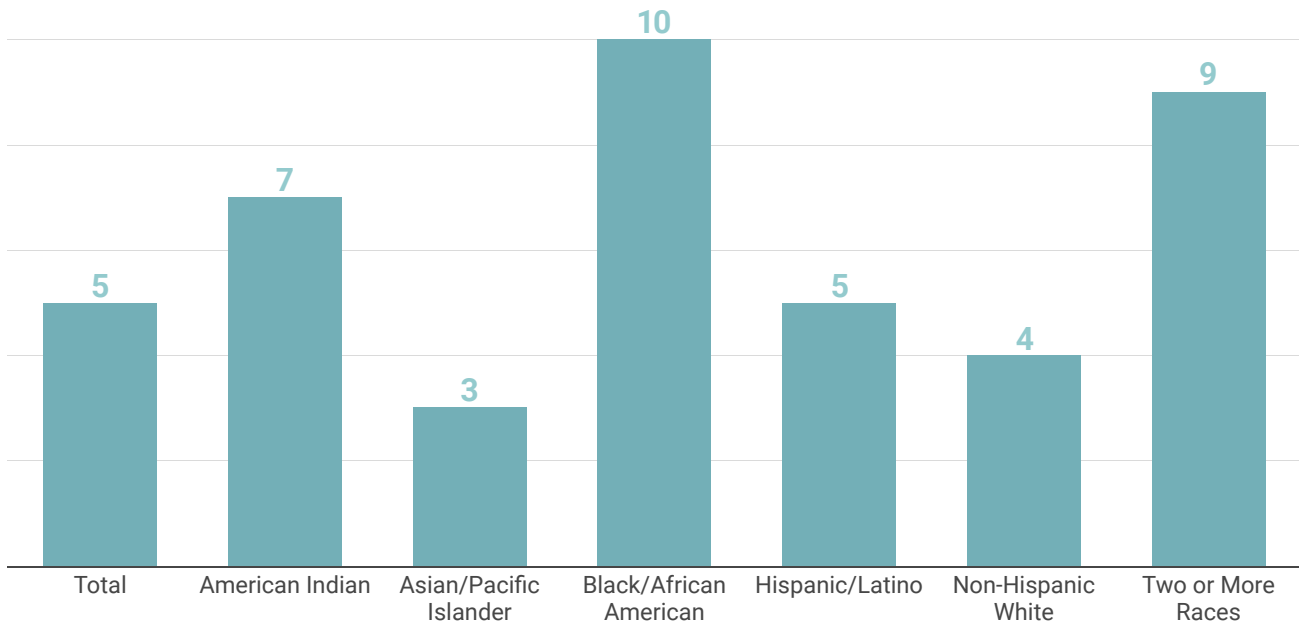
Source: Every Mother Counts

A prosperous society depends on everyone having healthy food to live and thrive, especially children and the people who birth and raise them. Due to systemic barriers, however, households with kids—particularly families of color—have lower nutrition access. Maternal and child health outcomes are infamously poor in the U.S.¹ and hunger is a significant factor. A federal policy allowing states to ban people with felony drug convictions from benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

Program (SNAP) can compound hunger and health challenges for moms and kids. In this year’s Farm Bill, our lawmakers in Washington, D.C. can advance health and racial equity through SNAP by **repealing the harmful policy allowing states to deny food assistance to families in which someone has a felony drug conviction.**

Food insecurity and other systemic disparities lead to worse health outcomes for babies and moms of color, especially Black and multiracial people.

U.S. Infant Mortality, by Mother's Race & Ethnicity (Rate per 1,000)



Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation, [Kids Count Data Center](#)



Compared to the general population, pregnant women are twice as likely to be food insecure.

Source: University of Iowa



Access to food assistance during pregnancy and a child’s early years has lifelong health benefits that promote academic success and economic security over generations. Among pregnant people, improved food security from supports like SNAP are linked to healthier blood pressure;⁹ a lower risk of gestational diabetes;¹⁰ and reduced levels of stress, anxiety and depression.¹¹ Food assistance provides developing fetuses with the nutrients they need for growth, lowering the risk of congenital disabilities, diabetes and coronary heart disease.¹² It also promotes initiation and duration of breastfeeding¹³ and decreases the odds of preterm birth, low birthweight and infant mortality.¹⁴ Young children in struggling families benefit from food assistance, with decreased vulnerability to lead poisoning,¹⁵ lower rates

of anemia,¹⁶ fewer serious asthma episodes¹⁷ and improved cognitive development.¹⁸ All of this leads to greater academic success, better health and self-sufficiency in adulthood. Rather than restricting SNAP access, we should recognize its value in mitigating the larger social costs of the drug trade and substance use disorder in our communities.

Federal SNAP policy makes it hard for families in many states to move forward. Since 1996, federal law has prohibited individuals with felony drug convictions from receiving SNAP benefits. However, states are allowed to partially or fully waive this restriction. In the past, Michigan waived the ban for people with only one felony drug conviction, but those with two or more arising from separate incidents that occurred after August 22, 1996 were barred for life from receiving food assistance. Through a bipartisan vote, Michigan waived the ban completely in 2020. Today, South Carolina still has a full SNAP ban and 21 other states have a partial ban.²

The ban is unfair in that it punishes people long after they serve their sentences and subjects entire families to hunger. It's also ineffective: recidivism is lower when people returning to their communities have supports like SNAP³ that make survival needs attainable.

The U.S. war on drugs and, by extension, the SNAP ban have disproportionately targeted people of color, especially Black⁴ and Indigenous people,⁵ people with disabilities⁶ and parents.⁷ These groups are already less food secure because of systemic disparities. Incarceration and denial of food assistance worsen the resulting health concerns.

Because the work of raising children remains skewed toward female parents, the impacts of the war on drugs, including hunger, disproportionately ripple out to moms (whether they have a conviction themselves or are supporting a partner with a conviction) and kids. Women are more likely than men to be incarcerated for a drug-related offense.⁸ Employment opportunities upon release may be even more severely limited, as many female-



Infants and toddlers from food-insecure families are 90% more likely to be in fair or poor health than those in food-secure households.

Source: Center for Law and Social Policy

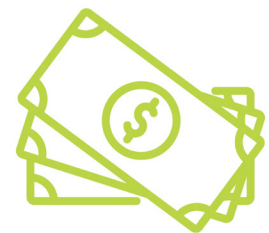
People in food-insecure households spend 45% more annually on healthcare than those in food-secure households.

Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities



SNAP reduces healthcare costs for an adult with low income by \$1,400 per year.

Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities



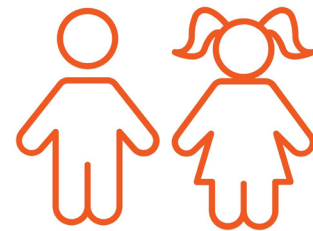
dominated fields like paid caregiving explicitly exclude workers with a criminal history.

The RESTORE Act offers hope. “Tough on crime” policies like the SNAP ban often cause more harm than the actions they supposedly aim to deter. Eliminating the ban is one of the easiest ways to disrupt this destructive dynamic and improve health, especially for moms and kids.

Bipartisan, bicameral federal legislation to repeal the ban nationwide was introduced in May 2023. The measure, named the [Re-Entry Support Through Opportunities for Resources and Essentials \(RESTORE\) Act](#), could be incorporated into the Farm Bill or enacted separately. No matter how it’s done, Congress must seize this opportunity to advance public safety, food security and health justice for families, no matter which state they call home. **End the state option to deny food assistance to families harmed by the failed war on drugs.**

A parent’s incarceration increases the likelihood of household food insecurity by up to 15 percentage points.

Source: University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research



Black children are five times more likely than white children to be separated from a parent by incarceration.

Source: PRB



4 out of every 5 women in jails are mothers. Most are their children’s primary or only caregiver.

Source: Prison Policy Initiative

End Notes

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