

Letting low-income Americans buy groceries online with SNAP benefits decreased the share of people without enough food

November 8 2023, by Grace Melo, Andrea Leschewski and Kyle Jones



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The share of low-income U.S. families experiencing [food insufficiency](#)—sometimes or often not having enough food to eat—fell from 24.5% to 22.5% at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, we found in a new [study published in the November 2023 issue of Food Policy](#).

This two-percentage-point decline coincided with the [rapid expansion of a pilot program](#) that allows the purchase of groceries online with benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as SNAP.

First mandated by the farm bill Congress passed in 2014, the SNAP [Online Purchasing Pilot](#) was initially [rolled out on a limited basis in 2019](#)

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Once COVID-19 arrived in the U.S. in early 2020, the [pilot](#) was rapidly expanded nationwide because the pandemic disrupted schooling, [child care](#), transportation, and in-person retail shopping. All of those changes curtailed access to food—especially for people with low incomes.

Nationally, SNAP online grocery purchases soared to US\$155 million in June 2020, from less than [\\$3 million in January of that year](#).

To investigate whether the rapid rollout of the Online Purchasing Pilot played a role in the food insufficiency decline at that time, we teamed up with [Jordan Jones](#), a U.S. Department of Agriculture economist. We analyzed 12 weeks of data covering April 23, 2020, to July 21, 2020, from the [Household Pulse Survey](#) involving approximately 10,000 low-

income households.

Because the pilot was rolled out gradually in different states, we were able to leverage the differences in the timing using a [two-way fixed-effects](#) model. This method made it possible to determine that SNAP's online purchasing program contributed to the decline in food insufficiency.

The prevalence of [deficient food security](#)—a condition in which people may skip meals—increased for [families with children in 2020](#). However, the impact of the Online Purchasing Pilot was not larger for these households as opposed to those without any kids.

We believe this suggests that the ability to use SNAP benefits online does not resolve some food-related problems, such as those that arise because of [school closures](#).

Low-income children are eligible for free meals at school. While many [school districts](#) found creative ways to distribute grab-and-go meals when school buildings were closed in 2020 and 2021, not all families could take advantage of those opportunities.

Why it matters

SNAP benefits currently help [more than 42 million Americans](#) buy food. The [maximum monthly amount for a family of four](#) in the 2024 fiscal year, which began on Oct. 1, 2023, is \$973 in the 48 mainland states and the District of Columbia.

[Online options for using these benefits](#) vary by state. In many locations, they include big stores selling groceries, such as Walmart, Target, Whole Foods, Safeway, and some popular online retailers like Amazon.

Buying groceries online makes life easier for anyone with trouble purchasing [food](#) in person, including people with disabilities, those with limited transportation access, or those living in remote locations.

About [1 in 6 Americans](#) pay for groceries online every week, and more than half have done so in the past 12 months.

What other research is being done in this field

This is one of several studies that have evaluated the impact of [temporary food assistance policies at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). One member of our group, Grace Melo, conducted research with a different team that found that the mental health of children in low-income families that got a boost in SNAP benefits did not [decline](#), even though they were [disproportionately affected by the pandemic](#).

What's next?

Another member of our research team, Kyle Jones, is now researching how this pilot affects what kinds of groceries Americans are buying with SNAP benefits. He also plans to analyze how [using the benefits for online purchases](#) changes how much time people with these [benefits](#) spend on [grocery](#) shopping.

More information: Kyle Jones et al, The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Online Purchasing Pilot's impact on food insufficiency, *Food Policy* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.foodpol.2023.102538](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2023.102538)

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