

SNAP AT A BREAKING POINT

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FUNDING FIGHTS, JUNK FOOD, & A SYSTEM THAT FORGOT THE “N” IN NUTRITION

How the nation’s largest food-assistance program is failing millions by prioritizing cheap calories over nutrient-dense food — and what must change to put real nutrition back at the center of SNAP.

When SNAP (food stamps) was created in 1964, it had a clear moral purpose: make sure low-income Americans don’t go hungry.

On that narrow metric, it technically does work. More than 40 million people rely on SNAP each month to keep food on the table—nearly half of them children, along with seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities.

But SNAP today sits at the center of two intertwined crises:

1. A political war over its funding and eligibility.
2. A design flaw that floods vulnerable families with cheap, ultra-processed calories instead of real nutrition.

The recent record-long government shutdown and Farm Bill stalemate made this brutally visible.

*“The food you eat can either be the **safest and most powerful form of medicine**, or the **slowest form of poison**.”*

— Ann Wigmore

WHAT SNAP WAS DESIGNED TO DO—& WHAT IT ACTUALLY FUNDS

Food security is officially defined as “access to affordable, nutritious food.” But when SNAP was built, “nutritious” was defined through a 1960s lens: vitamin-fortified, starchy, industrial calories counted as success.

That might have been appropriate then. But today—given what we know about ultra-processed food and metabolic disease—it’s disastrously outdated.

Yes, SNAP pays for fresh fruits and vegetables, but it also pays for:

- About \$7 billion a year in sugary drinks—roughly 20–30 billion servings of soda
- A significant portion of SNAP spending goes to ultra-processed products—chips, soda, frozen entrées, refined starches, shelf-stable junk

As a result, SNAP participants have higher rates of heart disease, diabetes, and premature death than nonparticipants with similar incomes.

SNAP does reduce hunger, but entrenches nutritional poverty.

Americans today are overwhelmingly not starved of calories; they are starved of nutrients, pushing them toward obesity, type 2 diabetes, fatty liver, and heart disease.

This is in part, because unlike every other federal food program—school meals, WIC, military food—which have nutrition standards, SNAP, the largest food program we have, still does not.

That is not a design oversight. It's the result of pressure.

HOW INDUSTRY KEEPS THE RULES BROKEN

Whenever policymakers propose even basic SNAP nutrition standards—like excluding soda—Big Food leans on Congress, hard.

We've seen this play out before:

- In a 2017 House Agriculture Committee hearing, public-health experts argued for removing sugary drinks from SNAP because of their direct role in obesity and diabetes
- Opponents claimed that would “stigmatize” SNAP users and create “chaos at the checkout,” despite SNAP already banning alcohol, hot prepared foods, and some energy drinks

The rhetoric escalated quickly: some lawmakers framed soda limits as an attack on “freedom,” even hinting at constitutional violations—language that tracks closely with industry talking points.

Follow the money and it becomes obvious:

- Members of the Agriculture Committee receive significant campaign contributions from soda, candy, and processed-food corporations and their trade groups
- Lawmakers most vocal against reform are often among the top recipients of donations from Coca-Cola, Pepsi, sugar producers, and industry Political Action Committees

In this environment, even tiny steps—like small pilot programs to test healthier SNAP rules in a few states—have been quietly killed before they begin, under the pressure of heavy lobbying.

This is not about protecting “choice.” It's about protecting billions in annual revenue from products disproportionately sold to, and consumed by, the poorest, sickest Americans.

THE LATEST CONTROVERSY: SNAP FUNDING UNDER FIRE

On top of its nutrition crisis, SNAP has gotten pulled into an unprecedented funding and eligibility fight.

In 2025, several moves converged:

- **House Republicans advanced the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act,”** which the Congressional Budget Office estimated would cut nearly \$300 billion from food aid over ten years
- **Farm Bill (which administers SNAP)** draft proposals floated hundreds of billions in SNAP reductions alongside higher subsidies for commodity crops—the raw material for ultra-processed foods
- **A 43-day federal government shutdown pushed SNAP to the brink;** USDA warned that November 2025 benefits would not be paid, affecting about 42 million Americans
- **Democratic-led states sued;** federal courts ordered USDA to keep funding SNAP, while the administration fought back up to the Supreme Court

For weeks, families had no idea if their EBT cards (the debit-like cards used to redeem SNAP benefits) would work. Food banks were overwhelmed. States scrambled to plug gaps.

It was the first time in modern history that SNAP was explicitly used as a bargaining chip in a shutdown fight—and it signaled that political appetite for cuts is very real.

THE LATEST CONTROVERSY: SNAP FUNDING UNDER FIRE

The shutdown ended with a sweeping funding bill that changes the near-term picture:

- SNAP is now funded through the end of September 2026
- USDA’s appropriation includes a meaningful increase for SNAP and WIC (the Women and Children benefits) and replenishes key contingency reserves that were drained to keep benefits flowing during the shutdown

1. For families:

- The immediate crisis—“Will I get benefits next month?”—is over, at least through September 2026
 - States can plan benefit issuance without wondering if Congress will pull the rug out every few weeks
 - We should see fewer emergency surges at food banks and less state-level improvisation just to keep people fed
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2. For politics:

- SNAP is now off the table as a shutdown hostage for the next budget cycle
 - But the fight over how generous SNAP should be, what it can buy, and what work rules apply is not resolved. It’s simply been pushed into Farm Bill negotiations, standalone bills, and USDA waiver policy rather than the immediate “lights on / lights off” drama
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3. For Food Fix, nutrition, and long-term health

- The extension locks in the current structure—billions of dollars with no nutrition standards—for at least another year unless Congress or USDA proactively reforms the program
- In other words, we’ve just committed over \$100 billion to a program that still allows huge flows of public money into soda, junk food, and ultra-processed products *without* requiring a single gram of fiber, produce, or real protein in return

So yes, the funding conversation has been paused—for now. But the underlying problem—what those dollars are buying and what they’re doing to people’s bodies—remains completely untouched.

MORE RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: SNAP IS CHANGING EVEN WITHOUT REFORM

Even as Congress moved to avert an immediate funding crisis, SNAP policy has continued to shift quietly in ways that materially affect who receives benefits—and how the program functions.

Expanded work requirements are now taking effect.

Under recent legislation, able-bodied adults without dependents ages 18–64 must now meet monthly work, training, or volunteer requirements to maintain eligibility. Several states have already begun implementing these rules, putting hundreds of thousands of people at risk of losing benefits—not because food insecurity has improved, but because compliance barriers and paperwork hurdles have increased.

At the same time, the debate over what SNAP dollars can buy is changing.

For the first time, multiple states have received or implemented federal waivers allowing restrictions on purchases of soda, candy, and other ultra-processed foods. Other states are preparing applications. Rather than a national nutrition standard, SNAP is beginning to fracture into a patchwork system where access to healthier rules depends on geography.

Add in modest cost-of-living benefit adjustments that still fail to match real food prices, and an emerging shift of SNAP administrative costs from the federal government onto states, and the picture becomes clear:

SNAP is being reshaped in real time, and again, without any coherent, nutrition-first strategy guiding those changes.

WHY THIS IS HAPPENING

Several forces are colliding:

1. Deficit politics

SNAP is a large, visible line item, so it's an easy target in budget and Farm Bill negotiations—even though it's one of the most effective anti-poverty programs we have and generates \$1.50–\$1.80 in local economic activity for every \$1 spent.

2. Backlash to benefit increases

The 2021 update to the Thrifty Food Plan raised benefits to match real-world food costs. Critics now call that an “unlawful expansion” and use it to justify structural cuts, even as food and housing costs remain high.

3. Ideology about “dependency”

Debate is dominated by rhetoric about “waste” and “work requirements,” rather than serious engagement with SNAP's role in stabilizing families, local economies, and long-term health.

4. Corporate interests

SNAP is a huge revenue stream for soda, snack, and processed-food companies. Adding real nutrition standards would hit profits, so industry lobbying naturally aligns with lawmakers seeking cuts or restructuring—while carefully avoiding limits on what SNAP can buy.

The result? We're fighting over how much to spend and who deserves help—without seriously confronting what we're buying with that money.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR EVERYDAY AMERICANS

For roughly 42 million people, SNAP is not an abstract policy; it's whether there is food in the house.

The shutdown and funding battle meant:

- Families not knowing if benefits would arrive on time—or at all
- Food banks overwhelmed by surging demand
- States scrambling to patch gaps with limited resources
- Confusion and fear in communities where a delay of even a day or two can mean empty cupboards

Today's funding deal changes the time horizon, but not the underlying dynamics:

- The proposed cuts and stricter work rules embedded in earlier bills are not gone—they're on pause and will likely resurface in Farm Bill debates or future budget fights
- Without nutrition reforms, SNAP dollars will continue to flow heavily toward ultra-processed, disease-driving foods, even as we inject more money into the program
- Healthcare costs, disability, and lost productivity from diet-driven disease will keep rising, no matter how predictably we fund SNAP

We're still arguing about how big the hose should be, without acknowledging that the hose is pumping gasoline, not water.

WHAT ACTUALLY WORKS: PUTTING THE “N” BACK IN SNAP

The tragedy is that we already know how to improve SNAP—without dismantling the safety net or weaponizing hunger.

Research and real-world pilots show that combining limits on the worst foods with strong incentives for the best foods significantly improves diets and health:

- A *JAMA Internal Medicine* trial modeled four SNAP-like designs and found the group with both junk-food restrictions and produce incentives ate the least ultra-processed food and the most fruits and vegetables. Restrictions or incentives alone barely moved the needle. Together, they worked.
- Programs like GusNIP, Double Up Food Bucks, Virginia Fresh Match, and state efforts in Massachusetts and Michigan consistently show that when you make healthy food cheaper and junk food less accessible, low-income families respond. They buy and eat more real food—and local farmers benefit.
- Tufts modeling suggests that a 20% incentive for fruits and vegetables among Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries could prevent 1.93 million cardiovascular events and save \$40 billion in healthcare costs; broadening incentives to include nuts, fish, whole grains, and olive oil could prevent 3.31 million events and save over \$100 billion net.

In simple terms: fresh food is cheaper than chronic disease. We don’t need to choose between “helping the poor” and “fiscal responsibility.” We can do both.

SNAP doesn’t need to be scrapped; it needs to be reoriented. A sane, evidence-based Food Fix approach would:

- Redefine food security as access to *nutrient-dense* food, not just enough calories to survive
- Add basic nutrition standards for SNAP (like every other federal food program already has)
- Pair junk-food restrictions (especially soda and energy drinks) with powerful incentives for fruits, vegetables, whole foods, and healthy fats
- Align agricultural subsidies and the Farm Bill with our dietary guidelines, not against them
- Protect vulnerable communities from predatory marketing that spikes soda and junk-food promotions when benefits hit
- Ensure public dollars no longer bankroll foods that systematically erode health and drive up Medicaid and Medicare costs

Right now, even with funding extended through September 2026, the SNAP debate in Washington is still mostly about cuts, compliance, and control—not about health, nutrition, or long-term cost savings.

That's both the danger and the opportunity of this moment:

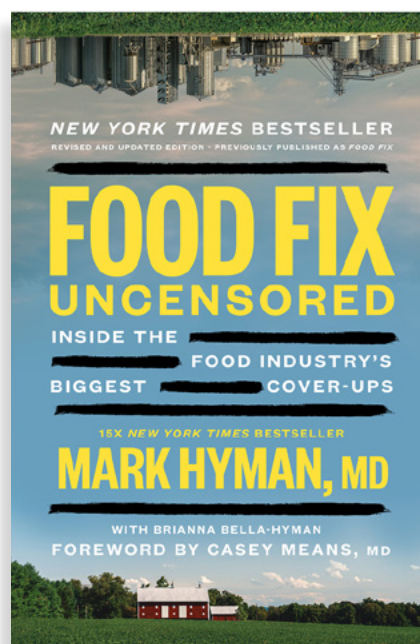
- If we treat the new funding as “problem solved,” we’ll deepen hunger and disease while congratulating ourselves for having averted a crisis
- If instead we use this breathing room to put the N back in SNAP, we can turn the nation’s largest food program into a lever for:
 - Better health
 - Lower healthcare costs
 - Stronger local economies
 - And a more resilient, humane safety net

We have the science. We have the pilots. We even have credible cost-savings models.

What’s missing is not ideas. It’s the political will to choose health over profit—and nutrition over noise.

If you want to truly understand the history, mechanics, politics, incentives, and real-world consequences of SNAP—and how we can fix it from the inside out, you can explore the full story in *Food Fix Uncensored*, coming out February 10.

It breaks down the entire system in plain language, exposes the forces shaping what SNAP pays for, and offers a clear roadmap for transforming America’s largest food program into a tool for health—rather than a pipeline for chronic disease.



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