

Imposing Additional Work Requirements in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Is a Terrible Idea and Would Hurt Latino Families

Although Latinos* participate in the labor force at higher rates than nearly all other racial and ethnic groups (65.5%), they often do not earn enough to cover basic needs like nutritious food, housing, and health care.¹ Federal programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) help Latino families put food on the table and stay healthy.

As the Congress moves toward consideration of the Farm Bill and raising the debt ceiling, some lawmakers have revived calls for work requirements for families receiving SNAP. While SNAP helps lift people out of poverty and food insecurity, work requirements do not. Instead, they exacerbate racial disparities in food insecurity and poverty by removing people from the program through sanctions and deterring others from applying for benefits:

- SNAP participation is already subject to strict work requirements, and there is increasing evidence that work requirements increase economic hardship and food insecurity without improving employment or wages.
- Most SNAP participants already work but have poverty-level incomes from poorly paying jobs and experience barriers to reporting adequate work hours.
- Additional work requirements just add needless and burdensome paperwork for families and administrators.
- The push for work requirements is based on a longstanding and racist myth about the “undeserving poor.”²

* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as “Latinx” to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

SNAP Helps Millions of Latinos Who Are Experiencing Hunger and Poverty

There are 62.1 million Latinos in the United States, who are 18.9% of the national population.³ Latinos experience disproportionately high rates of food insecurity, defined as “limited or uncertain access to adequate food.”⁴ Census Bureau data from February 2023 show that 21% of Latino households with children sometimes or often did not have enough to eat, compared to 10% of non-Hispanic white households with children.⁵

SNAP alleviates the disproportionate food insecurity and economic challenges experienced by low-income Latinos. More than one in five SNAP participants are Latino.⁶ In 2015, SNAP lifted over three million Latinos out of poverty or deep poverty.⁷ SNAP supplements low-income workers’ pay, providing them with the support to afford food and use their limited resources on other needs. During the pandemic, SNAP reduced racial disparities in hunger: between December 2020 and December 2021, the number of Latino adults experiencing hunger fell by six percentage points.⁸ Research also demonstrates links between SNAP and improved health outcomes in adults and children, including reduced likelihood of psychological distress.⁹

Adding additional punitive work requirements to SNAP threatens to push millions of hardworking people of color below the poverty line. According to a recent study from the Urban Institute, SNAP benefits kept 4.2 million people out of poverty since the end of 2021, with the largest poverty reduction for Hispanic and Black people.¹⁰ Federal law currently limits SNAP eligibility for childless unemployed and underemployed adults aged 18-49 (except for those who are exempt) to just three months out of every three years unless they can obtain and maintain an average of 20 hours a week of employment. Additional time limits and work requirements in SNAP threaten to harm low-income individuals nationwide.

Work Requirements Add Useless Paperwork and Would Harm Latino Health

Latinos face several systemic and structural barriers to participating in federal programs, including immigrant eligibility restrictions, low health literacy rates, limited English proficiency, and administrative burdens in applying for and retaining benefits.¹¹ Perhaps as a consequence, Latinos are already less likely than other eligible individuals to enroll in SNAP. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), more than four million Latinos are eligible, yet remain unenrolled in SNAP.¹² These barriers contribute to the disproportionately high rates of food insecurity in the Latino community and poorer health outcomes.¹³

SNAP’s existing work requirements on able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) do not improve employment. In fact, studies have repeatedly indicated that work requirements do not lead to permanent employment or increased wages.¹⁴ Rather, SNAP’s work requirements make it more difficult for families to access food and other basic needs.¹⁵

Adding additional, burdensome work requirements would further raise barriers to SNAP participation among Latinos and contribute to increased food insecurity among low-income Americans. Work requirements increase red tape for both states and SNAP applicants. As a result, eligible individuals may lose benefits even if they are working due to difficulties with documenting enough hours, challenges with navigating verification systems, or a failure to be screened for exemptions.¹⁶

Harsher work requirements will exacerbate racial disparities in food insecurity and poor health outcomes. Individuals who experience food insecurity are also likely to struggle with chronic conditions and diseases, like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, and are more likely to need medical treatment.¹⁷ Research extensively points to the disproportionate burden of diet-related diseases on Latinos and communities of color, making access to healthy food and programs like SNAP even more important.¹⁸ SNAP must be strengthened—rather than weakened—to ensure that Latinos have greater access to food for their families and children.

Latinos Work Very Hard Already

Most SNAP participants who are able to work do so.¹⁹ Moreover, Latinos are either working or actively looking for work at higher rates than nearly all other racial and ethnic groups.²⁰ More than 29 million Latinos are working today, with more Latinos entering the labor force each year.²¹ Additionally, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Latinos have one of the highest labor force participation rates (65.5%).²² While a majority of Latinos are working and the unemployment rate has declined as the economy recovers from the pandemic, Latino workers are overrepresented in low-wage jobs, often have variable hours and wages, experience little-to-no employer-sponsored benefits, are engaged in seasonal or part-time work, and may be victims of wage-theft.²³ These conditions make it difficult for many Latino workers to maintain a stable job and earn enough income to provide for their families.

Consequently, Latino workers are much more likely than white workers to be considered part of the “working poor,” which means that they spend at least 27 weeks in the labor force but have incomes falling below the federal poverty level. In 2020, 6.3 million individuals were among the “working poor,” and Latinos were twice as likely to be in this category than whites (7.4% versus 3.7%). Nevertheless, nearly all Latinos (94%) believe that the most important factors to succeeding in the United States are “a strong work ethic and working hard.”²⁴

Verifying employment is already burdensome for Latino workers, and many Latino SNAP participants report difficulties documenting their hours. These barriers are, in part, due to Latinos’ reduced access to resources necessary to make verification appointments, limited digital literacy, reduced access to broadband, and decreased access to transportation needed for in-person appointments.²⁵ These can lead to families wrongly losing benefits that they are eligible for and can exacerbate Latino nonparticipation in SNAP.

Work Requirements Have a Longstanding Racist History

Work requirements are rooted in a long history of racially motivated arguments against federal benefit programs and cause disproportionate harm to communities of color and immigrants.²⁶ Despite Latinos' over-participation in the work force and hundreds of years of Black Americans' forced labor, the work ethic of people of color has historically been a focus of spurious attacks, perniciously used to justify policies, such as work requirements, that exclude people of color from federal benefits or make them more burdensome.²⁷

As work requirements were introduced in local and subsequently federal programs, negative perceptions and stereotypes about people of color persisted and were used to justify the requirements.²⁸ The notion that welfare programs rewarded the "undeserving poor" became even more of a common trope when the demographics of welfare beneficiaries changed in the middle of the twentieth century to include more Black and Brown women.²⁹ Even now, people of color continue to have a higher likelihood of being subjected to work requirements and having their benefits terminated as a result of work requirements.³⁰

Imposing additional barriers to participation on people who cannot demonstrate that they comply with work requirements punishes them for the economic, racial, and gender inequities throughout the labor market.³¹ Furthermore, work requirements ignore pervasive bias and hiring discrimination in the labor market.³² A 2017 study showed that white Americans receive 24% more callbacks than do Latino applicants.³³

Requiring SNAP participants to work also ignores the effects of economic inequality on access to employment opportunity and paid hours of work. Despite their desire to work more, many low-wage workers do not receive enough hours from their employer to make ends meet. In February 2021, 6.1 million workers were involuntarily part-time, meaning that they preferred to work full-time but were only offered part-time hours.³⁴ Latino (6.8%) and Black (6.3%) workers are significantly more likely than white (3.7%) workers to be involuntarily part-time.³⁵ In fact, Black and Latino workers have more difficulty with finding full-time work and often work in jobs in which hours are variable and may be shortened without notice.³⁶

Additionally, people of color, particularly Latino and Black people, are unfairly targeted by policing and face harsher prison sentences than their white peers.³⁷ After they have fully paid their debt to society following their release, formerly incarcerated people struggle in the labor market due to obstacles that prevent successful re-entry into the job market.

Conclusion: More Burdensome Work Requirements Would Be Damaging for Latino Families

Given SNAP's critical role in addressing gaps in nutrition access while strengthening economic security for low-income Americans, it must be protected and strengthened, not further burdened. Policymakers must reject attempts to kick hardworking families off SNAP and should instead focus on investing in programs that have been proven to promote work and lift Americans out of poverty.

About UnidosUS

UnidosUS is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves as the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Since 1968, we have challenged the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos through our unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an [Affiliate Network](#) of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico. We believe in an America where economic, political, and social progress is a reality for all Latinos, and we collaborate across communities to achieve it.

For more information on UnidosUS, visit www.unidosus.org, or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

Endnotes

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