

## Barriers, Not Benefits: The Damage Done by SNAP Work Requirements

[47 million](#) people (including 14 million children) experience food insecurity each year in the United States. Food insecurity is linked to increased risk for negative health problems such as poor nutrition, developmental problems, substance use disorders, mental health issues, and more. SNAP work requirements create significant and unnecessary barriers to food security and nutrition assistance, harming the very people the program is meant to help. While work requirements are purported to reduce “fraud, waste, and abuse,” they instead only increase food insecurity for the most vulnerable, including people with disabilities, children, and older adults.

### Background

SNAP currently has [two](#) sets of work requirements in place: (1) general work requirements (GWRs), and (2) work requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs).

### General Work Requirements

- ◇ General work requirements include:
  - ◇ registering for work;
  - ◇ participating in SNAP Employment and Training (if assigned by the state’s SNAP agency);
  - ◇ taking suitable employment if offered; and
  - ◇ not quitting a job or voluntarily reducing work hours below 30 hours a week without “a good reason.”
- ◇ Individuals are exempt from the general work requirements if they are:
  - ◇ meeting work requirements for another program (such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families);
  - ◇ taking care of a child under six or an incapacitated person;
  - ◇ unable to work due to a physical or mental limitation;
  - ◇ participating regularly in an alcohol or drug treatment program; or
  - ◇ in a school or training program at least half-time.
- ◇ Failure to meet the general work requirements results in disqualification from benefits for at least a month, until requirements are met. Subsequent failures to meet work requirements may result in longer or permanent disqualification.

## ABAWD Work Requirements

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- ◇ ABAWDs must meet the general work requirements and additional ABAWD work requirements. These recipients must be working or enrolled in a work program for at least 80 hours per month to receive benefits.
- ◇ Individuals can be exempted from the ABAWD work requirement if they:
  - ◇ are unable to work due to a physical or mental limitation;
  - ◇ are pregnant;
  - ◇ have someone under 18 in the household;
  - ◇ are excused from the general work requirements;
  - ◇ are a veteran;
  - ◇ are experiencing homelessness; or
  - ◇ are aged 24 or younger and were in foster care as of their 18th birthday.
- ◇ ABAWDs without exemptions or not meeting their work requirements are limited to three months of SNAP benefits for a three year period, with limited opportunities to regain eligibility.

## Loss of Coverage

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- ◇ While there is [little](#) to [no data](#) that suggests work requirements have a positive impact on employment, [research does show](#) work requirements may cause more than half of adult SNAP recipients to lose their benefits, drastically increasing their risk of food insecurity.
- ◇ Moreover, harsher policies for ABAWDs [do not increase employment](#) or earning rates, and have caused more than [33%](#) of SNAP recipients to lose their access to nutritional support.
- ◇ Due to systemic racism and discrimination, Black adults are [disproportionately harmed](#) by SNAP work requirements, with research showing nearly a quarter of Black SNAP recipients (23%) losing access to food assistance compared to 16% of white recipients.

## The Costs of Work Requirements

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- ◇ [Learning costs](#) — understanding work requirements, eligibility, and exemptions consume significant time and resources for recipients.
- ◇ [Compliance costs](#) — ensuring that work requirements are met necessitates significant allocation of resources for collection/processing of documentation, verification of hours and employment status, intensive monitoring of individuals, etc. Furthermore, the added administrative burden of ensuring compliance with ABAWD work requirements [can have ripple effects systemwide](#), impacting other beneficiaries that rely on SNAP.

## How WRs Harm Justice-Involved Individuals

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- ◇ Pervasive stigma against justice-involved individuals, coupled with a lack of experience and education, causes many to struggle in obtaining employment. In a 2017 study, people with conviction records received [60%](#) less callback interview invitations compared to those without records.
- ◇ Further, many occupational fields outright [exclude](#) applicants with conviction records, including some positions in the medical industry, financial industry, transportation industry, educational field, and more, making the pool of potential employment opportunities for those with records even smaller.
- ◇ Nearly [half](#) of states have some form of ban on SNAP benefits for people convicted of a drug-related felony, and for states without a ban, work requirements stack additional barriers to food security for people with records, who, in addition to unemployment, experience significantly higher rates of poor health and food insecurity.
- ◇ Due to systemic racism, Black people are overrepresented in the criminal legal system and also face higher rates of unemployment, food insecurity, and poverty, all of which coalesce to make their need for public benefits even greater—but their ability to obtain them even more difficult in the face of work requirements.

## How WRs Harm People with SUDs

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- ◇ 48.5 million Americans (almost [17%](#) of the U.S. population) were struggling with a substance use disorder in 2023, and [research has demonstrated](#) that people with an SUD are far likelier to be food insecure compared to the general population.
- ◇ Moreover, research has demonstrated that some populations (for instance, HIV positive women) who experience food insecurity are subsequently [more likely](#) to develop an SUD.
- ◇ Many people with SUDs struggle to secure employment suitable under work requirements. Employers tend to be [biased against hiring](#) individuals with SUDs, even those in active recovery.
- ◇ Individuals with SUDs may also [lack the preferred education and skills](#) required for qualifying work, and of the jobs available to them, many have [unreliable hours](#), making it much more challenging to comply with work requirements.
- ◇ While there are exemptions to work requirements for people in an alcohol or drug treatment program, many people suffering from SUDs encounter [structural barriers](#) to accessing these programs, including financial burdens, long travel distances, and extensive wait times, rendering both their ability to get and stay well and remain food secure simply unfeasible.