

# Reducing Policy Barriers to SNAP Participation by Food-Insecure Veterans

**A**round 7.5 percent of all veterans—nearly 1.4 million—are food insecure, and they are consistently less likely than their nonveteran peers to be enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). A RAND study sought to address gaps in understanding about veterans’ need for food and nutrition resources, their rates of SNAP participation, and factors affecting their participation.

Although it is a national program, SNAP is administered by states. An analysis of state SNAP policies highlighted potential facilitators, barriers, and policy actions to boost food-insecure veterans’ SNAP participation and long-term food security.

## Addressing Veteran Food Insecurity Is a National Priority

After military service, veterans must find new housing, employment, and support networks—and they may be doing so while coping with service-related physical or mental health conditions, which increase their risk of food insecurity. Food insecurity is, in turn, associated with higher rates of depression, suicide, and homelessness. For these reasons, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) routinely screens veterans during primary care visits and connects those who are food insecure with SNAP and other nutrition resources.

However, food-insecure veterans who do not receive VA care may be unaware that they are eligible for SNAP. Others might resist participating in programs that they perceive as undermining their self-

reliance or taking food away from people in need. The figure on the following page shows a decade of disparity in food-insecure veterans’ and nonveterans’ SNAP participation.

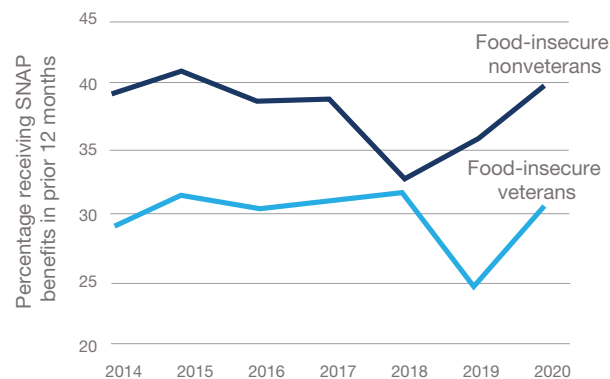
## Older and Disabled Food-Insecure Veterans Are Least Likely to Get the Support They Need

Several demographic characteristics were associated with lower SNAP enrollment among food-insecure veterans in national survey data, but two differences stood out:

- Food-insecure veterans age 70 and older had a 29-percent estimated probability of being enrolled in SNAP, compared with 39 percent for similar nonveterans.
- Food-insecure veterans who were not in the labor force due to a mental or physical illness had a 45-percent estimated probability of being enrolled in SNAP, compared with 54 percent for their nonveteran peers.

Most VA benefits are included in SNAP eligibility income calculations. These benefits could be insufficient to prevent food insecurity while disqualifying veterans from SNAP; more research is needed to determine the extent to which they pose a barrier to SNAP participation. But the evidence indicates that food-insecure veterans who received VA disability payments and other VA benefits had lower SNAP participation than food-insecure veteran peers who did not receive VA benefits.

## SNAP Enrollment Among Food-Insecure Veterans and Nonveterans, 2014–2020



SOURCE: Data from U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, 2014–2020.

NOTE: *Food insecure* was defined as three to five affirmative responses out of ten questions about food insecurity.

## State-Level SNAP Policies Can Facilitate or Hinder Veterans' SNAP Participation

Three state SNAP policies were statistically significantly associated with increased SNAP enrollment by food-insecure veterans: broad-based categorical eligibility, a combined application program, and call centers to facilitate communication with clients.

Food-insecure veterans who lived in a state with one or none of these SNAP enrollment policies were significantly less likely to participate in SNAP than their



### Broad-based categorical eligibility

Increases or eliminates the asset test or increases gross income limits for SNAP applicants



### Combined application

Streamlines SNAP application for Supplemental Security Income recipients



### Call centers

Clients can call their case worker instead of meeting in person

food-insecure nonveteran counterparts (27 percent versus 34 percent).

## There Are Opportunities to Improve Policies and Support for Food-Insecure Veterans

There are multiple promising paths to reducing barriers to SNAP participation for food-insecure veterans, particularly those who are older or disabled:

- Reconsider eligibility criteria, particularly for veterans who have a disability. VA benefits may be insufficient to offset lost income when veterans cannot work while making them ineligible for SNAP.
- Increase screening for older and disabled veterans, and educate them on their eligibility for SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs.
- Encourage states to adopt policies that reduce barriers to SNAP participation. A broad-based categorical eligibility policy may be particularly effective because it streamlines enrollment and increases income eligibility limits.
- Determine whether food-insecure veterans' participation in VA benefit programs is rendering them ineligible for SNAP despite a persistent need for nutrition assistance.
- Shift the tone of policy discussions about nutrition assistance to reduce stigma and negative messaging while supporting outreach campaigns that resonate with veterans.

Finally, there is a critical need for research on veterans' need for food and nutrition resources, rates of nutrition assistance program participation, and barriers to participation. Increased funding for studies of promising interventions, outreach strategies, and VA partnerships would help identify at-risk veterans, facilitate their access to SNAP and other safety-net programs, and improve their food security, long-term health, and well-being.

This brief describes RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute work from the report *Food Insecurity Among Veterans: Examining the Discrepancy Between Veteran Food Insecurity and Use of the Supplemental Nutrition Program (SNAP)*, by Tamara Dubowitz, Andrea Richardson, Teague Ruder, and Catria Gadwah-Meaden, RR-A1363-2, 2023 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR-A1363-2](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A1363-2)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RBA1363-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RBA1363-1). The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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