EconoFact Chats: The Consequences of Tighter Work Requirements for SNAP
Diane Schanzenbach, Northwestern University
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Michael Klein:
I'm Michael Klein, executive editor of EconoFact, a nonpartisan web-based publication of The Fletcher School at Tufts University. At EconoFact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org.

Michael Klein:
Should people who receive public assistance be required to work, or at least to look for employment? The simple answer seems to be yes. Those who can work should do so, or risk losing their benefits. But as with many economic and social policies, the simple answer may not be the correct one, and the answer to this question takes on special relevance now as the Congress debates bills that would force Medicaid and SNAP recipients to work or actively look for work, otherwise, they would lose their access to medical care, or, in the case of SNAP, lose financial support for feeding themselves and their families. To consider the consequences of tightening work requirements for SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program that was formerly known as Food Stamps, I'm happy to be speaking today to one of the country's leading experts on the topic, Professor Diane Schanzenbach of Northwestern University. Diane is a member of the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Science, Engineering and Medicine. Her research has been very influential in our understanding of social safety net programs. She recently testified in front of a congressional committee on this topic. Diane, welcome to EconoFact Chats.

Diane Schanzenbach:
Thanks for having me.

Michael Klein:
So to begin with, Diane, can you describe what SNAP is, and how people use its benefits?

Diane Schanzenbach:
Yes, SNAP is a program that's been with us for over 50 years, and it provides low-income families vouchers—today, they're electronic vouchers that look like credit cards—that can be used at grocery stores to purchase most foods that are intended to be taken home and eaten. We like to think about SNAP as the universal safety net because it's one of very few programs that can cover anybody, as long as they're income eligible. So, a large share of people who are on SNAP are elderly or disabled. A lot of them are children, and then, you know, other low-income adult Americans—sometimes parents, sometimes not—who are struggling to make ends meet.

Michael Klein:
So that distinguishes it from something like the Earned Income Tax Credit, where you only get the benefit if you're making a salary, right?

Diane Schanzenbach:
That's right. So much of our social safety net has shifted to promoting and rewarding work. So, if you think about the Earned Income Tax Credit, of course, that only goes to people with earnings. The Child Tax Credit also, only to people with earnings. Of course, Unemployment Insurance becomes a bigger deal in economic downturns, and of course, that's only available to people with earnings and so on. But SNAP is really very similar to—for those of us who remember Milton Friedman's *Free to Choose*, he talks about the negative income tax, and SNAP is the closest program we have to sort of that old Milton Friedman–style negative income tax.

Michael Klein:
What kind of financial support is provided by SNAP?

Diane Schanzenbach:
Supplemental is right there in the title. So it's not supposed to cover a lavish lifestyle, or all the food that you need to eat, but it's supposed to top up the resources that you have available from other sources, like Social Security benefits, or from earnings, so that, together with SNAP benefits and your other income, you can afford a healthy and balanced diet. So it's about a little less than $200 per month, about $6 per person per day. And it's really well targeted on the lowest-income Americans. So the last year, 2023, that we have data for, it lifted 2.4 million people out of poverty. A little more than half of those were children being lifted out of poverty. It is just a really important cornerstone of our social safety net.

Michael Klein:
So it's really helping people avoid malnutrition, which, as we know, especially for children, can have very awful long-term consequences.

Diane Schanzenbach:
Both malnutrition and then also this broader concept, which is food insecurity—and that's having to change what you eat, or because you don't have enough money for the balanced diets that you'd like to consume.

Michael Klein:
So the focus in our discussion today, Diane, is on work requirements to receive benefits. When did the government begin to require people to work or to look for work if they received SNAP benefits? Or maybe at that time, they were called Food Stamps.

Diane Schanzenbach:
Yes, they were called Food Stamps for most of the history of the program. So, you might recall that in 1996 we had a big welfare reform, which ended the old cash program called Aid to Families with Dependent Children and really shifted our social safety net to more encourage, and reward work. So, we got rid of out-of-work cash benefits, put a lot more money into the Earned Income Tax Credit. And even though SNAP, as we now call it, was around then—both before and after—there were reforms to the program at the time that said that a certain subcategory of people on the program, called ABAWDs—able-bodied adults without dependents—ages 18 to 49 at the time, had to be employed, and if they were not employed for more than three months, they couldn't receive SNAP for a 36-month period. So that’s been in place since 1996. And over time,

when we've got an economic downturn, usually Congress suspends this work requirement. But then also over time, more groups have been added to it. Now, instead of stopping at age 49, it goes up to age 54. And we're talking about adding more groups to this as well.

Michael Klein:
So to build on that a little bit, Diane, what are the current work requirements for SNAP?

Diane Schanzenbach:
Okay, so there are essentially three types of work requirements in SNAP. The first is the general SNAP work requirement. It applies to most SNAP participants unless they meet an exemption, such as they've got a disability. This requirement includes accepting a suitable job offer and not quitting a job, or voluntarily reducing your hours below 30. And essentially, everybody on SNAP is subject to this general work requirement, or the work test. So then second, states can create SNAP Employment and Training programs, and these could be compulsory, and result in the loss of food benefits if you don't comply with this program, or they could be offered to people who want to participate. Now, most states don't fund enough employment and training slots and so therefore they have to make decisions about where to target these training slots, and they target their programming on people who are a really high priority to the state. And then the third, most strict work requirement is the one that applies to able-bodied adults without dependents—or ABAWDs. If you're subject to the ABAWD work requirement, you lose your SNAP benefits if you're not working at least 20 hours per week.

Michael Klein:
Diane, are the work requirements meant to boost employment, or to lower the cost of this safety net program, or to be punitive, or some combination of each of these three motivations?

Diane Schanzenbach:
You know, it's hard to really know—for an economist—to know the political economy behind this. I will take them at their word that they want to boost employment. And I think we all agree that employment—stable employment, with a thriving wage—is the best way out of poverty. Now, that said, we had a lot of information—studies, etc, about how these work requirements impact things in practice that find that it doesn't seem to offer the boost to getting people into employment. But in practice, they turn out to be quite punitive.

Michael Klein:
What are some of the reasons that the work requirements don't result in more work?

Diane Schanzenbach:
So first, I want to remind us that we have so much in the social safety net that is already trying to draw people into work. And so, if we think about sort of the old, sort of how economists think about the world—you can get a job if you put in effort—we've really drawn in everybody, or most people, that it's just the lack of effort that's getting them to be part of the labor force. The people who are currently not working are just a harder case. In some cases, they're not working because they live in an area where the unemployment rate is still high. Even though the national unemployment rate has come back down, there are certainly pockets of places across the United States where jobs are not being created, and work is really hard to find. So that's one problem. A

second is…in many of these cases, people's skills are not well aligned for the jobs that are in demand in their local area. And so recently, when I testified before Congress on this, there were two heads of job training programs that were seated on either side of me, and they talked a lot about the important work they do to try to help people gain the skills that they need to participate in their local job markets. In some cases, that comes to training general skills. Sometimes it's about training specific skills so they can become a repair person…something like that. Generally, we think, well, either it's a demand-side problem or it's a supply-side problem. And if it's a demand-side problem, there's not a lot that the individual workers can do, aside from moving, or hoping that the economy gets better. And to the extent that it's a supply-side problem that's about a worker's skills being misaligned, what's best is that we come alongside them and help them develop the skills they need to thrive in today's economy.

Michael Klein:
Well, when you talk about demand-side problems, that reminds me of what you were saying earlier about when there's a recession, the work requirements are sometimes suspended. And there is growing concern that we could be entering a recession in the next year or so. Has there been talk about the suspension of these more stringent work requirements in the face of the possibility of a recession?

Diane Schanzenbach:
You know, the conversations that we're having right now seem to be more about expanding work requirements. And in particular, Michael, I think we see this over and over when we are recovering from a recession, is that we'd like to see it behind us quicker than it is. And something that is just an empirical fact that you can't avoid, is that the unemployment rate for people with low levels of education usually spikes higher, and it takes longer to recover. So, in the aftermath of a recession, a lot of times policymakers get frustrated. They say, we want people to be back to work. Why aren't they back to work? Let's try to hurry this up, maybe by pulling some of the supports that might be keeping them from working. And usually, the studies of this indicate that's a real small portion of this slow recovery. In fact, it's just about how jobs are created and how it's really not until we're really really running at full employment that we see unemployment rates come down for people with low levels of education, and other barriers to work.

Michael Klein:
What kinds of jobs would people who receive SNAP benefits typically expect to get if and when they do find work?

Diane Schanzenbach:
There are really two buckets of types of workers and potential workers that are on SNAP. One big bucket is low-income families with kids. They are generally working. They're getting the Earned Income Tax Credit. They are getting some or all of the Child Tax Credit. But just, you know, when you look at their earnings, they're not making enough to make ends meet—because they've got kids, because they've got high housing prices, etc.

Michael Klein:
So they're the working poor, right?

Diane Schanzenbach:
Exactly. And SNAP tops up the budget that they have. So you might initially think, well, what's the problem there? They're not going to get sanctioned off of SNAP. The problem is, since they're already working, basically the only risk they face is if they lose a job. Let's say a kid gets sick, they have to pull out of the labor market for a couple of weeks—and all of a sudden, you're in a situation where you're going to get sanctioned, even though most of the time you're a worker. This part of the labor market is just extremely volatile. Workers in this part of the distribution experience more bouts of unemployment, more uncertain hours, and things like that. So, we just see more churning overall.

Michael Klein:
And I think it's very much worth emphasizing that people at this level of income live very much hand to mouth. They don't have the resources or the savings to fall back on when they're facing hard times.

Diane Schanzenbach:
That's exactly right. And of course, that's exactly why we need a safety net. Now, I'd said there are two buckets. So, we've talked about the working poor, and then there's another set that I call the very poor. They generally have income levels less than 50% of the poverty line. They are really living hand to mouth. For many of them, SNAP is the only social safety net benefit that's available to them. Generally, they are looking at getting jobs in the service sector—food service, retail, other things like that. Again, they're facing a lot of uncertainty, high unemployment rates, a lot of job turnover, etc. So, what we see then is even if you can get a toehold in these jobs, a lot of times you end up losing them, sometimes through circumstances like your car breaks down and you can't get to work, sometimes through circumstances like they're just downsizing. There's just a lot of volatility in these jobs. And SNAP doesn't get to fix that, right? That is a problem with the broader economy. And as a result, many people are going to struggle to work 20 hours a week consistently.

Michael Klein:
Are you concerned, Diane, with the administration of programs like this, and the way in which the cuts in government personnel might impact people's abilities to receive the benefits that they should be receiving?

Diane Schanzenbach:
Yes, especially the more we do things like put work requirements in place, which requires a lot of additional paperwork burdens, right? You have to make sure that people are working the 20 hours a week, every week, to continue the benefits. That takes systems. It takes people. And of course, we're seeing the opposite happen. We're seeing lots of declines in the number of people working to administer these benefits etc, just at the time when we're raising the complexity of administering them.

Michael Klein:
And as we mentioned earlier, at a time when the risk of a recession seems to be rising as well.

Diane Schanzenbach:
That's exactly right.

Michael Klein:
Diane, in your congressional testimony, you illustrate these empirical and research results with the story of a particular person, which I think to many people is much more compelling. Can you tell our listeners about her? How her circumstances reflect the plight of many people receiving this type of government assistance?

Diane Schanzenbach:
Absolutely. And Michael, I'll say that one of the most enjoyable things I do right now is serving on the board of our local food bank here in Chicago—the Greater Chicago Food Depository. Talk about a group of people that are dedicated to helping the most disadvantaged members of our society, preserving dignity, and just making sure that no one goes hungry. I'm just really proud of the work they're doing. So, to put a human face on this: my colleague at the Greater Chicago Food Depository interviewed Veronica Cox, a local Chicagoan, a mother of three, when she visited one of our partner food pantries. She described how she's been working for 10 years in the field of security, but she had to stop due to some debilitating pain in her hips that meant she couldn't stand or sit for long periods of time without pain. She's got to stretch, do other treatments to help keep her pain manageable. She's applying for disability, but so far, her application has not been approved. She's got another hearing coming up. But you're not exempt from the SNAP work requirements unless you're adjudicated disabled. She doesn't cross that threshold yet.

Michael Klein:
Can you describe what that means, Dianne, adjudicated disabled?

Diane Schanzenbach:
Yeah—you have to go in front of a judge, present your case, why you have this disability, why it limits you from being able to work, and having them find that that's credible. And a lot of times, people have to wait a long time before they're seen by the judge. Sometimes they have to go multiple times before the case is resolved. It's a complex and burdensome system.

Michael Klein:
And during the time that it hasn't been resolved, is the presumption that the person is disabled and will receive benefits, or is the presumption that the person is not disabled and won't receive benefits?

Diane Schanzenbach:
That's right—until it's resolved in their favor, they're presumed to not be disabled. So, they won't receive benefits. Now sometimes those benefits are paid in arrears, but that doesn't do a lot of good when you're trying to feed your kids today, to find out, oh, in a year, I'll get this back pay. So when she was talking to my colleague, she talked about how difficult it is now, and how much more difficult it would be if she lost access to SNAP. She said: "Honestly, I don't know what I'd do. Definitely would hurt. It would cause damage. And it bothers me not being able to support my family. I had a game plan. I went to college." She's got a bachelor's degree in

criminal justice. “I didn’t want this.” And Michael, that really underscores the case that impacts so many of our neighbors. Right? They were on the right path. They just got unlucky because of a disability, because of a job loss, because of a plant closure. And this is why we need a social safety net, because we don’t know who’s going to get unlucky, but we know some people are. And it’s important to keep feeding them, and their kids.

Michael Klein:
Well, if the work requirements don’t get more people into the labor force, as you were saying earlier, do they have this other effect of forcing people off the anti-poverty programs?

Diane Schanzenbach:
Yeah. There are some really good studies. I regret to say I have not been an author on any of them, but I’m really impressed with the range of studies that look to see what happens when we enforce work requirements. A lot of them use administrative data and state-level variation. And like I said, some really good work is being done. Generally, what they find is when there’s a SNAP work requirement in effect, SNAP participation goes down—sometimes it goes down quite substantially, by 50%. On the other hand, you can follow those folks who are removed from the SNAP rolls to see, oh are they more likely to be working? Are they more likely to be earning more, etc.? Because they’ve got their quarterly earnings. And generally, these find no impact on employment, no impact on earnings. So, not getting SNAP benefits anymore, they’re not more likely to be working. And we really can only sort of fill in the blanks about what’s likely happening. But likely, they’re receiving assistance from food banks, like the ones we work with here in Chicago.

Michael Klein:
So the story of Veronica Cox is, as I said, very compelling, and it helps us remember that behind these statistics are human stories of people who are suffering. How was your testimony received by the House Committee on Agriculture when you spoke to them last month, Diane?

Diane Schanzenbach:
You know, it was received with some varied interest. I will say that those policymakers are very impatient. They want the economy to improve and to get better. And they are also under a lot of pressure to reduce the costs of SNAP. You know, we all want to see the SNAP participation go down, but only for the good reason that people are earning more. I’d say that many of the congressional representatives found the work that the people running job training programs…the work that they were doing was very compelling. And what they heard over and over from those folks was, taking away people’s SNAP isn’t going to make our jobs easier—it’s going to make our jobs harder. This is hard work, and please help us be successful when we can.

Michael Klein:
So how do you think political support for the safety net program—SNAP, but the other ones as well—can be built?

Diane Schanzenbach:
So much of it, I think, is about understanding…it’s just…that it’s not as simple as, you listen to the stories you think, yes, people should be working. Yes, people should be working. But when

you think about work requirements in Medicaid, I think it's even more stark, right? Because that essentially says you can have health insurance unless you get sick and can't work, and then we'll take away the medical insurance. The same broad idea happens here with SNAP. We don't want to have insurance that only pays off when you're a little bit hurt, right? You need to have insurance that also pays off in the case where you've lost your job. So, I honestly think that explaining this, having more people meet folks who are struggling, who've lost jobs through no fault of their own, and we're all struggling through inflation, seeing the potential impacts of tariffs, we are in this together. And it would be nice if we remembered that a little bit more.

Michael Klein:
So I started off by saying it's not so simple, and I like that you're concluding by saying it's not so simple. But not being simple doesn't mean it can't be understood, especially if people listen to experts like yourself, who have devoted their working and professional lives to considering these very important issues. So Diane, thank you very much for sharing your insights with me today, and I appreciate the work that you've been doing to help us better serve people who are at the lower ends of our economic situation.

Diane Schanzenbach:
Michael, thanks to you. I am a subscriber to EconoFact, and I'm really proud of the work that you are pulling together to try to educate folks on some of these really difficult questions. You know, I teach from EconoFact's documents all the time when I teach undergraduates, and I really am grateful for the work you're doing.

Michael Klein:
Well, thanks very much for those nice words, Diane.

Michael Klein:
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