**RESEARCH REPORT**

# Strategies to Support Young People's Access to Public Benefits

## Findings from a Literature Scan

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# Acknowledgments

# Strategies to Support Young People's Access to Public Benefits

Many young people transition to adulthood without access to familial resources and struggle to meet their basic needs for food, housing, and health care. Public benefit programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing subsidies, and Medicaid can help young people meet these needs at a critical time in their lives. Young people also need sufficient cash income to meet specific needs these in-kind programs do not provide, and some may receive this through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. However, many young people do not access programs they are eligible for. This report presents the results of a literature scan for evidence about what works to expand young people's access to public benefits. We found limited causal evidence of effective interventions, but various approaches are promising. We identified strategies that fall into five categories: targeted youth outreach, benefit navigation, cross-organizational partnerships, simplifying or expanding eligibility, and enhancing administrative efficiency and effectiveness. Based on our findings, we suggest future directions for policy, practice, and research.

## Introduction

Young people moving into adulthood—roughly ages 16 to 24—are in a crucial time of their lives. To transition into independent and thriving adult members of society, they need considerable support from the people and institutions around them. Despite the remarkable resourcefulness and resilience of many young people, decades of disinvestment and disparities in access to sufficient income to meet their basic needs, good education, good jobs, safe communities, and other key resources can affect young people directly and shape whether their families have the resources to support them through this transition. Some young people, particularly Black and Latinx young people; those who have experienced the justice system, homelessness, or foster care; or those who are young parents, are especially likely to have insufficient access to financial and other resources they need for a stable foundation as they move into adulthood.

Public benefit programs can provide young adults with stability so they have an opportunity to successfully transition to adulthood. These programs include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, TANF, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) subsidies. Extensive prior Urban research has shown that young people face many challenges accessing these programs, and many opportunities exist to make public benefits more accessible.[1] A critical next step in this work is to improve understanding of strategies and best practices that effectively increase young people's access.

The goals of this report are (1) to summarize existing evidence on interventions and best practices that increase young people's access to public benefits; and (2) to provide policy, practice, and further research recommendations based on evidence of what works or is promising.

## Methods

Using a broad range of search engines and terms, our team reviewed research dating back to 2013 for evidence of strategies or approaches that might increase young people's access to public benefits. Our guiding questions were the following:

1. What empirical research has been published on implementation practices that support young people's access to SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, WIC, and child care subsidies?

2. What, if any, research has been done that examines how school, job training, or workforce development programs can increase access to safety net programs for young people ages 16 to 24?

To maximize the number of relevant sources captured, we selected articles from peer-reviewed journals, research reports, and briefs from academic institutions, research institutes, federal agencies, and unpublished manuscripts available through online search engines. We reviewed publications involving various evaluation methods, including random-assignment studies, surveys, interviews, case studies, literature reviews, and expert consultations. We used several search terms and searched several search engines and websites (see appendix). We tracked and began summarizing our findings using a search tracking and synthesis matrix.

We kept our screening criteria broad to be as inclusive as possible but limited our inclusion of sources to research on approaches to increasing access to federal benefits for young people ages 16 to 24. We focused our search primarily on a select group of major federal benefits of interest—SNAP,

Medicaid, TANF, WIC, and child care subsidies—but also included strategies that involved other federal benefits and could be applied across benefit programs. We also chose to include sources describing benefits access strategies that could apply to young people but were targeted to a broader age group. Though strategies that work for older adults do not necessarily work for younger people, given their differing needs and developmental stages, we know from prior research that many barriers to benefits access cut across age groups. Therefore, we determined it was worth including strategies that may be broadly applicable to benefit seekers (e.g., Adams, Hahn, and Coffey 2021). In total, we identified and comprehensively reviewed 32 articles that met the inclusion criteria and 34 articles that we tagged as potentially worth including but ultimately determined did not meet the criteria, along with a less comprehensive review of more than 200 additional articles we determined were less relevant. Of the 32 included sources, 20 were focused on young people and the other 12 were focused on all adults.

We categorized strategies from the included sources by three levels of evidence:

1. **evidence-based practice**, meaning the strategy has undergone at least one evaluation designed to capture causal evidence that found it led to positive outcomes related to benefits access;

2. **promising practice**, meaning no causal evidence is available, but suggestive evidence exists that the strategy improved benefits access (e.g., from an implementation study, administrative data, or positive feedback from clients or staff implementing the strategy); and

3. **emerging practice**, meaning no causal or suggestive evidence exists, but the strategy aligns with other evidence-based or promising approaches or is designed to fill a known gap in access, and therefore warrants evidence-gathering on its effectiveness. This includes sources that collate best practice examples or solicit expert or practitioner recommendations that do not refer to a specific intervention.

We found that limited research has been done to evaluate practices and confirm that they increase youth access to public benefits, though a substantial number of promising and emerging practices exist. In the section that follows, we list strategies that meet our inclusion criteria and specify the level of evidence available about their effectiveness. We group the strategies by type of approach, including strategies related to *targeted youth outreach*, *benefit navigation*, *cross-organizational partnerships*, *simplifying or expanding eligibility*, and *enhancing administrative efficiency and effectiveness*. In some cases, sources referenced multiple strategies or a single multipronged strategy, in which case we included the source under each category that most aligned with the core elements of the approach(es) referenced, so some sources are repeated in multiple categories.

# Strategies to Support Young People's Access to Public Benefits

Within the five strategy types we identified, the sources addressed benefits access for young people in a variety of settings and contexts. Approximately one-third of the sources we reviewed addressed college settings. Justice system reentry and gig work were also important contexts addressed in some sources. Additionally, COVID-19 affected the policy contexts in which some sources captured evidence. Of the research published since the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, several sources addressed COVID-19-related policy innovations directly.

## Strategy Type 1: Targeted Youth Outreach

Many young people do not know that they are eligible for public safety net benefits or may not know which benefits exist. Therefore, bringing awareness to these benefits is key to increasing access for eligible young people (Hahn et al. 2021). We identified several documented approaches to doing this through targeted youth outreach. Many of the approaches focus on outreach to college students, a population of increasing focus in the benefits access field because of heightened recognition of their unmet basic needs (Hagedorn-Hatfield, Hood, and Hege 2022).

Though we were not able to identify any sources that provide evidence of targeted youth outreach directly causing increases in benefits access for young people, we did identify ample promising and emerging practices and approaches that are supported by what we know about young people's development and benefits access barriers (Adams, Hahn, and Coffey 2021). And benefits access experts and staff at organizations conducting benefits outreach to young people (e.g., staff at human services agencies and youth-serving nonprofits) documented their positive experiences using many of these approaches in sources we found. They therefore warrant additional evidence-gathering to confirm their effectiveness.

Specific types of outreach approaches that appear promising include the following:

- using communication channels that young people frequently access and are comfortable with, including popular social media platforms, text messaging, and mobile apps

- ensuring outreach teams or informative materials are physically present in spaces young people frequent (e.g., school or college classrooms and at campus-wide events); some sources suggest placing information about public benefits in communications young people are likely to

access anyway (e.g., in course syllabi or campus-wide emails and at orientations for college students)

- using data (including from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA) to identify likely eligible students and target them for outreach to reach college students

- enacting outreach campaigns designed and led by young people with lived experience accessing benefits, taking advantage of their ability to effectively connect with their peers in a destigmatizing way

- using supportive, empathetic, and clear language in written communications

- carefully wording outreach text messages to increase receptivity (e.g., by including benefit dollar values or mentioning familiar benefits like SNAP)

Table 1 summarizes each source we identified related to targeted youth outreach and relevant strategies they include.

TABLE 1
**Targeted Youth Outreach Strategies**

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| **Overview.** Coordinating SNAP & Nutrition Supports (CSNS) funds cohorts of programs to enact **strategies to align the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) with other nutrition supports to reduce hunger for children and families**. The Kansas project supported collaboration between the state Department for Children and Families and Department of Health and Environment. The agencies developed a shared platform to support automatic data sharing for SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and coordinated outreach based on shared data. Outreach included a family benefit navigator with lived expertise accessing benefits who provided community outreach and referrals. Similarly, the Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, project created a food security navigator team with lived experience to engage with community members, build trust, collect community input on solutions to improve benefits access, and share resources. The team administered a food insecurity screener at community events. | Promising | APHSA (2023): "Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports (CSNS) Impact Reports: Cohort 1"NYF* |
| **Evidence.** In project documentation, **the Kansas team anticipated their data matching and targeted outreach strategy would support increased access to SNAP and WIC among underserved communities. Administrative data suggest the Mecklenburg County outreach strategy was associated with a large increase in SNAP enrollment, with the majority of new enrollees being children.** | | |

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers in Philadelphia developed an **app to help young people experiencing housing instability or homelessness search for, identify, locate, and use Philadelphia-based social and health services**.<br>■ **Evidence.** Participants that used the app at least three times to search for resources during a two-week window were surveyed about their experience using the app. They rated its overall quality, engagement, functionality, aesthetics, and information provided relatively highly. Their **feedback suggests that the app is a promising way to increase young people's engagement with social services**. | Promising | Greeson et al. (2020): "Youth Matters: Philly (YMP): Development, Usability, Usefulness, & Accessibility of a Mobile Web-Based App for Homeless and Unstably Housed Youth" |
| ■ **Overview.** Four **Arkansas community colleges** involved in the Basic Needs Initiative sought to better **address students' basic needs by evolving their campus food pantries from food distribution centers to basic needs hubs that provide connections to other basic needs supports**, including SNAP and housing assistance. Targeted student outreach included embedding information about food benefits into existing college campus communications and partnering with campus departments that serve students with low incomes to proactively engage with those students.<br>■ **Evidence.** Regression analysis using college administrative data shows that **students with low incomes, adult students, and students of color are more likely than others to access basic needs hubs. Students who received targeted group outreach were more likely to access their campus hub. This suggests the hubs are a promising model to connect hard-to-reach students with high needs to benefits**, though the study did not examine whether the hubs directly increased the number of students receiving benefits or the amount of benefits they received. | Promising | Valentine, Lewis, and Deal (2023): "Addressing Food Insecurity on Campus: Connecting Students with Basic Needs Supports to Improve Academic Outcomes" |
| ■ **Overview.** Pilot projects in four states **matched data to identify families enrolled in Medicaid or SNAP but not WIC**. The pilots then **sent a series of text messages to these families encouraging them to request an enrollment appointment** in an effort to increase their WIC participation, given nearly half of eligible people do not participate.<br>■ **Evidence.** Analysis of pilot administrative data shows that in one pilot state **families initially enrolled in Medicaid but not WIC were more likely to be enrolled** as a result of the pilot, and in another state, families initially enrolled in Medicaid or in multiple other programs were more likely to enroll. The **messaging in the texts appeared to matter, as families were more likely to respond if texts mentioned the dollar value of WIC or included information about more familiar benefits like SNAP.** | Promising | Maneely and Neuberger (2021): "Using Data Matching and Targeted Outreach to Enroll Families With Young Children in WIC: Lessons Learned From State Pilots" [NYF] |
| ■ **Overview.** A pilot program at Compton College to provide a **low-cost text-based intervention where students were provided timely and relevant CalFresh (California SNAP) information. One group of students received text messages designed to be empowering that framed CalFresh as a positive and useful support to help them as they focus on completing their degree.** | Promising | Umaña et al. (2022): "Connecting Community College Students to SNAP Benefits: Lessons Learned from a Pilot Outreach Intervention in California" |

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| **Another group received text messages with only basic CalFresh information,** and a third group received no text message.<br>■ **Evidence.** Students identified as possibly eligible for CalFresh were randomly selected to be in one of three groups. Students in focus groups reported that embarrassment was a barrier to engaging college students about CalFresh and that miscommunication or lack of communication about public benefits were barriers to access. **Survey and focus group findings suggest the text messages were a positive step to removing access barriers**. Of the students who received text messages and responded to the survey, 8 in 10 reported remembering receiving them, and focus group participants reported finding the messages helpful and reassuring, particularly those designed to be empowering. | | |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers sought to capture strategies that human services agencies can use to improve outreach to college students. One strategy identified was engaging young people who are former SNAP participants to help design and implement outreach strategies for students that draw on their experiences.<br>■ **Evidence.** Work groups of staff at human services agencies and youth-serving nonprofits, as well as young people who are involved in improving the social safety net for other young people shared that they had observed that **engaging students who had used SNAP to design and implement outreach strategies for other students increased student access to nutrition assistance**. | Emerging | Coffey and Sonoda (2024): "How Human Services Agencies Can Improve Outreach to College Students Eligible for Safety Net Supports" |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers sought to understand challenges to student SNAP access and opportunities for improvement through a review of relevant policies and literature.<br>■ **Evidence.** Literature and policy review suggested several strategies for improving student SNAP access. **These included creating education campaigns about SNAP on college campuses and training university staff to identify food-insecure students**. | Emerging | Freudenberg, Goldrick-Rab, and Poppendieck (2019): "College Students and SNAP: The New Face of Food Insecurity in the United States"* |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers sought to understand promising practices to increase SNAP access among college students through data collection on two community college campuses.<br>■ **Evidence.** Surveys of 1,479 students cited not knowing they were eligible as their most common reason for not applying. Interviews with 10 students found that outreach specific to student needs helped them become aware of SNAP. Researchers recommend **postsecondary institutions implement widespread informational campaigns about SNAP and engage in data-driven outreach to inform students of their potential eligibility**. States could consider codifying federal guidance to **use FAFSA data for this purpose**.[2] | Emerging | Hodara et al. (2023): *Connecting College Students to Public Benefits: Findings from Community College of Allegheny County and Montgomery County Community College. Education Northwest** |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers reviewed literature on innovative state approaches to SNAP outreach.<br>■ **Evidence.** The authors highlight best practice examples from the literature. **Virginia passed a law requiring public colleges to provide students with information about SNAP on institutional websites, in orientation materials, and in annual campus-wide emails. And California considered legislation that would similarly require public campuses to notify students who may be** | Emerging | Hope Center (2022): "States Leading the Way in SNAP Eligibility and SNAP Outreach To Students"* |

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| **eligible for SNAP about the program and require use of FAFSA to identify likely income-eligible students.**[3] | | |
| ■ **Overview.** The authors developed a guide that provides principles and best practices around accessible content related to public benefits and how to develop and scale that content. They emphasize the importance of **designing content to be accessible by all people who use it—including beneficiaries, navigators, and policymakers. Content should be written in plain language, organized in a hierarchy with the most important information highlighted, and offered in multiple languages.**<br>■ **Evidence.** The guide provides case examples from a literature scan of accessible materials related to benefits access. One example was a research center developing **clear-language guidance about how to access COVID-era stimulus payments and a website answering questions about child tax credit eligibility available in multiple languages.** | Emerging | Kennan, Soka, and Sullivan (2022): *Accessible Benefits Information: Reducing Administrative Burden and Improving Equitable Access through Clear Communication about Safety Net Benefits*[NYF]* |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers sought to understand challenges and opportunities students experience accessing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for financial stability during college.<br>■ **Evidence.** Researchers analyzed administrative data on TANF applications from students in New Jersey, finding that students complete TANF applications at lower rates than people in older age groups. Informed by these findings, researchers conducted interviews with higher education experts to identify potential solutions. Interviews revealed that **additional outreach, with a focus on destigmatizing public benefits, could drive increased access.** | Emerging | Walsh et al. (2024): "Assessing Utilization and Accessibility of Public Cash Assistance Benefits among Postsecondary Students"* |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers captured insights from Medicaid and juvenile justice experts about opportunities to better support justice-involved young people's health needs through Medicaid in light of the federal ban on use of Medicaid funds to serve incarcerated persons.<br>■ **Evidence.** In conversations and meetings, experts suggested leveraging Medicaid consumer assistance programs to target young people leaving incarceration, including employing navigators, in-person assisters, and certified application counselors. **They suggested reaching justice-involved young people at targeted events like school-sponsored activities and targeting their families through messaging that reflects understanding for challenges they face.** | Emerging | Zemel et al. (2013): *Facilitating Access to Health Care Coverage for Juvenile Justice-Involved Youth*\* |

**Sources:** See the "Table Sources" section toward the end of the document for a list of all the sources cited in this report's tables.

[NYF] Intervention is not focused on young people.

\* Source appears in multiple tables.

## Strategy Type 2: Benefit Navigation

People of all ages often struggle to navigate public benefit systems, but the challenges are especially difficult for young people because of their developmental stage and level of life experience. Public

benefit systems are notoriously fragmented, so it is often necessary to complete application processes across multiple agencies to obtain all benefits a person is eligible for. Applications can be long and confusing, and documentation can be extensive and hard to obtain (Hahn et al. 2021). All of this means that having trained professionals who provide hands-on support to young people through the benefit application process, sometimes called benefit navigators, can be essential for supporting benefits access.

The sources we identified offer several evidence-based and other notable examples that illustrate how benefit navigators can play a critical role in driving benefits access for young people. **Here are characteristics of the few benefit navigation interventions that demonstrated causal evidence of leading to increased benefits access:**

- They were provided within packages of transition services delivered to young people with disabilities to support a stable transition to adulthood.

- They provided benefits counseling, where a caseworker or benefits specialist walked young people through the types of benefits they could receive given their income.

- They included connections to other transition-related services.

Several other sources capture promising approaches to benefit navigation and other practices that experts and local benefits access staff recommended. As with the targeted outreach strategies we identified, many of those related to navigation focus on college students, including

- emphasizing the importance of a centralized physical location on campus, sometimes called a "hub," or "one-stop," where students can receive assistance accessing benefits;

- ensuring navigation includes eligibility screening, application assistance, and case follow-up;

- framing services as opt-out rather than opt-in;

- making benefits access an institutional priority for campuses;

- training college staff on student eligibility; and

- partnering with community organizations to provide navigation when colleges lack capacity to do so.

Table 2 summarizes each source we identified related to benefit navigation with young people and relevant strategies they include.

TABLE 2
**Benefit Navigation Strategies**

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| ▪ **Overview.** The Social Security Administration's (SSA's) Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD) aimed to test approaches for promoting successful transitions to adulthood for young people ages 14 to 25 receiving or likely eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). Key components of the YTD model related to benefits access included **system linkages, or connections to service providers needed to access key resources, SSA waivers of some SSI/SSDI rules that otherwise limit allowed work earnings and that restrict program eligibility for YTD participants, and benefits counseling to explain the waivers**.<br><br>▪ **Evidence.** Six YTD sites participated in a randomized controlled trial. The evaluation found that in four of the six sites, the YTD project had **a positive impact on total amount of disability benefits young people received** in the third year after evaluation enrollment. | Evidence-based | Fraker et al. (2014): *Final Report on the Youth Transition Demonstration Evaluation*\* |
| ▪ **Overview.** Promoting Readiness of Minors in SSI (PROMISE) was **an initiative to promote positive change in the lives of young people who receive SSI**. Six state agencies were awarded funding to implement the model. Services offered through the PROMISE programs relevant for benefits access included **benefits counseling, technical assistance for benefits specialists, and youth case management**.<br><br>▪ **Evidence.** Random assignment study showed evidence of causal impact. Across the six sites, the PROMISE **increased average SSI payments**. In one site, PROMISE increased the **share of young people receiving SSI payments** in the fifth year after random assignment. Additionally, three program sites **increased youth enrollment in Medicaid** in the first year after random assignment. | Evidence-based | Patnaik et al. (2022): *Promoting Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE): Youth and Family Outcomes Five Years After Enrollment* |
| ▪ **Overview.** The Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) initiative aims to **prevent homelessness among young adults who have been involved in the child welfare system**. Six organizations received funding to implement **comprehensive service models** to support young people. YARH program services that may drive housing voucher access include **support with applying for housing vouchers and negotiating voucher eligibility requirements**, and more indirectly **case management, coaching, and guided practice to build life skills**.<br><br>▪ **Evidence.** Evaluators captured practitioner insights through semistructured interviews with two grantee teams who were testing comprehensive service models for improving youth outcomes related to housing, education, and training, social well-being, and permanent connections. These grantees recommend **working with young people to understand their options and empower their decisionmaking to help them navigate the application process and successfully obtain and keep housing vouchers**. | Promising | Chesnut, Shoji, and Woods (2021): "Using Housing Vouchers to Support Youth with Child Welfare Experience at Risk of Homelessness"\* |

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| **Overview.** The Benefits Access for College Completion (BACC) demonstration sought to provide evidence that public human services could support college completion. Seven **community colleges focused their work on supporting student navigation of public benefit applications,** including for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Medicaid, through prescreening, screening, application, and case follow-up.<br><br>**Evidence.** A mixed-methods evaluation of five of the BACC campuses included site visits, participant observations during community events, document review, and administrator interviews. It also included analysis of college program data that documented benefit screenings, applications, and receipt. Findings included that **in addition to screening activities, successful benefit navigation must include application assistance and case follow-up.** The evaluation also found that **providing a centralized hub for benefits access, framing services as opt-out rather than opt-in, and prioritization of benefits access as an institutional priority across levels were necessary conditions for successful implementation of benefits access services** at community colleges. | Promising | Price et al. (2014): *Public Benefits and Community Colleges: Lessons from the Benefits Access for College Completion Evaluation* |
| **Overview.** Researchers sought to understand challenges to student SNAP access and opportunities for improvement through a review of relevant policies and literature.<br><br>**Evidence.** Literature and policy review suggested several strategies for improving student SNAP access. **These included training university staff to identify food-insecure students and helping them apply for SNAP.** | Emerging | Freudenberg, Goldrick-Rab, and Poppendieck (2019): "College Students and SNAP: The New Face of Food Insecurity in the United States"* |
| **Overview.** Researchers sought to understand promising practices for increasing SNAP access among college students through data collection on two community college campuses.<br><br>**Evidence.** Interviews with 10 students found that students face challenges submitting documents to support SNAP applications, understanding application and eligibility requirements, and getting needed assistance. Researchers recommend **postsecondary institutions establish partnerships with local human services agencies and nonprofits with capacity to provide application assistance.** | Emerging | Hodara et al. (2023): *Connecting College Students to Public Benefits: Findings from Community College of Allegheny County and Montgomery County Community College. Education Northwest*\* |
| **Overview.** Researchers sought to understand challenges and opportunities students experience accessing TANF for financial stability during college.<br><br>**Evidence.** Researchers analyzed administrative data on TANF applications from students in New Jersey, finding that students complete TANF applications at lower rates than the broader applicant pool. Informed by these findings, researchers conducted interviews with higher education experts to identify potential solutions. Interviews revealed that **instituting one-stop centers to help students with benefits program access and dedicating university staff to coordinate student needs could improve student TANF access.** | Emerging | Walsh et al. (2024): "Assessing Utilization and Accessibility of Public Cash Assistance Benefits among Postsecondary Students"* |

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| ▪ **Overview.** Researchers captured insights from Medicaid and juvenile justice experts about opportunities to better support justice-involved young people's health needs through Medicaid in light of the federal ban on use of Medicaid funds to serve incarcerated persons.<br>▪ **Evidence.** In conversations and meetings, experts suggested leveraging Medicaid consumer assistance programs to target young people leaving incarceration, including **employing navigators, in-person assisters, and certified application counselors**. | Emerging | Zemel et al. (2013): *Facilitating Access to Health Care Coverage for Juvenile Justice-Involved Youth*[*] |

**Sources:** See the "Table Sources" section toward the end of the document for a list of all the sources cited in this report's tables.
[NYF] Intervention is not focused on young people.
[*] Source appears in multiple tables.

## Strategy Type 3: Cross-Organizational Partnerships

Organizations that help young people access benefits do so within a fragmented system of benefits administration, in which multiple agencies administer benefits that one young person may be eligible for. One agency does not automatically have access to data another agency collects that could support benefit determination. Moreover, organizations that offer benefit navigation services may lack expertise and capacities that other organizations or agencies can provide (Coffey 2023). And in the case of young people facing specific circumstances like homelessness and justice involvement, resolving barriers to benefits access may be challenging without the involvement of disparate institutions (Chesnut, Shoji, and Woods 2021; Scannell et al. 2022). This means cross-organizational partnerships can offer promise for smoothing and coordinating the benefit application process.

As with the evidence on youth navigation, the one evidence-based practice we identified in this category was offered within a package of transition services for young people with disabilities. In this case: **Young people received referrals to service providers to access benefit programs. Another example with promise involved a transition service model for young people facing housing insecurity, which involved fostering cross-system partnerships to support young people's access to housing vouchers within a service model that included other services.**

We also identified a number of other promising or emerging practices in this area:

▪ cross-agency data sharing to support cross-enrollment, sometimes with shared platforms to support automatic data sharing and case coordination

▪ justice institutions partnering with Medicaid to support young people's coverage upon reentry

- partnerships between agencies and universities to leverage their different capacities to move applications toward approval

Table 3 summarizes each source we identified related to cross-organizational partnerships and relevant strategies they include.

TABLE 3
**Cross-Organizational Partnership Strategies**

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| ▪ **Overview.** The Social Security Administration's (SSA's) Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD) aimed to test approaches for promoting successful transitions to adulthood for young people ages 14 to 25 receiving or likely eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). Key components of the YTD model related to benefits access included **system linkages, or connections to service providers needed to access key resources, SSA waivers of some SSI/SSDI rules that otherwise limit allowed work earnings and that restrict program eligibility for YTD participants, and benefits counseling to explain the waivers**.<br>▪ **Evidence.** Six YTD sites participated in a randomized controlled trial. The evaluation found that in four of the six sites, the YTD project had a **positive impact on the total amount of disability benefits young people received in the third year after evaluation enrollment**. | Evidence-based | Fraker et al. (2014): *Final Report on the Youth Transition Demonstration Evaluation*\* |
| ▪ **Overview.** Coordinating SNAP & Nutrition Supports (CSNS) funds cohorts of programs to enact strategies to align SNAP with other nutrition supports to reduce hunger for children and families:<br>» The Hawaiʻi project focused on enhancing interagency collaboration between the state Department of Health and Department of Human Services to support data matching between the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to streamline cross-enrollment. The approach included developing a **data-sharing memorandum of understanding, shared data dictionary, and an agreed-upon project governance framework**.<br>» The Kansas project took a similar approach, supporting collaboration between the state Department for Children and Families and Department of Health and Environment. The agencies developed a **shared platform to support automatic data sharing for SNAP and WIC and coordinated outreach based on shared data**.<br>» The New Jersey project involved establishing a cross-agency partnership between the WIC- and SNAP-administering agencies. They developed a **shared electronic database to facilitate cross-program outreach and a web service to facilitate automated cross-program eligibility determination**.<br>» And the New Mexico project involved the state Heath and state Human Services departments, **cocreating an online** | Promising | APHSA (2023): "Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports (CSNS) Impact Reports: Cohort 1"[NYF] \* |

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| **interface that securely screens anyone who applies for SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Medicaid for WIC eligibility.**<br><br>■ **Evidence.** Project documentation suggests the Kansas and Hawai'i projects were successful in enhancing interagency collaboration:<br><br>» The Hawai'i agencies anticipated that their effort, which supported program data analysis and matching, was **driving increased SNAP and WIC participation**.<br>» The Kansas team anticipated their data matching and targeted outreach strategy would **support increased access to SNAP and WIC** among underserved communities.<br>» The New Jersey team observed significant joint eligibility determinations and **substantial new enrollment in both SNAP and WIC**.<br><br>■ And the New Mexico team observed many **automatic WIC referrals, followed by an uptick in WIC enrollment**. | | |
| ■ **Overview.** The Youth At-Risk of Homelessness (YARH) initiative aims to **prevent homelessness among young adults who have been involved in the child welfare system**. Six organizations received funding to implement **comprehensive service models** to support young people. YARH program services that may drive housing voucher access include **support with applying for housing vouchers and negotiating voucher eligibility requirements**, and more indirectly **case management, coaching, and guided practice to build life skills**.<br><br>■ **Evidence.** Evaluators captured practitioner insights through semistructured interviews with two grantee teams who were testing comprehensive service models for improving youth outcomes related to housing, education, training, social well-being, and permanent connections. These grantees **recommend working to foster cross-system partnerships to remove barriers to young people successfully obtaining housing vouchers**, including with legal aid agencies, housing systems agencies, and landlords. | Promising | Chesnut, Shoji, and Woods (2021): "Using Housing Vouchers to Support Youth with Child Welfare Experience at Risk of Homelessness" * |
| ■ **Overview. Strategic partnership between basic needs center staff at UC Davis and Yolo County Health and Human Services Agency** staff to increase students' access to CalFresh. The partnership **leveraged complimentary capacities** of county staff in eligibility determination with targeted youth outreach by student outreach workers and student-centered application assistance.<br><br>■ **Evidence.** County administrative data showed **large increases in completed student applications and lower rates of incomplete student applications.** | Promising | Coffey (2023): "Meeting Young People's Basic Needs through Strategic Partnership: Case Study of the Yolo County Health and Human Services Agency's CalFresh (SNAP) Outreach Partnership with the University of California, Davis" |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers sought to understand how **California universities' basic needs centers support CalFresh access for students**. Basic needs centers are campus-based centers at each University of California campus that provide food pantries and CalFresh application assistance to students experiencing food insecurity. | Promising | Esaryk et al. (2022): "Helping College Students Get Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Facilitators of and |

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| ■ **Evidence.** In-depth interviews with campus basic needs center staff, campus financial aid office staff, county agency staff, and food back staff identified that **county staff being present on campus** and a **relationship between the county SNAP agency and campus staff were facilitators to student SNAP access**. | | Barriers to Students Accessing the Federal Nutrition Assistance Program" |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers sought to understand promising practices for SNAP access among college students through data collection on two community college campuses<br>■ **Evidence.** Interviews with 10 students found that students face challenges submitting documents to support SNAP applications, understanding application and eligibility requirements, and getting needed assistance. Researchers recommend **postsecondary institutions establish partnerships with local human services agencies and nonprofits with capacity to provide application assistance**. | Emerging | Hodara et al. (2023): *Connecting College Students to Public Benefits: Findings from Community College of Allegheny County and Montgomery County Community College. Education Northwest* * |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers sought to learn about facilitators and barriers to student SNAP application processing through interviews with county agency workers in nine California counties.<br>■ **Evidence.** From interviews with 24 county agency workers who process or advise on SNAP applications from college students, researchers found that eligibility workers emphasized partnerships with **campuses are critical to successfully process student applications**. This includes having **campus contacts** who can confirm students qualify for exemptions. In one case, a county partnered with a local university to **develop a standard verification letter** to ease the determination process. | Emerging | Martinez et al. (2024): "SNAP Student Rules Are Not So Snappy: Lessons Learned From a Qualitative Study of California County Agency Workers" * |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers aimed to capture expert insights about how to reduce Medicaid coverage gaps for justice-involved young people during reentry.<br>■ **Evidence.** Researchers conducted interviews with 28 health policy researchers, frontline providers, judges and probation officers, juvenile justice advocacy groups, and Medicaid administrators. Experts emphasized that young people face more heightened barriers to navigating Medicaid than older adults. These experts recommended **leaving Medicaid activated for young people in detention or reactivating it before or during reentry** to avoid the need for reenrollment. They noted that to do this successfully, **Medicaid and justice institutions must collaborate to ensure timely enrollment upon reentry**. | Emerging | Scannell et al. (2022): "Reducing Medicaid Coverage Gaps for Youth During Reentry"* |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers sought to understand challenges and opportunities students experience accessing TANF for financial stability during college.<br>■ **Evidence.** Researchers analyzed administrative data on TANF applications from students in New Jersey, finding that students complete TANF applications at lower rates than people in older age groups. Informed by these findings, researchers conducted interviews with higher education experts to identify potential solutions. Interviews revealed that **developing partnerships with county benefits agency staff and dedicating university staff to coordinate student needs could improve student TANF access**. | Emerging | Walsh et al. (2024): "Assessing Utilization and Accessibility of Public Cash Assistance Benefits among Postsecondary Students"* |

## Strategy Type 4: Simplifying or Expanding Eligibility

Complex and restrictive eligibility rules for public benefit programs are often major barriers to people getting support to meet their basic needs. This can be particularly problematic for young people as different programs have different eligibility requirements, which sometimes include distinct and seemingly arbitrary age restrictions. Some programs are considerably more generous to certain subpopulations of young people than others—notably more so for young people who are custodial parents, leaving childless young people without needed support. And students sometimes have restricted eligibility, especially if programs implement work requirements that do not count education. Compounding these eligibility limitations, young people are less experienced at navigating disparate benefit agencies' systems and accessing information about eligibility. Developmentally, they may be more inclined than older adults to give up before obtaining benefits they are eligible for (Adams, Hahn, and Coffey 2021). And states often have wide flexibility to enact their own rules or request federal waivers that simplify or expand program eligibility. All these factors make measures to simplify or expand eligibility for public benefits for young people worth pursuing.

**The few sources we identified that offer causal evidence for increasing youth benefits access involve relaxing or fully waiving qualifying income limits.** This loosening of restrictions allowed more young people to qualify for benefits or receive higher levels of benefits.

We included many sources that contain promising case examples and recommendations from experts and practitioners about how to increase young people's access to benefits by simplifying eligibility requirements, such as

- simplifying the process for income verification by self-employed workers—who are disproportionately young—to ease SNAP access; and

- making student SNAP eligibility rules simpler so they are easier to understand.

A number of case examples and recommendations we captured relate to expanding eligibility, such as

- expanding eligibility for SNAP to college students by eliminating student-specific eligibility restrictions or making the work requirement easier to meet; and

- removing exclusions on the use of Medicaid funds to serve incarcerated young people or enacting special procedures that presume young people are eligible to ease reenrollment upon reentry.

Table 4 summarizes each source we identified related to simplifying and expanding young people's eligibility for benefits and relevant strategies they include.

TABLE 4
**Simplifying and Expanding Eligibility Strategies**

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| **Overview.** The Social Security Administration's (SSA's) Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD) aimed to test approaches for promoting successful transitions to adulthood for young people ages 14 to 25 receiving or likely eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). Key components of the YTD model related to benefits access included **system linkages, or connections to service providers needed to access key resources, SSA waivers of some SSI/SSDI rules that otherwise limit allowed work earnings and that restrict program eligibility for YTD participants, and benefits counseling to explain the waivers**.<br>**Evidence.** Six YTD sites participated in a randomized controlled trial. The evaluation found that in four of the six sites, the YTD project had **a positive impact on total amount of disability benefits young people received** in the third year after evaluation enrollment. | Evidence-based | Fraker et al. (2014): *Final Report on the Youth Transition Demonstration Evaluation*\* |
| **Overview.** States have obtained waivers to relax or eliminate qualifying income limits for Medicaid to support insurance coverage for young people for expensive treatment for serious emotional disturbance.<br>**Evidence.** Findings from a regression analysis of data from the US Census, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Uniform Reporting System, and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services suggest that **relaxing or fully waiving qualifying income limits increases access to publicly funded treatment for young people, especially those under age 17**. | Evidence-based | Graaf and Snowden (2018): "Medicaid Waivers and Public Sector Mental Health Service Penetration Rates for Youth" |
| **Overview.** Researchers sought to describe how state agencies implemented the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and to capture recommendations to improve implementation.<br>**Evidence.** Researchers conducted focus groups with SNAP administrators and state-level SNAP supportive services staff representing 26 states. Participants emphasized that COVID-era changes to SNAP eligibility, **expanding SNAP access for young people by granting eligibility to college students who were eligible for work study or had no expected family contribution, were critical to meet student nutrition needs**. However, they also spoke about the **need for a faster federal response to state requests to expand student eligibility and clearer and more** | Promising | Headrick et al. (2022): "State Implementation of SNAP Waivers and Flexibilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives From State Agency Leaders" |

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| **timely guidance** about policy changes. In contrast, participants felt that the 2021 **universal 15 percent increase in SNAP was clearer and more equitable**. | | |
| ■ **Overview.** The authors provide an overview of challenges and opportunities with determining income eligibility for SNAP among the **increasing number of gig workers** in the American economy. Many of these workers **struggle with complex application processes** that require applicants to document their income and self-employment expenses. **Promising solutions states can adopt include using the same simplified self-employment deduction** allowed for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for SNAP if such an approach exists in a state—**where applicants with verified self-employment income automatically receive a predetermined percentage deduction**—or requesting approval from the US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service to adopt a standard deduction for SNAP.[4]<br><br>■ **Evidence.** Based on review of policies and conversations with state officials in four states, the authors describe states' successes implementing simplified methods for determining self-employment income for SNAP eligibility. **Simplified approaches were found to provide an easier application process for self-employed workers, more accurate benefit-level calculations, streamlined eligibility determinations, and more efficient benefit administration.** | Promising | Maneely and Roth-Eisenberg (2020): "Streamlining SNAP for the Gig Economy: Simplified Self-Employment Expense Deduction"[NYF] * |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers sought to understand challenges to student SNAP access and opportunities for improvement through a review of relevant policies and literature.<br><br>■ **Evidence.** Literature and policy review suggested several strategies for improving student SNAP access. **These included eliminating college student-specific eligibility restrictions; aligning SNAP, federal work study, and financial aid requirements; defining college as training or work for SNAP eligibility; and reducing the work requirement.** | Emerging | Freudenberg, Goldrick-Rab, and Poppendieck (2019): "College Students and SNAP: The New Face of Food Insecurity in the United States"* |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers sought to understand promising practices to drive SNAP access among college students through data collection on two community college campuses.<br><br>■ **Evidence.** Surveys of 1,479 students cited not knowing they were eligible as their most common reason for not applying. Researchers recommend **education leaders push for policy change to reframe student exemptions so eligibility is easier to understand**. | Emerging | Hodara et al. (2023): *Connecting College Students to Public Benefits: Findings from Community College of Allegheny County and Montgomery County Community College. Education Northwest*\* |
| ■ **Overview.** Researchers reviewed literature on innovative state approaches to increasing student SNAP eligibility.<br><br>■ **Evidence.** The authors highlight best practice examples from the literature. **Massachusetts implemented regulations to allow students who enroll in community college programs that demonstrate high likelihood of leading to employment to qualify for SNAP. California created a system to streamline determining which college and university programs allow students to qualify for SNAP; programs do not need to lead to a degree. New York expanded SNAP eligibility to include community college and career and technical education students. And Wisconsin allows** | Emerging | Hope Center (2022): "States Leading the Way in SNAP Eligibility and SNAP Outreach To Students"* |

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|---|---|---|
| **students to average qualifying work hours over a semester to accommodate academic obligations**. | | |
| ▪ **Overview.** Researchers sought to learn about facilitators and barriers to student SNAP application processing through interviews with county agency workers in nine California counties.<br>▪ **Evidence.** From interviews with 24 county agency workers who process or advise on SNAP applications from college students, researchers found that eligibility workers across counties were not consistently trained on student-specific CalFresh eligibility rules. County workers emphasized that student exemptions make program eligibility confusing for students. And they mentioned that tracking the number of new, revised, and temporary eligibility rules was burdensome and led to wrongfully denied applications. The researchers conclude that these findings support the **need to simplify student SNAP eligibility rules and expand eligibility to reflect the needs of students with low incomes, including allowing postsecondary study to be considered work participation**. | Emerging | Martinez et al. (2024): "SNAP Student Rules Are Not So Snappy: Lessons Learned From a Qualitative Study of California County Agency Workers"* |
| ▪ **Overview.** Researchers sought input from state Medicaid directors on **use of autism-specific Medicaid waivers to children and young people with autism spectrum disorder**.<br>▪ **Evidence.** A survey of Medicaid directors found that **10 states use autism-specific waivers to serve young people**. States reported using **several additional waivers, including a more general waiver for people with disabilities, to serve the same population**. | Emerging | Miller et al. (2016): "State Design and Use of Medicaid 1915(c) Waivers and Related Benefits to Provide Services to Children and Youth With Autism Spectrum Disorder" |
| ▪ **Overview.** Researchers aimed to capture expert insights about how to reduce Medicaid coverage gaps for justice-involved young people during reentry.<br>▪ **Evidence.** Researchers conducted interviews with 28 health policy researchers, frontline providers, judges and probation officers, juvenile justice advocacy groups, and Medicaid administrators. Experts emphasized that young people face heightened barriers to navigating Medicaid than older adults. These experts recommended **removing the federal inmate exclusion that prohibits states from funding health coverage for incarcerated people with federal Medicaid funds**. Short of that, they suggested **leaving Medicaid activated for young people in detention or reactivating it before or during reentry** to avoid the need for youth-led reenrollment. | Emerging | Scannell et al. (2022): "Reducing Medicaid Coverage Gaps for Youth During Reentry"* |
| ▪ **Overview.** The author seeks to understand challenges gig workers face in verifying eligibility for SNAP.<br>▪ **Evidence.** The article examines existing policies and literature with respect to the unique challenges of gig work, noting that income verification is a requirement to get SNAP benefits. This requirement is designed around those who have regular hours but is harder for those who work inconsistent hours and have difficulty documenting their earnings. Many gig work companies do not send out 1099s, increasing this difficulty. The author suggests **offering a simplified employment deduction as a potential solution. Policymakers could also mirror the approach taken in the temporary Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, which allowed workers to self-certify their employment and benefits—calculated based on previous earnings. The widespread pandemic-era state SNAP waivers** | Emerging | Thrasher (2023): "Making Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Enrollment Easier for Gig Workers"NYF* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **that provided maximum allotments to families soothed the application process for SNAP; reinstating this policy could improve access for gig workers and others who struggle to apply for and maintain benefits.** | | |
| ▪ **Overview.** Researchers captured insights from Medicaid and juvenile justice experts about opportunities to better support justice-involved young people's health needs through Medicaid in light of the federal ban on use of Medicaid funds to serve incarcerated persons.<br>▪ **Evidence.** In conversations and meetings, experts suggested several options to expand Medicaid access for justice-involved young people to ease reentry. These included **suspending eligibility while young people are incarcerated to ease reenrollment; offering continuous eligibility to minors who enter and leave detention within 12 months; offering presumptive eligibility to allow temporary eligibility determinations for reentering young people; and establishing special enrollment procedures like having a formal process for juvenile justice staff to submit Medicaid applications on behalf of reentering young people.** | Emerging | Zemel et al. (2013): *Facilitating Access to Health Care Coverage for Juvenile Justice-Involved Youth*\* |

**Sources:** See the "Table Sources" section toward the end of the document for a list of all the sources cited in this report's tables.

NYF Intervention is not focused on young people.

\* Source appears in multiple tables.


## Strategy Type 5: Enhancing Administrative Efficiency and Effectiveness

Applying for benefits can pose a large administrative burden on both applicants and human services agency staff. Often public benefit agencies use outdated technologies that limit efficiency of application processing and make communication with applicants to troubleshoot issues challenging. These challenges put added strain on caseworker teams, who are often overburdened and understaffed.[5] Developmentally, these dynamics may be particularly discouraging for young people who may choose to disengage rather than see the application process through (Adams, Hahn, and Coffey 2021). Therefore, improving efficiency and effectiveness of agencies' business processes that feed into application processing is an important strategy to consider.

Notably, most of the strategies we identified in this category are not focused on young people, reflecting the fact that efficient, effective public benefit administration positively affects benefit applicants of all ages and the agencies that serve them. That said, the strategies highlighted are all likely relevant for young people and include some approaches directed toward populations that include disproportionate numbers of young people, like gig workers and parents of young children.

**The one strategy related to improving benefit administration we identified with causal evidence of having increased benefits access involved expediting child care subsidy processing by offering a new online application option.**

We included numerous promising or emerging case examples of benefit agencies improving their business processes in ways that likely increase benefits access. Interagency data-sharing and case coordination strategies include

- strategies agencies have taken to ease and speed the application process for clients, including same-day SNAP interviews through multiple modes;

- strategies for smoothing the renewal process, including minimizing required submissions of information for renewals and lengthening renewal periods;

- new methods of digital communication and document verification;

- new investments in state-of-the-art, user-friendly, client-facing portals, apps, and web pages;

- automated backend processes to ease caseworker burden, including through using data from other programs to verify initial or continuing eligibility, which also minimizes client burden by reducing required documentation; and

- simplified ways for clients to produce income verification.

Table 5 summarizes each source we identified related to enhancing administrative efficiency and effectiveness and relevant strategies they include.

TABLE 5
**Enhancing Administrative Efficiency and Effectiveness Strategies**

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| ▪ **Overview. One Minnesota county experimented with establishing an online application process for Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) subsidies**. The county sent out the paper application for CCAP as people came off the waitlist and randomly selected some to also send a letter to about the opportunity to complete the application online. The online application required the same information, but the application was shorter and indicated eligibility faster.<br>▪ **Evidence.** There was **higher benefits uptake among the group who was offered both the paper and online application options. The findings suggest that when parents and guardians have more application options, more apply and they get benefits sooner**. | Evidence-based | Gravitz, Palmer, and Giannella (2021): "Moving Child Care Assistance Applications Online Means More Families Get the Help They Deserve"[NYF] |

| | Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Overview.** Coordinating SNAP & Nutrition Supports (CSNS) funds cohorts of programs to enact strategies to align SNAP with other nutrition supports to reduce hunger for children and families:<br><br>» The Hawai'i project focused on enhancing interagency collaboration between the state Department of Health and Department of Human Services to support data matching between the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to streamline cross-enrollment. The approach included developing a **data-sharing memorandum of understanding, shared data dictionary, and an agreed-upon project governance framework**.<br><br>» The Kansas project took a similar approach, supporting collaboration between the state Department for Children and Families and Department of Health and Environment. The agencies developed a **shared platform to support automatic data sharing for SNAP and WIC and coordinated outreach based on shared data**.<br><br>» The New Jersey project involved establishing a cross-agency partnership between the WIC- and SNAP-administering agencies. They developed a **shared electronic database to facilitate cross-program outreach and a web service to facilitate automated cross-program eligibility determination**.<br><br>» And the New Mexico project involved the state Heath and state Human Services departments in cocreating an **online interface that securely screens anyone who applies for SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Medicaid for WIC eligibility**.<br><br>**Evidence.** Project documentation suggests the Kansas and Hawai'i projects were successful in enhancing interagency collaboration:<br><br>» The Hawai'i agencies anticipated that their effort, which supported program data analysis and matching, was **driving increased SNAP and WIC participation**.<br><br>» The Kansas team anticipated their data matching and targeted outreach strategy would **support increased access to SNAP and WIC** among underserved communities.<br><br>» The New Jersey team observed significant joint eligibility determinations and **substantial new enrollment in both SNAP and WIC**.<br><br>» And the New Mexico team observed many **automatic WIC referrals, followed by an uptick in WIC enrollment**. | Promising | APHSA (2023): "Coordinating SNAP and Nutrition Supports (CSNS) Impact Reports: Cohort 1"[NYF][*] |
| | **Overview.** The authors highlight promising ways to improve SNAP interviews to facilitate more access to SNAP, including a case example in New York City.<br><br>**Evidence.** The authors highlight best practices for employing flexible SNAP interview processes to make the application process less burdensome. These **include offering same-day interviews when clients are in the office or on the phone; allowing unscheduled interviews; and using a call-in model** | Promising | CBPP and CLASP (2018): "Improving SNAP and Medicaid Access: SNAP Interviews"[NYF] |

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| where clients can call a call center to complete the interview quickly. In the case example provided, the **New York City Human Resources Administration piloted on-demand interviews and piloted new outreach materials, including an online message instructing people to call for interviews**. During the pilot, the **number of completed interviews at recertification increased and the new process decreased work related to scheduling**. | | |
| ▪ **Overview.** The Work Support Strategies (WSS) initiative was a **nine-state initiative to help families with low incomes get and keep public benefits**. The initiative focused on supporting states in reforming and aligning systems delivering these benefit programs, particularly SNAP, Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and the Child Care and Development Fund. States sought to **streamline and integrate service delivery (e.g., cross-enrollment), use updated technology (e.g., new data systems and electronic client information verification), and apply innovative business processes (e.g., more emphasis on timeliness and customer service)** to improve administrative efficiency and decrease burden on families. <br> ▪ **Evidence.** The mixed-methods evaluation of WSS included administrative and secondary data analysis, site visits, and review of planning documents and reports from states. In conjunction with process improvements, some states in the evaluation processed more applications on the day they were received. States improved their cross-program integration to help improve families' access to benefits. Five states saw SNAP and Medicaid/CHIP joint participation rates rise. States were able to provide faster service and greater access to a package of work supports. | Promising | Hahn (2016): "[Findings from the Work Support Strategies Evaluation: Streamlining Access, Strengthening Families](#)"[NYF] |
| ▪ **Overview.** The authors provide an overview of challenges and opportunities with determining income eligibility for SNAP among the **increasing number of gig workers** in the American economy. Many of these workers **struggle with complex application processes** that require applicants to document their income and self-employment expenses. **Promising solutions states can elect include using the same simplified self-employment deduction** allowed for TANF for SNAP if such an approach exists in a state—**where applicants with verified self-employment income automatically receive a predetermined percentage deduction**—or requesting approval to adopt a standard deduction for SNAP.[6] <br> ▪ **Evidence.** Based on review of policies and conversations with state officials in four states, the authors describe states' successes implementing simplified methods for determining self-employment income for SNAP eligibility. **Simplified approaches were found to provide an easier application process for self-employed workers, more accurate benefit level calculations, streamlined eligibility determinations, and more efficient benefit administration.** | Promising | Maneely and Roth-Eisenberg (2020): "[Streamlining SNAP for the Gig Economy: Simplified Self-Employment Expense Deduction](#)"[NYF*] |
| ▪ **Overview.** Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services piloted **two-way text communication for SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid clients**. Caseworkers used an off-the-shelf tool to help 69 clients submit documents via text message. | Promising | Wagner (2019): "[Leveraging Text Messaging to Improve](#) |

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| **Evidence.** Analysis of administrative data suggests that **texting could be an effective method of document verification**. The average time needed to reach an eligibility determination fell from 13 to 10 days and the approval rate rose from 53 to 67 percent. Takeaways from the pilot included that **flexible communication channels benefit clients and caseworkers; camera phones ease document submission; specific, responsive guidance from caseworkers improves accuracy of document submission; and faster feedback speeds resolution of errors.**[7] | | Communications in Safety Net Programs"[NYF] |
| **Overview.** Researchers sought to identify state uses of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds that supported SNAP expansion to enact modernization strategies that would streamline SNAP access, improve customer experience, and improve administrative efficiency and effectiveness.<br><br>**Evidence.** Findings from a November 2021 survey of state SNAP agencies and work groups conducted with states found that states used ARPA funds to **improve customer-facing systems like text messaging functionality and online portals and internal systems like agencies' eligibility platforms**. Work group and survey participants suggested that **investing in staff capacity for program response and resiliency; using robotic process automation to ease staff burden; and redesigning business models and systems to support person-centered service delivery as key approaches to improving access.** | Emerging | APHSA, No Kid Hungry, and Share Our Strength (2022): "Early Insights on SNAP Modernization through American Rescue Plan Investments"[NYF] |
| **Overview.** Eight states participated in the Maximizing Enrollment Transforming State Health Coverage project and worked to **streamline and simplify enrollment systems, policies, and processes for Medicaid and CHIP. A focus was on reducing enrollment barriers for clients and administrative burdens on staff**.<br><br>**Evidence.** A summary is provided of work done in five states to streamline and simplify the benefits process for Medicaid and CHIP. **States implemented single streamlined applications for Medicaid and CHIP and provided a "no-wrong-door" enrollment approach. States improved eligibility determination processes, including through Express Lane Eligibility, which automates enrollment and renewal using data from other human services programs. States simplified renewal processes to increase retention and smooth case transfers between agencies, including minimizing required submissions of information for renewals, lengthening renewal periods, and modifying premium payment requirements to be less punitive toward nonpayment. States focused on improving communication through use of plain language and field-testing notices. They also worked to streamline business processes by sorting applications into categories and creating new business systems that support technology use.** | Emerging | Baudoin, Weiss, and Hensley-Quinn (2014): *Paving the Way to Simpler: Experience from Maximizing Enrollment States in Streamlining Eligibility and Enrollment*[NYF] |
| **Overview.** Researchers investigated **strategies states took in anticipation of the end of the federal public health emergency, which ended COVID-era continuous Medicaid eligibility**. States were required to develop plans for prioritizing outstanding eligibility and renewals cases. | Emerging | Brooks, Gardner, Osorio (2022): *Medicaid and CHIP Eligibility and Enrollment Policies as of January* |

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| ■ **Evidence.** A survey of 50 states and DC collected information on states' enrollment and renewal processes as well as plans for dealing with the end of continuous enrollment when the public health emergency was lifted. The authors emphasized that state **plans must consider how to ensure continuity of coverage for those who remain eligible**. Some **promising options include adopting 12-month continuous coverage for children; extending postpartum coverage; and improving data-driven determinations and renewals using information from other programs**. | | *2022: Findings from a 50 State Survey*[NFY] |
| ■ **Overview.** The authors developed a guide that provides principles and best practices around accessible content related to public benefits and how to develop and scale that content. They emphasize the importance of **designing content to be accessible by all people who use it—including beneficiaries, navigators, and policymakers. Content should be written in plain language, organized in a hierarchy with the most important information highlighted, and offered in multiple languages**.<br><br>■ **Evidence.** The guide provides case examples from a literature scan of accessible materials related to benefits access. One example was a research center developing **clear-language guidance about how to access COVID-era stimulus payments and a website answering questions about child tax credit eligibility available in multiple languages**. Another group developed an **easy-to-use, free smartphone app available in all states that allows participants to monitor their benefits through individualized content**. New York City implemented **user-focused web pages that help people determine whether they may be eligible** for more than 40 public benefits and programs and find nearby support. | Emerging | Kennan, Soka, and Sullivan (2022): *Accessible Benefits Information: Reducing Administrative Burden and Improving Equitable Access through Clear Communication about Safety Net Benefits*[NYF] * |
| ■ **Overview.** County benefits administrators identified that to improve access for college students, they needed better and more streamlined policies and processes for college students.<br><br>■ **Evidence.** Twenty-four SNAP administrators from nine California counties containing a University of California campus participated in interviews about SNAP applications for students. Based on their experiences processing SNAP applications for college students, administrators reported needing **better training on student exemptions, clearer communication with students, extra effort to help students gain eligibility, and additional resources about requirements for student eligibility**. | Emerging | Martinez et al. (2024): "SNAP Student Rules Are Not So Snappy: Lessons Learned From a Qualitative Study of California County Agency Workers"* |
| ■ **Overview.** The author seeks to understand challenges gig works face in verifying eligibility for SNAP.<br><br>■ **Evidence.** The article examines existing policies and literature with respect to the unique challenges of gig work, noting that income verification is a requirement to get SNAP benefits. This requirement is designed around those who have regular hours but is harder for those who work inconsistent hours and have difficulty documenting their earnings. Many gig work companies do not send out 1099s, increasing this difficulty. The author suggests **offering a simplified employment deduction as a potential solution. Policymakers could also mirror the approach taken in the temporary Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, which** | Emerging | Thrasher (2023): "Making Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Enrollment Easier for Gig Workers"[NFY] * |

| Strategy | Level of evidence | Source |
|---|---|---|
| allowed workers to self-certify their employment and benefits—calculated based on previous earnings. The widespread pandemic-era state SNAP waivers that provided maximum allotments to families soothed the application process for SNAP; reinstating this policy could improve access for gig workers and others who struggle to apply for and maintain benefits. | | |

**Sources:** See the "Table Sources" section toward the end of the document for a list of all the sources cited in this report's tables.

[NYF] Intervention is not focused on young people.

\* Source appears in multiple tables.

# Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Further Research

Our literature scan showcases the limited evidence of practices that have been evaluated and confirmed to increase young people's access to public benefits. It summarizes the many practices public benefit agencies and youth-serving organizations are engaging in across the country that show signs of promise for helping ease benefits access. And we have highlighted many approaches that policy experts and youth-serving practitioners recommend based on their knowledge of barriers young people face accessing public benefits and observations of practices designed to mitigate them.

This concluding section summarizes our analysis of what the literature suggests about positive directions for policies and practices to increase young people's access to public benefits. It also highlights considerations for useful and practical next steps for research in this area to further inform the field.

## Considerations for Policy and Practice

This is a pivotal moment in the youth and public benefits fields, as funders, policymakers, public benefit administrators, youth service providers, young leaders, and others are increasingly recognizing gaps in young people's basic needs and advocating to fill them.[8] The spotlight is on these issues, and stakeholders are eager to enact policies and implement programs that are effective at getting more public resources into young people's hands. Our findings offer insights about promising next steps.

### NEXT STEPS FOR POLICY

The existing literature on increasing youth benefits access offers the following insights on where policymakers could prioritize their efforts:

- Service models that **offer support to young people transitioning to adulthood in the form of a comprehensive set of supports** should be a priority for funding because they have the most causal evidence of effectiveness for increasing young people's access to benefits. These models should include approaches that fall within multiple categories of promising approaches we have highlighted in this report—for example, including benefit navigation along with cross-organizational partnerships and eligibility expansion appears to be an effective combination.

- Where possible, federal and state legislators should **prioritize easing restrictions on eligibility for public benefits**, particularly where those restrictions disproportionately restrict access for young people (e.g., restrictions on student eligibility for SNAP and TANF). These policymakers should also amend legislation to **make eligibility requirements simpler to understand and easier to verify.**

- Federal agencies should continue recent efforts to **make it easier for states to request waivers** that reduce administrative burdens on families. And states should **be proactive in requesting waivers that expand eligibility and reduce application requirements.**

### NEXT STEPS FOR PRACTICE

The literature on increasing youth benefits access suggests additional next steps for how public benefit agencies, youth-serving practitioners, and others supporting benefits access for young people could focus their efforts in shifting practices to be more conducive to access:

- Public benefit administrators should **think comprehensively about enacting human-centered business practices that ease burdens on applicants and staff** when applying for benefits. They should place **special emphasis on youth-centered practices** when enacting business process changes. This means considering improvements along the entire continuum of practices the agencies engage in related to benefits access, including

  » plain language communication through multiple platforms young people are likely to use (e.g., apps and text messaging);
  » easy options for electronic document transmission and application troubleshooting;
  » cross-program and cross-agency data sharing to support co-enrollment and case coordination and reduce documentation requirements for each application; and
  » automated backend application processing.

- Youth-serving practitioners, including community nonprofit providers and higher education support staff, should **prioritize promising types of benefits access supports that are designed with young people's specific needs and developmental stage in mind**, including

  » providing targeted youth outreach that includes youth-centered communication strategies, including plain language, empathetic digital communication and peer-led outreach, and easy access to support at benefit "hubs" or "one-stops";

  » providing benefit navigation and application assistance from initial screening to follow-up and troubleshooting after application submission; and

  » intentionally partnering with public benefit agencies and other organizations that will help connect young people to benefits, including through data and knowledge-sharing and complementary, coordinated services.

## Considerations for Further Research

Public benefit agencies, advocates, and youth-serving organizations need strong evidence about which interventions lead to more benefits in the hands of young people who need them. As our scan demonstrates, few interventions in this area are supported by strong evidence. This makes it difficult for funders in government and philanthropy to know where to invest. Evaluations can help agencies and organizations find out what works and how, raise additional money for interventions shown to be effective, and justify widespread implementation of evidence-based practices (OPRE 2018).

Given the general lack of evidence, the findings from our literature scan suggest that **strategies focused on promising and emerging approaches to supporting youth benefits access in all the categories we identified**—targeted youth outreach, benefit navigation, cross-organizational partnerships, simplifying or expanding eligibility, and enhancing administrative efficiency and effectiveness—**warrant future evaluation efforts**. Additionally, only a few sources had specific findings addressing the influence of race and gender on benefits access. Further exploration in this area could help advance equity in benefits access. And currently limited evidence exists about benefit take-up rates for young people. Further research would yield insights about where large gaps exist to support targeted strategies to improve access.

That begs the question of where to start. Evidence from evaluation of human services and youth programming underscores the **importance of thinking carefully about what types of evaluation are appropriate** for a given intervention (Lansing et al. 2022). Below we discuss the pros, cons, and other considerations around several types of evaluations.

**Impact evaluations** tell us how well an intervention is working, so this type of intervention is attractive for agencies and funders who want strong evidence of which interventions lead to the benefits access outcomes they want to see. However, certain knowledge, skills, and resources are necessary for an impact evaluation to succeed—that is, to find the impacts the evaluation is testing for (Lery, Packard Tucker, and Kuhns 2022). Here are key considerations that together indicate an impact evaluation may be successful:

- The target population is clear.

- The intervention model is well-defined and will not change, and ideally, the intervention has a manual that guides its operations.

- The intervention has a clear theory of change that logically describes how and why an intervention will cause change.

- The intervention delivery is consistent (meaning all participants get the same service).

- The outcomes are clearly defined and follow from the theory of change.

- There is leadership buy-in across stakeholders about the importance of the proposed evaluation.

- Staff across levels have the capacity and commitment to work as a team to implement the evaluation. This may include support for a randomization process to determine which clients receive the intervention, which can take significant staff time and be controversial among staff who want all their clients to have access to all interventions (Saldanha, Skelly, and Ley 2022).

There are other practical considerations related to the potential return on investment for an impact evaluation. Those that use experimental (i.e., randomized) designs are considered the highest standard for generating causal evidence and are more expensive than other options. So if the goal is to yield useful evidence of what works for the field (as opposed to just evidence that supports continuing an individual intervention), it is important to consider how generalizable results are likely to be to interventions in other contexts.

Our literature scan suggests that many existing interventions that may drive benefits access for young people are not ready for a successful impact evaluation. It is not clear from publicly available documentation that most have a consistently delivered, well-codified model—though that would be a useful area of inquiry for future research to confirm. Some interventions serve only a small number of clients and likely have limited staff resources, which can make impact evaluation challenging. Further, benefits access interventions operate in different contexts, have different goals, and work with young

people in different circumstances. As a result, an impact evaluation of a single intervention may not generate evidence that can be widely generalized to inform other interventions.

The good news is that many other avenues are available to obtain evidence that will advance our shared understanding.

**Implementation studies** that document intervention components, goals, and populations served can shed light on mechanisms that drive desired outcomes. Implementation studies are valuable for capturing nuances of the context in which interventions are implemented, such as funding, local partnerships, and state or local human services policy, to suggest what it takes for an intervention to be successful. They shed light on the experiences of people who receive an intervention. These studies can also help agencies or organizations carrying out a given intervention codify and refine their model and theory of change, potentially moving them closer to readiness for impact evaluation (Peters et al. 2014).

**Case studies,** outside of a formal implementation study, are useful to the field to capture additional and more nuanced examples of promising approaches. Case studies employ multiple research methods to record interventions in detail at a point in time (Priya 2021). These examples can provide important information to draw on for agencies looking to design their own interventions.

**Participation of young people with lived experience** is valuable regardless of the evaluation methods pursued. The field should move toward employing research approaches that include participation of young people with lived experience accessing public benefits in their design and execution. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), an approach that supports young people in conducting research to improve interventions intended to serve them, lends itself well to identifying key program components and implementation considerations that align with young people's needs and are therefore more promising for driving benefits access.[9] Agencies and funders should consider employing all of these evaluation approaches as appropriate for gathering evidence on interventions to increase benefits access for young people. Their goal should be to set **a multipronged research agenda** that could create a roadmap for human services agencies and youth-serving organizations, allowing them to more easily tailor services to young people's needs and developmental stage based on evidence of what works. It could also allow policymakers and funders to make informed decisions in designing policy and allocating resources.

# Appendix

## Search Terms Used In Our Literature Search

- access
- basic needs
- basic needs center
- benefits
- campus basic needs center
- cash assistance
- child care
- cross-agency collaboration
- data integration
- foster care
- help accessing Medicaid
- human services
- improved technology + [SNAP/Medicaid/ TANF]
- improved technology use
- income assistance
- justice system
- Medicaid
- opportunity youth
- out-of-school youth
- public assistance
- public benefits access
- public benefits navigator
- public benefits receipt
- relaxing qualification requirements
- safety net
- SNAP
- [SNAP/Medicaid TANF] navigator
- SNAP E&T
- streamlining [SNAP/Medicaid/ TANF] applications
- TANF
- targeted youth outreach
- youth
- youth access
- youth navigation
- youth services
- young parents

In addition to standalone term searches, we used combinations of search terms above.

## Search Engines and Websites We Searched

- Beeck Center Digital Benefits Hub
- Department of Labor Clearinghouse for Labor and Evaluation and Research
- Google Scholar
- The Hope Center at Temple University
- Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation Project Index
- RealCollege Resource Library
- University of New Mexico Basic Needs Project
- US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service Data and Research
- Urban Institute

# Notes

1. See Urban's "Young People and the Safety Net" web page for many relevant sources: https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/center-labor-human-services-and-population/projects/young-people-and-safety-net (accessed August 20, 2024).

2. The US Department of Education has provided guidance to states to use FAFSA for this purpose. See Federal Student Aid, "(GENERAL-24-93) Guidance on Means-Tested Benefits Outreach for Institutions and State Grant Agencies," July 29, 2024, https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/electronic-announcements/2024-07-29/guidance-means-tested-benefits-outreach-institutions-and-state-grant-agencies.

3. The bill referenced was signed into law on September 30, 2022: Student nutrition: CalFresh: student eligibility: Federal Application for Student Aid data, A. B. 2810, Reg. Sess. (2021–22), https://legiscan.com/CA/bill/AB2810/2021.

4. This evidence is particularly relevant because gig workers are disproportionately young adults. See Monica Anderson, Colleen McClain, Michelle Faverio, and Risa Gelles-Watnick, "The State of Gig Work in 2021," Pew Research Center, December 8, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/12/08/the-state-of-gig-work-in-2021/.

5. "Watch: How a Complicated Benefits System Lets Some Fall Through the Safety Net," Code for America, March 12, 2024, https://codeforamerica.org/news/watch-pbs-how-a-complicated-benefits-system-lets-some-fall-through-the-safety-net/.

6. This evidence is particularly relevant because gig workers are disproportionately young adults. See Anderson et al., "The State of Gig Work in 2021."

7. This practice may be particularly promising for young people, because they are more likely to be comfortable with, and even dependent on, text messaging and smartphone-based applications for communication. See Risa Gelles-Watnick, "Americans' Use of Mobile Technology and Home Broadband," Pew Research Center, January 31, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/01/31/americans-use-of-mobile-technology-and-home-broadband/.

8. "Biden-Harris Administration Holds First-Ever Interagency Youth Policy Summit: Cultivating Possibilities" (press release), US Department of Education, February 13, 2024, https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/biden-harris-administration-holds-first-ever-interagency-youth-policy-summit-cultivating-possibilities; "Who Are We?," A New Deal For Youth, accessed September 25, 2024, https://newdealforyouth.org/who-we-are/#new-deal-for-youth.

9. "Why YPAR?," YPAR (Youth-led Participatory Action Research) Hub at University of California, Berkeley, accessed August 27, 2024, https://yparhub.berkeley.edu/why-ypar.

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