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## An already food-insecure NC sees hunger on the rise

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people depending on SNAP benefits has increased by 29 percent in the state

By HEBA ATWA, BTC Policy Advocate

**P**rior to the COVID-19 pandemic, North Carolina had the ninth highest rate of food insecurity in the nation.<sup>1</sup> In our state, 559,500 households were food insecure, meaning they could not afford enough nutritious food to sustain a healthy and active lifestyle.<sup>2</sup>

When families experience food insecurity, they often must make difficult choices about the quality and amounts of food they are able to provide. Households that are considered to have “very low” food security not only lack access to healthy and nutritious food, but they often skip meals all together.

Not everyone in North Carolina experiences food insecurity equally, and some households are more likely to be food insecure. Households with children are more likely to have difficulty putting enough nutritious food on the table. Nationally, 13.6 percent of households with children are food insecure, compared with only 10.5 percent of households without children.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, households headed by single mothers are more likely to experience food insecurity compared with households headed by single fathers. Last year, almost 30 percent of families led by single women were food insecure, compared with 15.4 percent of families led by single men. Families where the head of household was white experienced food insecurity at a rate of 7.9. percent, compared with 19 percent for Black families and 15.6 percent for Latinx families.<sup>4</sup> These disparities point to systemic issues such as the racial-pay and gender-pay gaps as well as the extremely high cost of child care.

1 Coleman-Jensen, Alisha, et al. September 2020. Household Food Security in the United States in 2019, USDA. Accessed at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/99282/err-275.pdf?v=3852.9>

2 Ibid

3 Ibid

4 Ibid

The COVID-19 public health and economic crisis has caused even more people in our state and around the nation to become food insecure. Nationally, 14 percent of adults with children and 8 percent of adults without children report that their household sometimes or often did not have enough to eat over the course of the last seven days. This is almost three times the pre-pandemic rate of adults who reported that their household did not have enough to eat at some point over the 12 months of 2019.<sup>5</sup>

Black and Latinx households are more than twice as likely as white households to report experiencing food insufficiency at 22 percent and 16 percent respectively.<sup>6</sup> In North Carolina, the number of people who rely on the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to purchase food has increased by 29 percent during the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

### **Reducing poverty with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the largest anti-hunger program in the nation, also plays a significant role in reducing poverty, improving health outcomes for children, and making sure families don't have to make tough choices between paying the rent or placing food on the table. Across the nation last year, 7.3 million people were lifted out of poverty by SNAP, and 1.3 million people were lifted out of poverty by SNAP in North Carolina alone.<sup>8</sup> SNAP works across the state, serving families in all 100 counties, including 52,000 veterans.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to being one of the most important anti-hunger programs, SNAP is also responsible for stimulating local economies as one of the nation's most effective public-private partnerships. Recipient households generally spend all of the benefit — 80 percent of SNAP benefits are redeemed within two weeks and 97 percent are spent within a month.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, every dollar in new SNAP benefits increases Gross Domestic Product by more than \$1.70 during a weak economy.<sup>11</sup>

In 2019, the latest year for which there is data, the SNAP program brought more than \$1.86 billion in benefits to our state, while roughly 9,000 businesses across the state participated in the SNAP grocery program.<sup>12</sup>

**“Across the nation last year, 7.3 million people were lifted out of poverty by SNAP, and 1.3 million people were lifted out of poverty by SNAP in North Carolina alone.”**

5 Tracking the COVID-19 Recession's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. Accessed at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and>

6 Ibid

7 Ibid

8 Chartbook: SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table, November 7, 2019. Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. Accessed at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/chart-book-snap-helps-struggling-families-put-food-on-the-table#part3>; North Carolina SNAP Factsheet, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. Accessed at: [https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap\\_factsheet\\_north\\_carolina.pdf](https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_north_carolina.pdf)

9 Keith-Jennings, Brynne and Cai, Lexin, January 8, 2020. SNAP Helps 1.3 Million Low Income Veterans, Including Thousands in Each State. Accessed at: <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/11-9-17fa.pdf>

10 Bolen, Ed and Wolkomir, Elizabeth, May 28, 2020. SNAP Boosts Retailers and Local Economies, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. Accessed at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-boosts-retailers-and-local-economies>

11 Bolen, Ed and Wolkomir, Elizabeth, May 28, 2020. SNAP Boosts Retailers and Local Economies, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. Accessed at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-boosts-retailers-and-local-economies>; North Carolina SNAP Factsheet, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. Accessed at: [https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap\\_factsheet\\_north\\_carolina.pdf](https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_north_carolina.pdf)

12 Ibid

Unique to the SNAP program is its built-in ability to reflect the health of the economy. As unemployment and poverty rise, so do the number of individuals participating in SNAP. As the economy adds good-paying jobs and opportunities for families to thrive, the number of people participating in the program falls. SNAP's poverty fighting effect — along with its ability to support families in critical times of need and to boost local economies — is what makes this program such an effective tool to fight hunger.

## Stop building barriers to food security

Despite the successes of anti-hunger programs like SNAP, lawmakers have sought to limit access. Over the past few years, state and federal lawmakers have considered, and in some cases passed, harmful measures that have increased hunger. In 2016, NC lawmakers limited access to food assistance for some of our state's poorest adults by reinstating a harsh federal law that places a three-month time limit on SNAP for nondisabled, childless adults. This change meant that many North Carolinians were denied food assistance even though they lived in communities where there were no job opportunities available.

Lawmakers are currently considering eliminating a policy that allows low-income families with high expenses to be eligible for SNAP. These families, who have modest incomes but pay significant amounts of their income toward things like child care and rent, are often forced to make tough choices about how to cover all their living expenses. Eliminating this policy, known as categorical eligibility, would not only prevent these families from applying for food assistance but would also cost the state additional administrative dollars.

In 1996, as part of the ongoing "War on Drugs," Congress imposed a lifetime ban from SNAP against individuals who have been convicted of a drug felony. Although states have the ability to opt-out of the ban, North Carolina has chosen to continue a partial ban that prevents individuals convicted of certain drug-related felonies from accessing food assistance for a minimum of six months, during the most vulnerable time for an individual who is transitioning from incarceration.<sup>13</sup> This "SNAP felony ban" undermines an individual's ability to transition successfully into the community, provide for their families, and build the strong foundation of support necessary to avoid recidivism.

Finally, both state and federal lawmakers have sought to impose harsh requirements and unfunded mandates that will punish North Carolinians who are unable to find work and will impose strict administrative requirements on state and local agencies.<sup>14</sup> Rather than narrowing access to food assistance, we should be using the tools available to ensure that no North Carolinian ever goes hungry.

## Ways to support families

North Carolina has the opportunity to take the lead in addressing hunger by using common sense policy options. Protecting the program integrity of SNAP and ensuring that every eligible North Carolinian has access to the program are important first steps. By protecting categorical eligibility, opting out of the SNAP felony ban, and allowing

13 N.C. Gen. Stat. § 108A-25.2, [https://ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter\\_108A/GS\\_108A-25.2.html](https://ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter_108A/GS_108A-25.2.html)

14 Kennedy, Brian. Farm Bill is a costly way to make more North Carolinians hungry, The Progressive Pulse, NC Justice Center, May 2018. <http://pulse.ncpolicywatch.org/2018/05/16/farm-bill-is-a-costly-way-to-make-more-north-carolinians-hungry/>

time-limit waivers that let childless adults continue to receive food assistance beyond the three-month time limit, lawmakers can ensure that the potential of the SNAP program to stabilize individuals and families and to benefit our local economy is maximized.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 33 percent of SNAP recipients were in families with a member who was either elderly or had disabilities.<sup>15</sup> By implementing the Standard Medical Expense Deduction waiver, a tool that makes it easier for eligible individuals to exclude things like medication and hospitalization costs from their countable income, lawmakers could reduce much of the administrative paperwork that seniors must complete and ensure that these individuals have enough to eat each day.

In addition to strengthening and supporting the SNAP program, there are other important tools that our lawmakers can use in the fight against hunger. Almost half of households that receive food assistance have family members who are working.<sup>16</sup> Increasing the state's minimum wage would significantly boost workers' ability to place food on the table for their families. In addition to increasing wages for working families, reinstating a state Earned Income Tax Credit would give working families a boost to their household budgets that would help them pay for the basics — child care, transportation, and housing — that allow them to keep working.

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15 SNAP Factsheet: North Carolina, January 15, 2021. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, [https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap\\_factsheet\\_north\\_carolina.pdf](https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_north_carolina.pdf)

16 Ibid

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*Note: Some of this brief was based on research in "NC Ranks 10th in Hunger in the Nation", by Brian Kennedy II, which was published in November 2018.*