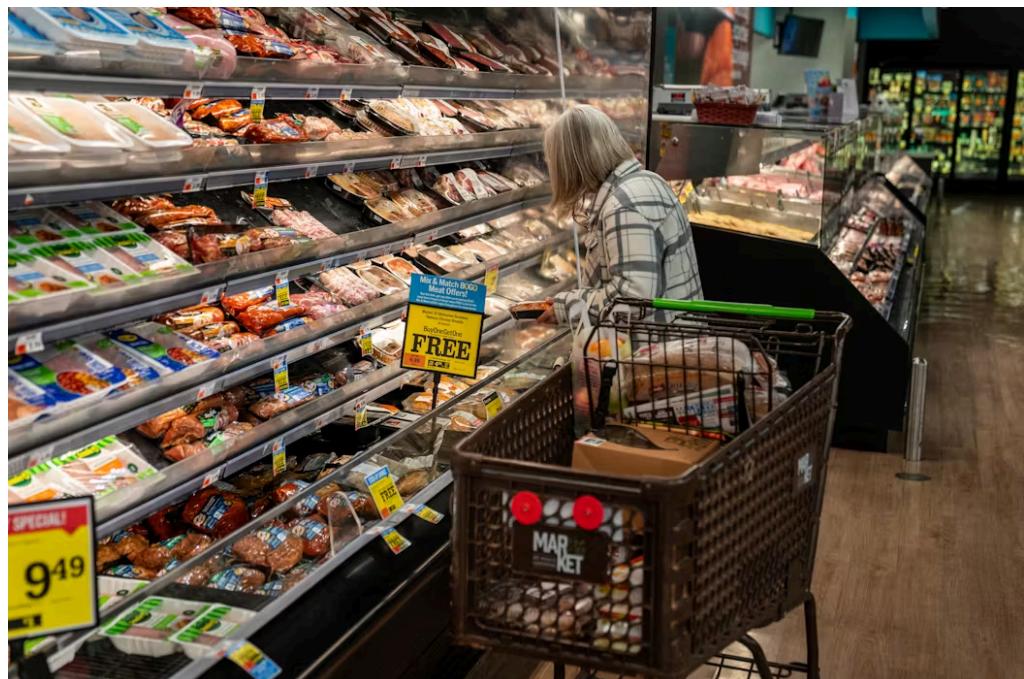


Who gets SNAP benefits to buy groceries and what the government pays for the program – in 5 charts

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Some 42 million Americans rely on SNAP benefits to put food on the table.

Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images News

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program has helped low-income Americans buy groceries for decades with few disruptions.

But on Nov. 1, 2025, the federal government halted the flow of funds to states to distribute as SNAP benefits. The Trump administration blames this unprecedented disruption on the federal government shutdown, which began a month earlier. Following multiple court orders, federal officials said they plan to distribute at least a portion of the US\$8 billion that's supposed to flow monthly to the states to cover the costs of the program's benefits. On Nov. 6, another judge ordered the distribution of all SNAP funds that were due in November.

Although the program costs billions, the benefits that families and individuals can receive from it are modest. The most a person living on their own can get is \$298 a month, but many people receive far less. The average benefit is an estimated \$6.17 daily – which falls below some estimates of the minimum cost of eating a nutritious diet in the United States.

The Conversation U.S. asked Tracy Roof, a political scientist who has researched the history of government nutrition programs, to explain who SNAP helps, how enrollment varies from state to state and what the program costs to run.

How many Americans are enrolled in SNAP?

The number of people getting SNAP benefits soared during the Great Recession, a big downturn that began in December 2007 and had long-lasting effects on the economy.

Because of high unemployment and poverty rates, more people were eligible for SNAP during those years. Many states, eager to bring dollars into their economies from federally funded SNAP benefits, made unprecedented efforts to enroll eligible families. SNAP enrollment peaked in 2013 at roughly 15% of Americans. The number of the program's participants fell as the economy recovered, but never returned to pre-recession levels because a greater share of eligible families continued to enroll in the program after the economic crisis than before.

When the COVID-19 pandemic upended the U.S. economy in 2020, the number of people with SNAP benefits soared again. President Donald Trump has blamed high enrollment in SNAP on the Biden administration “haphazardly” handing benefits “to anyone for the asking.”

That assertion is misleading. While the Biden White House increased benefits, it did not expand who was eligible for SNAP. In fact, President Joe Biden agreed to apply work requirements and time limits to more SNAP recipients. Moreover, states, not the federal government, are primarily responsible for determining eligibility and enrolling people in SNAP. The number of people who received SNAP benefits during Biden's presidency never exceeded 43 million – the peak reached in September 2020 during the first Trump administration.

The number of people using SNAP benefits to buy groceries has not fallen substantially because the number of people in poverty and the cost of living, including what Americans pay for food, have both increased since 2020.

How much does the program cost the federal government?

In inflation-adjusted 2024 dollars, spending peaked at \$128 billion in 2021 and fell to \$100 billion in 2024 – nearing pre-pandemic levels.

The program's spending had previously increased significantly during the Great Recession because SNAP enrollment rose and benefits were temporarily increased. Spending declined as the economy gradually recovered.

While the number of people on SNAP during the pandemic and its aftermath never reached the peak of the Great Recession, the level of spending did reach much higher levels. This was because of three steps taken to increase benefits by more sizable amounts than during the Great Recession.

1. The Families First Act, which Trump signed into law in March 2020, offered “emergency allotments” that increased monthly benefits for many households receiving SNAP. Biden extended emergency benefits to all households enrolled in the program in April 2021, driving spending even higher. Budget legislation that Congress passed in December 2022 ended the emergency benefits in February 2023.
2. Biden signed two pieces of legislation in 2021 that temporarily increased the maximum SNAP benefit by 15% through September 2021 – the height of the pandemic’s effects on the economy.

3. The Biden administration adjusted the basis for calculating monthly benefits in October 2021, just as the temporary increase was expiring. That change permanently increased benefits.

Most households getting SNAP benefits include children and older people

Nearly 60% of Americans enrolled in SNAP are either children under 18 or adults who are 60 or older.

About 1 in 5 non-elderly adults with SNAP benefits have a disability.

Less than 10% of all the people receiving SNAP benefits are able-bodied adults without children who are between the ages of 19 and 49.

Around 55% of all families with children that receive SNAP benefits include at least one employed adult.

Enrollment ranges widely from state to state

In some states, 1 in 5 people receive SNAP benefits. In others, it's 1 in 20.

The share of a state's population getting SNAP is determined both by its poverty rate and its policies. Those policies can affect who is eligible and the share of eligible families and individuals who enroll in the program.

Of the 10 states with the highest percentage of people on SNAP, five are also in the top 10 for the percentage of the population in poverty: New Mexico, Louisiana, Oklahoma, West Virginia and Nevada.

According to 2022 data, nine of those 10 states have enrolled nearly all families who are eligible for SNAP benefits: New Mexico, Louisiana, Oregon, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Massachusetts, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Illinois.

States vary widely in terms of the percentage of eligible families who obtain SNAP benefits. In the bottom quarter of states, fewer than 81% of eligible residents in 2022 were getting benefits. The percentage in Arkansas was the lowest: 59%.

States with the highest enrollment numbers tend to make it easier for their residents to get SNAP benefits by minimizing red tape and engaging in more outreach to eligible families. They also adopt policies that allow some people to qualify for SNAP at higher incomes or with more assets.

Americans of all races and ethnic backgrounds rely on SNAP

A little over 35% of people who get SNAP benefits are white, more than any other racial or ethnic group. Around 26% are Black and 16% are Hispanic.

Although more white people are enrolled in SNAP, Census data shows that greater percentages of Black and Hispanic people get these benefits: 24.4% of Black people and 17.2% of Hispanic people compared with 9.7% of white people. This is because these groups are disproportionately poor.

Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for SNAP. Only 4.4% of SNAP recipients in the 2023 fiscal year were immigrants who were not citizens but legally present in the U.S., such as refugees.

The “big” tax-and-spending package Trump signed into law on July 4, 2025, however, ended SNAP eligibility for most of those immigrants.

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