

State SNAP Policies Are Failing Arkansas's Kids and Families

*Equitable Choices Needed
to Help Our State Thrive*



January 2025



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Introduction

Arkansas is an agricultural state rich in the production of so many diverse food products that it would be reasonable to assume that food insecurity would be low here. However, the opposite is true. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) ranks Arkansas as the state in which food insecurity is the highest, with a rate of 18.9% in 2023, compared to 13.5% nationally. The USDA defines food insecurity as an “economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.”¹ And even more distressing is that food insecurity among children is even higher. For 2023, Feeding America reports that 25% of children, up from 19% in 2021, were food insecure. That means that in 2023, nearly 570,000 Arkansans — more than 168,000 of whom were children — lacked sufficient food.² These numbers are unacceptable.

Food insecurity and hunger have significant, cumulative and long-lasting consequences on children, families, and communities. For children, the impact can begin before birth, have stunning consequences during the child's life, and persist into adulthood. Research shows that low prenatal iron can result in long term deficits in children's “socio-emotional, motor, cognitive, and physiological functioning” during the first five years of life.³ Long-term conditions can result from lack of sufficient nutrition during childhood including nutritional deficiencies, such as iron-deficiency anemia, rickets, cancer, stroke, type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, osteoporosis, and more.⁴

The United States government has recognized the importance of helping people unable to afford sufficient food for decades. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is one of the most effective government programs, boosting not only nutrition but also local economies (every \$1.00 in federally funded SNAP benefits generates \$1.79 in economic activity).⁵ And yet, even as one of the poorest states, Arkansas has low participation in SNAP. This is because Arkansas has put into place overly restrictive policies that make it more difficult to receive food assistance.

Arkansas must do better for families, and we know that it can. We can only have a thriving Arkansas if everyone is able to participate in our economic well-being. The state has a responsibility as well as the ability to address the systemic issues underlying our high poverty and food insecurity numbers. This report presents essential data regarding food insecurity; the impact poverty has had on Arkansas families; and food assistance program enrollment, participation, demographics, benefits, and trends within Arkansas. It also outlines opportunities for improvements to Arkansas hunger policies.

**Support for the research
in this report was provided
by MAZON: A Jewish Response
to Hunger.**

What's Behind Arkansas's Food Insecurity?

Hunger and Poverty Go Hand in Hand

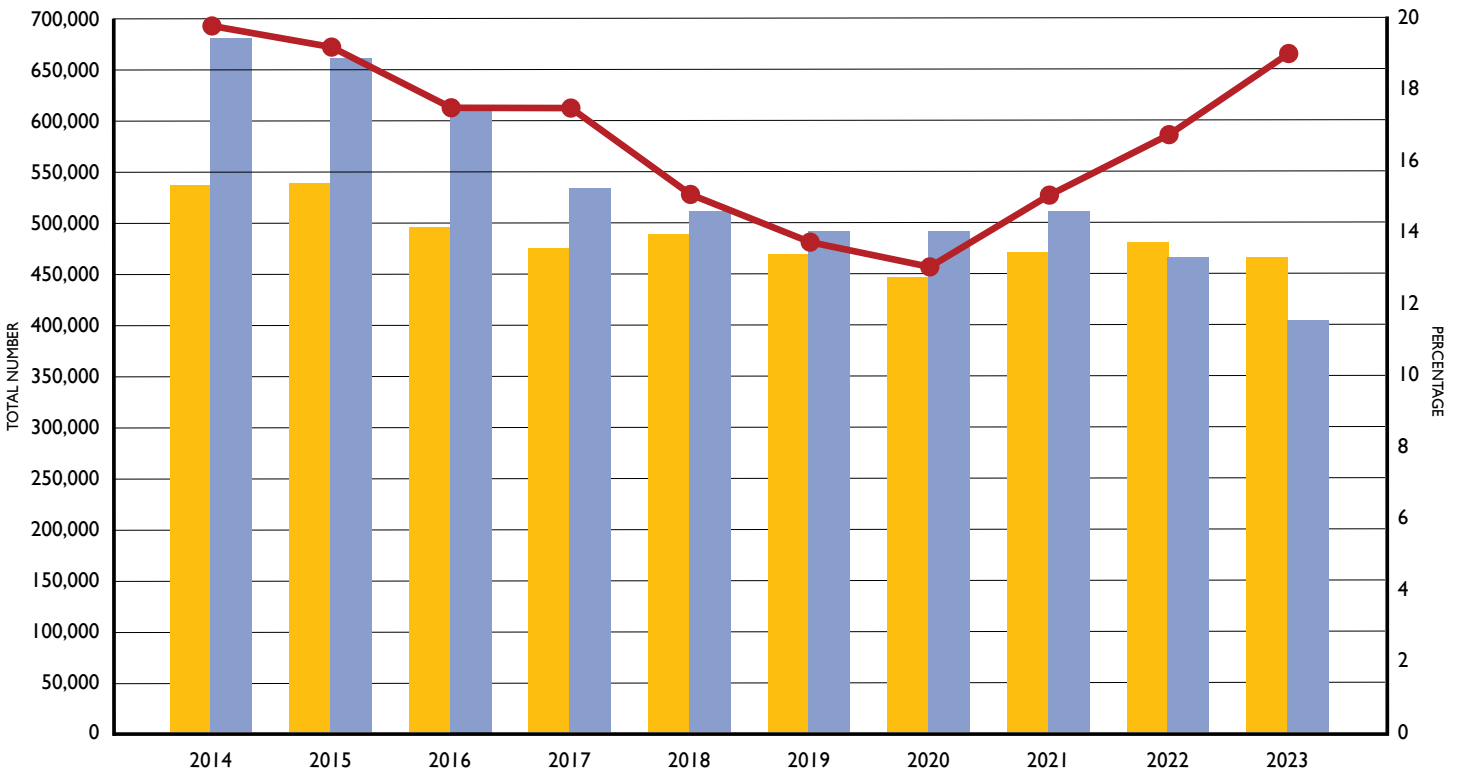
Arkansas has the sixth highest poverty rate nationwide. Data released by the Census Bureau for 2023 show that the poverty level remains high in Arkansas even though it has decreased for some individuals. The poverty rate in Arkansas is approximately 15.7%, significantly higher than the national average of 12.7%.⁶ High poverty rates are closely correlated with high rates of food insecurity.

Unfortunately, these are not new problems. Arkansans have consistently suffered both high poverty levels and high rates of food insecurity over the past decade, and the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated these issues. Over the past 10 years, Arkansas's poverty rate, the number of people who earn at or below the federal poverty guidelines, has been consistently higher than the national average and ranks us in the bottom seven states.

The Intersection of Race and Food Insecurity

In 2018, a study examining the impact of structural racism on food insecurity found that “the relationship between race/ethnicity and food insecurity is complex and is clearly intertwined with other established determinants of food insecurity including poverty, unemployment, incarceration, and disability.”⁷ There is a clear concentration of social and economic disadvantage over the lifetime of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) that contributes significantly to higher rates of food insecurity. The USDA has been tracking food insecurity for more than two decades; and even though food insecurity has risen and fallen over that time, the data shows a continual gap in the rate for BIPOC individuals compared to Whites.⁸ Current data shows that Black and Hispanic individuals face food insecurity at a rate more than double their White counterparts.

Figure 1. Comparing Arkansas's Poverty, Food Insecurity, and SNAP Enrollment Data



*Source: US Census Bureau, "Income & Poverty Data Tables," Census.gov, November 22, 2021. <https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/data/tables.html>.

**Source: Arkansas Department of Human Services. "SFY 2023 DHS STATISTICAL REPORT," August 27, 2024. <https://humanservices.arkansas.gov/wp-content/uploads/Annual-Statistical-Report-2023.pdf>.

***Source: Author Analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Household Food Security in the United States, Reports from 2014 - 2023

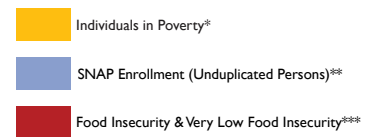
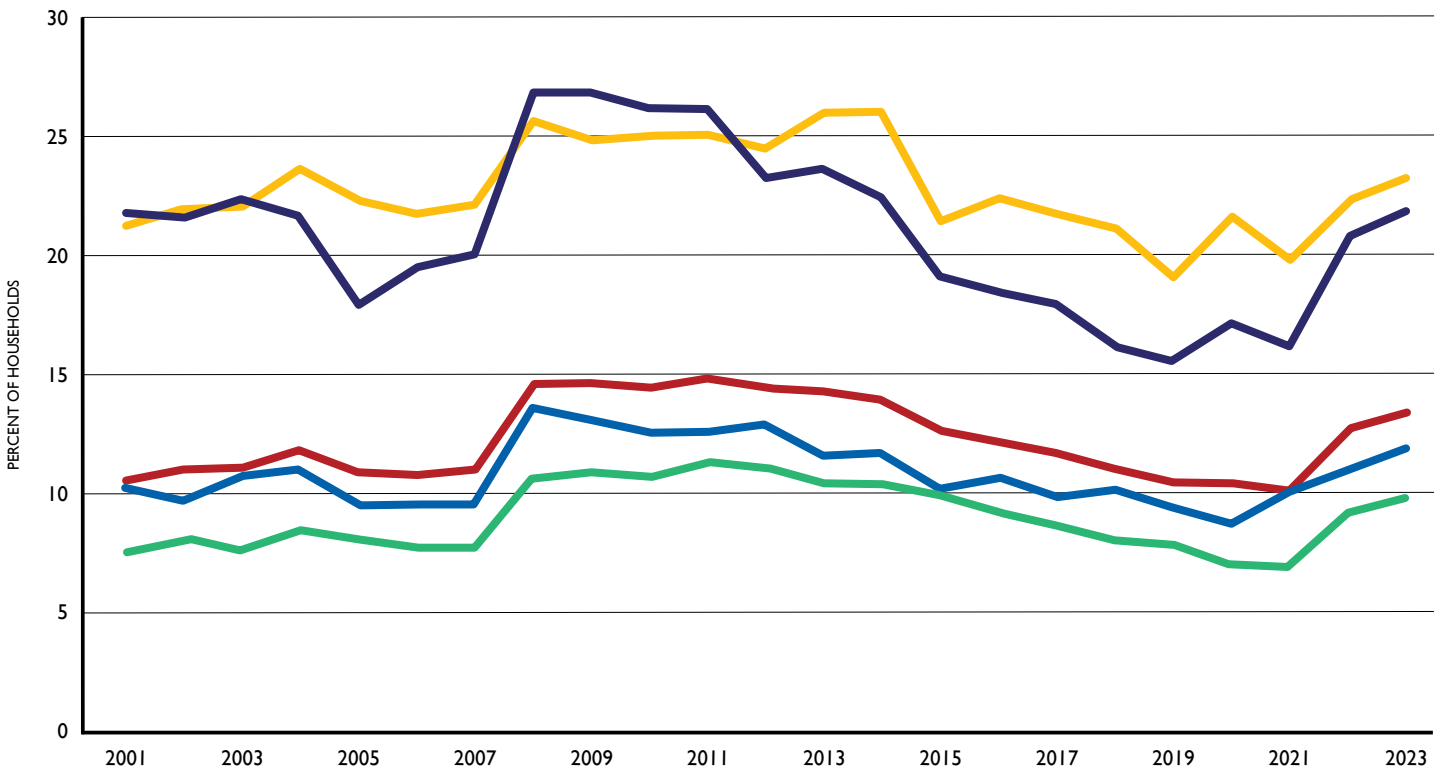


Figure 2.
Trends in Food Insecurity by Race and Ethnicity, 2001-2023⁹



Note: The “Other, non-Hispanic” category for the race and ethnicity of a household reference person includes non-Hispanic adults that identify as multiple races or ethnicities including American Indian, Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander. There are not sufficient respondents in the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement to present reliable estimates for these individual groups for all outcomes, so they are grouped together into the “Other, non-Hispanic” category.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements data.



This trend continues when looking at childhood food insecurity. Even when controlling for socioeconomic, health, education, and other factors, racial disparities continue to exist. Thanks to continued research, it is becoming increasingly understood that structural racism is a significant factor in outcomes for children.¹⁰ Structural racism is “the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color.”¹¹ So, when evaluating structural racism in terms of food security policy, we must look not only at the historical context, but also at the current norms that hold BIPOC communities at a disadvantage while over-advantaging Whites.

More work needs to be done to connect qualified individuals with safety net programs to address food security, and we need to increase targeted programs to reduce poverty. However, if we want to address food insecurity holistically, we must work more broadly to develop “policy and programmatic strategies that promote equity in food access and health by addressing the legacy of racial, ethnic, and class inequality.”¹²

SNAP: A Powerful Anti-Hunger and Anti-Poverty Program

SNAP is a federal anti-hunger program administered by states that plays a vital role in addressing food insecurity among households with low incomes. It plays a critical role in Arkansas, where, despite some improvement over the past year, poverty continues to remain high and causes significant challenges for Arkansas families due to the intersection of poverty and food insecurity. Working families, children, senior citizens, and disabled individuals rely on SNAP to help supplement them with good quality, healthy foods.

This federal program is overseen by the USDA, and funds are given to the states. The states administer the program; but since there is a lot of flexibility in how states can do that, an individual's experience with SNAP is highly dependent on where they live. For example, while the federal program has set a floor of 130% of the federal poverty guideline to determine SNAP eligibility, some states have adopted higher income level thresholds, making SNAP available to a greater share of their population.

Participants receive their monthly benefits through an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) system. EBT makes the issuance of benefits much easier through electronic transactions.¹³ It means that SNAP recipients automatically receive their benefits monthly on their EBT card without having to be in the office to load benefits. Instead, as soon as their benefits are transferred each month, participants can go to an approved SNAP retailer and purchase SNAP eligible foods.



Who is eligible to receive SNAP in Arkansas?

- U.S. citizens or, under certain limited circumstances, non-citizens who are lawfully present. Some of those categories include lawful permanent residents, refugees, asylees, and victims of trafficking. As of 2024, “lawfully present non-citizens” includes the large population of Marshallese migrants who live and work in Arkansas legally but are part of the Compact of Free Association (COFA) and who were previously excluded from receiving SNAP benefits.
- Must be residents of Arkansas. Although SNAP benefits are federal, they are administered by the states, so participants can only receive benefits in one state.
- The household must have a gross income at or below 130% of the federal poverty level. For an average family of three in Arkansas for Fiscal Year 2025, that would be \$33,576 annually or \$2,798 a month. The household must have net income, after allowed expenses are accounted for, at or below the federal poverty level (for the same family of three, that would be \$25,824 annually, or \$2,152 monthly).
- The household must not have more than \$3,000 in resources, or \$4,500 if the household includes someone with a disability or someone 60 or older. The asset limit is the same regardless of household size.
- The household must meet work registration requirements if not excluded. Generally, all household members between ages 16-59 who are able to work must meet work registration requirements, unless they meet a specific exemption.[†] Failing to meet these requirements results in that individual being removed from SNAP temporarily, or, after a second violation, becoming permanently ineligible. Household members who qualify must also meet the requirements for Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) by working at least 80 hours a month unless they meet exceptions.¹⁴

[†] Most 16- and 17-year-olds meet the exemption by being enrolled in school.

Who is receiving SNAP in Arkansas?

SNAP in Arkansas serves a diverse demographic, including families with children, elderly individuals, and people with disabilities;† families that live in urban and rural areas, and working families struggling to pay for necessities that have risen exponentially high.

In Arkansas, for the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2023, 402,521, unduplicated persons relied on SNAP. That was 13% of the population. This included 170,487 children (42% of all recipients) and 28,319 senior citizens over 65 (7% of all recipients).¹⁵ This is problematic because nearly 16% of the population is under 100% of the poverty guidelines, making them presumptively eligible since the income limit is 130%. Approximately 21% of the population is below 130% of the federal poverty guideline.¹⁶

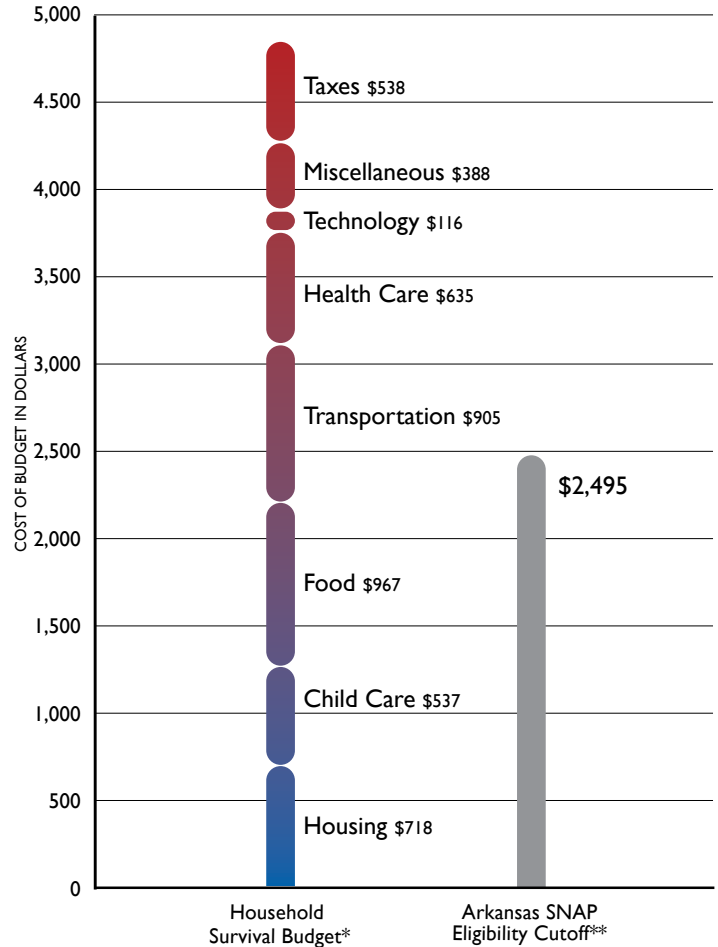
USDA data from 2020 (the most recent year available) show that only 69% of eligible Arkansans were enrolled in SNAP. That is the third lowest participation rate behind only North Dakota (63%) and Wyoming (52%).¹⁷ A staggering 31% of eligible participants are not enrolled in SNAP and are missing out on critical food assistance.

Furthermore, new data show that 31%, or 366,907, of Arkansas households are identified as ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed). These households earn above the federal poverty guidelines but cannot afford the basic cost of living in their county.¹⁸ ALICE families are largely ineligible for benefits even though they cannot meet the cost of living because federal program eligibility relies on an outdated measure from the 1960s that doesn't accurately account for cost of living in today's world, the federal poverty guidelines. As of 2022, the actual cost of living in every county in Arkansas was much higher the federal poverty guidelines.

42% of all recipients on SNAP were children (170,487 kids) in 2023.

† Arkansas did not report how many disabled individuals are on SNAP. Nationwide, the USDA estimates that 19% of all households include a non-elderly individual with a disability.

Figure 3.
Arkansas ALICE Monthly Survival Budget for Two Adults and One Preschooler (Age 3-4) Compared to Arkansas SNAP Income Eligibility Cutoff



*Source of the data: <https://www.unitedforalice.org/household-budgets/arkansas>

**Source: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocs/CED-HHS-Poverty-Guidelines-2022.pdf>

Given this outdated measure, families are forced off benefits for earning just over the 130% limit. This is known as a benefit cliff. Forty-four states have now adopted a higher income and/or asset limit through the adoption of “Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility.”¹⁹ States have chosen income limits anywhere from 150% to 200% of the poverty guidelines. Not only does this mitigate benefit cliffs, it helps states reach more families in need of food assistance.

Instead of enacting policies to broaden SNAP eligibility and enroll more food-insecure individuals and families, Arkansas’s lawmakers have made choices that uphold and create new

barriers to enrollment. As a result, Arkansas continues to see large decreases in participation from year to year. This is true even though the state’s poverty level has not decreased by a similar measure.

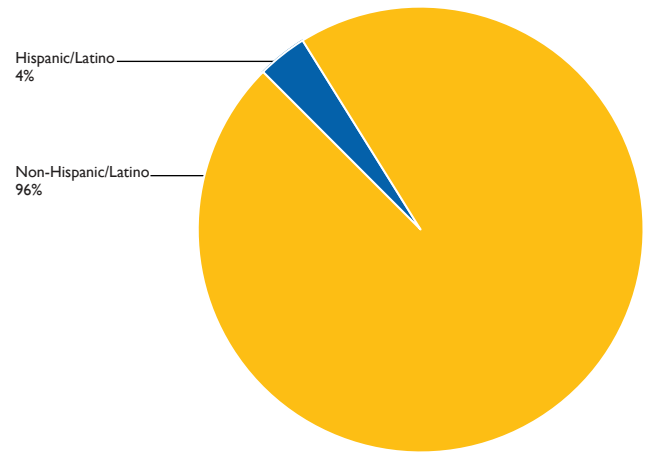
For example, the state has made it significantly harder to apply for SNAP by implementing additional requirements that have resulted in a 30-page application form. And, although the application is printed in Spanish and Marshallese, the Marshallese application is translated so poorly that Marshallese advocates report that it cannot be

understood.²⁰ Marshallese families are some of the most food insecure in our state.²¹ Now that Marshallese-born individuals are eligible to apply for SNAP, it is incumbent upon the Arkansas Department of Human Services to work with native speakers to develop outreach and educational materials that are accurate and that convey the requirements in simple terms. State officials have reported that they are working with a provider for a new translation. Given that not everyone has access to a computer or the ability to complete the form online, the ability to access and submit a paper application is a minimum requirement.

Household Composition of SNAP Enrollees in Arkansas, Fiscal 2023

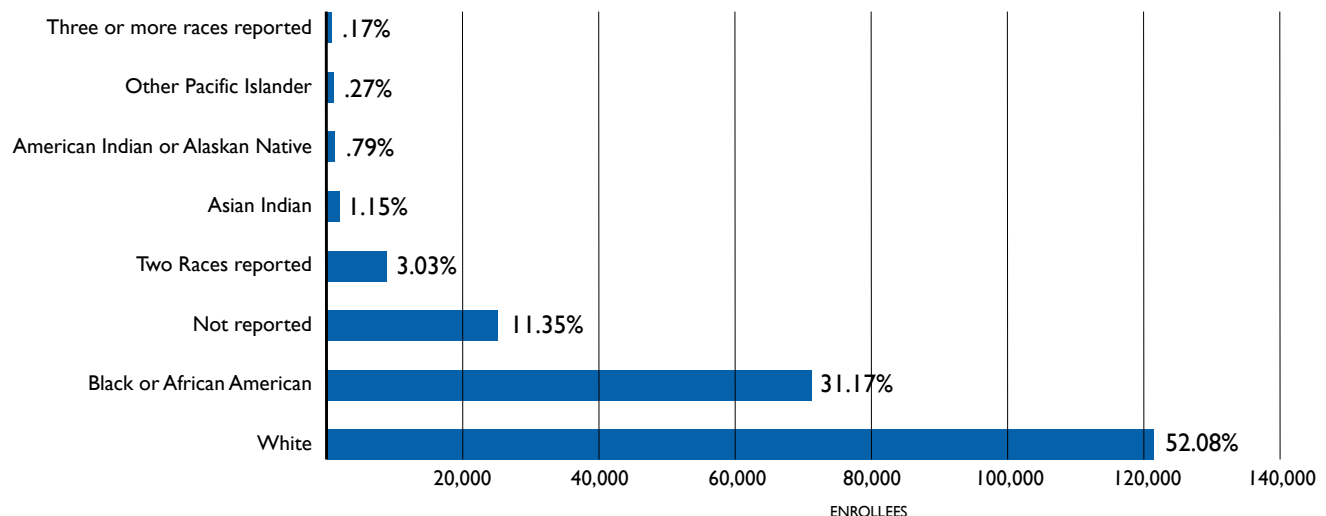
- 42% of SNAP recipients were children (under age 18)
- 7% of SNAP recipients were elderly (with or without a disability)
- Race and ethnicity reflects the diversity of our state:
 - The largest group of SNAP participants were White (52.08% or 121,235)
 - 72,544 of SNAP participants were Black or African American (31%)
 - Other Pacific Islander SNAP participants, which should include Marshallese who are born in the United States, were less than 1% of all participants (629 total, and 0.27%)
 - 3.76% of SNAP participants were Hispanic or Latino (8,430)

Figure 4. SNAP Enrollment by Ethnicity, 8/27/2024



Source for Figures 4 and 5: Data received from Arkansas Department of Human Services as of August 27, 2024

Figure 5. SNAP Enrollment by Race, 8/27/2024



From Food Stamps to SNAP

The SNAP program was initially created and known as the Food Stamp program during the Great Depression. For every \$1.00 in stamps that a family purchased, the federal government provided \$0.50 in stamps that could be used to purchase those commodities that farmers had in excess.²²

The program as implemented in 1939 was temporary and was not particularly created to address hunger. Instead, the program was created primarily to help White farmers get rid of their surplus crops, and it benefited primarily White families that found themselves in need due to the Great Depression. One major problem for those families who were at the lowest income levels before the Great Depression is that they had to first be on benefits to be eligible and they had to have funds to purchase the orange stamps to receive the blue surplus stamps.²⁵ This impacted who could participate in the program.

The idea that only certain people were worthy of assistance predated the New Deal programs but were ingrained in the policies of the time. “The original proponents of mothers’ pension programs made clear that a child’s deservingness for aid depended on the mother’s character; to state and local program administrators, that often meant aiding white children of widowed mothers, not children of unwed or Black mothers. Federal policymakers designing later cash assistance programs preserved much of states’ and localities’ discretion over mothers’ pension programs.” Black families were largely excluded from participating in the Food Stamp program as state administrators had authority to decide eligibility.²⁶ This was the Jim Crow era, in which state and local statutes explicitly legalized racial segregation with the purpose of denying Black people access to opportunities to the benefit of Whites. Many wealthy White people believed assistance should go to the “deserving poor,” or White families who had suddenly been impacted by the Great Depression and did not deserve to suffer for their unintended losses.

In the 1960s, during the Civil Rights Movement, President Johnson signed the first legislation that made the Food Stamp program permanent. It also provided the first protections for individuals by prohibiting “discrimination on the bases of race, religious creed, national origin, or political beliefs.”²⁷ However, because of



Orange stamps were good for any grocery item the purchaser chose, except drugs, liquor, and items consumed on the premises.²⁵



Blue stamps bought only surplus foods—dairy products, eggs, citrus fruits, prunes, and fresh vegetables.²⁴

the strong negative connotation that the idea of “welfare” had, the program became closely associated with the idea of laziness or people who didn’t need the benefits.

In the 1990s, under President Bill Clinton, the Food Stamp program became tightly tied to work through welfare reform and excluded most legal migrants from receiving SNAP, including Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs or green card holders) who had not been in the United States for a minimum of five years.²⁸ In 2008, the Farm Bill changed the name of the Food Stamp program to SNAP in an effort to decrease stigma. In December 2019, new and stricter work requirements for “able-bodied” adults without children ensured that 700,000 SNAP recipients would no longer be eligible for benefits.²⁹

What Role does the Federal Government Play in SNAP?

SNAP is the largest federal nutrition assistance program. It accounted for 68% of all USDA nutrition spending in 2023.³⁰ SNAP is funded through the Farm Bill, instead of the Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) like many other nutrition programs including the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), school meals, etc. The goal of SNAP is to address food insecurity and improve overall diet quality for individuals with low incomes.³¹ The Farm Bill needs to be reviewed every five years, and funding decisions made as part of this process impact how states implement the program. The federal government sets a minimum standard for states, such as income guidelines, but states have the flexibility to implement more than the minimums that are allowed. Arkansas has historically not chosen to be more flexible and instead has created significant hardships for Arkansas families that need access to this critical safety net program.

At the federal level, the Farm Bill has been extended a couple of times and is now set to expire in September. Current budget proposals, however, call for reductions in future SNAP benefits to help pay for tax cuts that mostly go to the wealthy. These proposals would threaten the benefits that help families afford groceries at a time when food prices have risen sharply. A big part of the reduction would come from a freeze on adjustments to the Thrifty Food plan, the underlying rate that sets benefit amounts. Other proposals call for changing the SNAP funding structure, which would force cuts at the state level, as well as changes to eligibility for parents, foster youth and others. In the newly elected Congress that took office in January, Arkansas's Senator John Boozman is Chairman of the Agriculture Committee and will play a leading role in writing the new Farm Bill. His role will be key in determining whether SNAP benefits are sufficient and keep up with inflation, and whether funding caps and participation restrictions keep needy families from participating in this essential program.

The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic exacerbated child hunger in Arkansas, as it did many existing issues, and at the height of the pandemic in the summer of 2020, food insecurity rates rose to about 11% of White households with children and to more than 23% of both Latino and Black households with children. We know that the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected BIPOC families in Arkansas and nationwide, showcasing racial and social disparities that exist between different populations.³² While there are many factors that may contribute to these disparities, equity (whether health, socioeconomic, education or otherwise) still does not exist for BIPOC families.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant increase in the number of individuals applying for and receiving SNAP benefits. In response to the increased demand, the federal government implemented temporary measures, such as the emergency allotments program, which provided additional funds to households. These measures were instrumental in sustaining food security for many families during challenging times.[†]

At the state level, Arkansas applied for many waivers from the federal government to allow greater access to the SNAP program. One example was not requiring face-to-face interviews prior to approval or recertification. During the height of the pandemic, enrollment surged by over 25%,³³ reflecting the economic hardships faced by many families.

Unfortunately, many of the modifications and extensions that helped struggling families during the pandemic were not made permanent. Federal guidelines allowed extended benefits until February 2023, when the federal government declared the end of the public health emergency. Arkansas, however, ended the additional benefits at the end of June 2021, leading to significant hardships for families who relied on SNAP just when inflation began to soar, increasing food costs, gas prices, and housing costs.

On average, **53,498** SNAP households had at least one person working from December 1, 2023, to November 1, 2024.^{††}

[†] State Fiscal Year 2021 for SNAP was from July 1, 2020 - June 30, 2021, capturing the height of the pandemic and the when increased benefit allotments were put in place to help mitigate challenges associated with the ongoing COVID pandemic.

^{††} Author analysis of Arkansas Department of Human Services data.

How State Policy is Keeping Families from Success

States have a lot of leeway in setting eligibility levels, duration of benefits and other restrictions in safety net programs. Here are some Arkansas policies that make it harder for families to access benefits:

- Arkansas is one of only 13 states that continues to have an asset limit, or a limit on how much money a family can have in their bank account, the value of an additional vehicle, etc., and still have access to SNAP. Most states have chosen to eliminate the asset limit. Arkansas maintains the lowest asset limit, which means that families cannot save sufficient money to support themselves, save for emergencies, or achieve the economic security needed to transition off benefits.
- We are one of six states that does not take advantage of flexibilities that would allow more food insecure families to access SNAP through “Broad Based Categorical Eligibility.”³⁴
- Requiring individuals to be registered with child support enforcement harms single mothers and their families. Families who were never married and are co-parenting and have agreements about child support already are forced into this system, and it causes more problems than it solves.
- Increasing requirements to include checks with the Lottery and Racing Commission delays application processing and puts families at risk of missing meals.
- We have strict time limits and work-reporting requirements in place for adults on SNAP. Arkansas reinstated these requirements in 2016 for all counties, even those with the highest poverty and unemployment rates, though federal law would have allowed more flexibility at the county level.

None of these choices benefit the families who receive SNAP in Arkansas. Instead, they make it significantly harder for families to receive benefits and literally are taking food away from children.



How SNAP is Working (or Not Working) for Families in Arkansas

Recently proposed federal changes to the SNAP program have not been targeted primarily toward ensuring the alleviation of hunger, but instead on excluding as many people from the benefits as possible. However, we must also look at how Arkansas made policy choices and legislative changes to the program that create barriers to access for food insecure families.

The Arkansas Legislature has continued restricting the program to the detriment of Arkansas's food-insecure children and families. Arkansas is one of nine states with the strictest asset-limit cap of all the states.³⁵ An asset limit requires that applicants for SNAP not only have very low income but also that any resources owned, such as property or money in bank accounts, are valued below the cap. Forty-one states/territories have eliminated asset limits or significantly raised them, with the understanding that programs like SNAP need to allow families to save money so they can transition off of SNAP and be less likely to fall back into poverty.

Most financial advisors recommend keeping three to six months of expenses in savings. But living expenses have gone up significantly since the pandemic. A family of three in Arkansas can earn \$33,576 and still qualify for SNAP. To have six months of expenses, it would mean having at least \$16,788 in savings. Yet, Arkansas maintains the strictest asset limit at \$3,000 (\$4,500 for individuals with disabilities and those 60 or older). That is not enough for one month of expenses. In the 2023 session, while certain legislators attempted to raise the asset limit for all SNAP participants (first to \$12,500 and then a lowered amount of \$6,000 in an effort to compromise), the final version of the bill did not result in an across-the-board asset limit increase.³⁶ If we want families to be successful at transitioning off benefits, the asset limit should be eliminated altogether to ensure that families can save to become financially secure.

Although SNAP could help lift many thousands of Arkansans out of poverty and reduce child hunger, many families face challenges that actually or effectively make the program inaccessible. For example, Marshallese families have the highest food insecurity in Arkansas. Those who were born in the Marshall Islands, and who live and work legally in the United States, were categorically ineligible for SNAP benefits until Congress changed the law in March 2024.³⁷ For others, the strict documentation requirements can be a challenge. For many rural participants who lack access to Internet services, online applications are not accessible, and they may face transportation challenges in going to county offices to apply.

A new state-level proposal by Arkansas Governor Sarah Sanders seeks to put restrictions on how families use SNAP, seeking to prohibit “highly processed, unhealthy junk food” purchases. While details of the proposal weren't available for this report, in general, measures to limit food choices should be approached with caution. Many Arkansans with low incomes live in food deserts, especially in rural areas, and those families don't have as much flexibility to buy fresh produce or products that haven't been processed. Further, this type of niche measure isn't addressing the root causes of why Arkansas is failing at SNAP: it doesn't make high-quality foods more accessible, it doesn't make SNAP more accessible to those who need it, and it doesn't make benefits more adequate for purchasing a healthy diet.

Arkansas Knows How to Address Food Insecurity; We've Done it Before

We know that food insecurity and poverty are serious in Arkansas. This has been an ongoing concern. And we know that Arkansas has the power to adopt equitable policies that will address the high food insecurity rates. We've done it before:

National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the National School Breakfast Program (NSB) in Arkansas

School breakfast and lunch programs play a critical role in addressing childhood food insecurity in Arkansas. In 2023, 275,057 students participated in school meals programs and, of those, roughly 49,000 only qualified for reduced-price meals. During the COVID pandemic, waivers granted to schools allowed for Universal Free Meals, but those waivers expired in 2023 and schools had to go back to regular processes. However, Arkansas took a positive step to guarantee free meals for low-income students with Act 656 of 2023.³⁸ All students eligible for reduced-price meals became eligible for free meals with no additional work on their part, starting with the 2023 – 2024 school year.

49,000 additional children received free meals in the 2023-2024 school year thanks to Act 656.

Protecting Disabled Combat Veterans' Benefits from SNAP Limits

Act 201³⁹ passed in 2023 as well. It requires the Department of Human Services (DHS) to apply for a waiver to exclude any disability payments for a combat-related injury from the SNAP income limits. Although this applies to a relatively small number of individuals, this is a first step in protecting those most vulnerable from being subject to a benefit cliff because of a disability. We should know how many disabled

individuals are on SNAP, and the state should be reporting that data clearly. Income related to disabilities shouldn't be used to put a family over a benefit cliff because the standard deductions don't consider the increase in expenses disabled individuals have, whether for medical or adaptive equipment or even access and transportation. The fact that a disabled individual receives disability payments should not be used against them.

293,000 children participated in Summer EBT in 2024, receiving \$120 each to offset childhood hunger.

New Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) Program

During the COVID-19 pandemic the federal government created a new program to address childhood hunger called Pandemic EBT. Each eligible child received a designated amount of funds for summer months because not all summer feeding sites were open and available to families and prices at the grocery stores were steadily increasing. Children also received funds during the school year for any days that COVID closed the school and school meals were therefore not available.

This program was very successful and helped create the basis for what is now a permanent program Summer EBT. The program allowed each eligible child to receive \$120.00 for food to offset summer hunger. Governor Sanders agreed to allow the state to participate in this program in 2024, and an estimated 293,000[†] children participated in the first summer. In fact, the program was so successful, the Governor has already approved Arkansas to participate again in 2025 to help eliminate childhood hunger.

[†] Data provided by Arkansas Department of Human Services, but as of 12/12/2024 the number has not been finalized.

Policy Recommendations

Arkansas doesn't have to accept high poverty and food insecurity rates. It's hard to argue that the state has a budget surplus when the majority of lawmakers aren't engaging in policies that would address the specific needs of Arkansans who daily have insufficient food or are having to make decisions between buying food or paying for rent. The following policy recommendations would help alleviate hunger in our state:

- Arkansas should repeal the asset limit for SNAP. Making sure that families can save enough funds to be stable when transitioning off benefits is vital to ensuring family economic security.
- Arkansas should repeal the requirement to participate with child support enforcement. This policy delays access to benefits and creates undue burden on families.
- Arkansas should raise the income limit to 200% of the federal poverty guidelines. This would help eliminate a benefit cliff and allow additional families that are struggling to participate in SNAP.
- Arkansas should allow “broad-based categorical eligibility” so that families who qualify for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program are categorically eligible for SNAP. This would increase access to benefits for families without additional work.
- Arkansas should reduce the length of the SNAP application. While ours is 30 pages, state applications are typically half that length or less.
- Arkansas should add funds into the program to ensure benefit adequacy so that families are able to buy healthier options.
- Arkansas should simplify the application process so that eligible families are receiving access to needed benefits as soon as possible.
- Arkansas should adopt Universal School Meals, allowing all students to participate in free meals regardless of family income. A big step in this direction would be establishing free breakfast for all students, which is under consideration in the current state legislative session. The proposal has the support of Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders.



Appendix

SNAP is used at an estimated 2,600 retailers statewide, helping boost local economies while reducing hunger. But with numerous enrollment barriers in place, Arkansas participation

is typically low. Though the income eligibility level is higher than the federal poverty rate, participation in most counties is lower than the number of people who live in poverty.

SNAP at the County Level in Arkansas

County	Total SNAP Dollars Allocated**†	People Who Used SNAP in 2023†	Number of People at or Below Poverty in 2023‡	Percent of People at or Below Poverty in 2023‡
ARKANSAS	\$3,357,905	2,449	2,697	16.8%
ASHLEY	\$5,406,213	3,750	3,338	18.4%
BAXTER	\$5,786,561	4,608	6,746	16.0%
BENTON	\$18,018,281	15,011	23,885	7.8%
BOONE	\$6,298,599	5,130	5,660	14.9%
BRADLEY	\$2,653,748	1,940	2,314	23.2%
CALHOUN	\$687,576	531	639	14.3%
CARROLL	\$3,551,062	2,837	4,232	14.8%
CHICOT	\$3,627,393	2,600	2,621	29.7%
CLARK	\$4,124,972	3,117	3,512	18.9%
CLAY	\$2,591,001	2,141	2,454	17.5%
CLEBURNE	\$3,839,321	3,044	3,387	13.5%
CLEVELAND	\$1,225,614	911	1,147	15.7%
COLUMBIA	\$5,214,828	3,968	4,704	23.3%
CONWAY	\$3,910,729	2,943	3,566	17.1%
CRAIGHEAD	\$23,044,571	16,803	17,811	16.1%
CRAWFORD	\$10,548,278	8,150	8,147	13.3%
CRITTENDEN	\$14,470,072	10,513	9,578	20.6%
CROSS	\$3,466,316	2,588	3,091	19.1%
DALLAS	\$1,266,639	1,006	1,162	19.6%
DESHA	\$3,640,588	2,638	2,598	25.0%
DREW	\$3,743,780	2,788	3,365	20.6%
FAULKNER	\$14,919,487	11,610	16,042	12.9%
FRANKLIN	\$2,941,603	2,222	3,260	19.0%
FULTON	\$2,351,111	1,802	2,136	17.5%
GARLAND	\$19,332,830	14,543	18,604	18.9%
GRANT	\$2,144,766	1,686	2,018	11.1%
GREENE	\$9,585,212	7,293	7,390	16.2%
HEMPSTEAD	\$4,107,227	3,048	3,171	16.6%
HOT SPRING	\$6,047,033	4,461	5,155	16.9%
HOWARD	\$2,915,247	2,225	2,190	17.8%
INDEPENDENCE	\$5,897,675	4,627	5,006	13.5%
IZARD	\$2,571,077	2,054	2,637	20.3%
JACKSON	\$4,366,721	3,108	3,513	24.6%
JEFFERSON	\$20,549,059	14,336	14,081	24.3%
JOHNSON	\$5,464,429	4,292	4,377	17.1%

County	Total SNAP Dollars Allocated*†	People Who Used SNAP in 2023†	Number of People at or Below Poverty in 2023‡	Percent of People at or Below Poverty in 2023‡
LAFAYETTE	\$1,599,211	1,226	1,372	22.8%
LAWRENCE	\$3,895,112	3,063	2,882	18.3%
LEE	\$3,513,962	2,155	2,507	38.7%
LINCOLN	\$2,326,600	1,687	2,327	26.2%
LITTLE RIVER	\$2,495,529	1,894	2,060	7.7%
LOGAN	\$4,202,884	3,296	3,504	16.6%
LONOKE	\$8,822,504	6,848	7,223	9.6%
MADISON	\$2,587,051	2,047	2,601	14.8%
MARION	\$2,744,247	2,168	3,009	17.4%
MILLER	\$10,585,645	7,829	8,806	21.5%
MISSISSIPPI	\$12,955,975	9,430	9,378	24.9%
MONROE	\$2,085,850	1,517	1,686	26.3%
MONTGOMERY	\$1,362,143	1,027	1,600	18.8%
NEVADA	\$1,849,973	1,397	1,844	23.2%
NEWTON	\$1,199,083	968	1,313	18.8%
OUACHITA	\$5,672,079	4,057	4,018	18.8%
PERRY	\$1,704,547	1,331	1,421	14.1%
PHILLIPS	\$9,124,170	5,920	5,057	34.2%
PIKE	\$2,149,394	1,633	1,814	18.2%
POINSETT	\$6,527,958	4,829	4,214	19.1%
POLK	\$4,197,502	3,152	3,619	18.8%
POPE	\$8,920,000	6,965	8,387	13.5%
PRAIRIE	\$1,174,982	852	1,216	15.4%
PULASKI	\$85,854,713	64,418	61,392	15.7%
RANDOLPH	\$3,237,801	2,705	3,433	18.5%
SAINT FRANCIS	\$8,797,537	5,936	6,414	34.3%
SALINE	\$9,236,069	7,220	11,900	9.3%
SCOTT	\$2,868,544	2,153	1,882	19.5%
SEARCY	\$1,326,987	1,090	1,560	20.2%
SEBASTIAN	\$24,272,845	18,416	16,217	12.8%
SEVIER	\$3,070,793	2,353	2,888	18.7%
SHARP	\$4,095,846	3,272	3,495	19.7%
STONE	\$2,501,199	1,927	2,220	17.7%
UNION	\$8,770,789	6,302	6,969	19.0%
VAN BUREN	\$2,883,060	2,341	2,638	16.5%
WASHINGTON	\$21,664,706	17,625	34,017	13.5%
WHITE	\$13,901,569	10,655	11,899	15.7%
WOODRUFF	\$1,931,239	1,410	1,424	24.4%
YELL	\$3,412,627	2,634	3,261	16.5%
TOTAL 2023	\$533,190,249	402,521	459,701	15.4%

* Does not include adjustments due to cancellations.

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