

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

A Lifeline for Hungry Mainers

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MAINE
EQUAL



JUSTICE
PARTNERS

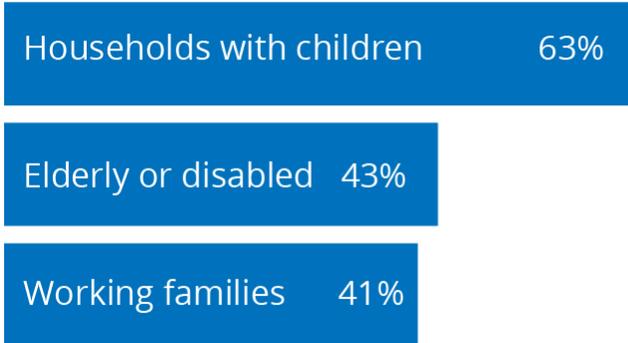


Preble
Street

SNAP in Maine

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) along with its predecessor, the Food Stamp Program, have been the foundation of anti-hunger efforts in Maine and the United States for more than five decades. **In a typical month in 2016, SNAP provided food assistance to approximately 189,000 individuals—one in every seven Mainers.**¹

SNAP Households in Maine



Overall, of all Mainers enrolled in SNAP, nearly **63%** are in households with **children**, more than **43%** are in households with members who are **elderly or have a disability**, and almost **41%** are in **working families**.² The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the federal agency charged with administering SNAP, has found that, throughout the nation, the share of SNAP households that have earnings is on the rise.³ In fact, today, one in ten of all Maine workers supplement their earnings with SNAP when they head to the grocery store.⁴

SNAP food benefits are *entirely federally funded*, with the program's administrative costs being *shared equally* by the State and federal governments. **The average Mainer receiving SNAP gets assistance of approximately \$109 per month—that's about \$1.20 per person per meal.**⁵



1 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2017). *Maine food supplement program*. Retrieved from: https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_maine.pdf

2 *ibid*

3 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2017). *SNAP increasingly serves the poor*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=82672>

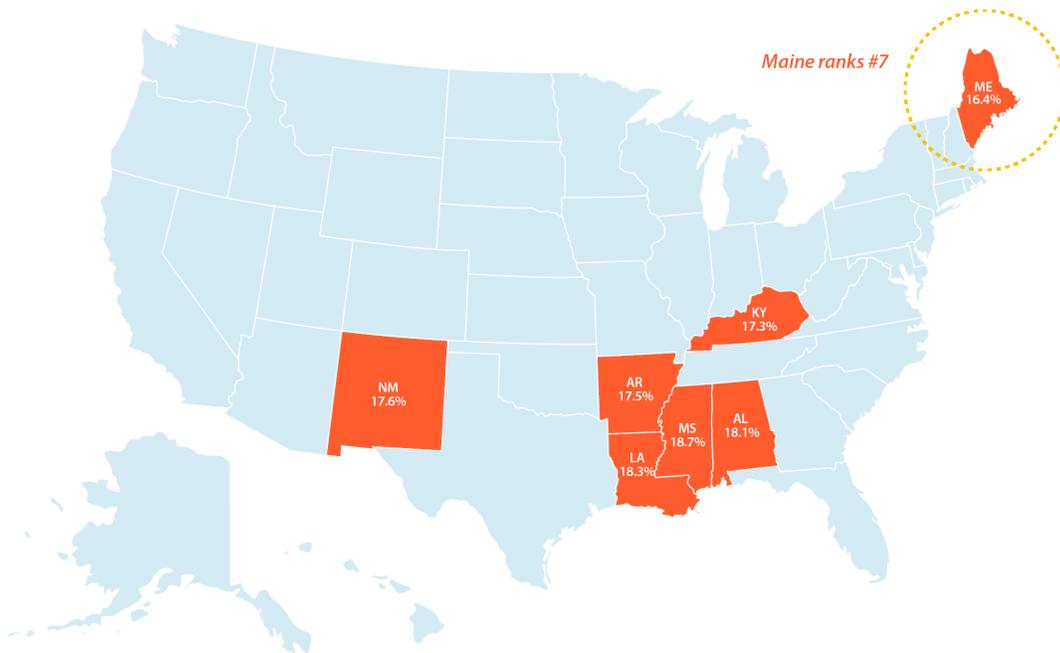
4 Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. (2017). *SNAP helps 1 in 10 workers in Maine put food on the table*. Retrieved from: https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/factsheets_8-31-17fa_me.pdf

5 U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2017). Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Retrieved from: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

The Prevalence and Severity of Food Insecurity in Maine

Each year, USDA's Economic Research Service works with the U.S. Census Bureau to conduct a survey assessing the extent to which households struggle to put enough food on the table. This year's report, issued on September 7, 2017, found that 16.4% of Mainers are food insecure. This means that these households had difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources. Maine's percentage of food insecure households is a striking 26% higher than the national average of 13%.⁶

Food insecurity nationwide

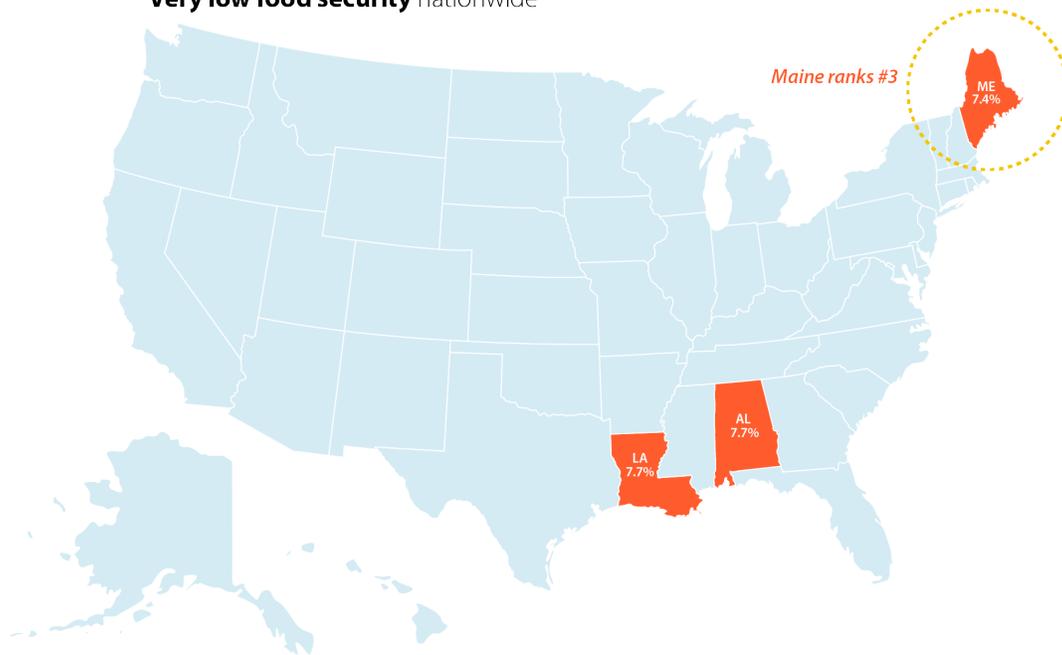


Maine now has the 7th highest rate of food insecurity in the nation, dropping two spots from last year's ranking of 9th worst. More troubling still, 45% percent of these households face an even more severe circumstance described as "very low food security". This equates to more severe hunger as food intake for these individuals is actually reduced and normal eating patterns disrupted at times during the year due to limited resources.⁷ By this measure, *Maine ranks third worst in the nation.*

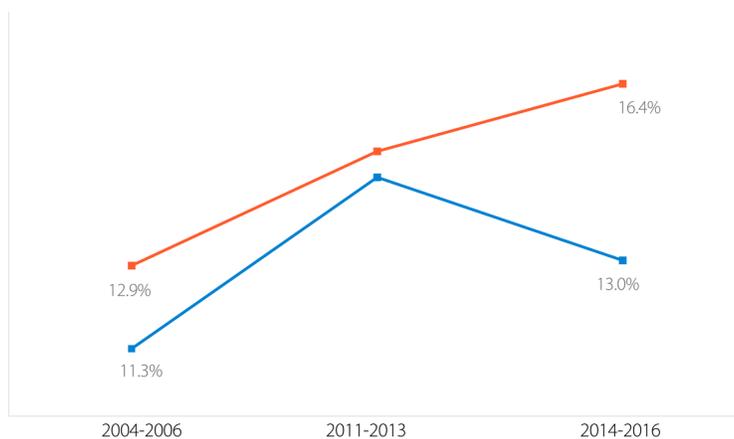
⁶ Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M., Gregory C., & Singh A. (2017). *Household food Security in the United States in 2016*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84973/err-237.pdf?v=42979>

⁷ *ibid*

Very low food security nationwide



To put these data in the context of our economy, Maine’s rate of food insecurity remains well above its pre-recession level of 12.9% between 2004-6, while the rest of the nation has made far greater progress in reducing the heightened rate of food insecurity that existed during the Recession era.⁸



Average Food Insecurity 2004-2016: ■ Maine vs ■ U.S.

Research conducted in Maine last year found that cuts to Maine’s SNAP program have deepened the state’s hunger crisis,⁹ contributing to its continuing high rates of food insecurity relative to other states. As Congress begins to debate President Trump’s proposed

8 ibid

9 Preble Street & Good Shepherd Food Bank. (2017). *Hunger pains: Widespread food insecurity threatens Maine’s future*. Retrieved from: <https://www.preblestreet.org/wp-content/uploads/Hunger-Pains-Final-Report-February-2017-4.pdf>

budget, which recommends cuts in federal funding for SNAP that would cost Maine an estimated \$444 million dollars over ten years,¹⁰ it is essential that policy makers consider the impact of cuts already made here in Maine and the high levels of hunger that have resulted. This report provides evidence of the importance of SNAP in Maine. It offers policy makers a window into how further SNAP cuts at the federal level would effect low-income Mainers who need help putting food on the table.

Survey Method; Participant Characteristics

This report presents findings from a survey of Maine families and individuals who receive, or have recently received, help from SNAP in order to determine how the program impacts their levels of food security and overall wellbeing.

Throughout June and July of 2017, **Maine Equal Justice Partners** and **Preble Street** partnered with the **Aroostook Agency on Aging**, the **Rural Community Action Ministry**, **Food and Medicine** and various other community groups to collect surveys from **over 430 Mainers** who currently or recently received SNAP benefits. Surveys were mainly collected at meal sites, childcare centers, facilities serving veterans and other community settings. The data were compiled and analyzed by Sandy Butler, Professor of Social Work at the University of Maine. Professor Butler has published multiple studies examining the circumstances of persons living in poverty throughout her career.

The study sought to better understand the circumstances of six particular sub-groups of SNAP recipients including older Mainers, families with children, people with disabilities, veterans, working families, and those living in rural areas.

While SNAP is widely recognized as the nation's most effective anti-hunger program; beyond that, the program is not well understood. For example, most people do not know that the highest proportion of SNAP recipients is children, followed next by people with disabilities and then older individuals.¹¹ Nor do they realize that SNAP is serving an increasing share of working families¹² and large numbers of veterans.¹³ Or that a higher percentage of people living in rural areas receive SNAP than those in urban areas.¹⁴

10 Leachman, M., Rosenbaum, D., Wolkomir, E. (2017). *President Trump's budget would shift SNAP costs to states, increasing risk of hunger and weakening responses to recession*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/president-trumps-budget-would-shift-snap-costs-to-states-increasing>

11 Gray, K.F., Fisher, S. & Lauffer, S. (2016) *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Fiscal year 2015*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support. Retrieved from: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/Characteristics2015.pdf> Table B5

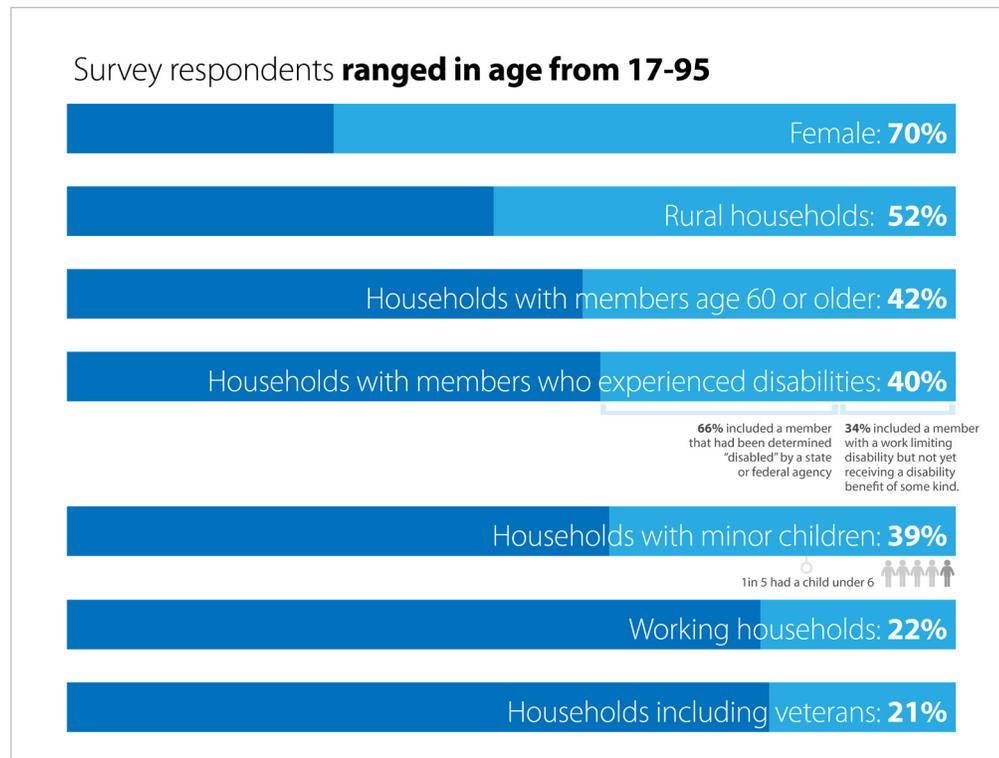
12 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2017). *SNAP increasingly serves the poor*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=82672>

13 National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. (2015). *Veteran poverty trends*. U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. Retrieved from: https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/specialreports/veteran_poverty_trends.pdf

14 Bailey, J.M. (2014). *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and rural households*. Center for Rural Affairs. Retrieved from: <http://files.cfra.org/pdf/snap-and-rural-households.pdf>

Because Maine is a rural state with one of the lowest average weekly wages in the nation¹⁵; the third highest percentage of veterans¹⁶, the highest percentage of citizens over age 65¹⁷ and the fifth highest rate of disability¹⁸, what happens to SNAP has a disproportionate impact on Maine people. This is particularly true as Maine's economy still struggles to recover from the Great Recession. That is why we asked representatives of these groups to tell us about their experience with SNAP and why it matters to them.

Efforts were made to oversample most of these groups as a means to better understand the level of food and financial hardships that they face, and the role that the SNAP program plays in reducing hunger and improving their health and well-being. It further examined



15 Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2017). The Economics Daily: *Average weekly wages highest in D.C. and lowest in Mississippi in fourth quarter 2016*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/average-weekly-wages-highest-in-dc-and-lowest-in-mississippi-in-fourth-quarter-2016.htm>

16 StateMaster.com. (n.d.). *Percent of civilian population who are veterans by state*, American Community Survey 2004. Retrieved from: http://www.statemaster.com/graph/peo_per_of_civ_pop_who_are_vet-percent-civilian-population-who-veterans

17 Kaiser Family Foundation. (2016). *Population distribution by age*. Retrieved from: <http://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-age/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

18 Kaiser Family Foundation. (2017). *Percentage of non-institutionalized population who reported a disability*. Retrieved from: <http://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/disability-prevalence/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

coping strategies respondents use when they run out of food and how these households believe they would fare without SNAP.

- › Survey respondents ranged in age from 17-95; 70% were female.
- › Rural households made up 52% of the sample.
- › Households with members aged 60 and older made up 42% of the sample.
- › Households with members who experienced disabilities made up 40% of the sample. Of these, 66% included a member that had been determined “disabled” by a state or federal agency, and 34% included a member with a work limiting disability but not yet receiving a disability benefit of some kind.
- › Households with minor children made up 39% of the sample; one in five included a child under age 6.
- › Working households made up 22% of the sample.
- › Households including veterans made up 21% of the sample.

It is important to note that these groups are not mutually exclusive and that survey respondents often fell into more than one group.

Not surprisingly SNAP serves a high percentage of people with disabilities. **People with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty, endure material hardships, and experience food insecurity.**¹⁹ Persons with disabilities appeared in nearly all sub-groups in this study with 72% of veteran households indicating at least one household member having a disability, and 56% of households of parents with minor children also indicating at one person in the household had a disability.

Among all respondents, high percentages noted that their households included a person with a serious and chronic health condition including arthritis (42%), asthma (30%), diabetes (26%), heart disease (20%), and cancer (7%). In addition, over one in four of those who wrote in additional health issues indicated having a mental health condition.

As noted above, SNAP is increasingly serving a larger share of working families. In Maine workers who participate in SNAP most commonly work in service occupations such as cooks or home health aides, and administrative support occupations such as customer service representatives and sales and related occupations such as cashiers or retail salespersons.²⁰ Many who work in these jobs do not earn wages that are high enough, or have enough hours available to put sufficient food on the table.

19 Carlson, S., Keith-Jennings, B., & Chaudhry, R. (2017). *SNAP provides needed food assistance to millions of people with disabilities*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-provides-needed-food-assistance-to-millions-of-people-with>

20 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2017). *Snap Supports Workers in Every State*; Maine. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbpp.org/snap-helps-workers-put-food-on-the-table#National>

The great majority of SNAP recipients—3 out of 4—of the 95 households surveyed with working age respondents without a disability are in fact working, or have recently worked. Twenty-one percent of these households included a person looking for work. More than half of the small percentage remaining include an adult in school; with others facing problems that interfered with their ability to work at the time of the survey.

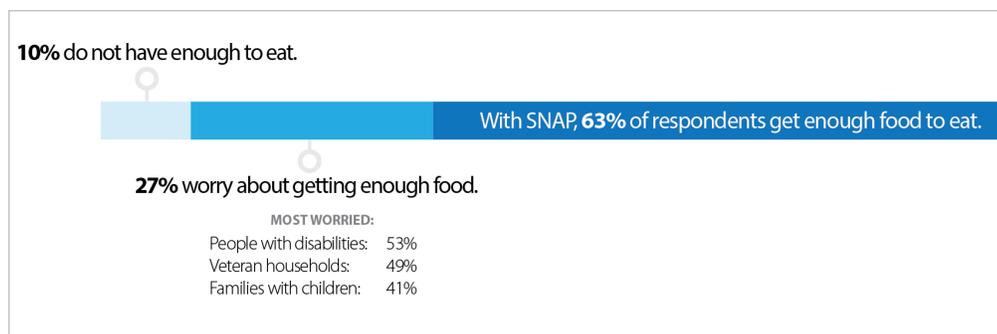
Twelve percent—one in eight—of these workers struggled with hours or work schedules that change so often that they can't depend on getting a steady amount of pay every week. Such irregular work schedules and the stress and economic instability that result are an increasing feature of the US economy, and may, in part, explain why more working families are turning to SNAP to make ends meet. While common myths about SNAP often portray it as discouraging work, these results show that to be far from the truth.

The Results: What We Learned from Maine's SNAP Households

SNAP helps most respondents get enough to eat, but a troubling minority still do not

Thanks to SNAP, 63% of survey respondents indicated they were getting enough to eat, albeit the majority report not always the food they needed for a well-balanced diet. Of great concern is that more than one in three of these families (37%) reported that they either worry each month that they won't have enough to eat, or actually don't get enough to eat. These data send a strong message that any further cuts to SNAP would be a risky proposition with consequences that would undoubtedly increase Maine's already unacceptably high rate of hunger.

“ I feed my son, not myself. ”
 –Rural working parent



- › 63% of respondents said that with SNAP, they get enough food to eat.
- › 27% of respondents worry about getting enough food.
- › 10% do not have enough to eat.

Among the sub-groups sampled, people with disabilities had the highest percent—over half (53%)—who worried every month about getting enough to eat, or did not actually get enough to eat. Both veteran households (49%) and families with children (41%) shared similar higher concern than the full sample. Notably, many parents commented that they would often go without food themselves in order to ensure that their children had enough to eat.

SNAP covers half or more of family food budgets for most

SNAP, by definition, is a supplement to families' food budgets, but is not intended to satisfy all of their food needs. It boosts their ability to purchase sufficient and nutritious foods. Many families living under severe financial strain often build their monthly budgets around SNAP, enabling them to use limited cash resources for other necessary bills or urgent financial crises.

The majority of respondents (59%) reported that SNAP covered half or more of their monthly food budget. But, for a significant minority (41%), it did not. In particular, veterans (52%) and older Mainers (47%) had a higher than average percent of households for whom SNAP provided less than half of monthly food costs. Due to receipt of Social Security and or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) many older Mainers receive the minimum SNAP benefit (just \$16 a month), and thus SNAP benefits cover less of their overall food costs. Nevertheless, many older Mainers have longer-term food challenges because they live on fixed incomes with less ability to respond to financial challenges, causing them to feel the impact of limited SNAP assistance more acutely.

SNAP reduces stress; it eases, but does not eliminate, overall financial strain on families

When asked what they like most about SNAP, respondents replied that it enabled them to purchase food and still pay their other bills (65%); that it lowered their stress and anxiety about having enough food (57%); and that they felt healthier because it enabled them to eat better (40%). As noted above the reality of these families' lives is that they are constantly challenged to

balance a budget in which expenses exceed income. SNAP eases, but does not eliminate that burden, by reducing the relentless daily competition between one basic household

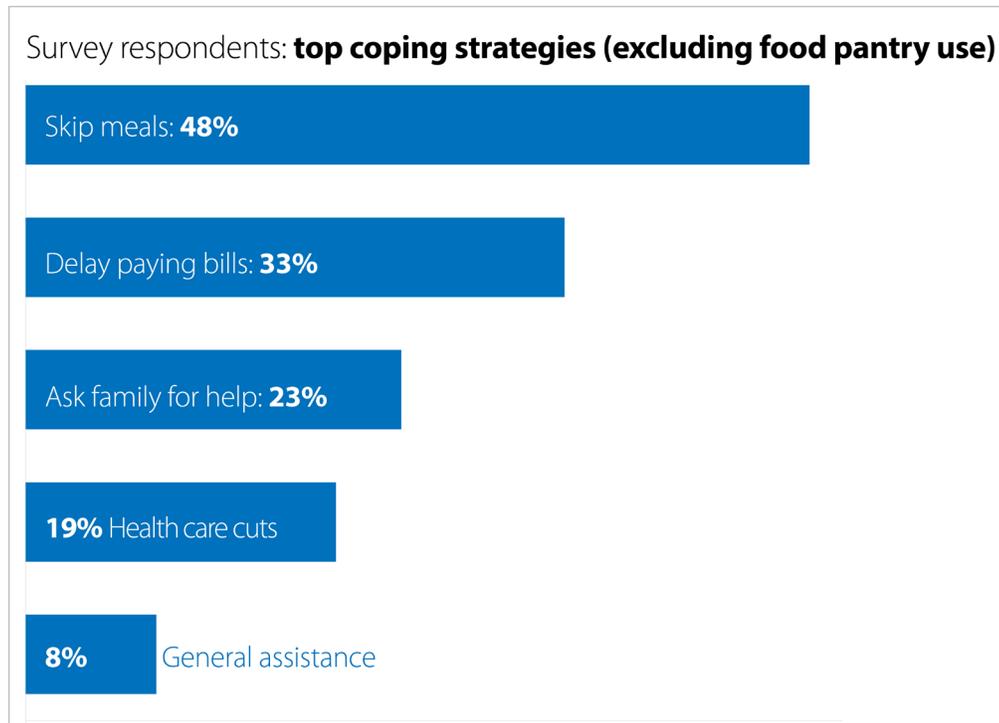
“ [What I like most about SNAP is the] dignity and trust extended to me to give back. Today is my last day on SNAP! ”

– Rural Mainer with a disability

need and another—competition in which, without SNAP, an adequate household diet is often the loser.

Notably, among the SNAP sub-groups surveyed, working households (78%) and families with children (68%) responded in the highest numbers that SNAP relieved their stress and anxiety about not having enough food. Conversely, older Mainers were the least likely to say that they experienced these effects.

SNAP recipients that run short of food cope by making painful choices; without SNAP, most would go without needed food



While most respondents (66%) coped by turning to food pantries when they run short of food, the majority of those (63%) noted that pantries would be a wholly inadequate substitute should they lose their SNAP benefits. Many pantries have limited hours and nearly half (47%) of respondents said that this inaccessibility, along with limited food supplies would be a barrier to them getting sufficient help from this source. While food pantries provide a crucial service for many in Maine, they cannot, nor were they ever intended, to meet the ongoing food needs of hungry Maine families.

“ Sometimes bills come before food. ”
 –Rural family with kids with disabled household members

Nearly half of all respondents (48%) reported that they cope by skipping meals when food runs short. One in three delayed paying their rent,

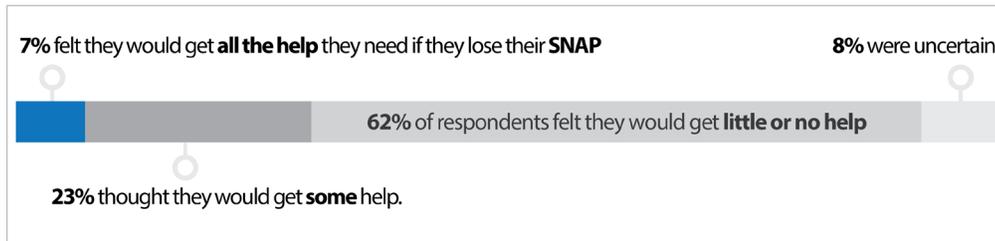
heating or utility bills; and less than a quarter (23%) turned to their family for help. Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) reported cutting back on medicine or other needed health care.

Among the sub-groups, households with disabilities were the most likely to skip meals when food ran short with 6 out of 10 coping in this manner. Households with disabilities were also the most likely to turn to food pantries for help. Veterans were the most likely to cut back on medicine or other health care to meet their food needs. They also reported skipping meals nearly as frequently as people with disabilities. A higher than average percentage of families with children also reported skipping meals, however, many parents commented that they would skip meals themselves to ensure that their children had enough to eat.

Older Mainers were the least likely to turn to their families for help.

Nowhere to turn

Perhaps the starkest indicator of why SNAP matters to families living in precarious financial circumstances was the survey response to a question about how much help respondents would get from family, friends or local charities if they lost their SNAP benefits. Fully 62% said that they would get very little or no help to get the food they needed and 23% said that they would get some help. A distinct minority, only 7%, said that they would get all the help they needed.



Among all sub-groups, responses from families with children showed that they were the least likely to receive the help they needed to avoid hunger should they lose their SNAP benefits with 71% expressing that concern. Households that included a member with a disability and working

households were close seconds in sharing this concern. It is possible that those who use food pantries—where many respondents to this study were recruited—are also those with very few other resources. These individuals may be more likely to indicate that they would

“ I couldn’t survive without SNAP; as is two weeks out of the month I struggle. ”
 —person with a heart condition living in a rural area

get little help elsewhere than individuals who receive SNAP but who do not use food pantries, and who are therefore less likely to be represented in this study.

Nearly all survey respondents see the harsh effects of hunger in their communities.

Overwhelmingly, respondents believed that hunger was present and having a serious impact on their communities. Only one percent said that they did not see any effects of hunger in their communities.

Two out of three respondents noted that people in their communities are less healthy because they can't afford better food. Two out of three also shared the belief that older Mainers were making trade-offs to get enough food to eat, having to choose between paying for prescription drugs and food. A majority (56%) of respondents believed that children were having trouble learning in school because they didn't have enough to eat; among families with children, fully two-thirds indicated that this was a problem in their communities. Sixty percent of the full sample believed that many people do not seek needed food assistance because they are too embarrassed to ask for it. This view was shared by more than two out of three (68%) working families.

Respondents living in rural areas described a number of barriers preventing them from getting enough to eat

Just over half (52%) of respondents to this survey identified themselves as living in a rural area. Recruitment strategies for this study purposefully sought to include Mainers living in rural regions of the state so as to get a better understanding of the unique circumstances and barriers that rural residents face.

Given the opportunity to respond to an open-ended question asking rural respondents to list the problems in their area that make it hard for people to get enough food to eat there were striking similarities in their responses. Not surprisingly, the most common problem identified was transportation, with a majority of respondents raising this concern. Their concerns related to both access to transportation itself, or for those with vehicles, the higher costs associated with having to travel a greater

“No transportation makes it hard, not only to buy groceries but it makes it difficult to [make] applications for food assistance...as well as going to the food bank. If I can only get to the store every few weeks, then I can't purchase some of the produce I might otherwise.”

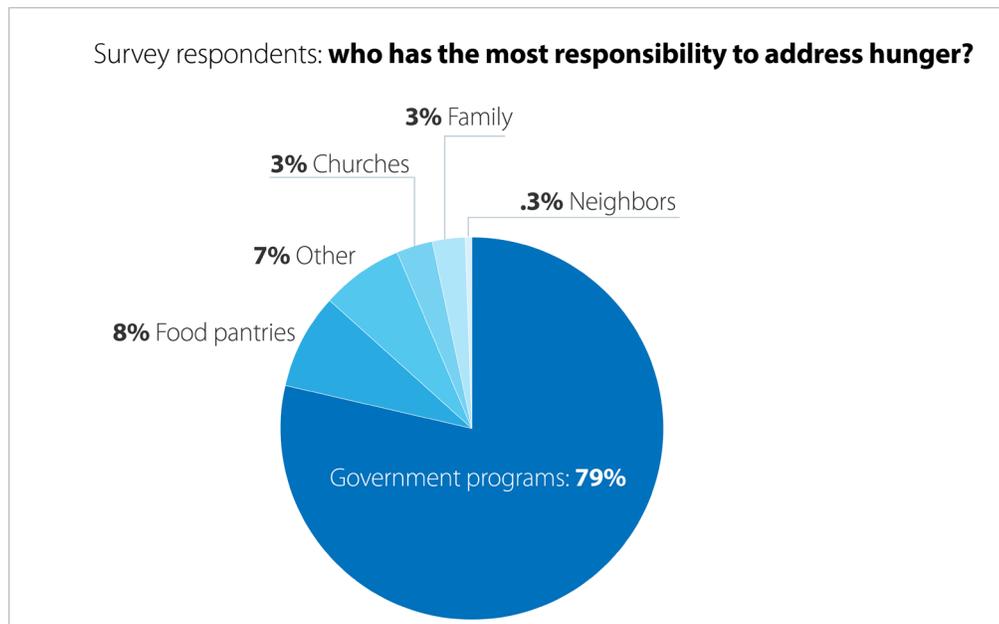
—Veteran household in a rural area; household members with disabilities

distance to get groceries. Many others raised concerns about the limited availability of food pantries making it difficult to rely on this strategy to make ends meet. Another common concern was the high cost of food. Many noted that they were only able to shop at local “corner” stores where prices were higher, and supplies more limited. Not surprisingly many

spoke of higher unemployment rates, lack of jobs and low wages in rural areas that reduced economic opportunity and made SNAP an even more important part of their household budget. Finally, several noted that shame kept people in smaller communities from seeking needed food assistance where they were often more visible in seeking help.

Respondents overwhelmingly agree that the government has the greatest responsibility to address hunger

When low-income respondents to this study were asked who they thought had the most responsibility to help people who are hungry, they overwhelmingly (79%) said that responsibility lay with public programs like SNAP funded by the government. Just a small minority believed some other source should have the greatest responsibility. Only 8% thought this responsibility should rest with food pantries; 3% believed this responsibility belonged with families; and another 3% thought that churches had the greatest responsibility.



These opinions are not surprising given respondents’ concerns described above that food pantries, which while helpful, were not a reliable source of adequate food assistance and could not meet their needs. Similarly as noted above the great majority of respondents did not believe that families or charities could provide them with the help they needed if they lost SNAP.

Some sub-groups had a higher than average response that the government should take the greatest responsibility in fighting hunger. Nearly 9 out of 10 working families (87%) identified government programs as having the greatest responsibility, and more than four out of five (82%) veterans and families with children also believed that it was government’s responsibility to address this problem.

Summary

This study gave Maine people with low-incomes the opportunity to describe their experiences with, and observations about what it is like to struggle with hunger. Their views on the role that SNAP plays in their lives and their communities provide an important caution to policy makers as they consider changes to this program whether at the state or federal level. It concludes that SNAP plays an essential role, both financially and nutritionally. For most, it is an important foundation in the family budget, staving off hunger and mitigating the severe financial strain that many respondents live with each day. Without it, most respondents would get very little or no help in getting enough to eat. Any future policy changes are of particular importance for Maine as the level of food insecurity in the State continues to be well above the national average, with disproportionate numbers of Mainers struggling with hunger relative to those in other states.

Survey responses paint a bleak picture of the hardships faced by these families as they often must make grueling choices to do something as basic as putting food on the table each day, and the consequences when they cannot.

The majority of these families see SNAP as a lifesaver, a resource that they can count on to help them meet their most basic material needs. Most credit SNAP with reducing stress and the chronic budgetary demands that force them to forgo one basic need for another, and enables them to give greater priority to food.

Nevertheless, despite SNAP's great value to these families, many still go without. One in three respondents still worry each month that they won't have enough to eat, or actually do not have enough to eat. A near majority of families report skipping meals when budgets fall into the red, something not uncommon in their daily lives. While others turn to food banks, many still must resort to strategies like delaying rent payments or cutting back on medicine.

Nevertheless, the study gives important insight into why SNAP is seen as the nation's most important anti-hunger program. A strong majority of respondents agree that without SNAP they would get very little or none of the help they need to simply get enough to eat. This caution is one that policy makers should take to heart as they consider the future of this vital program.