



# SNAP KEEPS LOUISIANA STRONG AND HEALTHY DURING DIFFICULT TIMES

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This report was written in conjunction with the [SNAP Story Bank Project](#), a photography and film series that profiles hunger, food insecurity, and food access across Louisiana. The Jesuit Social Research Institute and Congressional Hunger Center made this report and project possible.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hunger and food insecurity are real experiences that impact thousands of households in our state. In urban and rural areas and from north to south, too many Louisiana families struggle to afford a steady nutritious diet. In 2015 the state ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in household food insecurity, with 18.4 percent of the population reporting a lack of adequate food during the year.<sup>1</sup>

Food insecurity is closely tied to economic insecurity. Economic challenges including unemployment, underemployment, and low wages leave many Louisianans without enough money to purchase food for their families throughout the month. The response by food banks, food pantries, and faith-based organizations plays a significant role in fighting

hunger through providing families with emergency food, but they cannot distribute enough food on a regular basis to meet the needs of all struggling Louisiana households.

The most effective tool to address and prevent food insecurity is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, is federally funded and administered by the state's Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS). Since the program's inception in the late 1960s, SNAP has had a measurable impact on overall health and economic security in the United States and Louisiana, especially for women, children, and elderly adults.<sup>2</sup> In fiscal year 2015-16, \$1.34 billion in federal SNAP benefits were distributed to 399,284 Louisiana households.<sup>3</sup> Ninety percent of those households had household income below the poverty line and 49 percent were households with children.<sup>4</sup>



Source: SNAP Story Bank, JSRI

Despite SNAP's ability to reach thousands of Louisiana families during times of economic hardship, thousands of income-eligible households in Louisiana are not receiving SNAP benefits. DCFS program data indicate that roughly 83 percent of income-eligible persons are participating in the program, leaving more than 187,000 that are not.<sup>5</sup> Exploring ways to connect these Louisianans to SNAP is an opportunity to improve health and economic outcomes for those households and the state as a whole.

SNAP is a unique safety net program because it is designed to be responsive during periods of economic downturn. Its structure as an entitlement program—meaning anyone who meets eligibility requirements is entitled to receive benefits—allows SNAP rolls to grow and shrink in response to economic trends. Most recently, SNAP participation increased substantially when many families experienced job loss or reduced income during the Great Recession. The extra money for food protected families, many who had never before relied on government assistance, from hunger and destitution.

SNAP also had a demonstrable impact on the stabilization and recovery of local economies most impacted by the recession. Through a temporary increase in SNAP benefit levels and an increase in eligible participants, the program generated economic activity at a critical time for our state.<sup>6</sup> In short, SNAP helped Louisiana families keep food on the table and kept a steady flow of dollars to local businesses.

Given SNAP's proven track record of reducing food and economic insecurity, it is critical that its current funding and structure is protected. Throughout the program's history, misconceptions about SNAP or ideological opposition to government assistance have



Source: United State Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service

prompted proposals to cut or fundamentally change the nature of the program. These proposals often include turning SNAP into a “block-grant” to states or otherwise capping funds given to states to limit total federal spending on the program. Doing so would eliminate SNAP's unique ability to respond to economic downturns or changes in industry trends. It could lead to reduced benefit levels, tightened eligibility standards, and waiting lists in the program, especially during periods of increased need, leaving families without adequate help when they need it most. Worst, it would increase the number of people in the United States who go to bed hungry at night, which is an experience that simply should not occur in the wealthiest nation in the world.

This report will explore the prevalence and connectedness of food insecurity and poverty in Louisiana, the role of SNAP in addressing those issues, and the far-reaching impacts that the program has on the health and economic wellbeing of our state. Finally, it will offer solutions for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the program in Louisiana.

# PART I

## HUNGER, FOOD INSECURITY, AND POVERTY IN LOUISIANA

Hunger and food insecurity both are caused by a lack of adequate, nutritious food. While *food security* is a measure of a household's ability to provide sufficient food to all of its members, *hunger* is an individual-level experience that results from not having enough to eat.<sup>7</sup> USDA uses the food security measure to determine how many households in the United States have access to an adequate diet on an ongoing basis.

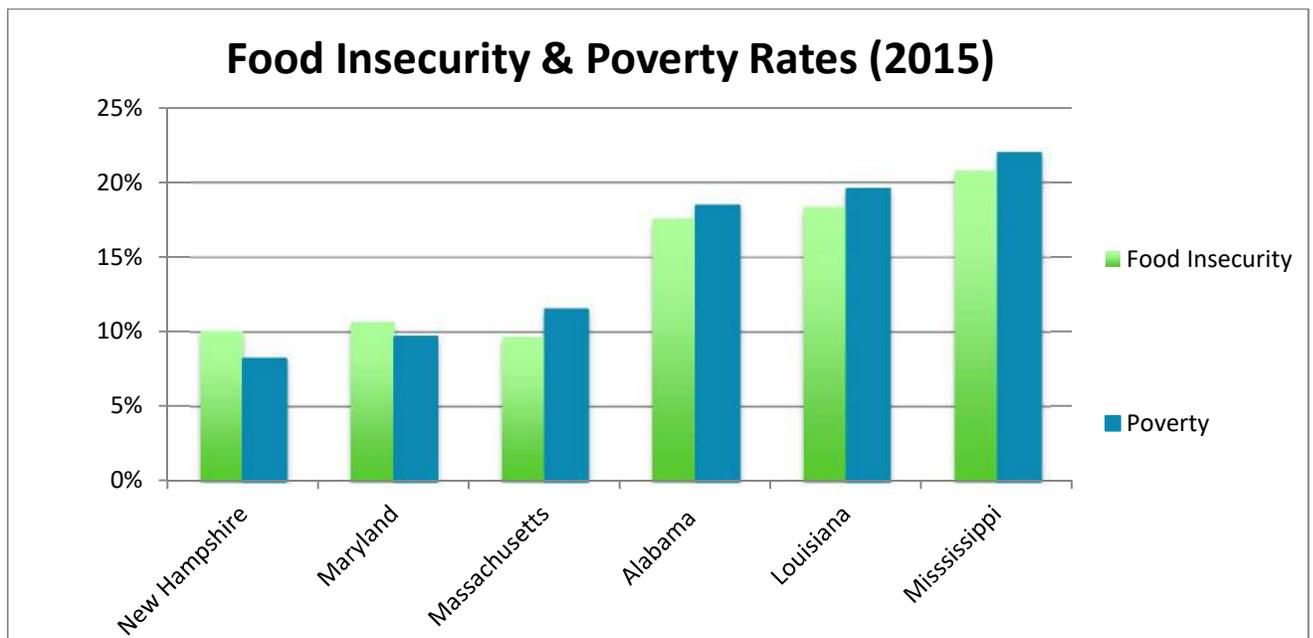
### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POVERTY AND FOOD INSECURITY

Hunger and poverty go hand in hand. Families that don't earn enough money to make ends

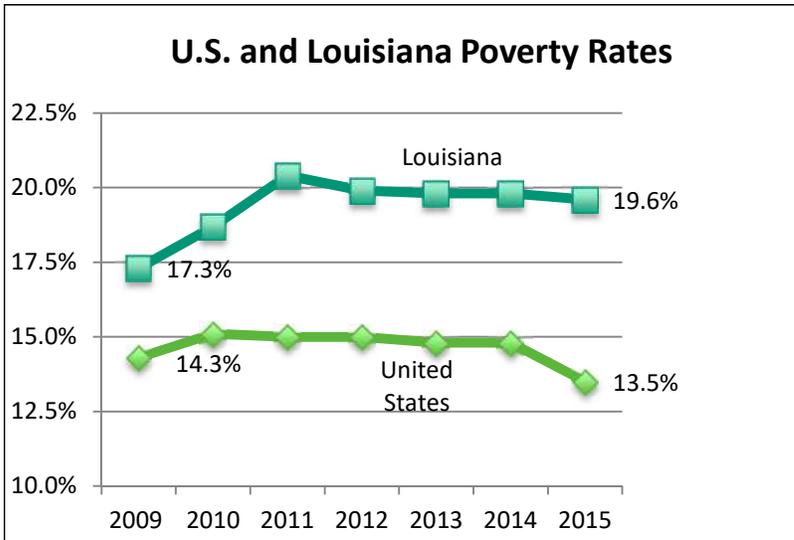
meet are forced to make difficult decisions about how to stretch their limited dollars. This often includes skipping meals and relying on low-cost, high calorie processed foods. These difficult tradeoffs have a variety of negative consequences that impact the health and wellbeing of individual families and our state.

When families do not earn enough to make ends meet their chances of going hungry increase. In places where poverty and economic insecurity are prevalent there are also high rates of food insecurity. Louisiana has the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest rate of poverty in the country, with 19.6 percent of Louisianans, nearly one in five, living in poverty.<sup>8</sup> Louisiana also has the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest rate of food insecurity, with nearly one in six—18.4 percent—of Louisianans living in a food insecure household.<sup>9</sup>

High rates of poverty and food insecurity plague the entire Gulf South region, with similarly alarming statistics in Mississippi and Alabama. In states where more households enjoy more economic security, rates of food insecurity are substantially lower.



Source: Analysis of US Census Population Data and USDA Food Insecurity Data by Center for American Progress, Talk Poverty Project. <https://talkpoverty.org/poverty/>



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey. Individual Poverty Status in the Last 12 Months.

**CHILD FOOD INSECURITY IN LOUISIANA**

In Louisiana and across the country children suffer disproportionately from food insecurity compared to the general population. In Louisiana, nearly one in four, were food insecure.<sup>11</sup> Children struggle with food insecurity in every parish, but child food insecurity rates are highest in northern Louisiana. East Carroll Parish has the highest rate of child food insecurity in the state, where 38.6 percent of children

are affected. Cameron Parish has the lowest rate of child food insecurity, where still 18.6 percent of children suffer.

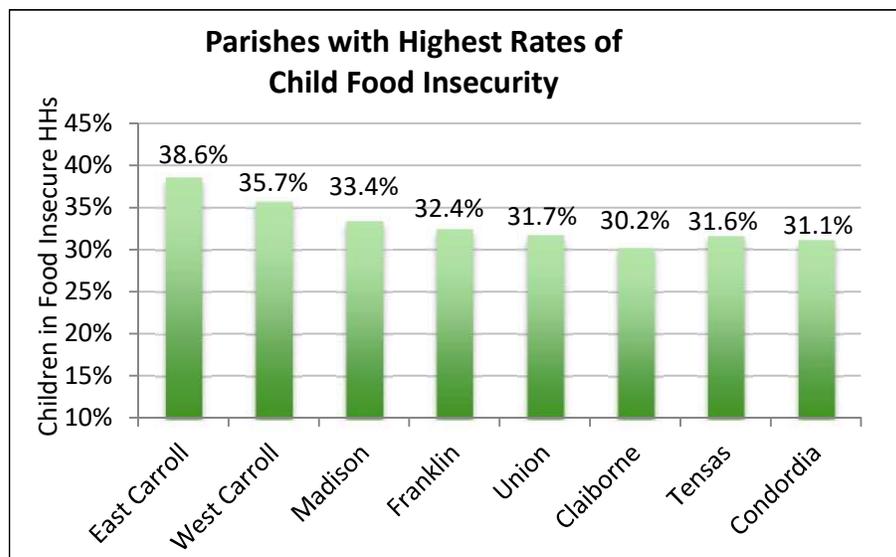
**LOUISIANA POVERTY RATES REMAIN HIGH AFTER RECESSION**

The Great Recession significantly impacted the economic stability of households in Louisiana and across the nation. Many families struggled with job loss, home loss, and reduced household income, which caused them to fall into poverty or deeper into poverty. The poverty rate in Louisiana peaked at 20.4 percent in 2011 and nationwide at 15.1 percent in 2010. Since the end of the Recession the national poverty rate has been declining slowly—down to 13.5 percent in 2015.

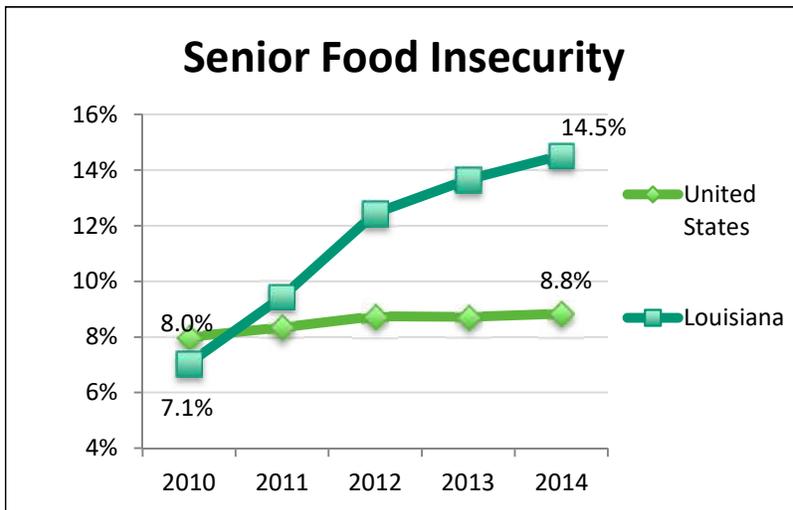
In Louisiana, however, the poverty rate has dropped less than 1 percentage point since the post-Recession peak, down to 19.6 percent in 2015. Louisiana’s heightened levels of poverty since the Great Recession have directly coincided with an increase in food insecurity. Statewide food insecurity rates have risen from 10 percent in 2009 to 18.4 percent in 2016.

**SENIOR FOOD INSECURITY IN LOUISIANA**

Senior citizens, who often live on fixed incomes, are increasingly at risk of food insecurity. Between 2001 and 2011, the number of food insecure seniors in the country more than doubled, rising to 8 percent of seniors in 2011.<sup>12</sup> Food insecurity is particularly harmful for the elderly, whose continued health depends on



Source: Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap 2016: Louisiana by Parish



Source: National Foundation to End Senior Hunger, State of Senior Hunger Supplement, 2010-2014

adequate caloric and nutrient intake. Many factors impact food security for elderly adults, including marital status, living arrangement, and education level.<sup>13</sup> For example, seniors are three times more likely to experience food insecurity if they are caring for grandchildren.<sup>14</sup>

As with child food insecurity, Louisiana’s rate of senior food insecurity is consistently higher than the national average. In 2014, 14.5 percent of persons aged 65 and older in Louisiana experienced food insecurity compared to 8.9 percent nationwide.<sup>15</sup> The rate of food insecurity among seniors in Louisiana also has increased substantially since 2010, while the national rate has remained fairly constant.

**FOOD INSECURITY AND DISABILITY STATUS**

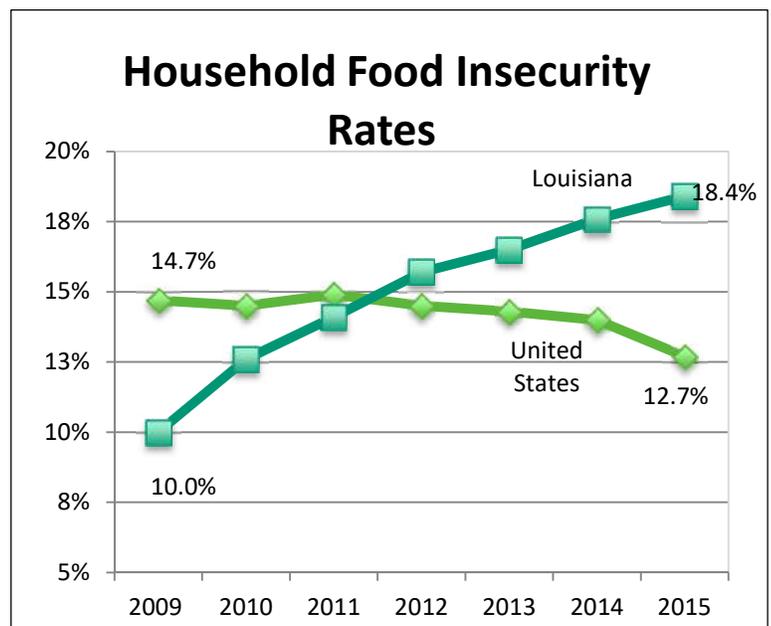
Disability status, along with household income, is an important risk factor for food insecurity. Nationwide, 1 in 3 households that have an adult who is unable to work due to a disability is food insecure.<sup>16</sup> Disabilities often lower one’s earning potential and that of other household members who may need to provide care. People with disabilities often have high medical

expenses and a need for special adaptive equipment, placing additional strain on limited household income. What’s more, transportation and mobility issues among some persons with disabilities only compound their risk for food insecurity.<sup>17</sup>

**LOUISIANA MUST REDUCE POVERTY AND FOOD INSECURITY**

To decrease the number of Louisiana families suffering from poverty and food insecurity, we must improve economic opportunity for Louisiana

residents and ensure access to SNAP. State leaders must implement solutions that lead to economic security including employment opportunities, higher wages, and increased household income and wealth. Until Louisiana takes the bold steps necessary to create an economy that works for everyone, we must protect and strengthen safety net programs like SNAP that connect vulnerable groups—including children, working poor adults, disabled persons, and the elderly—to food assistance and other basic needs.



Source: US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. Household Food Security in the United States.

## PART II

### A RESPONSE TO HUNGER: THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)

#### AN OVERVIEW OF SNAP

The most effective and efficient tool that states can use in the fight against hunger and food insecurity is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.<sup>18</sup> SNAP is a federal assistance program that provides money in the form of Electronic Benefit Transfers (EBT) to low-income households. The EBT funds are used to purchase grocery items to supplement the households' overall food budgets. SNAP lifts millions above the poverty line each year and substantially reduces food insecurity rates. Still, improvements to the program are necessary to maximize its reach and impact.

SNAP is designed to respond effectively in the wake of national and regional economic downturns, natural disasters, and household financial emergencies. For example, the structure of SNAP as an entitlement program allowed it to expand to meet the needs of individuals and states during the Great Recession and then retract as the U.S. economy rebounded. The total number of SNAP recipients in the U.S. has decreased as the economy has slowly recovered—from a post-Recession peak of 47.8 million participants in December 2012 to 43.2 million participants in November 2016.<sup>19</sup> As the national and state economies slowly recover, the program continues to play a crucial role in the household budgets of many families, especially in Louisiana.

#### HISTORY

Since its inception in the 1960s SNAP has been serving our country's most vulnerable populations and continues to do so today. The original federal food assistance program was implemented in the 1960s and has been altered by Congress over time to increase efficiency and effectiveness in addressing hunger in America:<sup>20</sup>

- 1961 – President Kennedy signed an executive order initiating the Food Stamp Pilot Program
- 1964 – President Johnson signed the Food Stamp Act, making the program permanent
- 1974 – Congress expanded the Food Stamp Program to all 50 states
- 1977 – President Carter signed the Food Stamp Act establishing national standards for eligibility and expanding purchasing options
- 1984 – Benefits became available on electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards
- 2008 – The Food Stamp program was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

#### SNAP IS EFFECTIVE AT LOWERING HOUSEHOLD FOOD INSECURITY

Participation in SNAP has a measurable impact on household food security status. A study by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) found that SNAP participation was associated with a 5 to 10 percentage point decrease in rates of household food insecurity, depending on household composition.<sup>21</sup> Another study by USDA's Economic Research Service found that the months leading up to SNAP enrollment could be the hardest for low-food security households.<sup>22</sup> Of the households that were sampled, 20 percent had *very low* food security four to six months before enrolling in SNAP.<sup>23</sup> Within a few months of participating, the prevalence of *very low* food

insecurity dropped to 12 percent, suggesting that SNAP has an ameliorative effect on food insecurity status.<sup>24</sup>

#### INTEGRITY AND EFFICIENCY OF SNAP

SNAP continues to have one of the lowest rates of documented fraudulent activity of all federal assistance programs.<sup>25</sup> Just over one percent of SNAP benefits are “trafficked” meaning that they are sold for cash rather than used for food purchases.<sup>26</sup> USDA aggressively pursues retailers who engage in trafficking, with 1,400 retailers permanently disqualified from accepting SNAP in 2012, 342 criminal convictions, and \$57.7 million recovered.

Another form of fraud in SNAP includes recipients who lie on their application to participate in the program. USDA and state administrative agencies work together to combat consumer fraud in SNAP and penalize those who misuse the program. In fiscal year 2014, USDA cited a 96 percent accuracy rate in benefit distribution nationwide, with Louisiana boasting a nearly 99 percent accuracy rate in benefit delivery<sup>27</sup>, meaning that nearly all SNAP benefits were distributed at the correct level to truly eligible households.

SNAP also is one of the most efficiently operated federal entitlement programs, with relatively low administrative costs as a percentage of total spending. In 2015, 93 percent of all funds allocated to SNAP went directly to spending on food. Just six percent went to state administrative costs and less than one percent was used for federal administrative costs.<sup>28</sup>

#### SNAP ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

To qualify for SNAP benefits households must meet certain criteria related to their income, assets, citizenship status, disability status, and employment status. Federal standards apply to applicants in all states, though states have flexibility when determining asset limits and other

minor program rules. The following eligibility criteria applied to applicants in Louisiana in 2016:

#### INCOME AND ASSETS

- Household incomes must be at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line.
- After deductions, maximum allowable net income is \$1,675/month for a family of three.
- Assets must be at or below \$2,250 for all households unless the household has an elderly or disabled member, in which case the asset limit is \$3,250.

#### CITIZENSHIP STATUS

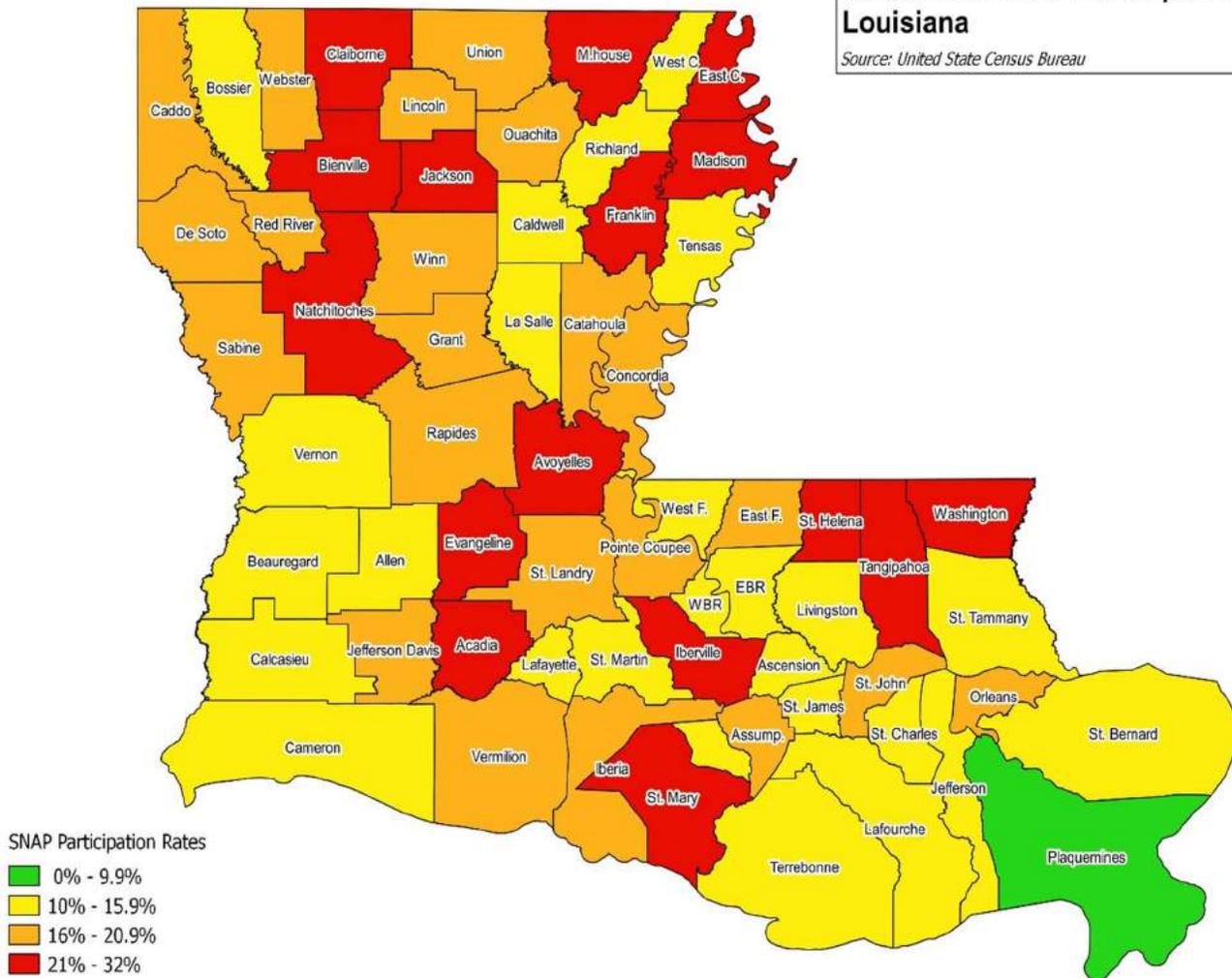
- Undocumented immigrants are ineligible for SNAP benefits.
- If undocumented parents have children with a social security number, parents can apply for SNAP benefits on behalf of their children.

#### EMPLOYMENT STATUS

- To receive SNAP benefits all adults in the household (unless elderly or disabled) must meet work requirements. If not already working at least 20 hours a week, adults must:
  - Register for state sponsored employment and training program
  - Not voluntarily quit or reduce working hours
  - Take a job if offered
- States experiencing higher than average unemployment rate can apply for a federal waiver that allows able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) to receive benefits for more than three months without meeting general work requirements. Louisiana currently has this waiver but requires ABAWDs to register with a Louisiana Workforce Commission Business and Career Solutions Center to continue receiving benefits.

## Household SNAP Participation in Louisiana

Source: United State Census Bureau



### WHO BENEFITS FROM SNAP IN LOUISIANA?

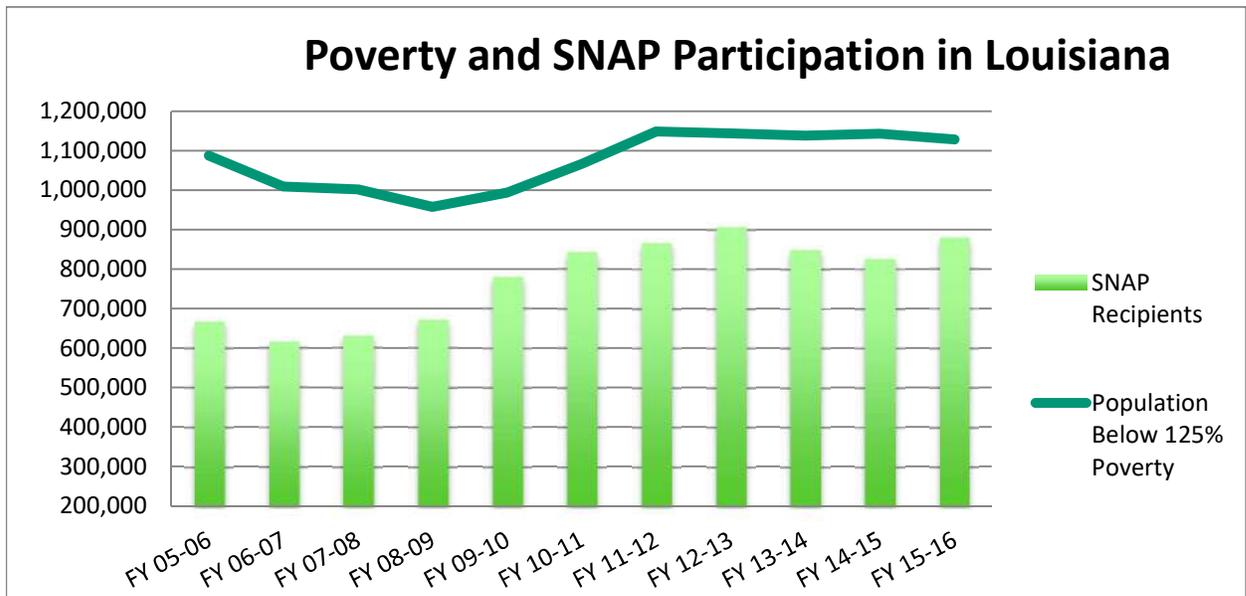
All 64 parishes in Louisiana are home to families that receive SNAP benefits. USDA data indicate that in 2015, 387,000 households that included 855,000 Louisiana residents participated in the program.<sup>29</sup> The number of SNAP beneficiaries is highest in urban areas, but as a percentage of population many rural counties have participation rates similar to the metro areas. Two-thirds of SNAP recipients in Louisiana are children, senior citizens, or persons with disabilities. More than 4 in 10 SNAP recipients live in a household that has earned income, but not enough to make ends meet. The average family size for SNAP households in Louisiana is 2.2 persons.<sup>30</sup>

For many Louisiana families SNAP benefits are a temporary stopgap measure to help the household get through a difficult economic time,

such as a spell of unemployment or having to care for a grandchild. The average length of time that a household receives SNAP in Louisiana is 16 months.<sup>31</sup> To receive SNAP benefits, households must meet income, asset, and household requirements as outlined by the federal government and their home state. Households are required to report changes in total assets or income and, if they exceed the established limits, they are no longer eligible to receive benefits.

### CLOSE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POVERTY AND SNAP PARTICIPATION

The number of households using SNAP in Louisiana declined as the state's economy slowly recovered from the recession between 2008 and 2012. The need for SNAP increased again between 2014 and 2016, however, as the price of oil dropped and many workers found themselves



Source: US Census Bureau and DCFS SNAP Participation by Fiscal Year

out of work. Some regions of the state still are plagued by double digit unemployment rates, making SNAP a critical lifeline in those communities. In short, SNAP participation rates are consistent with employment and economic trends, whether they are due to instability in a particular sector or a long-term lack of economic growth.

**SNAP DOES NOT REACH ALL INCOME-ELIGIBLE LOUISIANANS**

Many who are eligible to receive SNAP benefits in Louisiana are not enrolled in the program. In 2014 SNAP reached only an estimated 83 percent of eligible persons in the state, meaning that about one in six Louisianans who could benefit from the program are not participating.<sup>32</sup> Barriers to participation in SNAP will be addressed in a later section.

**DEMOGRAPHICS OF SNAP RECIPIENTS IN LOUISIANA**

**Children**

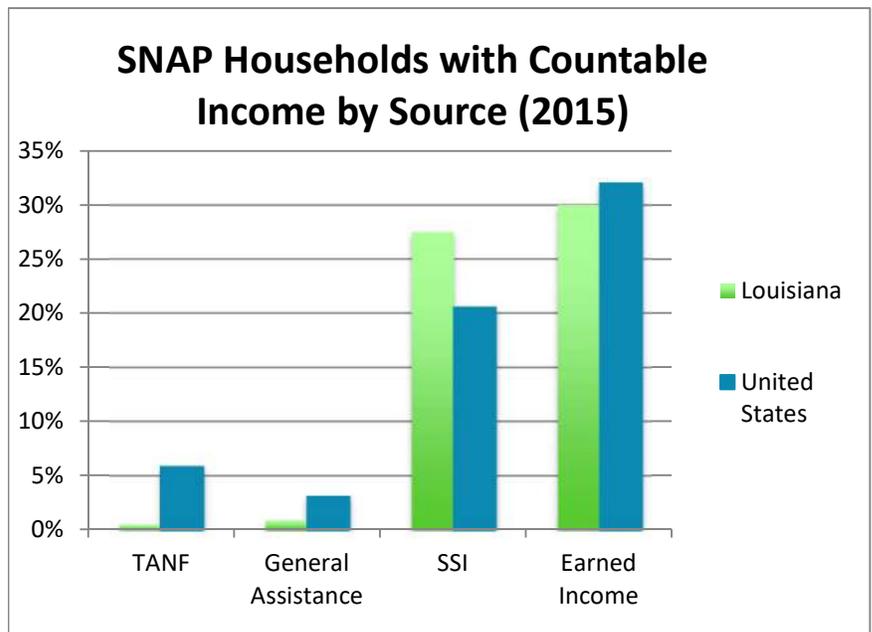
SNAP is critical to child wellbeing in Louisiana. Nearly 407,000 children, or 37 percent of all children in the state, benefitted from SNAP in 2015.<sup>33</sup> Children also make up the largest demographic group of SNAP participants in the state, as 48 percent of all recipients are below the age of 18. SNAP is particularly important to young Louisiana families with infants and toddlers, with 40 percent of all children ages 0-4 in the state participating in the program.<sup>34</sup>

Share of Children in Louisiana who Participate in SNAP, 2015				
	Children under 18 years old	Pre-school children ages 0-4	Children ages 5-11	Children ages 12-17
Children Receiving SNAP	406,975	123,881	172,713	110,381
Total State Population	1,114,813	310,817	434,814	369,182
Percent Receiving SNAP	37%	40%	40%	30%

Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities Analysis of USDA Economic Characteristics of SNAP Households and U.S.

### Seniors

In 2015, 70,000 seniors in Louisiana received SNAP benefits representing 11 percent of all seniors in the state.<sup>35</sup> Although elderly adults make up a smaller fraction of overall SNAP participants (8%), the program is particularly important to their health and longevity. Unfortunately, only one in three seniors eligible for SNAP participate in the program.<sup>36</sup> Reasons for low participation among seniors vary, but often-cited reasons include stigma related to SNAP, social isolation, confusion about eligibility requirements, and difficulty with the application process.<sup>37</sup>



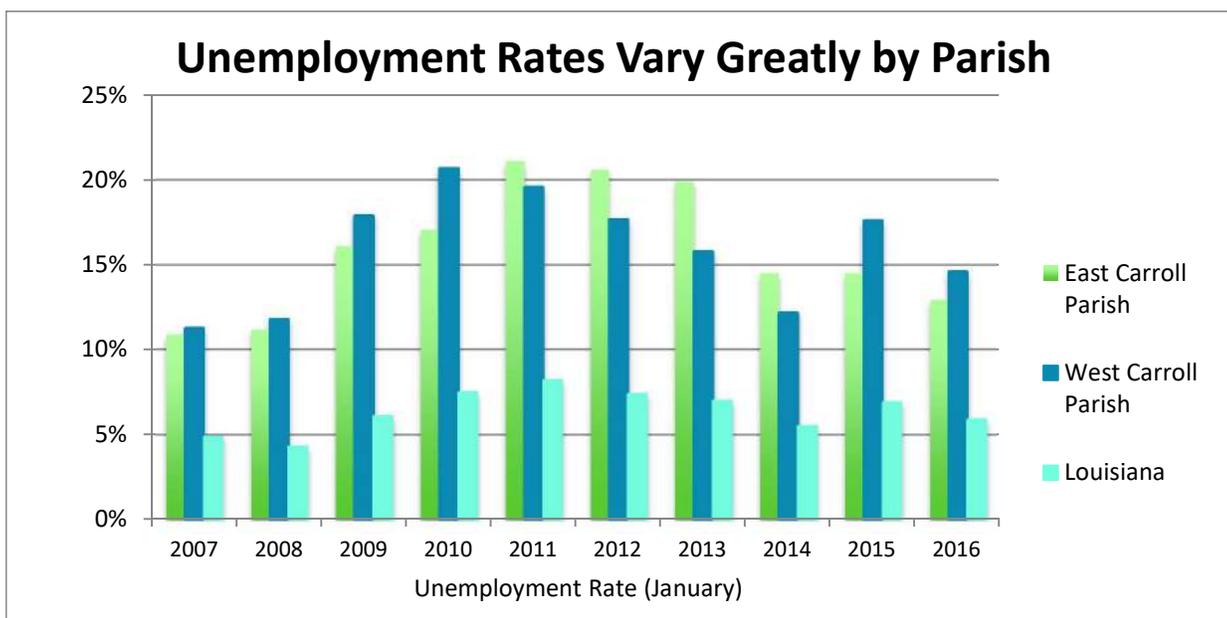
Source: Characteristics of SNAP Households, Distribution of Participating Households by Selected Countable Income Sources and by State, 2015

### The Working Poor and Unemployed

SNAP households frequently are led by working adults that simply don't make enough money to pay the bills. Thirty percent of Louisiana households receiving SNAP, which includes 41 percent of all SNAP recipients in the state, have earned income.<sup>38</sup> The average monthly income of those households was \$1,040/month, which leaves a family of three far below the federal poverty line of \$1,674/month.<sup>39</sup> The average

SNAP benefit per household in Louisiana is \$276 per month, representing 27 percent of the average SNAP family's income.<sup>40</sup>

Many families end up relying on SNAP during times of unexpected unemployment or underemployment. While Louisiana's statewide unemployment rate has moved closer to pre-



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics Map

recession levels, the most hard-hit parishes have continued to experience consistent unemployment rates above 10 percent. For example, East Carroll and West Carroll parishes have the highest rates of unemployment and food insecurity in the state.<sup>41</sup> These same parishes also have the highest household SNAP participation rates in the state, reflecting the urgent need for food assistance and greater economic opportunity.

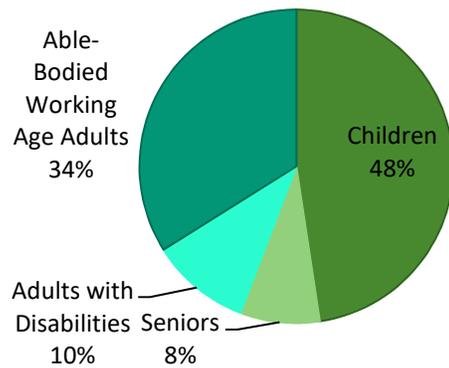
**Persons with Disabilities and Caretakers**

SNAP is a critical resource for disabled adults who rely solely on a fixed income. In 2014, 88,000 adults with disabilities in Louisiana relied on SNAP, representing 10.3 percent of all recipients.<sup>42</sup> The average monthly Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefit is \$733 per individual and \$1,100 if the individual has an eligible spouse, leaving them below the federal poverty line.<sup>43</sup> SNAP also serves 21,000 children with disabilities in Louisiana.<sup>44</sup> Many individuals who care for persons with disabilities, pre-school aged children, or an elderly family member also rely on SNAP. These individuals can receive an exemption from SNAP work requirements while other household members are expected to work, seek employment, or attend school.<sup>45</sup>

**Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents**

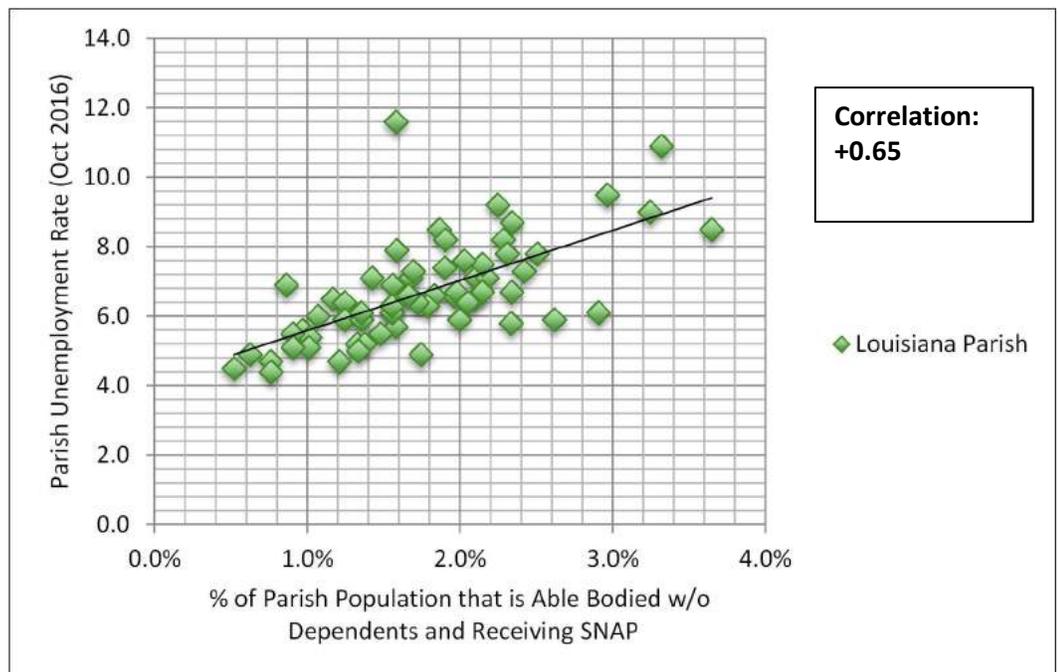
While most SNAP recipients are children, seniors, working parents, or disabled persons, a small group of

**SNAP Recipients in Louisiana**



Source: USDA Characteristics of SNAP Households 2015

recipients in Louisiana are able-bodied working adults without dependents (ABAWDs). In October 2016 there were 74,284 ABAWDs receiving SNAP in Louisiana<sup>46</sup>, accounting for 7.6 percent of all cases.<sup>47</sup> This population is required to work at least 20 hours per week to receive SNAP benefits or be enrolled in a qualified education or training program. If they do not meet the work requirement they are limited to receiving SNAP benefits for three months in any 36-month period. Due to persistent levels of high unemployment in Louisiana the state has received



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Unemployment Rate by Parish and DCFS SNAP ABAWD Data, JSRI Analysis

a federal waiver for the three-month time limit. In 2016, Governor John Bel Edwards implemented a requirement that ABAWDs who did not meet the work requirement must meet with their local workforce development center in order to continue receiving SNAP beyond 36 months. Still, it is difficult for many able-bodied adults in Louisiana to find stable, consistent employment. There is a direct correlation between the percentage of ABAWDs receiving SNAP in a given parish and the unemployment rate in the parish, highlighting the need for ongoing food assistance.

### SNAP EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING PROGRAMS

Federal SNAP Employment and Training funding is made available to states to aid SNAP recipients with finding work and educational opportunities that satisfy eligibility requirements. In Louisiana, if a SNAP recipient is not meeting minimum work requirements and does not participate in a SNAP Employment and Training activity, they are disqualified from receiving SNAP benefits.<sup>48</sup>

States have flexibility in designing job-training programs and supports intended to help SNAP recipients deal with issues of job-loss, underemployment, and skill building. Historically SNAP Employment and Training funds have been underutilized as a workforce development resource, but new federal program rules and innovations by states have given rise to some promising new employment and training models for SNAP recipients.<sup>49</sup>

In fiscal year 2016, Louisiana received \$1.4 million in federal funds to provide employment and training programs to SNAP recipients.<sup>50</sup> The state uses the funds to operate the Louisiana Job and Employment Training (LaJET) program. LaJET is a workforce development program available to SNAP recipients in Rapides, Orleans, Caddo, Lafayette, and Ouachita parishes. It is designed to help ABAWDs and SNAP recipients who are able-bodied find employment or opportunities to meet

SNAP work requirements. In the rest of the state, employment and training support is available through the Louisiana Workforce Commission (LWC) via Helping Individuals Reach Employment (HiRE), the LWC's online jobs portal.<sup>51</sup>

### BARRIERS TO ENROLLMENT IN SNAP

Data from DCFs indicate that more than 1.1 million persons in the state are income eligible for SNAP, but only 932,000 were participating in December 2016.<sup>52</sup> There are several formal and informal barriers to enrolling in SNAP that keep persons at risk of food insecurity from participating in the program.

Formal barriers to participation are federal or state policies and rules that have been put in place which bar certain income-eligible individuals from receiving SNAP. They include:

- 1) Persons who have been convicted of a drug felony cannot receive SNAP for the one calendar year after they have completed their sentence. This arbitrary policy hinders the ex-offenders ability to reintegrate to society and meet their basic needs.
- 2) Persons who have liquid assets worth more than \$2,250 are not allowed to receive SNAP. This state policy discourages savings and encourages families to spend down their emergency savings to receive SNAP benefits.
- 3) Households in which one able-bodied working adult does not comply with work requirements are disqualified entirely, rather than disqualifying only the noncompliant individual.

Informal barriers to participation are issues that hinder income-eligible individuals from enrolling in SNAP:

- 1) Lack of information about SNAP, especially among hard-to-reach populations such as seniors, children

- aging out of foster care, and non-English speakers.
- 2) Difficulty completing the lengthy and complex SNAP application and recertification processes.
  - 3) Low benefit levels for seniors or working households with incomes near the eligibility threshold.

## THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF SNAP

### Family Economic Stability

While SNAP was designed to be an anti-hunger program, it also helps to decrease the extent and severity of poverty and economic insecurity by allowing recipients to use more of their earned or fixed income towards non-food expenses like utilities, health care, and childcare. Households receive SNAP benefits according to their financial need. Very poor households receive more in SNAP benefits because they need more resources to bridge the gap between their household income and costs of living. Family size also determines SNAP benefit levels.

The current SNAP benefit is an average of \$126 per person, the equivalent of \$1.40 per meal. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) uses the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) to determine SNAP benefit amounts, which the agency has

developed as the national standard for a nutritious diet at minimal cost.<sup>53</sup> The USDA assumes that families will spend around 30 percent of their net income on food and SNAP benefits make up the difference between the family contribution and the costs of the TFP.<sup>54</sup> Many argue that current SNAP benefit levels based on the TFP are inadequate and lead to families choosing cheaper foods with lower nutritional value or running out of benefits before the end of the month.<sup>55</sup>

From 2013-2015, the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) showed that SNAP, as a non-cash government assistance program, lifted nearly 4.6 million people in the U.S. above the federal poverty line.<sup>56</sup> The average poverty rate in Louisiana from 2013-2015 was 21 percent, representing 961,000 children and adults. When SNAP benefits are taken into account by the SPM, the poverty rate in Louisiana drops to 17.9 percent. This means that an additional 145,000 people would fall below the federal poverty line in the absence of SNAP.<sup>57</sup>

### State and Local Economies

SNAP benefits are spent directly at local grocery stores, which increases economic activity and creates jobs. Research by Moody's Analytics estimates that every SNAP dollar spent generates

Economic Activity Generated by SNAP in Louisiana	
Louisiana SNAP participants in December 2016	931,915
Average monthly benefit per person	\$126
Average SNAP benefits distributed statewide/month	\$117 million
Average economic activity generated per month	\$202.4 million
SNAP benefits distributed statewide in 2016	\$1.4 billion
Estimated economic activity generated by SNAP in 2016	\$2.4 billion

Sources: DCFs, SNAP Reciprocity Rate and Poverty Level, December 2016 Average Monthly Benefit per person: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Costs, 2016. SNAP Multiplier: Mark M. Zandi, Assessing the Macro Economic Impact of Fiscal Stimulus 2008, Moody's Analytics.

<b>Estimated Loss of Economic Activity in Louisiana Due to Income-Eligible Persons Not Enrolled in SNAP</b>	
Total estimated income-eligible residents (at or below 125% of Poverty) Dec 2016	1,119,173
Louisiana SNAP participants in December 2016	931,915
Income-eligible for SNAP but not participating	187,258
Average monthly SNAP benefit per person	\$126
Estimated SNAP benefits lost per month	\$23.6 million
Average economic activity lost per month	\$40.8 million
Estimated lost SNAP benefits in 2016	\$282.7 million
Estimated annual economic activity lost in 2016	\$489.8 million

See Sources in Previous Chart.

\$1.73 in economic activity.<sup>58</sup> What's more, SNAP acts as a stabilizing force for vulnerable families and the economy during economic downturns like the Great Recession.

In fiscal year 2015-16, an average of \$117 million in federal SNAP benefits were disbursed to Louisiana households each month. SNAP recipients spend the benefits at one of the state's 4,820 authorized food retailers. Using Moody's Analytics' economic multiplier, SNAP benefits generate an estimated \$202 million of economic activity each month in Louisiana. That equals nearly \$2.4 billion in economic activity generated across the state annually.

The positive health and economic impacts of SNAP could be increased significantly if all households that are eligible for SNAP were enrolled in the program. More than 187,000 low-income persons who are at risk of food insecurity are not being reached. If these income-eligible residents were connected to SNAP benefits, an additional \$23.6 million in federal SNAP dollars would flow to the state each month, generating an estimated \$490 million in economic activity per year.

#### HEALTH IMPACTS OF SNAP

SNAP helps to protect vulnerable children, adults, and seniors from food insecurity and its impacts on health. Negative health outcomes associated with food insecurity include diet-related disease and, in recent years, obesity.<sup>59</sup> For adults, the negative impacts of food insecurity can lead to difficulty finding or maintaining a job. For children, food insecurity can lead to poor academic performance, attention difficulties, and, in the long run, more risk for obesity.

Households that receive food stamps experience significant improvements in child health and educational outcomes. For children, the positive health outcomes start before they are even born. Pregnant mothers who received food assistance at the onset of pregnancy were less likely to be iron deficient and between 5 to 23 percent less likely to give birth to underweight babies.<sup>60</sup> These include decreased rates of adult obesity and decreased overall risk for iron deficiency anemia.<sup>61</sup> Increased food security also has a strong correlation to higher IQ, overall educational attainment, adult earnings, and economic self-sufficiency.<sup>62</sup> These positive outcomes benefit the individual and our society as a whole because we all benefit from higher productivity, healthier communities, and stronger families.

SNAP also helps to improve health outcomes for seniors. A quarter of all seniors are nutrient deficient, which weakens the immune system and can result in longer hospital stays.<sup>63</sup> Compared to financially secure seniors, low-income seniors who are food insecure are more likely to experience depression, decreased physical performance and have a poorer quality of life.<sup>64</sup> Nationwide, only 3 out of 5 eligible seniors participate in SNAP, leaving 5.2 million eligible seniors that are not receiving SNAP benefits.<sup>65</sup> What's more, many seniors struggle with inadequate SNAP benefit amounts. In 2015, on average, seniors living alone received \$108 in SNAP benefits, close to \$3.50 a day.<sup>66</sup>

### Diet-Related Diseases and SNAP

Obesity, heart disease, hypertension and diabetes are all too common in Louisiana. These conditions can be grouped into the category of *metabolic syndromes*, or diseases that are associated with a poor diet.<sup>67</sup> In 2013, Louisiana ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in adult obesity and 6<sup>th</sup> in childhood obesity, based on a report from Louisiana State University.<sup>68</sup> In 2014, the American Diabetes Association reported that 14 percent of all adults in Louisiana had diabetes

and that 1.2 million people were at risk for developing diabetes.<sup>69</sup> In 2016, four out of ten adults were diagnosed with hypertension in Louisiana.<sup>70</sup>

In addition to medication, healthy eating is a critical component in managing these diseases. Food insecurity can interfere with disease management especially in cases where a strict diet is needed or when financial stress might cause the person to skip meals or medication.<sup>71</sup> These diseases disproportionately impact low-income residents in the state. SNAP's ability to increase access to healthy foods makes it an important component of disease management for low-income residents and a contributor to positive health outcomes in the state.

### SNAP and Farmers Markets

Farmer's markets are a great resource to buy fresh, healthy produce and other foods. . As of November 2016, there are 23 farmers markets authorized for SNAP use in Louisiana. Some participating farmers' market help customers stretch their SNAP dollars through matching programs that increase the value of the SNAP

benefit for purchasing locally grown produce. The Crescent City Farmers Market in New Orleans operates the Market Match Program, which doubles SNAP dollars up to \$20 dollars, providing \$40 dollars in value.



Source: SNAP Story Bank Project, JSRI

## CONCLUSION

Food is a basic necessity for human life. Families who are chronically poor or fall on hard times should not have to suffer from hunger or food insecurity. Sadly, in Louisiana, it is a reality that many face. It is imperative; therefore, that we use all available tools to reduce the number who go without enough food. Otherwise this pervasive problem will continue to undermine the health and economic prosperity of Louisiana. SNAP is a critical program that already is working to meet the nutritional needs of thousands of families. Accordingly, our state and federal leaders must not only fight to protect SNAP, but also examine ways to grow the impact and further the reach of the program.

The following recommendations include best practices for improving the reach of SNAP and thereby creating a stronger Louisiana for all.

### Recommendations for Federal-Level Officials

- Schedule visits with DCFS offices, food banks, and food pantries in your districts to gain an understanding of constituent issues related to hunger and food insecurity.
- Support an update to the USDA's Thrifty Food Plan, or calculate SNAP benefit levels on USDA's Low-Cost Food Plan to ensure that families can afford healthy, fresh foods throughout the month.
- Oppose proposals to block grant SNAP, reduce benefit levels, or decrease eligibility for the program.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE-LEVEL OFFICIALS

- Schedule visits with DCFS offices, food banks, and food pantries in your districts to gain an understanding of constituent issues related to hunger and food insecurity.

- Eliminate or increase asset limits in the SNAP program to encourage savings among working poor families.
- Continue to waive the three-month time limit for SNAP for able-bodied adults without dependents who work less than 20 hours per week, especially in areas with unemployment rates substantially above the state and federal averages.
- Streamline the application process for senior citizens through the Elderly Simplified Application Process and Standard Medical Deduction.
- Eliminate the one-year waiting period for ex-drug offenders to receive SNAP benefits after release.
- Screen all young adults who are aging out of foster care for SNAP eligibility and exempt former foster children from ABAWD time limits and requirements until the age of 26.

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