

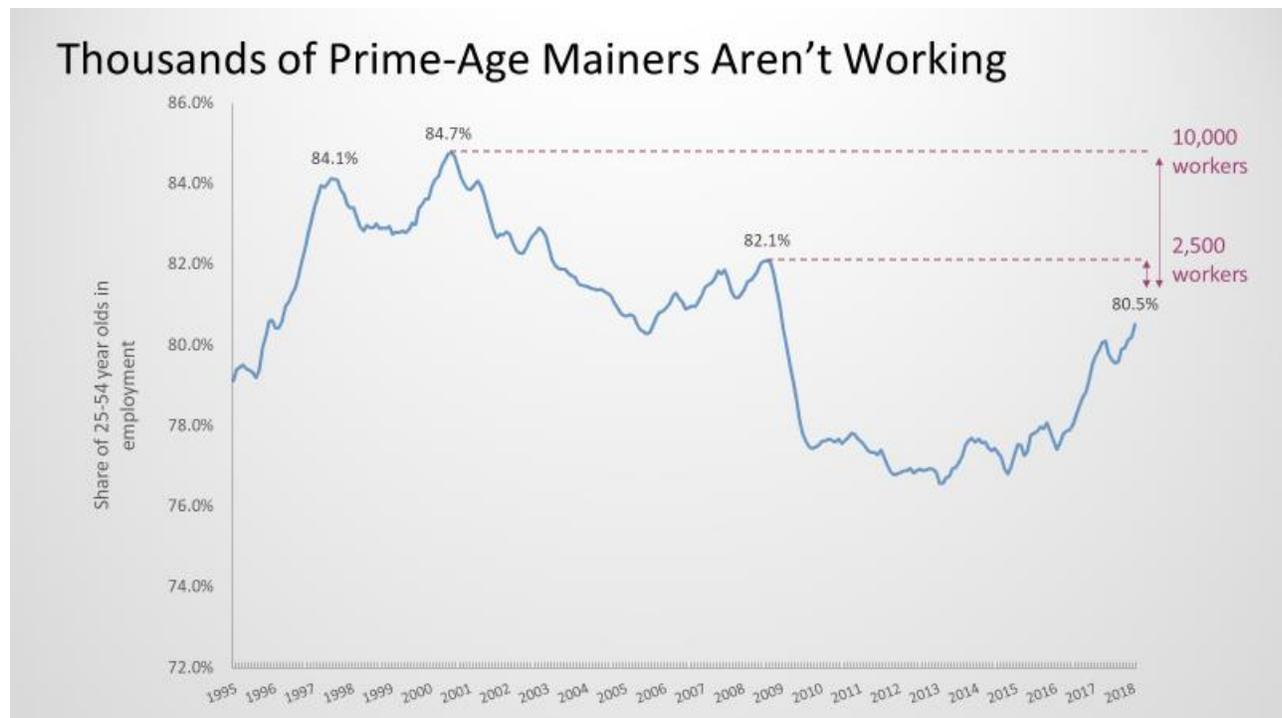
## Food Security in Maine: Notes from USM Food Security Symposium

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**Maine faces an acute labor force challenge.** This is partly fueled by demographic change (i.e. the aging of our population, and the lack of young workers to replace retirees), but an overlooked contributor is the low work rate among “prime-age” Mainers. Mainers aged 25-54 still aren’t working at the rates they were before the 2008 recession, and far below the peak rate seen in 2001. Our low unemployment rate (< 3.0%) is a little misleading because people who have given up looking for work aren’t counted as unemployed. If the same proportion of prime-age Mainers were working today as in 2001, we’d have about 10,000 additional workers in the labor force. For perspective, there were just under 20,000 Mainers officially “unemployed” in March 2018.

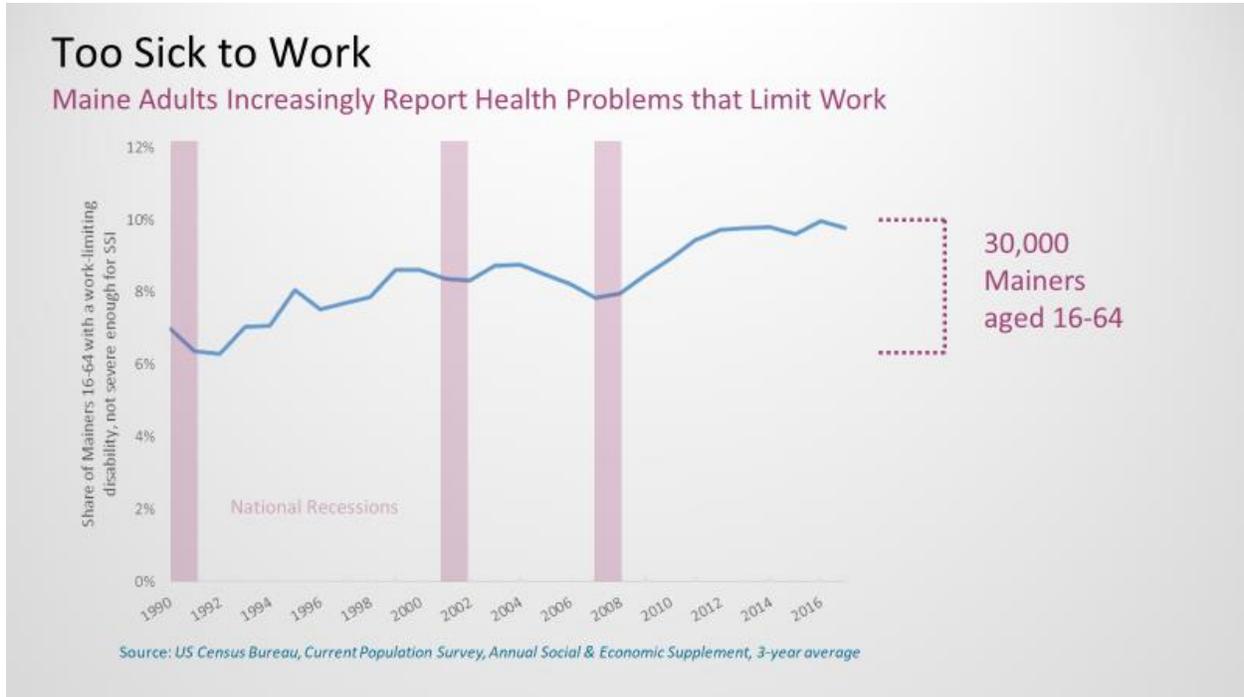
For more information see MECEP’s “*State of Working Maine 2017*,” at <https://www.mecep.org/new-report-state-of-working-maine-2017/> (Note that the data have changed significantly since this was written so some of the figures are out of date).



The primary reason these prime-age workers are out of the labor force is ill health. The Census Bureau and Department of Labor ask a very broad question about why people aren’t working or looking for work, and the consistent trend since 2000 has been that more Mainers are citing ill health as a reason for nonparticipation (the alternatives are being in school, caring for home/family, and retirement). We

know that these folks, while too sick to work, aren't permanently disabled, because there hasn't been a parallel increase in the share of Mainers collecting Social Security Disability Insurance.

Since 1992, the share of Mainers aged 16 to 64 who report being too sick to work but who don't qualify for SSDI has increased from 6% to 10%. That's the equivalent of 30,000 Mainers of working age.



### How hunger impacts our economy

Hunger, and food insecurity more broadly, have a significant impact on our economy. We know that hunger is a significant issue in both K-12 and higher education. In Maine, 1 in 5 children struggle with food insecurity. We know that when students are hungry, they can't learn, and underachieve in schools. Hunger and the stress associated with poverty also impact children's mental health.

See also: *Report of the Task Force to End Student Hunger in Maine* (Maine Legislature, Jan 2015):

<https://www.maine.gov/legis/opla/studenthungerreport.pdf>

The Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey is administered to public school K-12 students and includes questions on nutrition: <https://data.mainepublichealth.gov/miyhs/home>

Measuring food security for college students is more difficult, partly because college students living in dormitories aren't included in the US Dept of Agriculture's annual Food Security Supplement survey, which is the standard measure for food security. However, data from the FSS indicate that among Maine

college students *not* living in dorms, 19% are food insecure.<sup>1</sup> The most recent research on food security among college students suggests that nearly half of community college students, and one third of students at 4-year colleges are food insecure.

For more, see *Still Hungry and Homeless in College*, Sara Goldrick-Raab et al., April 2018. Available at <http://wihopelab.com/publications/Wisconsin-HOPE-Lab-Still-Hungry-and-Homeless.pdf>

The Wisconsin HOPE Lab is a great resource on college hunger: <http://wihopelab.com/index.html>

Research on the impact of hunger in the workplace, and in our economy more broadly, is even harder to find. Two studies put the impact of food insecurity on the US economy at between \$111 billion and \$206 billion (in 2018 dollars):

See: *Hunger in America: Suffering We All Pay For*, Donald Shepard et al, Oct 2011. Available at:

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/reports/2011/10/05/10504/hunger-in-america/>, with some numbers updated here:

[http://www.bread.org/sites/default/files/downloads/cost\\_of\\_hunger\\_study.pdf](http://www.bread.org/sites/default/files/downloads/cost_of_hunger_study.pdf)

And *The Economic Costs of Domestic Hunger*, Larry Brown et al, 2007. Available at [http://us.stop-hunger.org/files/live/sites/stophunger-us/files/HungerPdf/Cost%20of%20Domestic%20Hunger%20Report%20\\_tcm150-155150.pdf](http://us.stop-hunger.org/files/live/sites/stophunger-us/files/HungerPdf/Cost%20of%20Domestic%20Hunger%20Report%20_tcm150-155150.pdf)

Scaled to the size of Maine's population, that's roughly equivalent to between \$440 and \$820 million in Maine. For comparison, the food stamp program in Maine spent just \$264 million in 2015-2016.<sup>2</sup>

### **How SNAP (Food Stamps) supports work**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as Food Stamps, acts as a safety net for people whose income falls below a level roughly equivalent to 185% of the federal poverty level.<sup>3</sup> The program is especially important for Mainers whose employment or earnings are volatile. This includes the many temporary and seasonal workers in Maine, as well as the large number of people employed in sectors like retail, where schedules can be erratic, and subject to change at short notice.

The program is structured so that it doesn't disincentivize work. Unlike some safety net programs, it doesn't have a "welfare cliff." As people's income increases, their SNAP benefits taper off, so that they don't lose out by earning more money.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has some good infosheets on SNAP:

Maine fact sheet: [https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap\\_factsheet\\_maine.pdf](https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_maine.pdf)

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<sup>1</sup> MECEP analysis of US Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Food Security Supplement 2016, using the Integrated Public Use Microdata System from the University of Minneapolis.

<sup>2</sup> US Dept of Agriculture, SNAP State Activity Report, Fiscal Year 2016, available at [https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap\\_factsheet\\_maine.pdf](https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_maine.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> For current federal poverty guidelines, see <https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-guidelines>

How spending helps local grocery stores: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-boosts-retailers-and-local-economies>

Database of retailers accepting SNAP: <https://www.cbpp.org/snap-retailers-database>

### **The problem with work requirements**

Unfortunately, the SNAP program includes a work requirement for adults without children who don't qualify for disability insurance (so-called "able-bodied adults without dependents"). The problem with work requirements is that they assume that the reason SNAP recipients aren't working is that they don't want to work. It's a coercive measure designed to prod people into work. The reality for most low income Mainers is much different. If they're not working, or working less than the required 20 hours a week, it's often because they've got a serious obstacle to working. That includes health problems which don't qualify as a disability; low levels of education; the need to care for a family member who isn't a child or disabled adult (e.g. an aging parent); lack of transportation; or simply lack of available work.

The federal government recognizes that work requirements are especially unfair when work isn't available, so it allows states to apply for waivers to the work requirements when unemployment rates in states or counties is consistently high. This has historically been the case in many parts of rural Maine.

Following the 2008 recession, the federal government allowed all states to apply for blanket waivers in light of the poor economic conditions nationwide. In 2014, Governor LePage ended Maine's waiver program early, effectively reimposing work requirements on Mainers in the SNAP program. As a result, the caseload of "able bodied adults without dependents" in Maine's SNAP program declined by 80%. Some may have earned enough money not to qualify for the program any more, but the majority probably lost their benefits.

We know, for example, that the majority of people affected by the work requirement were worse off than before. Many who lost their benefits because they weren't working still couldn't work after the policy was put in place. Those who did get work worked irregularly, and didn't earn enough to bring them above the food stamp eligibility threshold.

The governor's Office of Policy and Management wrote up a report on the impact of the work requirement proposal, which was highly flawed and poorly written.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities highlights problems with the Maine report, and a similar effort in Kansas:

<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-reports-present-misleading-findings-on-impact-of-three-month-time>

Summary of MECEP's findings from the SNAP work requirement:

<http://blog.mecep.org/2018/04/despite-poliquins-praise-maine-is-no-model-for-food-insecurity/>

Another target of Governor LePage has been the idea that SNAP recipients “waste” their money on “junk food.” However, the only comprehensive study of the spending habits of SNAP recipients, conducted by the USDA in 2016, found that their purchases were broadly similar to those of average Americans:

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/foods-typically-purchased-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap-households>