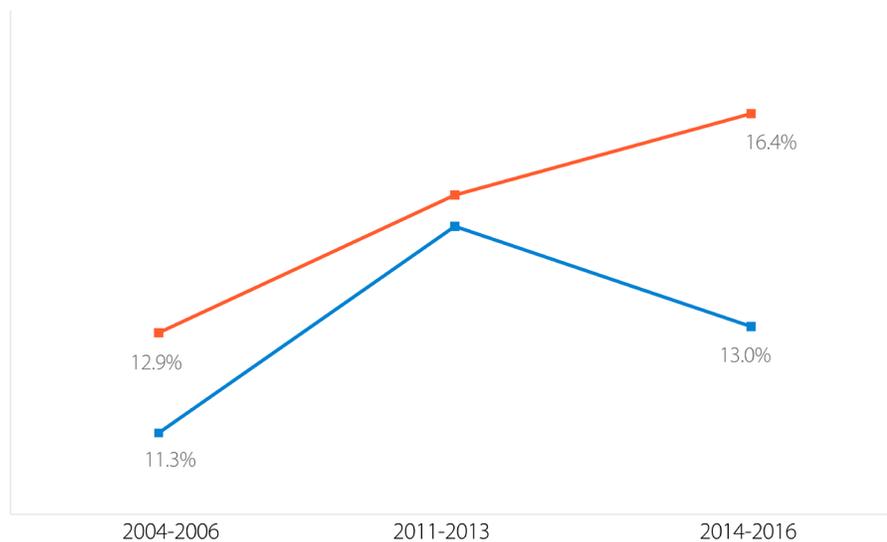


## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): A Lifeline for Hungry Mainers

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While the nation makes progress in reducing hunger, Maine is losing ground compared to other states. This report describes the experience of Maine families as they struggle to pull together the resources to put enough food on the table .



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

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is Maine's first and most important line of defense in helping hungry Mainers get enough to eat. Sixty-three percent of Maine SNAP participants are in households with children, 43% contain household members who are elderly or have a disability, and 41% are working households.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 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](https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_maine.pdf)

To better understand that role that SNAP plays in Mainers lives, **Maine Equal Justice Partners** and **Preble Street** partnered with agencies and community groups from throughout the State throughout June and July of 2017, to survey 430 families who were either currently receiving or recently received SNAP benefits. The study focused on six population sub-groups within the program. They included older Mainers, people with disabilities, families with children, veterans, rural residents and working families. The survey asked respondents to tell us about their experience with SNAP and why it matters to them.

## What Did the Study Find?

### **SNAP Helps Most, But Not All, Respondents Get Enough to Eat**

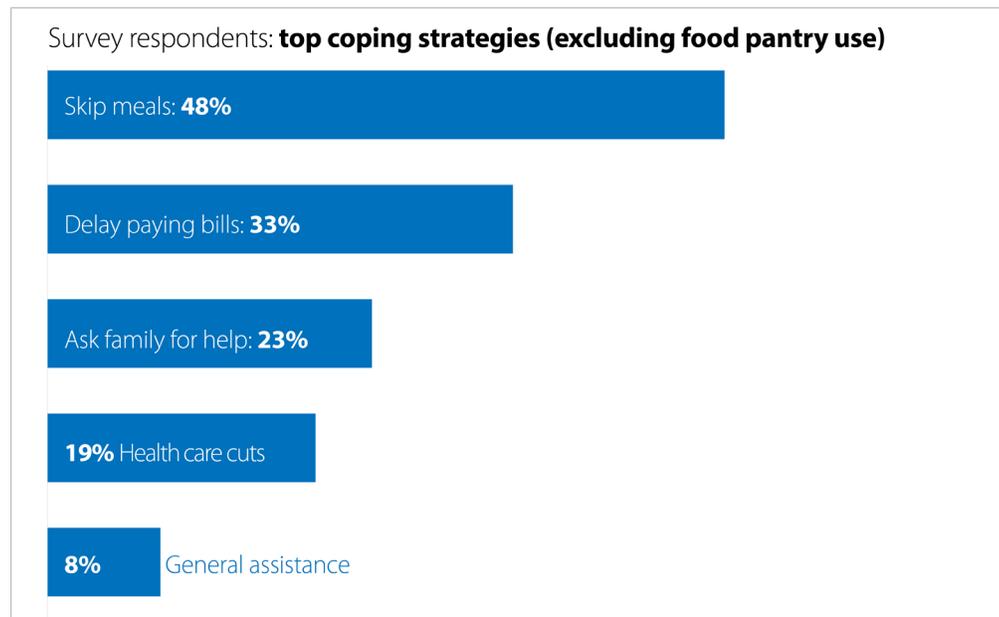
Thanks to SNAP, 63% of survey respondents indicated they are getting enough to eat. Of great concern, however, are the one in three (37%) who indicated that they either worry each month that they won't have enough to eat, or do not actually get enough to eat.

### **SNAP Reduces Stress; It Eases, But Does Not Eliminate Financial Strain on Families**

Nearly two-thirds of respondents said SNAP enables them to purchase food and still pay other bills (65%), that it lowers stress and anxiety about having enough to eat (57%) and that they felt healthier because of SNAP (40%).

### **SNAP Participants Cope by Making Painful Choices When They Run Short of Food**

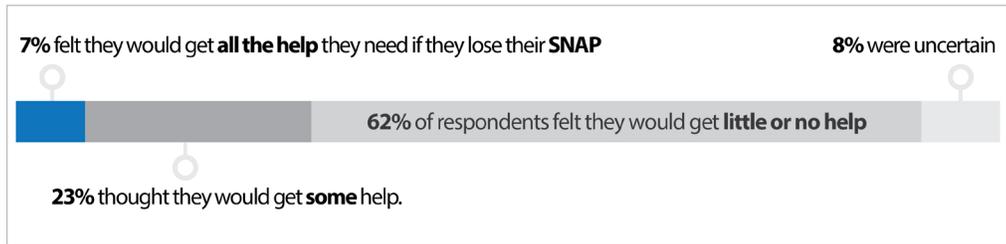
When respondents ran short of food most coped by turning to food pantries (66%), however, the majority of those (63%) noted that pantries cannot fill all the gaps. Many pantries have limited hours, with nearly half of the survey respondents (47%) saying that inaccessibility along with the limited food supplies at pantries would mean they would go hungry without SNAP.



Nearly half of all respondents (48%) coped by skipping meals. One in three (33%) delayed paying rent or heat and less than a quarter (23%) turned to their family for help. One in five (19%) cut back on medicine or other healthcare needs.

**SNAP Matters; Most Hungry Families Have Nowhere Else to Turn**

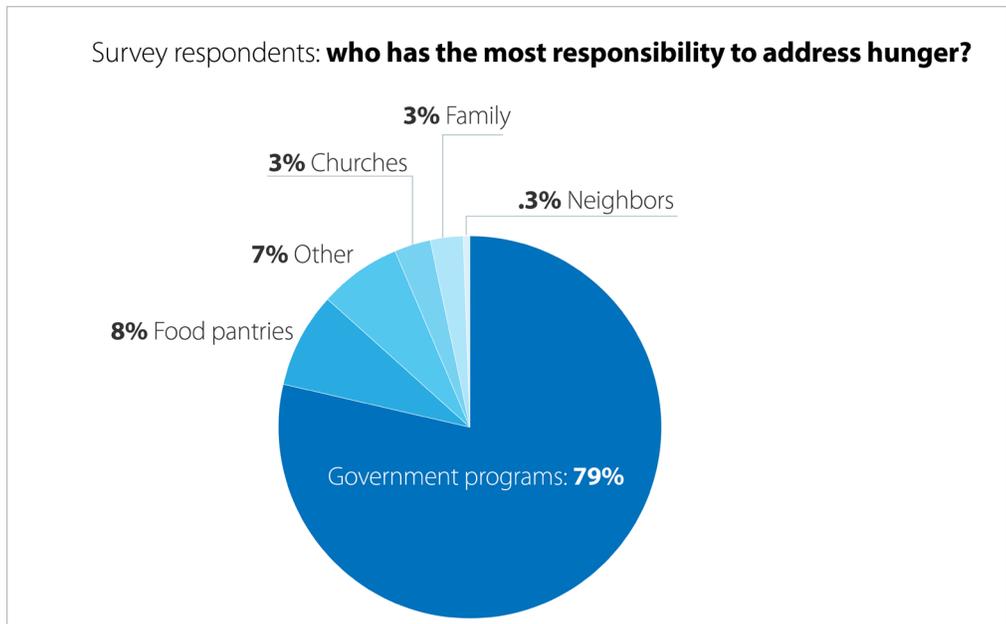
Over half of the respondents (62%) said they would get very little or no help to get the food they need if they lost SNAP benefits, 23% said they would get some help, with only 7% saying that they would get all the help they needed to make up that loss.



**Mainers in Rural Areas Face Particular Barriers to Getting the Food They Need.**

Of the 52% of respondents who indicated that they live in a rural area, the most common problem in accessing food was lack of, or the cost of, transportation. Another common concern was the high cost of food: many noted that they were only able to shop at local “corner” stores where prices are higher.

**Respondents Overwhelmingly Agree That Government Has the Greatest Responsibility to Fight Hunger**



Nearly four out of five (79%) of the respondents said that public programs like SNAP have the greatest responsibility to help people who are hungry. Only 8% thought this responsibility should rest with food pantries, with smaller minorities saying that families or churches should provide the most help (3% each).

### **SNAP Is a Lifeline**

Survey respondents overwhelmingly saw hunger as a persistent and serious concern in their communities. Two out of three respondents indicated that people are less healthy because they can't afford nutritious food. Two out of three said their neighbors were making trade-offs to get enough food to eat, like skipping healthcare interventions or delaying payment of bills. A majority see children struggling to learn in school because they are hungry. A majority also said that their neighbors are often too embarrassed to ask for help when they need it.

## How Do the Experiences of the Survey's Sub-groups Compare?

SNAP is widely recognized as the nation's most effective anti-hunger program; yet, beyond that, the program is not well understood. For example, most people do not know that children make up the highest proportion of SNAP recipients, followed next by people with disabilities, and then older individuals.<sup>2</sup> Nor do most realize that SNAP is serving an increasing share of working families<sup>3</sup> and large numbers of veterans,<sup>4</sup> or that a higher share of people living in rural areas receive SNAP than those in urban areas.<sup>5</sup>

Because Maine is a rural state with one of the lowest average weekly wages in the nation<sup>6</sup> the third highest percentage of veterans<sup>7</sup>, the highest percentage of citizens over age 65<sup>8</sup>

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2 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://fnsp-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/Characteristics2015.pdf> Table B5

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 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](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/specialreports/veteran_poverty_trends.pdf)

5 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>

6 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>

7 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](http://www.statemaster.com/graph/peo_per_of_civ_pop_who_are_vet-percent-civilian-population-who-veterans)

8 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>

and the fifth highest rate of disability<sup>9</sup>, 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. This is why we asked representatives of these groups to tell us about their experience with SNAP and why it matters to them.

Remarkably, there was broad agreement among all of these different demographic groups about the importance of SNAP and the valuable role it plays in their lives. But there were some important differences as well. Here is a snapshot of some of those differences:

### **Older Mainers:**

- › Due to receipt of Social Security and/or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), many older Mainers receive the minimum SNAP benefit (just \$16 per month). Consequently, SNAP provided less than half of the monthly food budget for a higher proportion of older Mainers than those in all but one other group (veterans).
- › Comparatively few older Mainers felt that SNAP helped reduce stress on their household budgets so that they could *both* buy food *and* pay their bills. They were also less likely to agree that SNAP reduced anxiety about getting enough food to eat, or made them feel healthier because they could access more and better food.
- › Older Mainers were the least likely of any group to turn to family for help when they ran short of food.

### **People with Disabilities:**

- › Households that included at least one member with a disability were the most likely of any group to skip meals when food ran short, with 6 out of 10 using this as a coping mechanism. They were also the most likely to turn to food pantries for help.
- › Compared to other groups, people with disabilities were the second most likely to say they would get very little or no help in getting enough food if they lost their SNAP benefits.
- › Households with disabled members were the most likely to worry each month that they would not get enough food to eat or actually did not get enough to eat with more than half sharing that concern.

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<sup>9</sup> 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>

### **Families with Children:**

- › A relatively high proportion—nearly 7 out of 10—of families with children reported that SNAP lowered their anxiety about getting enough to eat.
- › A higher than average percent of this group also skipped meals as a coping mechanism when food ran short. Many parents commented that they skipped meals themselves to ensure that their children had enough to eat. This was also the most likely group to postpone paying their rent or utility bills as a coping mechanism when they run short of food.
- › Families with children were also most likely to say—7 in 10—that they that they would get very little or no help from family, friends or local charities if they lost their SNAP benefits.

### **Veterans:**

- › Veterans were the most likely to cut back on medicine or other health care needs when food ran short. A higher than average proportion—6 out of 10—also reported skipping meals when they didn't have enough to eat.
- › Veterans were the group second most likely to report worrying that they won't have enough to eat, or actually not getting enough to eat.
- › Veterans had the highest share of respondents indicating that SNAP did *not* meet at least half of their monthly food cost.

### **Rural Residents:**

- › When asked to identify the most common challenges in accessing food in rural areas, respondents broadly agreed upon five factors: transportation, limited access to food pantries, higher cost of food at smaller local markets, lack of jobs and low wages, and shame or stigma in seeking help in smaller communities.

### **Working Households:**

- › Working households were the most likely to report that SNAP boosted their ability to buy food and still pay their other bills; felt less anxious about having enough to eat, and were healthier because they were able to access better foods.
- › Working households were among the most likely to say they would receive little or no help to replace SNAP if they lost benefits, with nearly 7 out of 10 sharing this concern.
- › Working families held the strongest belief that publicly funded programs like SNAP have the greatest responsibility to help hungry members of their communities, with nearly 9 out of 10 sharing that opinion.

These findings provide a window into the lives of the Maine people who know, better than most, what it means to be hungry. And the role SNAP plays in addressing hunger. Their responses raise a caution for policy makers as they consider further changes to SNAP.

If SNAP is cut or access to the program is impaired, many members of our community will be without alternatives and hunger will be likely to increase. SNAP is a vaccine. SNAP is a public health program. SNAP is an economic pillar, especially in rural areas. It brings more than \$250 million dollars annually into Maine helping to strengthen our state and our economy. The findings of this report argue for preserving, protecting and expanding the reach of this vital program.