

## **Food Assistance and Resilience in Colorado: The Changing Role of SNAP**

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- As of September, over 600,000 Coloradans (10%) received SNAP benefits in 2025.
- County participation varies from under 2% (Pitkin County) to over 35% (Costilla County).
- 47% of SNAP households have children, 36% have seniors, and 47% have disabled peoples.
- Cutting SNAP benefits by 20% will lower Colorado's annual GDP by about \$35 million.

### ***Introduction***

This report provides background on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and its role in Colorado's economy and communities. It further explores how recent reductions and pauses in SNAP benefits may affect Coloradans and concludes with brief policy considerations and key food assistance resources in Colorado.

### ***What is SNAP?***

SNAP is a federal program that helps low-income individuals and families purchase food. Federal funds are allocated to states and distributed monthly based on state-specific eligibility rules and benefit levels. The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which supplies food to local food banks, operates separately from SNAP, though both target food insecurity. Some states, like Colorado, also support complementary initiatives such as Double Up Food Bucks, which incentivize healthy food purchases.

Beyond reducing poverty, SNAP functions as an economic stabilizer. Enrollment typically follows the business cycle, rising during recessions and falling during economic expansion. The program's impact extends beyond participants by supporting small retailers and rural grocers, which often operate on slim margins and are sensitive to changes in consumer demand.

### ***A brief history of food assistance in the US***

The first federal food assistance program, The Food Stamp Program, began in 1939 to address widespread unemployment and food surpluses during the Great Depression. The program ended in 1943 but was reintroduced in 1961 under President Kenedy as a pilot program, and later made permanent through the Food Stamp Act of 1964 under President Johnson to support agriculture and impoverished Americans. Since then, the program has evolved through reforms, including replacing the physical food stamps with Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards and ongoing adjustments to eligibility, benefits, and reporting. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have expanded and contracted the program, reflecting its longstanding bipartisan relevance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> USDA - <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/history>

### SNAP in Colorado

#### Trends

As of September, more than 600,000 Coloradans received SNAP benefits in 2025, injecting roughly \$120 million into the state’s food economy.<sup>2</sup> Participation has fluctuated over the past decade, reaching a low of 444,000 in 2019 before increasing 34% to nearly 594,000 in 2024. The average monthly payment for a Colorado SNAP participant is about \$190, \$2 above the national average.<sup>3</sup> Pandemic era supplements pushed total benefits to a high of \$139 million in 2022 before decreasing to \$112 million in 2024 – still more than double 2019 levels.<sup>2</sup>

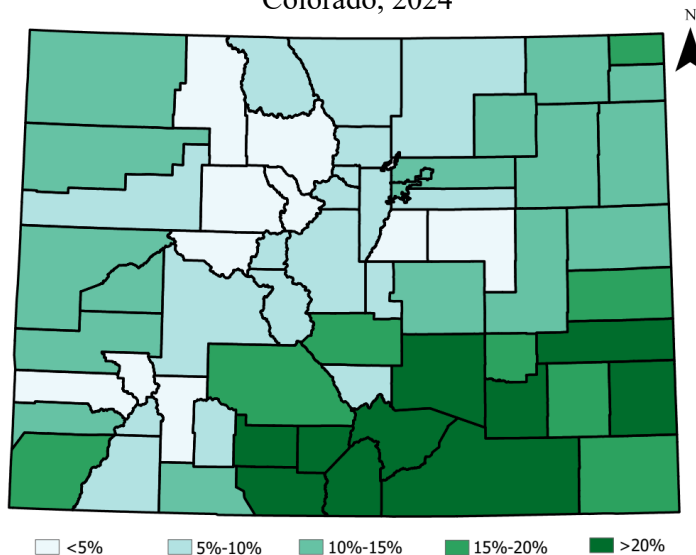
#### Geography

In 2024, nearly 10% of Colorado residents participated in SNAP each month.<sup>2</sup> County participation ranged from just under 2% in Pitkin County to over 35% in Costilla County. Ten counties recorded average monthly participation rates above 20%. Generally, rural counties show higher average participation rates (13%) compared to urban counties (9%), however outliers such as Pueblo County (24%) and Hinsdale County (3%) exist.

#### Demographics

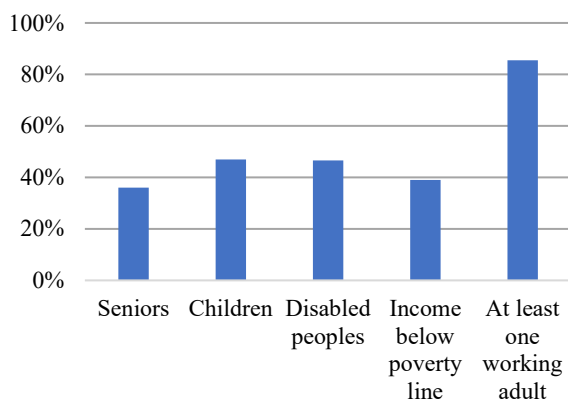
According to the 2022 American Community Survey, approximately 78% of Colorado SNAP participants identified as White, 16% identified as Some Other Race, 3% as Native American, 2% as Black, and 1% as Asian.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of race, one third of Colorado SNAP participants reported Hispanic ethnicity. Among SNAP households, 47% include children, and 36% include seniors, 47% include a person with a disability, and 85% include at least one working adult.<sup>4</sup> Approximately three of five Colorado SNAP households earn income above the federal poverty level (capped at 200%) – consistent with the program’s goal of helping families avoid, as well as escape, poverty.

Figure 1. Share of SNAP Participation Colorado, 2024



Data source: Colorado Department of Human Services <sup>2</sup>

Figure 2. Share of Colorado SNAP families with...



Data source: 2022 American Community Survey<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>CDHS: <https://cdhs.colorado.gov/snap-data>, USDA-FNS: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

<sup>3</sup>Traceone - <https://www.traceone.com/resources/plm-compliance-blog/states-that-depend-most-on-food-assistance>

<sup>4</sup>American Community Survey, 2022. Table S2201: FOOD STAMPS/SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)

### ***The Economic and Social Roles of SNAP***

While SNAP is primarily viewed as a nutrition and anti-poverty program, it also plays a vital role in supporting local economies. When real incomes fall during recessions or inflationary periods, food spending declines, placing strain on small grocers and agricultural producers. Even small declines in local food demand can threaten small, rural stores operating on thin profit margins. Furthermore, as people buy less food there is less demand for locally grown produce which could decrease prices and hurt farmers and ranchers' bottom line.

Research from the US Department of Agriculture estimates that every \$1 in additional SNAP expenditure generates about \$1.54 in economic activity during a weak economy.<sup>5</sup> This multiplier effect of 1.54 reflects the additional sales, jobs, and input purchases throughout the food supply chain.

Given food's role as a daily necessity and the agricultural industry's importance to national security, policymakers have long viewed SNAP as a tool to sustain communities through economic stress. The program supports access to nutrition, sustains local demand for food, and helps stabilize food prices during periods of economic upheaval. When benefits are reduced, however, many households often substitute fresh produce with shelf-stable, ultra-processed foods to stretch their budgets. This shift can further erode nutrition and contribute to rising food insecurity and health disparities, particularly in rural areas.

### ***Current Changes to SNAP***

#### ***SNAP reform***

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (H.R. 1) reduces national SNAP funding by \$186 billion (approximately 20%) through 2034.<sup>6</sup> For comparison, the largest previous cut to SNAP was a \$6.1 billion annual cut (in 2025 dollars) signed by President Clinton in 1996.<sup>7</sup> The present cuts tighten work requirements, eliminate auxiliary programs like SNAP-Ed, remove eligibility for refugees, and reduce automatic qualification for free school meals, amongst other reductions in program scope and scale. Some canceled work requirement exemptions specifically affect vulnerable populations, including veterans, individuals experiencing homelessness, and former foster youth. Analysts estimate that more than 330,000 Colorado families could lose some or all benefits, with expanded work requirements alone affecting about 168,000 residents.<sup>8</sup>

SNAP participation automatically qualifies households for other programs – such as WIC, free school meals, and Summer EBT – consequently, reductions could increase administrative costs and limit youth access to nutrition programs. Many of these programs primarily serve children and youth, meaning they will bear the brunt of the secondary effects. As families lose SNAP eligibility, some will turn to WIC or local food pantries, placing additional strain on the emergency food system, which is already facing rising demand, higher costs, and supply challenges, especially in rural and resort communities with high living expenses.

Beyond the human impact, the proposed reduction has significant economic implications. Given the USDA's estimated multiplier of 1.54 (see previous section), the \$186 billion cut to SNAP implies a potential \$286 billion decline in national GDP over the next decade, underscoring SNAP's role as both

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<sup>5</sup>USDA - <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details?pubid=93528>

<sup>6</sup>NPR - <https://www.npr.org/2025/08/09/nx-s1-5494750/independent-grocery-stores-rely-on-food-stamps-sales-the-new-tax-bill-could-impact-this>, Nourish Colorado: <https://nourishcolorado.org/budget-reconciliation-impacts-on-nutrition-security/>

<sup>7</sup>Congressional Budget Office, "Federal Budgetary Implications of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, December 1996, <https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/104th-congress-1995-1996/reports/1996doc32.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup>Nourish Colorado: <https://nourishcolorado.org/budget-reconciliation-impacts-on-nutrition-security/>

a nutritional safety net and an economic stabilizer. Generalizing this 20% national cut to Colorado would reduce Colorado SNAP by nearly \$23 million and the state's GDP by about \$34 million annually. In addition, H.R. 1 introduces a federal–state cost-share model aimed at reducing administrative error, which would shift a portion of operating costs to the states.

### *Government Shut Down*

Government shutdowns, which halt all nonessential discretionary spending, appear to be occurring with increasing frequency and duration. The federal government shutdown that began on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025, is the longest on record. With the suspension of nonessential spending, SNAP benefits were paused nationwide. Amid ongoing legal disputes, the federal government appears set on funding only half of November's benefits, prompting Colorado to delay roughly \$120 million in distributions while recalculating eligibility and benefit levels.<sup>9</sup> A permanent 50% reduction in Colorado SNAP would reduce the state's GDP by an additional \$70 million annually.

During this period, EBT cards remain active, new SNAP applications are still being processed, and school meal programs continue operating. While Colorado's WIC program is largely unaffected, the shutdown has disrupted TEFAP, which supplies food banks. Unable to purchase new food, food banks – the primary safety net when SNAP is unavailable – are facing mounting strain. To help bridge the gap, Colorado allocated \$3.3 million every two weeks in emergency support, up to \$10 million or until the shutdown ends. Residents in need of assistance can find resources listed at the end of this report.<sup>9</sup>

### *Conclusions and Policy Proposals*

Colorado's current challenges from federal funding reductions and program interruptions will test the state's capacity to protect vulnerable populations and maintain resilient local food systems. Some Colorado organizations suggest policymakers 1) expand healthy food incentive programs, 2) support culturally responsive nutrition and outreach, and 3) remove structural barriers to food access (e.g., transportation).<sup>10</sup> Continued coordination among state agencies, nonprofits, and local governments will be critical to ensuring access to food and stability for households and small retailers alike.

### *Resources*

Coloradans in need of nutrition assistance should contact the following organizations:

- **Colorado 211:** Call 2-1-1 or (866) 760-6489, or visit [www.211colorado.org](http://www.211colorado.org)
- **Feeding Colorado:** Visit [feedingcolorado.org/find-food](http://feedingcolorado.org/find-food) or email [info@feedingcolorado.org](mailto:info@feedingcolorado.org)
- **Hunger Free Colorado Food Resource Hotline:** (855) 855-4626

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<sup>9</sup> Hunger Free Colorado -

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Y1djbe47yZyEpIj1GTBvNoOZ4\\_X7RpHhsTXTw2TuqFk/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.6v3dbxqgx986](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Y1djbe47yZyEpIj1GTBvNoOZ4_X7RpHhsTXTw2TuqFk/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.6v3dbxqgx986)

<sup>10</sup> Nourish Colorado - <https://nourishcolorado.org/restricting-snap-purchases-undermines-dignity-access-and-equity/>