

# Rural Hunger in America

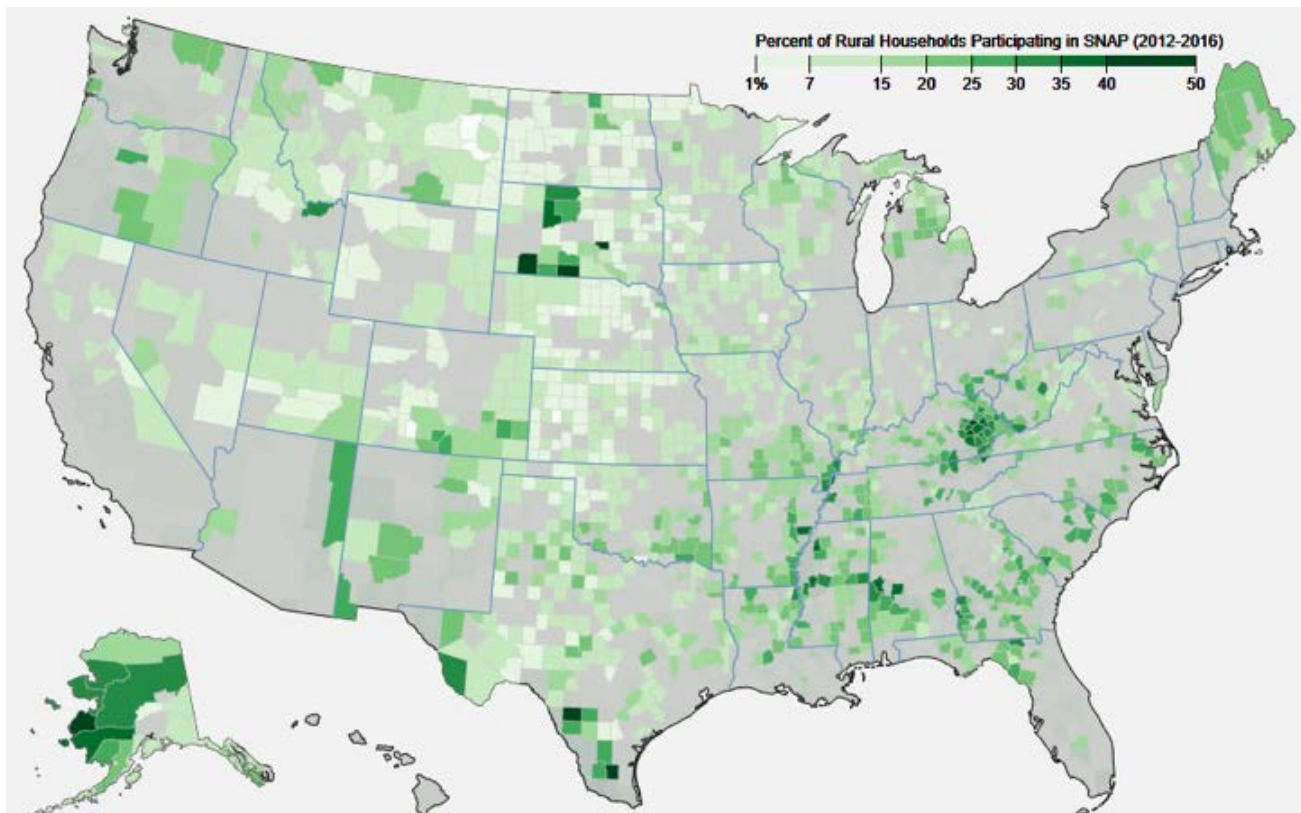
## SNAP: GET THE FACTS

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation's first line of defense against hunger, is critically important for rural America. In addition to improving the food security, health, and well-being of participating families, federal SNAP dollars stimulate rural economies through assistance that goes directly to struggling families to purchase food.

### In rural areas across America, SNAP:

- delivers assistance quickly and effectively to people recovering from natural disasters or economic crises;
- reaches key vulnerable populations – the large majority are children, seniors, and people with disabilities;
- is efficient, using electronic benefits technology and regular channels of commerce;
- generates \$1.79 in local economic activity for every SNAP dollar spent — helping to create jobs and expand markets for farmers; and
- supports work, helping families struggling with low wages.

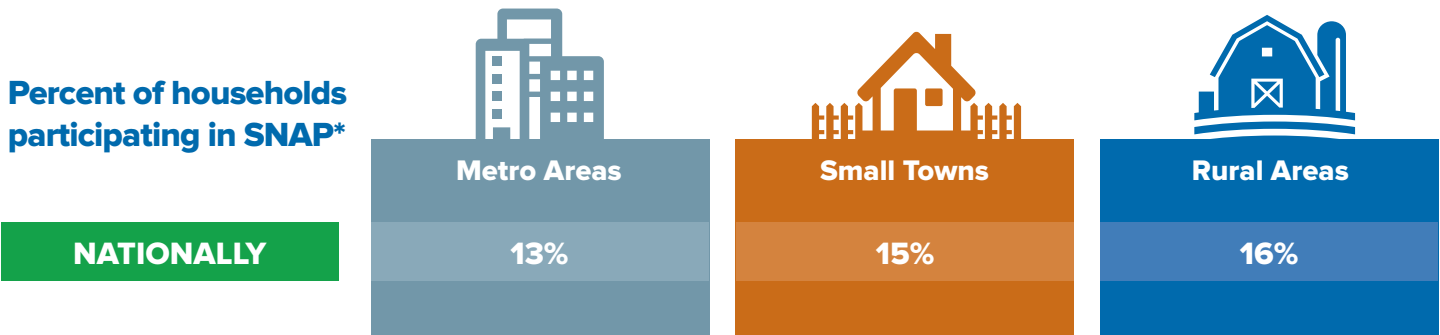
### SNAP Participation Among Households in Rural Counties, 2012-2016



Source: FRAC analysis of 5-year 2012-2016 American Community Survey data, in collaboration with Punam Ohri-Vachaspati, PhD, RD, Professor, Arizona State.

## Did You Know? Millions of Rural Residents Benefit from SNAP

SNAP participation nationally was highest among households in rural (16 percent) and small town (15 percent) counties compared to households in metro counties (13 percent).



\* American Community Survey 2016 five-year estimates (2012–2016).

## Did You Know? SNAP Can Grow to Reach Millions More Rural Residents Struggling with Food Insecurity

Rural residents who are eligible for SNAP often miss out on benefits because they lack information and disproportionately lack access to apply and recertify for benefits. Barriers — especially for low-income working families with children — may also include the time and cost of getting to distant SNAP offices to submit paperwork and have interviews.

## What We Can Do

The following six key strategies can help more rural communities overcome SNAP barriers:

### 1. Ramp-Up Education and Application

**Assistance:** States can partner with non-profit groups to get information about eligibility to low-income people in rural areas and to help them navigate the application questions and documents they will need to submit in order to be approved for benefits. Trusted messengers who can address stigma many rural residents feel include doctors and other health professionals, faith-based groups, and peers (such as [elderly persons](#) and military veterans).

### 2. Address Poor Access for Rural Residents to SNAP Offices:

Rural residents often are located far from SNAP offices and may have limited transportation options. States can operate mobile eligibility offices to better serve rural customers as well as offer them applications and interviews online, [over the telephone](#), and through mobile technology.

### 3. Adopt SNAP Options to Serve More Working Poor and Other Rural Residents:

States can [eliminate asset tests](#) in SNAP and [allow applicants with gross incomes up to 200% of the federal poverty line](#) to have their out-of-pocket costs for other basic needs taken into account to determine if they have net incomes low enough (100% of poverty) to qualify for SNAP benefits. The so-called SNAP “Categorical Eligibility (Cat EI) Option” allows SNAP to serve more rural working families with children who have high child care costs as well as elderly people who would otherwise be ineligible if they had more than \$3,500 in countable assets. Cat EI is particularly helpful at mitigating a “cliff effect” — a loss of program eligibility as earnings increase.

### 4. Promote Opportunities to Connect Older Adults to SNAP and Age in Place:

Rural populations are disproportionately elderly. Currently, fewer than half of all those eligible aged 60 or over participate in SNAP, and many who do participate are getting benefit amounts that are lower than the amount for which they are eligible. States can: partner with non-profit groups on application assistance, streamline application forms and procedures for enrolling elderly people, establish a standard medical

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deduction to take into account out-of-pocket medical expenses, and use state funds to supplement the SNAP monthly minimum benefit (currently \$15).

## 5. Prepare to Meet Future Disasters with Disaster

**SNAP:** SNAP's program structure allows it to respond quickly and effectively to changes in need, whether those are due to economic downturns or natural disasters. The most recent recession and disasters hit rural communities hard. Just since 2016, Disaster SNAP (D-SNAP) provided important aid to victims of floods, hurricanes, tornadoes and wildfires in rural and other communities in California, Florida, Louisiana, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, and West Virginia. States can better prepare to leverage such federal assistance to meet future disaster situations by updating their annual Disaster SNAP plans, by partnering with non-profit groups on education and application assistance, and by exploring telephone interviews and pre-registration systems to streamline the D-SNAP application process for clients and caseworkers.

## 6. Use SNAP Employment and Training (E&T)

**Resources:** Getting and keeping full-time, year-round

work that pays a family-sustaining wage is a challenge for many rural residents. For some of those residents, lack of skills training is a barrier. States can access federal SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) resources to help more rural SNAP participants gain job skills and move toward greater self-sufficiency. States can partner with other stakeholders to leverage federal reimbursements. For example, states can partner with community colleges in rural areas to serve SNAP-eligible students, including returning military veterans, while they are enrolled in a program for career and technical education.

*This fact sheet is part of a series on rural hunger developed by the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) with the support of Smithfield Foods. FRAC and Smithfield Foods have teamed up to create the Rally Against Rural Hunger initiative to raise awareness about rural hunger and to connect eligible people across the country with federal food assistance programs so they may get the nutrition they need for their health and well-being.*