

*July 2021*

# Closing the SNAP Gap

**WORKING TOGETHER TO END HUNGER &  
STRENGTHEN SNAP IN SOUTH CAROLINA**

**South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center**

*With support from:*

**Food Research & Action Center**

**The Food Trust**

**Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**





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## I. Executive Summary

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) which monthly benefits to eligible low-income people to purchase food is the most effective tool to fight hunger in the nation. According to Feeding America, for every one meal provided by the network of food banks and food shelves in the United States, SNAP provides nine.<sup>1</sup> SNAP is incredibly effective at allowing low-income families a path out of poverty, and has been shown to have positive impacts on health and educational outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Despite its efficiency at fighting poverty, and the long term generational advantages of improving health and education for recipients, SNAP is still, unfortunately, an under-utilized resource across South Carolina. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimated in its most recent survey that in fiscal year (FY) 2018, more than one in five (23%) of SNAP-eligible South Carolina residents were not enrolled in SNAP.<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing the need to address the state's SNAP gap, the South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center initiated the South Carolina SNAP Project, to develop a better understanding of people's experiences with the program. We set out to discover barriers to accessing SNAP, find solutions for these barriers, and offer key recommendations to improve SNAP utilization. After conducting two comprehensive surveys, as well as a series of follow-up interviews with ten survey participants, we gained a better understanding of reasons South Carolinians were not enrolling or staying enrolled in SNAP.

Following that research, the South Carolina SNAP Project convened stakeholders from the anti-hunger community, state government agencies, public health advocates, food retailers and others to develop strategies, administrative changes, and policy improvements to increase access and ease of enrolling in the program, reduce stigma associated with SNAP, and expand program flexibilities. The recommendations in this report aim to ensure all South Carolinians have access to the nutrition they need to reach their full potential.

## II. South Carolina SNAP Project and Acknowledgments

South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center (SC Appleseed) is a statewide nonprofit organization that advocates for policies that support low-income communities across our state. In early 2020, SC Appleseed embarked on a project to understand and minimize the South Carolina SNAP gap. The project received support from the Food Research & Action Center, The Food Trust, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The project aimed to learn from SNAP participants about barriers they had experienced in their path to accessing and participating in SNAP, and connected with hundreds of South Carolina's SNAP recipients, as well as dozens of anti-hunger advocates and top-level regional and state administrative leadership, to gain insights and create meaningful momentum toward a goal of maximizing participation in SNAP.

While the project initially planned to conduct in-person focus groups with SNAP participants, due to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, project methodology adapted to accommodate social distancing guidelines and to protect participants' safety. The project was fortunate to enter into a partnership with Propel, a technology company with the mission of providing modern, respectful, effective technology for low-income Americans.<sup>4</sup> More than 75,000 South Carolina households use Propel's "Fresh EBT" app to manage their SNAP benefits. For the project Propel fielded two South Carolina Fresh EBT SNAP customer surveys (one in July 2020 and another in February 2021). These surveys helped staff better understand recipients' experiences with SNAP and Pandemic EBT Program (P-EBT). Carrie Draper at the Arnold School of Public Health at the University of South Carolina conducted qualitative follow-up interviews with ten SNAP households.

In addition to these methods of obtaining the perspectives of SNAP recipients, SC Appleseed facilitated a series of virtual stakeholder convenings. Project staff connected with state and federal officials, anti-hunger and public health advocates, service providers, food retailers and more and worked to develop consensus recommendations for improving SNAP participation in South Carolina.

SC Appleseed is grateful to the South Carolina SNAP participants who generously shared their time and insights in response to the Fresh EBT surveys and follow-up interviews conducted by our team.

Their experiences and wisdom are the foundation of this report and the basis of the recommendations contained herein. Project staff are also grateful for the amazing partner and provider organizations across South Carolina, who work tirelessly towards the goal of feeding households and ending hunger in our state.

### Partners for Ending Hunger in South Carolina

- AARP South Carolina
- American Heart Association
- Carolina Farm Stewardship
- Columbia Food Policy Committee
- Diabetes Free SC, BlueCross-BlueShield of SC
- Feed & Seed Co.
- Feed a Neighbor Project
- FoodShare South Carolina
- Harvest Hope Food Bank
- HubCity Farmers Market
- LiveWell Greenville
- Loaves & Fishes
- Lowcountry Food Bank
- Lowcountry Street Grocery
- Oconee Food Summit
- One80 Place
- PASOs
- Pinehurst Farmers Market
- Richland Library
- South Carolina Commission for Minority Affairs
- South Carolina Community Loan Fund
- South Carolina Department of Social Services
- South Carolina Food Policy Council
- South Carolina Hospital Association
- South Carolina Legal Services
- South Carolina Office of Rural Health
- SC Thrive
- Senior Resources
- South Carolina State Library
- University of South Carolina School of Public Health
- Wholespire, formerly Eat Smart Move More SC

### III. Hunger & SNAP in South Carolina

Hunger and food insecurity are challenges that have long plagued individuals and communities across South Carolina, and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

During 2021, the projected rate of food insecurity in South Carolina is 11%<sup>6</sup> for households overall, and an even worse 14%<sup>7</sup> for households with children. Moreover, the pandemic has provided a new lens on long-standing disparities.<sup>8</sup> Entrenched inequities, namely systemic racism and white supremacy, contribute to disproportionately high rates of poverty and food insecurity for people of color across our country, particularly in the Southern states. Over the past two decades Black and Latinx households have been *twice as likely* as white households to experience food insecurity. In South Carolina during the coronavirus pandemic, Black workers were nearly twice as likely as white workers to be unemployed.<sup>9</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 25% of Black South Carolinians, and 42% of Latinx South Carolinians, were living in poverty in 2018. In comparison, during that same period, 12% of white South Carolinians were living in poverty. that same period, only 12% of white South Carolinians were living in poverty.<sup>10</sup>

#### Family & Economic Benefits of SNAP

SNAP is South Carolina's first line of defense against hunger and plays a crucial role in lifting households out of poverty nationwide. According to DSS records, in calendar year 2019, 282,335 households consisting of 606,370 South Carolinians received SNAP benefits in an average month.<sup>11</sup> Monthly benefits issued in South Carolina averaged \$70,014,014.<sup>12</sup> After the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, the average monthly number of South Carolina households and individuals receiving SNAP benefits between March 1, 2020 and March 31, 2021 increased to 298,073 and 626,907, respectively. During that time, the average monthly benefits issued in South Carolina increased to \$114,153,337, primarily due to temporary emergency allotments USDA authorized.<sup>13</sup>

Once distributed, SNAP benefits have additional positive impacts on the economy. According to FRAC's review of the research, every dollar of SNAP benefits during a downturn generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80

in economic activity, benefiting the entire food chain — from farmers and food manufacturers, to truckers, grocery stores and clerks who stock shelves and check out customers.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, when a family participates in SNAP, its children are considered categorically eligible for free school meals. They are "directly certified" for such by the local school district, streamlining the process of school meal access for families and school administrators. This wraparound nutrition support is crucial in supporting our children to learn and grow.<sup>15</sup> When children experience even the mildest forms of food insecurity, their health and education suffers. Conversely, participation in SNAP among food insecure populations has been shown to have positive impacts on health and educational outcomes, pointing to the program as an important tool to help achieve health equity.<sup>16</sup>

By supporting the growth and education of children, SNAP and school meals support the future of South Carolina.

#### SNAP Administration in South Carolina

**In South Carolina, SNAP is administered by the South Carolina Department of Social Services (SCDSS), while the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Southeast Regional Office provides oversight and guidance to South Carolina and other states in the region. The USDA also provides funds to states for conducting SNAP outreach and application assistance (on a 50/50 federal/state reimbursement basis); implementing SNAP Education, known as SNAP-Ed (based on a federal formula basis); and offering SNAP Employment and Training, also known as SNAP E & T (on a 50/50 federal/state reimbursement basis as well as through a limited 100% federal allocation).**

## The SNAP Gap

Despite its benefits, many eligible South Carolinians do not participate in SNAP. USDA estimates that more than one in five (23%) of SNAP-eligible South Carolina residents are likely *eligible but not enrolled* in SNAP.<sup>17</sup> This underutilization of SNAP benefits is commonly referred to as “the SNAP gap.”<sup>18</sup> The SNAP gap harms the health and wellbeing of South Carolina households and undercuts the state economy by leaving millions of federal food assistance dollars on the table.

In addition to under-participation among SNAP eligible South Carolinians, some groups face particular barriers to eligibility. For example, unlike a majority of states, South Carolina limits SNAP eligibility to only those under 130% of the Federal Poverty Level.<sup>19</sup> That undercuts support for many low-income families with children working their way up the economic ladder. Also unlike other states, in South Carolina former drug felons making new starts face an absolute lifetime ban on SNAP participation.<sup>20</sup> Traditional federal rules also foreclose SNAP access for many struggling college students. Effective January 1, 2021, however, some of those federal bars have been eased for college student eligibility during COVID-19.<sup>21</sup>

In the event that a SNAP recipient receives a higher benefit amount than prescribed by law, the recipient is responsible for repaying the value of the overpayment to the state.<sup>22</sup> While federal law allows states to compromise these claims,<sup>23</sup> South Carolina has a “zero compromise” policy with overpayments, even when overpayments are caused by agency errors. When SNAP participants receive notices to recipients, whether they are about overpayments or changes in benefit amounts, the notices can be confusing and fail to inform recipients of possible recourse or free legal assistance to which they may be entitled. Stakeholders identified these administrative issues regarding benefit changes and overpayments as deterrents that prevent former SNAP participants from seeking assistance later.

## SNAP during COVID-19

From the start of the pandemic, SNAP has filled a crucial role for many families in South Carolina. During the spring and summer months of 2020, many residents applied for food benefits as they lost their jobs or saw their hours reduced. Federal legislation<sup>24</sup> allowed SNAP households to temporarily receive the *maximum* SNAP allotment based on their household

size in order to better meet the nutrition needs of low-income households during COVID-19. South Carolina operated under a state of emergency due to the coronavirus pandemic from March 13, 2020 until that order was lifted on June 6, 2021.<sup>25</sup> As of July 2021, it remained unclear whether South Carolina would adopt another form of pandemic health declaration as many other states had done that would allow it to leverage federal SNAP Emergency Allotments for SNAP households after July 31, 2021.<sup>26</sup>

## SNAP EBT Online Purchase Pilot

During the pandemic, South Carolina began participating in the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot, which enables SNAP households to purchase groceries online. By June 2021 the SNAP authorized retailers that offered SNAP EBT online purchasing to South Carolina SNAP customers included ALDI, Amazon, Food Lion, Publix, and Walmart.<sup>27</sup>

## Pandemic EBT a.k.a. “P-EBT”

In addition to SNAP, Pandemic EBT (“P-EBT”), is a new federal program initiated in spring 2020.<sup>28</sup> P-EBT reimburses families for the value of free school meals their children missed during COVID-19. South Carolina has administered two rounds of P-EBT: first from March through June of 2020,<sup>29</sup> and then again for the 2020-2021 school year (from September 2020 to June 2021).<sup>30</sup> More recently, changes at the federal level support states providing P-EBT benefits to go SNAP households with children under age six.<sup>31</sup> Similar to SNAP, families receive P-EBT benefits on an EBT card that is mailed to their homes and that can be used to purchase groceries.

## Healthy Bucks: South Carolina’s SNAP incentive program

In 2013, South Carolina established the Healthy Bucks Program, a statewide SNAP incentive that provides a modest bonus (an extra \$10 in SNAP credits) when SNAP participants spend at least \$5 of their SNAP allotment on produce from a farmer’s market. The program, which is administered by SCDSS, has successfully improved many recipients’ access to nutritious foods as well as provided additional financial support to farmers and markets.

## IV. Project Findings

### Learning from South Carolinians Receiving SNAP

SC Appleseed began this project to address South Carolina's SNAP gap, and to improve SNAP as a whole, by collaborating with program participants and stakeholders to identify and address inefficiencies and access barriers. Staff prioritized listening to South Carolina SNAP recipients to learn about their experiences and recommendations for improving the program. Two surveys were issued; one in July 2020 and the other in February 2021, through Fresh EBT, an app on which SNAP recipients can check their SNAP balance and learn about resources in their community. A total of 890 surveys were completed across both time periods, representing people from 45 of the state's 46 counties. Our partner Carrie Draper conducted follow-up phone interviews with ten survey respondents to gain a more in-depth understanding of their experiences with and perspectives on SNAP.

In both surveys, over 64% of respondents stated that they had skipped or delayed paying their bills, rent, or mortgage.<sup>32</sup> In July 2020, 45% of respondents had visited a food pantry or free food site.<sup>33</sup> By February 2021, the percentage of food site visitors had risen to 50%.<sup>34</sup> From July 2020 to February 2021, the number of respondents who had lost their jobs had risen (from 35% to 38%)<sup>35</sup> as had the number of respondents who had their work hours or salaries reduced (from 35% to 36%).<sup>36</sup>

Most respondents had at least one child enrolled in K-12.<sup>37</sup> In July 2020, 67% of these respondents received P-EBT.<sup>38</sup> In February 2021, the percentage of respondents with children receiving P-EBT had fallen to 59%.<sup>39</sup>

In July 2020, 61% of respondents who did not receive the maximum SNAP allotment before the pandemic were receiving extra benefits at the time of the survey.<sup>40</sup> Out of those respondents, 80% stated that the increase in SNAP benefits allowed them to purchase enough food to make it through the month.<sup>41</sup> By February 2021, 79% of respondents reported receiving extra benefits,<sup>42</sup> and just over three quarters of those who reported the extra benefits (76.7%) said their benefits lasted through the month.<sup>43</sup>

Some survey respondents reported SNAP enrollment process challenges, and about half of respondents in

both surveys applied online.<sup>44</sup> 69% of respondents who did apply online had trouble accessing the website and about 14% of individuals who used the website found the online application to be confusing.<sup>45</sup> Further, 16% of respondents who applied online reported issues with submitting the requisite documents<sup>46</sup> and one in three online applicants had problems with phone system delays.<sup>47</sup> Half of the ten SNAP recipients with whom we had in-depth follow-up interviews described phone delays of 45 minutes or more, or being transferred to multiple agency representatives before getting agency answers to questions about their SNAP benefits.

### SNAP as a Lifesaver to South Carolinians During COVID-19

Despite the challenges described above, most survey respondents said that SNAP helped them during the COVID-19 pandemic, some said they did not know what they would have done without it.

*“SNAP has been a lifesaver. I live in an area where grocery stores are few. Cost of items can be challenging. Giving the maximum benefits right now, it's helping families feed their children.”*

– SNAP recipient in Georgetown County

SNAP recipients with children noted that SNAP was particularly helpful while their children were home due to school closures. Some parents talked about how receiving the maximum SNAP benefit<sup>48</sup> made it possible for them to afford to purchase and prepare healthier meals.

*“Being a single parent with 3 girls, I gave and taught my girls how to cook many dishes and keep everyone healthy! The one on one time was excellent and my smallest fights to cook now. I don't know what I would have done without the help of SNAP with trying to pay utilities and other bills.”*

– SNAP recipient from Richland County

Individuals who had only qualified for the \$16 monthly minimum benefit prior to COVID-19 reported that getting the maximum household allotment allowed them to prepare and eat healthier meals.

*"I am a low income retired Senior and cancer survivor. I live in a subsidized senior community. I had been receiving \$16 a month in SNAP benefits for years which I used to buy ingredients for healthy soups I would then freeze to stretch through the month. I am so grateful for the full allotment over the last few months! It helps so much to be able to buy more nutritious foods like fish and fresh veggies and fruits. And to make more nutritious soups!"*

–SNAP recipient from Charleston County

The many families that endured job loss or a decrease in hours during the pandemic also spoke of the importance of SNAP because of those situations:

*"SNAP is a great blessing as I lost my job that I had for almost 8 years without notice due to my company using COVID-19 as the reason to eliminate my position. A week and a half later my husband's job also eliminated his position and we went from a household earning over \$90,000 to \$0."*

–SNAP recipient from Charleston County

Many respondents explained that the receipt of the maximum SNAP allotment alleviated some of the worries that food insecure households experience, and that they were grateful for the benefits:

*"SNAP has made it easier to provide a meal for my family. Most of the time we would have to go days figuring out how to pay for food or what to eat for dinner. But with SNAP it is a reassuring feeling that you can put food in your refrigerator and pantries and won't have to worry about what's to eat. It's hard during this time to pay for bills and to add to the struggle of finding out what's for dinner every night, it's stressful. But, with SNAP it is a feeling that is undeniably great. Thank you to SNAP and everyone involved working to get families meals during this unpredictable pandemic."*

–SNAP recipient from Richland County

The surveys provided only modest feedback about the option for online SNAP EBT purchases, which reflects the fact that this is still a relatively new practice, and that retailer access is still expanding. Of those surveyed in February 2021, only one in four reported making SNAP purchases online. But it made a positive difference at least for some:

*"I can't go shop carefully. Shopping online with SNAP is my lifeline. Thank you for that option! The extra help during this time has made it possible to get better food than I could have without, helping my health and reducing some of the stress."*

–SNAP recipient from Laurens County

## Some South Carolinians are Still Struggling to Put Food on the Table

Though most people spoke of ways SNAP helped them during the pandemic, others expressed continued concern about having enough food for their families. An increase in food costs was often cited as the reason SNAP benefits were exhausted earlier in the month:

*"It helped somewhat, but around the third week, I was out of resources only because the price of food was too expensive. Even though I tried to stretch the resources, it just didn't work out."*

– SNAP recipient from Horry County

Having kids at home due to school closures increases the challenge some parents and grandparents have in feeding their families:

*"My kids are virtual, so they eat more while at home. The SNAP benefits helped but not as much."*

– SNAP recipient from Aiken County

Some survey respondents reported that they did not receive any extra SNAP benefits, experienced a decrease in their monthly amount, were dropped from the program, or were denied when applying during the pandemic:

*"SNAP was certainly a blessing to me, until I received a \$4.00 raise on Social Security. I'm 72 and have to work a part-time job to make ends meet. I receive \$834.00 a month on Social Security. My rent is 411.00 plus I'm living with many health issues. Being on SNAP allowed me to be able to purchase fresh and healthy foods, which is critical to me maintaining my overall good health. I really would like to get back on SNAP. Not sure how to do that."*

– SNAP recipient from Richland County

## SNAP Recipient Ideas to Make the Program Even Better

Multiple recommendations for strengthening SNAP in South Carolina were suggested by survey respondents and in follow-up interviews (see Table 1).

While some of these changes could be implemented through changes to state policy, others would require federal-level changes.

**TABLE 1: Beneficiaries' Feedback for Strengthening SNAP in South Carolina**

Theme	Illustrative Quote
Increase benefit amount	<i>"Should raise the amounts up. Just cause you're a household of 1 or 2 doesn't mean 174 will last you a month. The grocery stores prices are very high and still don't make much difference with your coupons."</i> – SNAP recipient from Horry County
Increase income eligibility	<i>"Although making over the amount some still can't afford groceries when being a single parent."</i> – SNAP recipient from Lexington County
Extend increased benefits that were received during COVID permanently	<i>"It will be helpful if we can continue to get SNAP until things get 100% better."</i> – SNAP recipient from York County
Improve communication and customer service from SCDSS	<i>"I think it should be better communication if you do have a caseworker because it's kind of like being blindsided waiting on the mail to see what you need to submit rather than speaking with someone to tell you exactly what you need unless you go up there. So it's not really an easy process, and waiting on the phone lines takes a very, very, very long time. I probably sat on there for an hour just to get through to somebody. I think it should be kind of more personal as far as being able to access a caseworker."</i> – SNAP recipient from Spartanburg County
Streamline application process by decreasing the required steps (paperwork, phone interview)	<i>"I think if they could make it a little easier. I think with senior citizens it's hard for them to try to fill out the application on their own without any help. It's a lot of questions that it's not trying to be tricky but it would be hard for them to understand. Only ask the questions that you really, really need."</i> – SNAP recipient from Charleston County
Decrease stigma and misinformation	<i>"I don't think a lot of people understand the application process and what you have to go through and what you have to prove and that you have to prove the need and all that. I wish people were more educated on that."</i> – SNAP recipient from Charleston County

## Engaging Multi-Sector Stakeholders

The project hosted three virtual convenings to engage a wide range of stakeholders in conversations about SNAP during a time of social distancing. These convenings included:

- February 2021: The SNAP landscape in South Carolina, the SNAP Gap project, Propel/Fresh EBT survey results.
- April 2021: SNAP policy changes to increase college student eligibility.
- April 2021: Perspectives from SCDSS & USDA SERO on South Carolina SNAP priorities

In addition to active dialogue during the virtual convenings, SC Appleseed reached out to stakeholders with requests to identify the most critical issues regarding SNAP access in South Carolina and to provide recommendations about what other voices should be engaged to inform program improvements.

## Need and Opportunities for Improving College Student Food Security and SNAP Access

Prior to the second convening, stakeholders identified the importance of addressing food insecurity among college students and increasing their access to SNAP, particularly given inequities experienced by first-generation college students and students of color:

*“I recently conducted a survey on my campus and found a number of important insights on this. Race, first generation, and family assistance are all related to food insecurity. Not only that, but non-white students and first generation students also are less likely to take advantage of resources like our food bank due to stigma.”*

– University representative

Stakeholders prioritized increasing awareness and correcting misinformation as among keys to improving college student enrollment rates, perhaps because of recent changes to SNAP eligibility rules for that population:

*“I think there needs to be some educational information provided by colleges to students about SNAP benefits. I really think that college students do not know about SNAP benefits at all, or that they may*

*be eligible, or that it does not impact any type of future employment opportunities if they were to receive SNAP.”*

– SCDSS representative

During the April 2021 convening, panelists representing FRAC, SCDSS, SERO, the Columbia Food Policy Committee, and Richland Library provided national, state, and community-level updates on SNAP and food insecurity among college students. They explained that, effective January 1, 2021, temporary eligibility improvements during COVID-19 provide new opportunities for enrolling college students in SNAP<sup>49</sup> and described SCDSS’s early implementation and future plans for utilizing the new pathways. Stakeholders learned about the Columbia Food Policy Committee’s College Food Insecurity Subcommittee focus groups with students, faculty, and staff from five colleges and universities. Those focus groups sought to determine the level of college community awareness of the COVID-19 temporary SNAP flexibilities:

*“I was on one focus group Friday and the answer was ‘no.’ So far folks don’t know. It really brings us to the table. We’ve been talking to our student organizers about how they can be advocates to their peers of making sure they know about this information. I know those five institutions are ready so if we can give them some directives and give them some work, I think we would have five guinea pigs to start thinking about how we can do some immediate outreach to students.”*

– Columbia Food Policy Committee representative

A Richland Library social work representative described the library’s pre-COVID-19 work to promote SNAP awareness and enrollment at Benedict College, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) and its plans to continue such outreach with Benedict and other local colleges once in-person interactions become safe. Similarly, a representative from the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education indicated willingness to work with their 63 colleges and universities to get SNAP information sent out through financial aid offices; interest in SNAP outreach and application assistance to promote food security for college students was echoed by many others participating in the convening. Participants agreed that making the pandemic flexibilities for students permanent would improve food security for South Carolina’s underserved student population.

## Need and Opportunities to Protect, Strengthen, and Expand SNAP and Related Programming

During the subsequent April 2021 convening, attendees heard updates from leaders of SCDSS and SERO about their work and priorities for SNAP during COVID-19 and beyond. SCDSS explained how the agency provided food assistance to children, families, and adults during the pandemic, and offered the following facts and statistics:

- Received 400,000 SNAP applications since last March — 149,000 more than typically received prior to COVID-19 — and volume still remains 40-50% above pre-COVID averages;
- SNAP caseloads increased by 30,000 cases and over 47,000 clients from February 2020 to February 2021;
- During COVID-19 due to the emergency supplements authorized by Congress, the amount of benefits going to South Carolina families and supporting the state's economy more than doubled: increasing from \$67 million in the pre-Covid month of February 2020 to \$138 million in February 2021;
- 133,000 households that were already receiving the maximum, or close to the maximum, monthly allotments and, therefore, not eligible for the above emergency supplements in 2020 became newly eligible to receive monthly supplements effective April 2021 (for a total monthly increase of \$10.5 million in federal emergency allotments leveraged by South Carolina);
- Deployed P-EBT for the 2019-2020 school year for 481,000 children totaling \$159 million; 36% of these children were already receiving SNAP;
- Launched P-EBT "2.0" in March 2021 with 378,000 qualified school-aged children receiving a total of \$94 million for food; the second round of issuances was underway in summer 2021 and will result in 363,000 students receiving \$52 million in benefits; and
- Engaged in work to expand P-EBT to 0-6 year-olds in 2021.

*"You can hear our staff have been busy for the past 18 months. Looking back it would have been easy for us to stick to the bare minimum. And goodness knows that the bare minimum alone has challenges, but we're not here to do what's easy. We're here to push and grind and stretch ourselves, our agency, our partners, and practices to transform the way we view and do this work so that no child, individual, or family in South Carolina ever has to feel unsafe, lacking, or less than. That's what we're working towards and committed to"*

– SCDSS State Director

Much of this work was said to have been done by agency staff, some making as little as \$23,000 a year and amidst outdated equipment in terms of the system and technology.

SERO representatives presented USDA's priorities and gave attendees an overview of opportunities in place to further support SNAP families. These included improving racial equity within the program as well as SNAP Outreach, SNAP-Ed, Disaster SNAP (D-SNAP), the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot (which has recently expanded in South Carolina), and SNAP E & T.



Prior to the convening, registrants were invited to share their questions and perspectives about SNAP priorities. The feedback identified several key issues: food access challenges, especially in rural areas that lack grocery stores; expansions needed to better serve SNAP customers through the “Healthy Bucks” Program and Online SNAP EBT purchase option; and bolstering access to and effectiveness of South Carolina’s SNAP-Ed programs by expanding trainings and technical assistance for agencies.

*“Taking the [state’s SNAP healthy incentive program “Healthy Bucks”] process digital! How can we increase ease of access and decrease time for reimbursement so that more retailers are comfortable accepting SNAP programs (thus increasing options for participants)? Also, updating the state contract so that free machines are not just the analog ones.”*

– Nonprofit food access program representative

Also cited were needs to continue increased benefit levels post-pandemic, decrease the amount of time between applying and receiving SNAP funds, and increase outreach of the program and awareness of the option to appeal if denied benefits.

*“SCLS gets very few intake requests for representation in cases where SNAP has been denied. What is the approval rate in SC? Are applicants told they have the right to appeal a denial? If so, how do we notify applicants that SCLS is available to appeal the denial?”*

– South Carolina Legal Services representative

Finally, the lifetime ban on SNAP participation for former drug felons was identified as a significant barrier in South Carolina.

*“You have got people that may be 50, 60 years now and disabled trying to keep food on their tables, feed their grandchildren, or just getting by. But because they had a drug charge in their younger days that’s keeping them from getting benefits. That’s not right. I just wish they could feed a little more hungry people, as far as their drug charges. People who really need it. Just 25, 30 dollars. Something for them to be able to go get something to eat. I think they should really consider some kind of option for them.”*

– SNAP recipient from Orangeburg County

## Engaging Additional Stakeholders While Prioritizing Those With Lived Experience

When asked which additional stakeholders need to be engaged in conversations about SNAP access, multiple sectors and agencies were mentioned. These included elected officials, SCDSS, SNAP outreach organizations, WIC agency representatives, educators, health care providers and entities, retailers, faith-based organizations, and public libraries. Additionally, people identified an ongoing priority to engage SNAP recipients and people who are eligible but not currently participating in the program for their input and expertise.

*“SNAP participants need to be engaged in these conversations. If there is an option to provide compensation for their participation in the work, that would be ideal.”*

– Healthy food and physical activity coalition representative



## V. Recommendations

### Improving SNAP in South Carolina

Based on the input obtained from SNAP customers and stakeholders, many of themes emerged for leveraging SNAP to better support South Carolina's residents, health and economy. While some obstacles require federal policy changes to be fully addressed, below are recommendations for improvements to SNAP that South Carolina can make to drive progress toward closing the participation gap.

#### I. Increase the South Carolina SNAP Gross Income Limit to Serve More Working Families with Children

In South Carolina SNAP benefits end when a household's gross income reaches or exceeds 130% of the federal poverty level (FPL).<sup>50</sup> (In FY 2021 that is \$2,353 a month for a three-person household).<sup>51</sup> As a result, many program participants face a "benefits cliff," when a modest increase in household earnings cause their public benefits to end, a point acknowledged earlier in this report. The abrupt reduction or loss of benefits can be disruptive for families because the earnings increase is usually not enough to become fully self-sufficient. Many states have addressed this problem by increasing the SNAP gross income test (up to 200% of the federal poverty level) (\$3660 a month for a family of three).<sup>52</sup> This helps a low-income household work its way up the economic ladder without losing SNAP eligibility. As the household progresses on the income scale, the amount of SNAP benefits decreases. That approach is especially important to ensure that pay raises for low-income working families with children do not cause the family to lose their food benefits at a time when they still are struggling with significant out-of-pocket costs for childcare and shelter.

Additionally, to ensure that SNAP participants receive the benefits they need, South Carolina can strengthen training for technicians to ensure all applicants are thoroughly screened for applicable dependent care expenses and that households that include older adults or people with a disability are screened for excess medical expenses. Screenings should routinely ask applicants about such costs.

#### II. Bolster Purchasing Power and Expand Redemption Options

SNAP household survey responses and stakeholder feedback underscore that SNAP benefits are typically too low to meet South Carolina households' nutrition needs, and that SNAP households often lack sufficient options for redeeming their benefits. During the pandemic, many households found that additional Emergency Allotments and P-EBT benefits provided the additional resources necessary to make it through the month with sufficient food to feed their families. In particular, the increased allotments have allowed recipients to purchase healthier and more nutritious foods, and helped participants stretch this money further by buying in bulk. Unfortunately, because South Carolina's state of emergency ended in June of 2021, these emergency allotments will likely expire August 1, 2021 — five months before the federal program ends — unless the state government chooses to work with FNS to continue the program. Notably, other states around the country have decided to increase SNAP benefits levels for program participants with their own resources.

As discussed earlier, by establishing the Healthy Bucks Program in 2013, South Carolina took an important step toward increasing SNAP households' purchasing power. SNAP recipients receive modest bonuses when they use their EBT cards to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. Stakeholders suggested the program could be improved by (1) developing a method to reimburse farmers' markets and other SNAP Healthy Bucks vendors more quickly; and (2) identifying state investments that can maintain the program beyond the initial federally-funded phase. More than fifteen other states, including North Carolina, have allocated state funds to increase their SNAP benefit levels with nutrition incentives, and South Carolina could do the same.<sup>53</sup>

The pandemic also called attention to a longstanding challenge for SNAP participants, the ability to use their SNAP benefits locally and conveniently because they live in communities underserved by food retailers. Particularly in

rural areas, lack of transportation can be a barrier to purchasing groceries with SNAP benefits. The utilization of SNAP with online purchases, especially those that can be delivered, helps alleviate the transportation barrier. Currently, five SNAP authorized retailers participate in the online purchase program. South Carolina can help expand online SNAP redemption opportunities, especially for smaller in-state outlets, by offering technical assistance and providing free or affordable equipment for processing SNAP EBT online transactions to more South Carolina food retailers, like farmers markets.

### **III. Develop and Implement Initiatives and Policies to Decrease Stigma, Promote Awareness, and Address Barriers, Especially for Underserved Populations.**

SNAP is our country and state's first defense against hunger, yet lack of awareness and misinformation undercut its positive impacts. Using information from community partners, local residents, and former and current SNAP participants, a marketing and communications campaign could be developed to connect and educate the public and SNAP eligible people about the program. An effective marketing/communications campaign with culturally relevant, multi-platform approaches can combat misperceptions and stigma about SNAP. This would involve establishing a consistent presence on both traditional and social media, with messages that highlight positive impacts of the program, such as benefits to the economy at large and the health and educational outcomes of participants. Additionally, a comprehensive communication plan focused on outreach and application assistance could include tools that clearly illustrate the SNAP enrollment process in South Carolina, and make information about SNAP policies and procedures more accessible for clients and partners, and available in multiple languages.

Moreover, as SCDSS and stakeholders discussed, there are more opportunities to reach specific underserved populations, such

as college students. South Carolina can build on current efforts to implement temporary expansions of college student SNAP eligibility and get students connected to benefits. The state should also invest in targeted application assistance to support applicants, specifically from underserved populations, through the SNAP enrollment process. An evaluation on the effectiveness of application assistance strategies could help guide the best use of new investments for outreach initiatives. In addition to these initiatives, policy change would be required to provide access for some population groups.

### **IV. Strengthen South Carolina's SNAP Administrative Capacity and Customer Service**

SCDSS has the challenging and important task of helping families struggling to afford basic needs. SCDSS should be provided the resources necessary to invest in technology that promotes efficiency and good customer service, and to compensate staff adequately.

Additionally, SCDSS should revise some practices and policies to better serve SNAP households. For example, all notices to clients should use language that is clear and simple. Moreover, when SNAP recipients face an overpayment claim, the SCDSS notice should inform them of the availability of free legal assistance. SCDSS should permit the waiver or mitigation of overpayment caused by an agency error as federal law permits.

To improve communication, SCDSS can explore ways to use technology to keep clients informed about their progress throughout the application process and increase the use of text messages and other technologies as options to communicate with clients. SCDSS can also make it easier for clients to navigate the SCDSS systems and processes by providing multilingual advocates to support clients, and investing in targeted application assistance.

## Conclusion

Investing in the health and economic future of our state by connecting every eligible South Carolinian individual and household with SNAP benefits, through implementation of the recommendations included herein, can end hunger in South Carolina. Many pathways exist to remove SNAP access barriers in South Carolina: change may come in the form of policy changes at the federal and state level. But the overarching goal for our state is clear: connecting eligible households with SNAP benefits and related programming will strengthen and fortify our communities to rebound strong from the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. Implementing these recommendations will take the sustained work of a number of stakeholders across South Carolina, such as SCDSS, SNAP outreach organizations, WIC agency representatives, educators, health care providers, retailers, faith-based organizations, policymakers and people with lived experience of food insecurity. By working together, we can make key improvements to SNAP access will make South Carolina a healthier, more thriving state for all who live here.



Appendix A

Figure 1

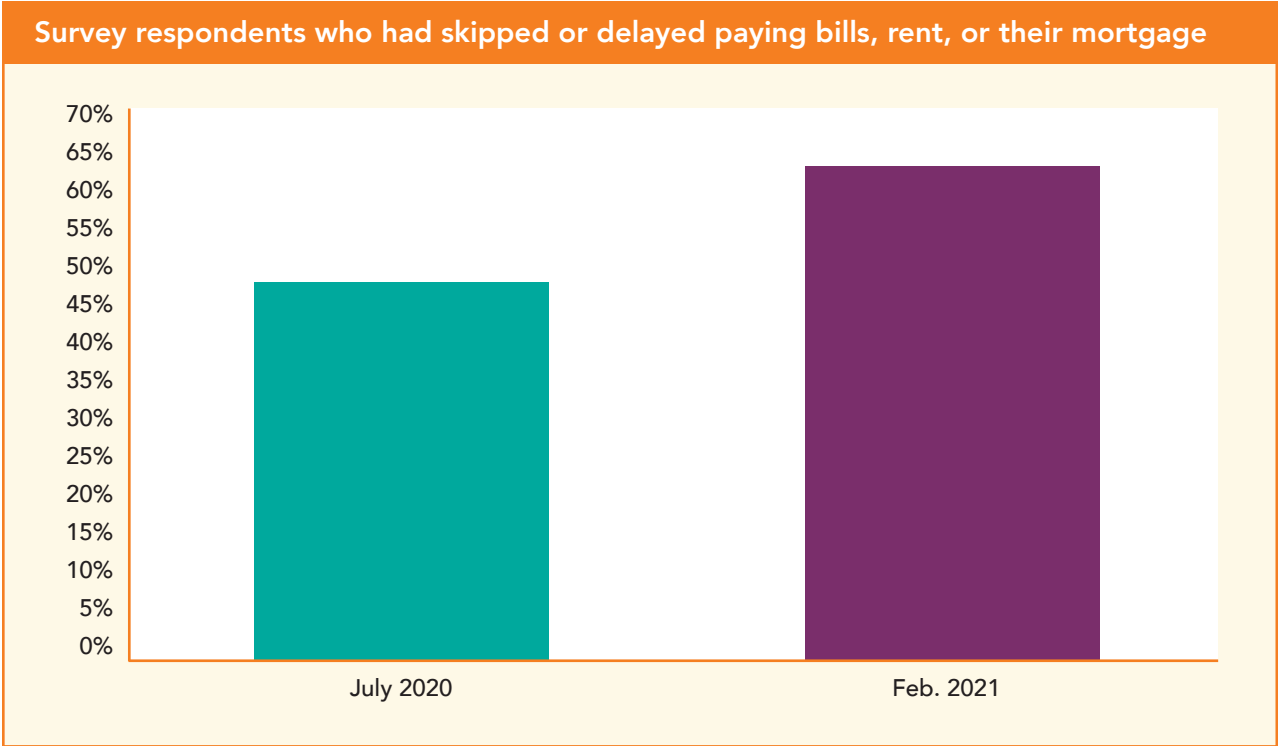


Figure 2

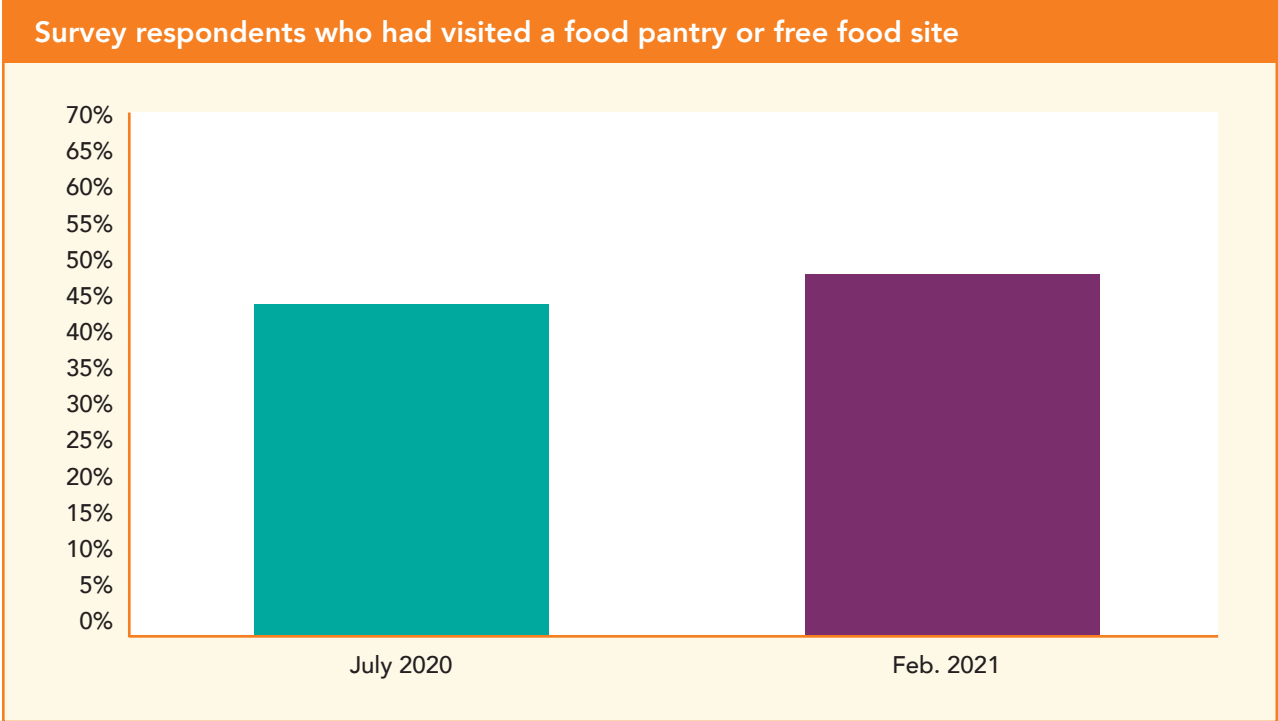


Figure 3

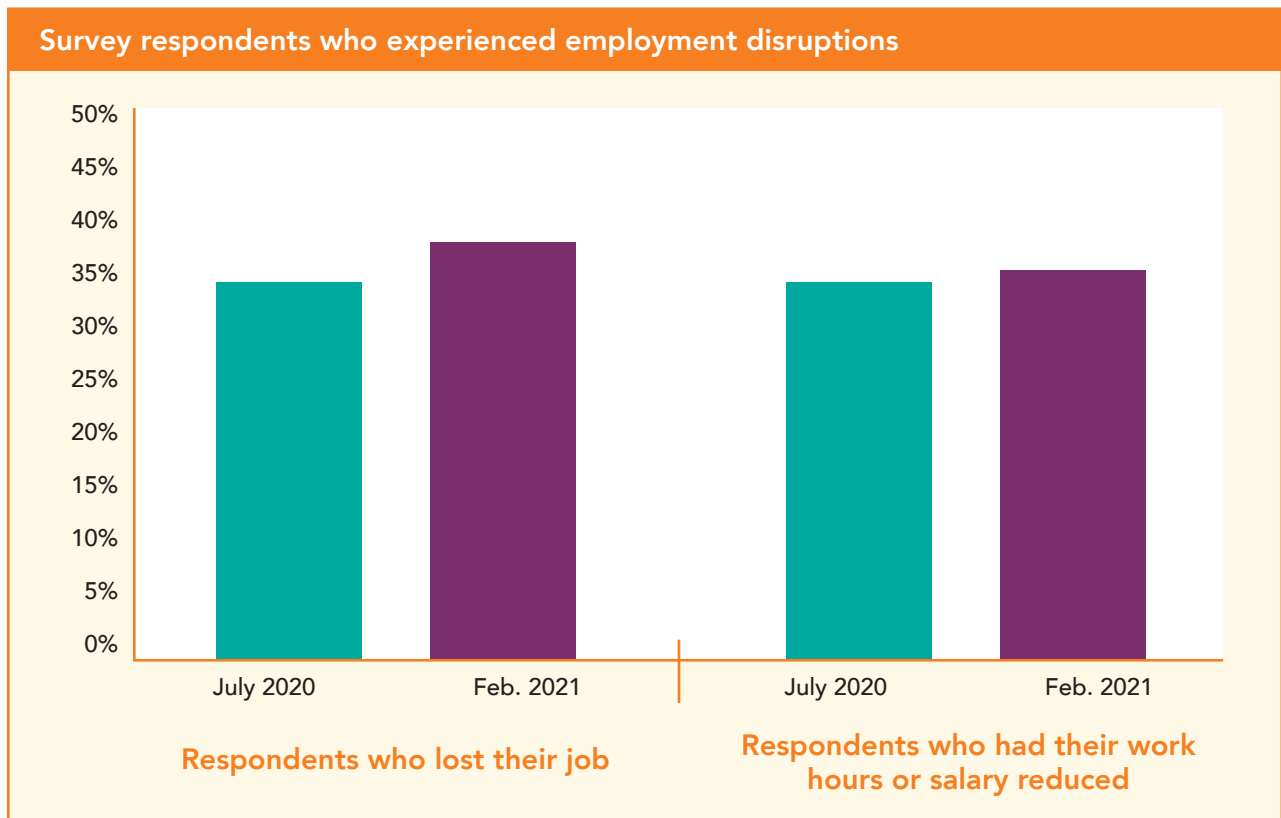


Figure 4

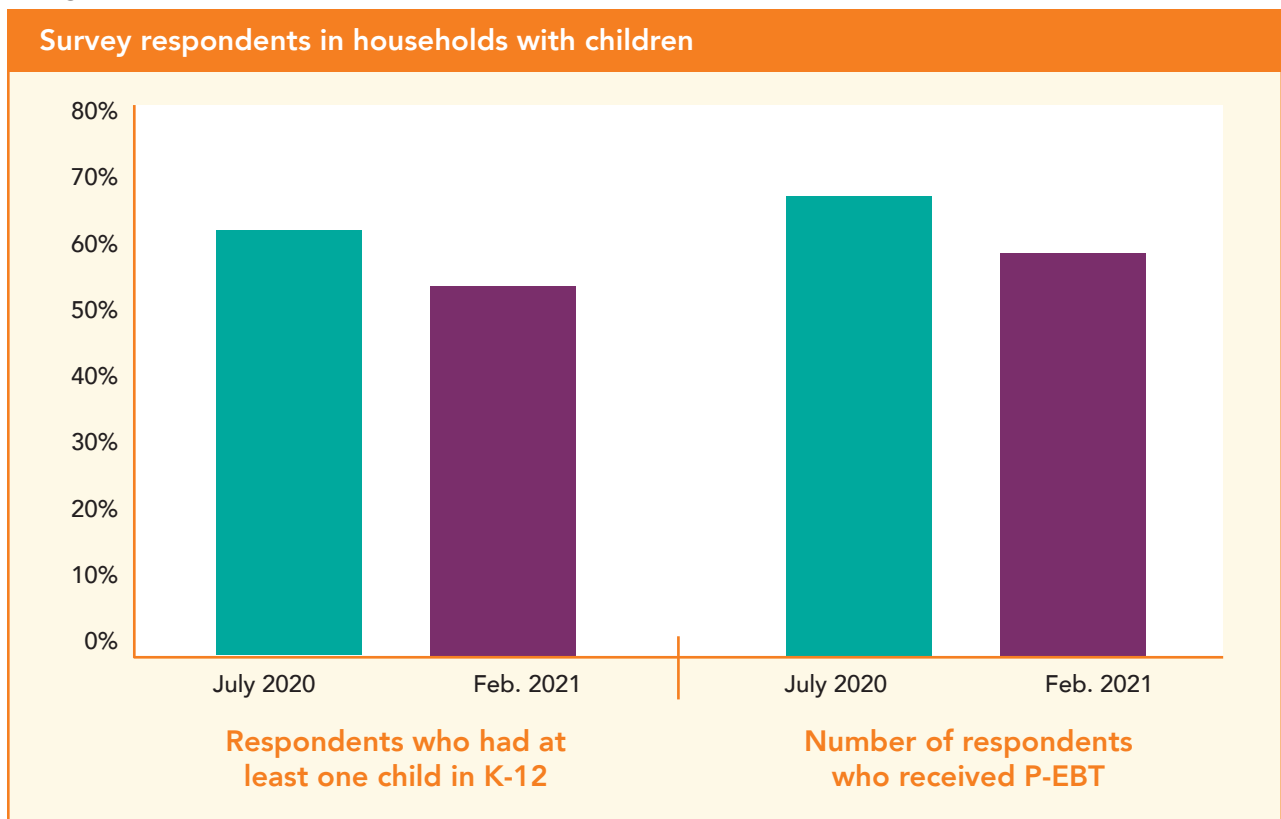


Figure 5

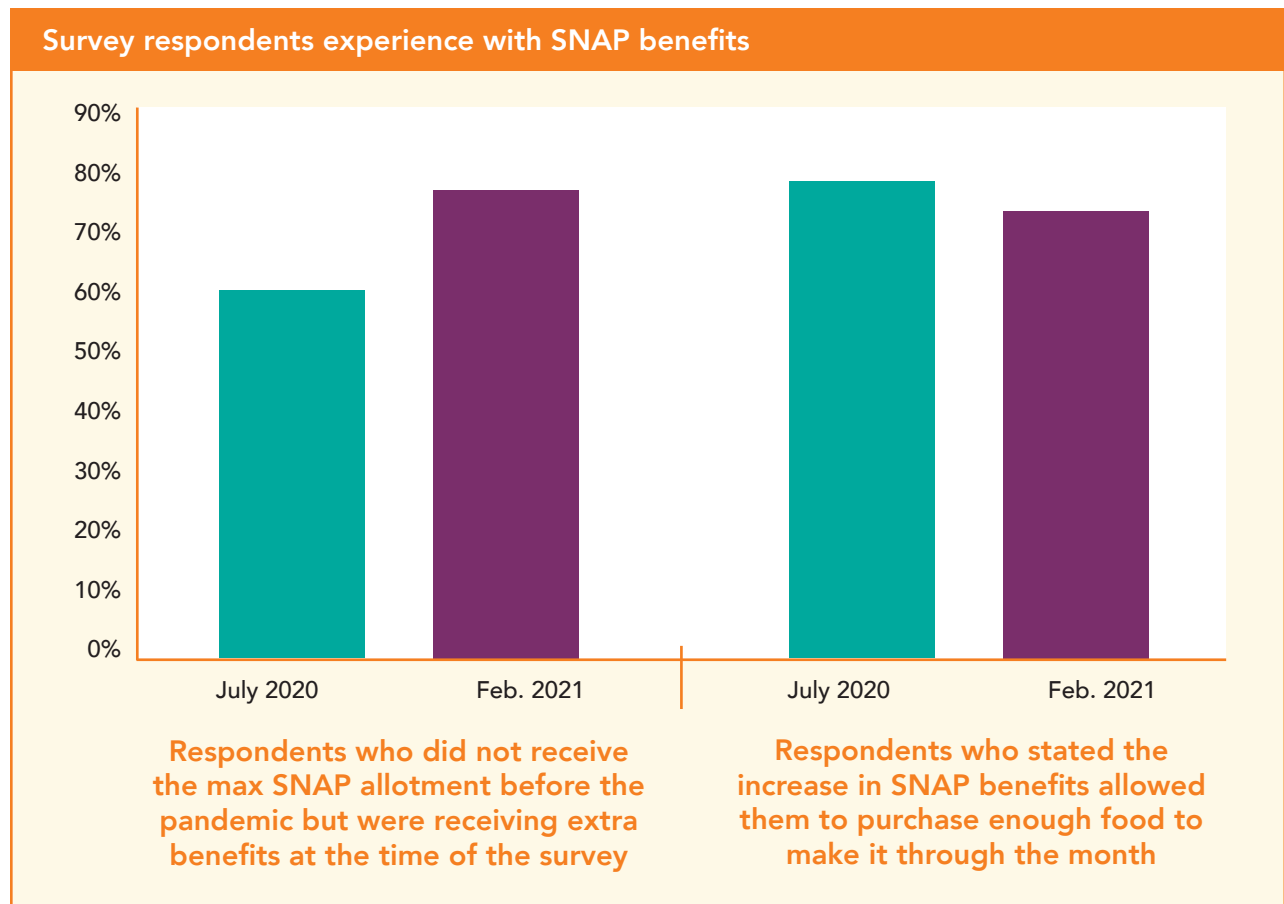


Figure 6

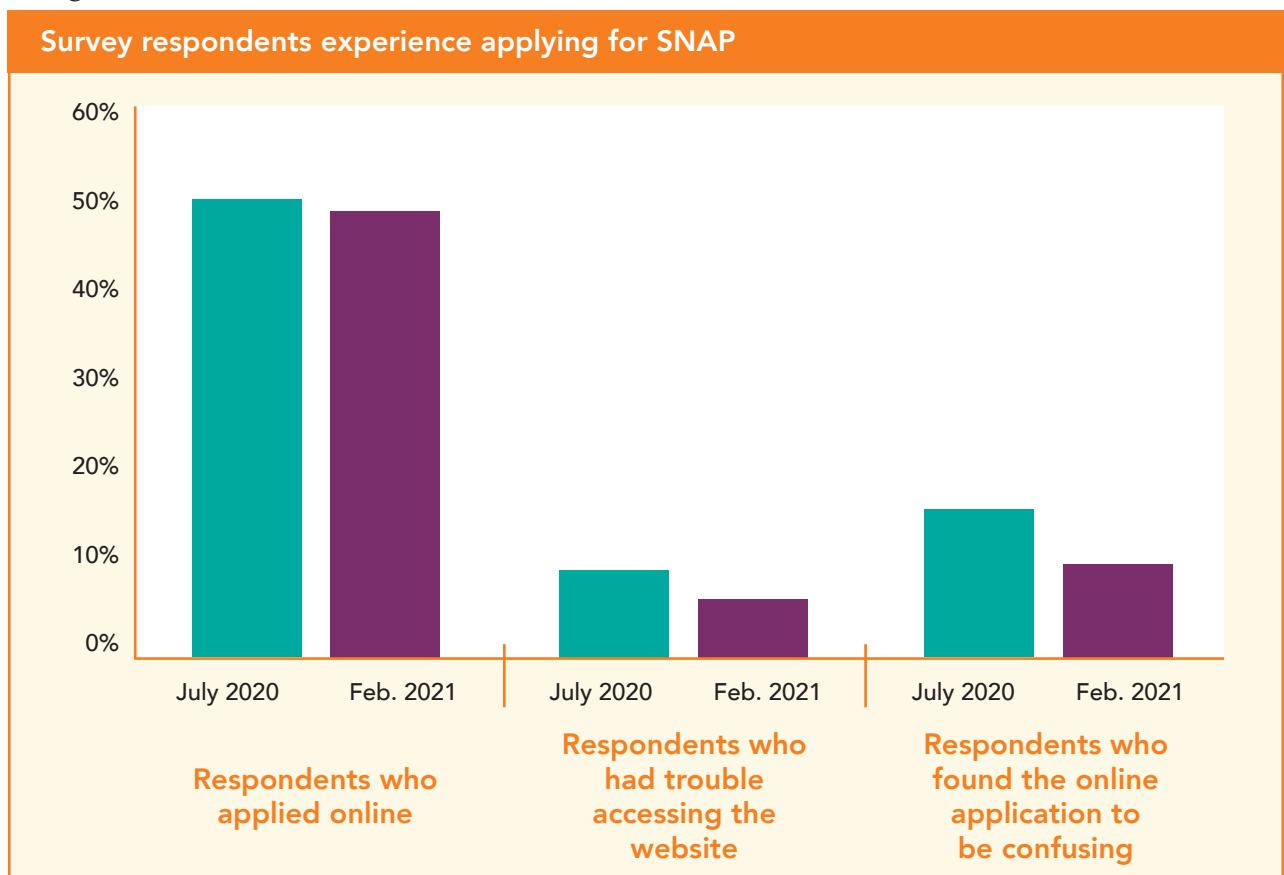
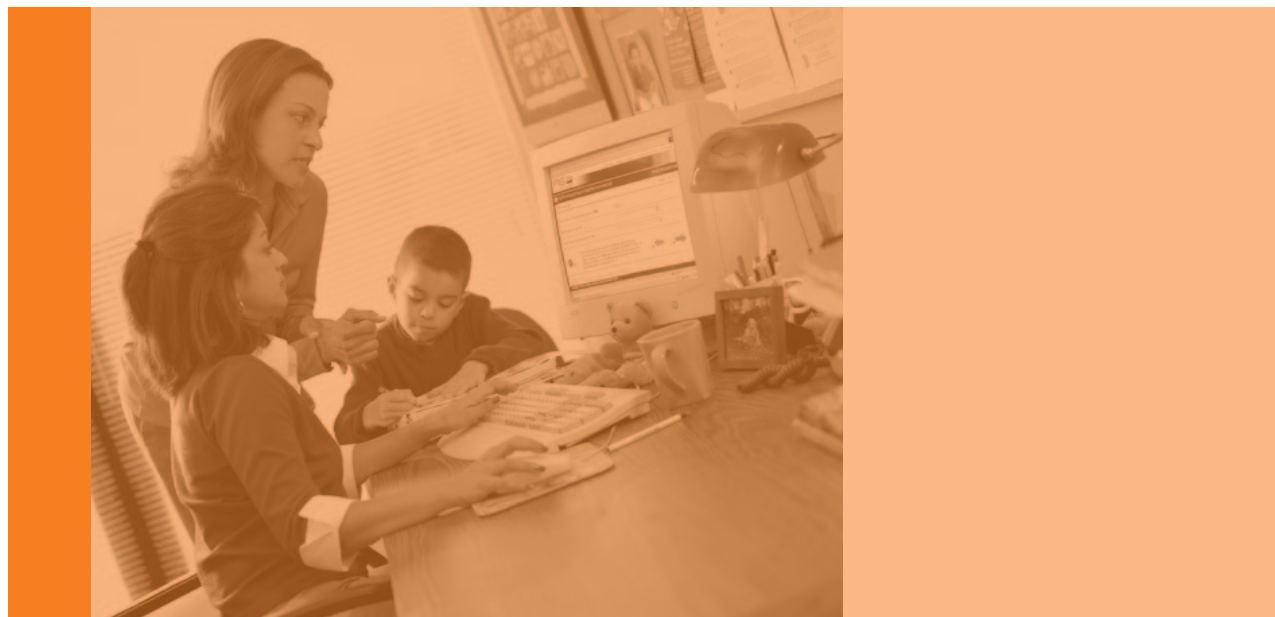
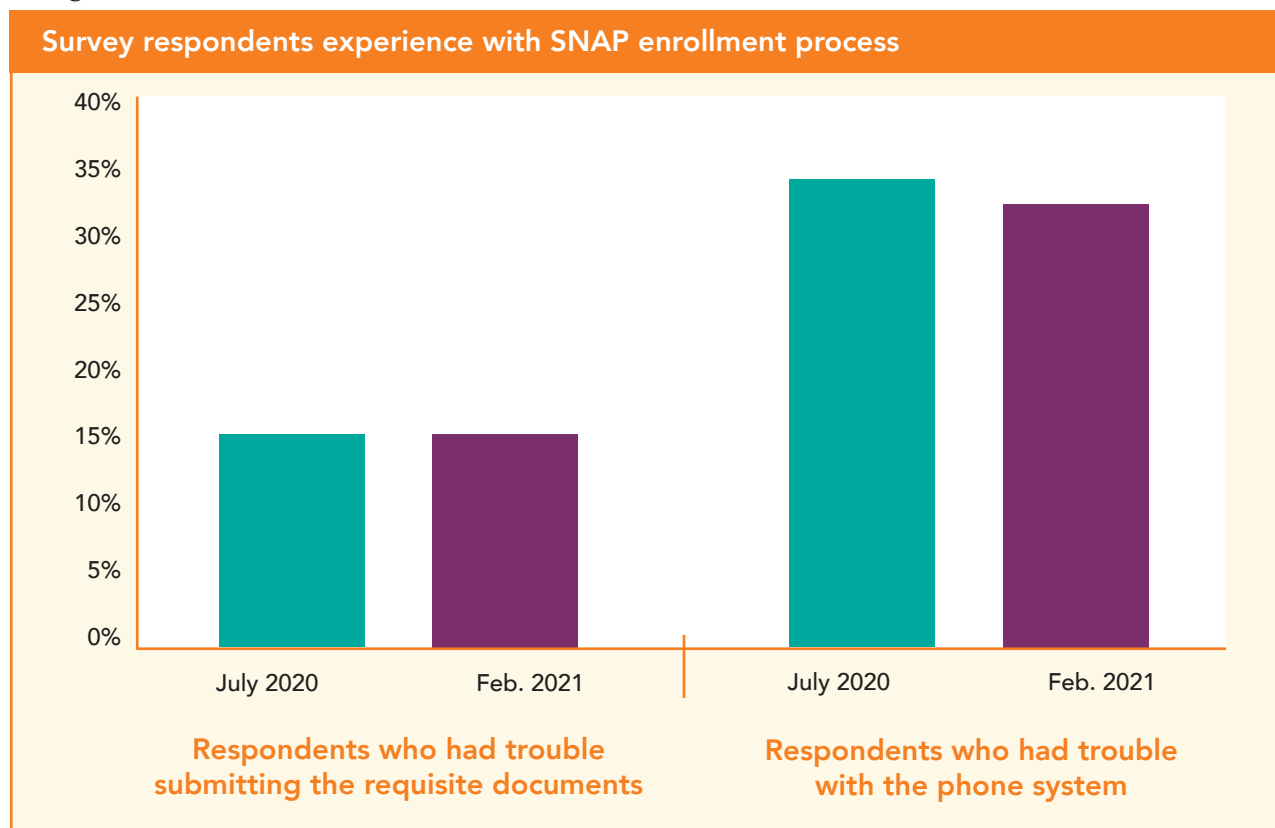


Figure 7



**TABLE 1: Fresh EBT Survey Results July 2020**

Variable	N (Sample Size)	#	%
<b>Experienced since COVID-19</b>	<b>537</b>		
Lost a job		188	35
Had hours/salary (wages) reduced		189	35
Visited a food pantry or free food site		239	45
Skipped or delayed paying bills, rent, or mortgage		259	48
<b>Most recent time applied for SNAP</b>	<b>536</b>		
Within the last month		46	9
1-5 months ago		138	26
6-12 months ago		75	14
More than a year ago		277	52
<b>First time applying for SNAP</b>	<b>181</b>		
Yes		35	19
No		146	81
<b>Able to apply online for SNAP</b>	<b>529</b>		
Yes		273	52
No		175	33
Don't Know		81	15
<b>Experienced with applying online for SNAP</b>	<b>273</b>		
Trouble accessing the website		25	9
Difficulty submitting documents		43	16
Phone system delays		95	35
Online application was confusing		44	16
<b>Children in K-12 schools</b>	<b>536</b>		
Yes		339	63
No		197	37
<b>Received P-EBT</b>	<b>337</b>		
Yes		228	68
No		82	24
Don't Know		27	8
<b>Received extra SNAP deposits during the month of January</b>	<b>535</b>		
Yes		330	62
No		177	33
Don't Know		28	5

*continued on following page*

**TABLE 1: Fresh EBT Survey Results July 2020**

Variable	N (Sample Size)	#	%
<b>Additional benefits allowed the purchasing of enough food to make it through the month</b>	<b>329</b>		
Yes		264	80
No		65	20
<b>Length of time January benefits lasted</b>	<b>267</b>		
Less than 1 week		46	17
1-3 weeks		182	68
More than 3 weeks		39	15
<b>Age</b>	<b>536</b>		
18-20		6	1
20-29		87	16
30-39		181	34
40-49		115	21
50-60		87	16
61-64		23	4
65+		37	7
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>526</b>		
American Indian or Alaskan Native		9	2
Asian		1	.02
Black or African American		304	58
Hispanic or Latino		17	3
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander		1	.02
White		194	37

**TABLE 2: Fresh EBT Survey Results February 2021**

Variable	N (Sample Size)	#	%
<b>Experienced since COVID-19</b>	<b>351</b>		
Lost a job		132	38
Had hours/salary (wages) reduced		126	36
Visited a food pantry or free food site		173	49
Skipped or delayed paying bills, rent, or mortgage		225	64
<b>Most recent time applied for SNAP</b>	<b>349</b>		
Within the last month		33	10
1-5 months ago		69	20
6-12 months ago		68	19
More than a year ago		179	51
<b>First time applying for SNAP</b>	<b>101</b>		
Yes		10	10
No		91	90
<b>Able to apply online for SNAP</b>	<b>341</b>		
Yes		175	51
No		110	32
Don't Know		54	16
<b>Experienced with applying online for SNAP</b>	<b>175</b>		
Trouble accessing the website		10	6
Difficulty submitting documents		28	16
Phone system delays		57	33
Online application was confusing		17	10
<b>Used SNAP benefits to purchase food online</b>	<b>350</b>		
Yes		91	26
No		256	73
Don't Know		3	1
<b>Children in K-12 schools</b>	<b>350</b>		
Yes		192	55
No		158	45
<b>Received P-EBT</b>	<b>191</b>		
Yes		115	60
No		57	30
Don't Know		19	10

*continued on following page*

**TABLE 2: Fresh EBT Survey Results February 2021**

Variable	N (Sample Size)	#	%
<b>Received extra SNAP deposits during the month of January</b>	<b>350</b>		
Yes		276	79
No		53	15
Don't Know		21	6
<b>Additional benefits allowed the purchasing of enough food to make it through the month</b>	<b>276</b>		
Yes		208	75
No		68	25
<b>Length of time January benefits lasted</b>	<b>347</b>		
Less than 1 week		39	11
1-3 weeks		211	61
More than 3 weeks		97	28
<b>Age</b>	<b>351</b>		
20-29		49	14
30-39		104	30
40-49		73	21
50-60		69	20
61-64		14	4
65+		42	12
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>351</b>		
American Indian or Alaskan Native		14	4
Asian		2	.05
Black or African American		177	50
Hispanic or Latino		9	3
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander		1	.03
White		166	47

## Endnotes

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- <sup>28</sup> Families First Coronavirus Response Act, Pub. L. No. 116-127, 134 Stat. 178 (2020).
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- <sup>33</sup> Appendix A, [Fig. 2](#).
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- <sup>35</sup> Appendix A, [Fig. 3](#).
- <sup>36</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>37</sup> Appendix A, [Fig. 4](#) (63% for July, 55% for February).
- <sup>38</sup> Appendix A, [Fig. 4](#) (42% of all of the respondents received P-EBT).
- <sup>39</sup> *Id.*

*Endnotes continued from previous page*

<sup>40</sup> Appendix A, [Fig. 5](#).

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> Appendix A, [Fig. 6](#).

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> Appendix A, [Fig. 7](#).

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*

<sup>48</sup> USDA, *USDA Increases Emergency SNAP Benefits for 25 million Americans; Ensures COVID-19 Relief Reaches Those Struggling the Most*, <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2021/04/01/usda-increases-emergency-snap-benefits-25-million-americans-ensures> (April 1, 2021) (“The Families First Coronavirus Response Act authorized emergency allotments to SNAP households to help address temporary food needs during the pandemic. Since the start of the pandemic, USDA has issued about \$29 billion in additional benefits, to bring all SNAP households up to the maximum benefit for their household size.”).

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### **South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center:**

For over 40 years, the South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center has advocated for justice, fairness, and equity at the intersection of the statehouse, courthouse, and South Carolina communities. Our goal is to influence policymakers to ensure the law is fair, to educate the public and their advocates about the law, and to assist attorneys in bringing systemic litigation where the law is unfair. SC Appleseed has worked to end hunger in South Carolina since its inception and continues to work with key stakeholders to improve food policy and access statewide. To learn more about SC Appleseed, visit [www.scjustice.org](http://www.scjustice.org).



**Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)** is the leading national nonprofit organization working to eradicate poverty-related hunger and under-nutrition in the United States. Founded in 1970, FRAC provides coordination, training, technical assistance and support on nutrition and anti-poverty issues to a nationwide network of advocates, service providers, food banks, program administrators and participants and policymakers. To learn more about FRAC, visit [www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org).



**The Food Trust**, founded in 1992, strives to make healthy food available to all. Working with neighborhoods, schools, grocers, farmers and policymakers, The Food Trust has developed a comprehensive approach that combines nutrition education and greater availability of affordable, healthy food. To learn more about The Food Trust, visit [www.thefoodtrust.org](http://www.thefoodtrust.org).

**Propel** is a mission-driven technology company that builds modern, respectful, effective technology that helps Americans with limited income improve their financial health. Propel builds Fresh EBT, an app that helps over 5 million SNAP households check and manage their EBT and cash balances, save money, and access timely information about resources and benefits updates. To learn more, visit [www.joinpropel.com](http://www.joinpropel.com).

