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ABSTRACT

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as “food stamps,” has long played a critical role in reducing food insecurity and alleviating poverty in America. However, common political and cultural narratives about who uses the program often fail to recognize the needs and experiences of rural communities—often, the very populations who stand to benefit most from the program. Previous research has shown that rural households participate in SNAP at higher rates than their urban counterparts. Using results from the 2011-2015 American Community Survey and 2016 quality control data from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), this analysis demonstrates the extent to which SNAP is used in rural counties throughout the US; shows how the program generates economic activity that can support farmers, food retailers, and other industries; and presents an evidence-based portrayal of rural SNAP users. The data make a compelling case that the country cannot afford for nutrition assistance to remain a partisan issue.



Photos, clockwise from top left: ©2016 public domain, US Air Force/Karen Petri, US Department of Agriculture

INTRODUCTION

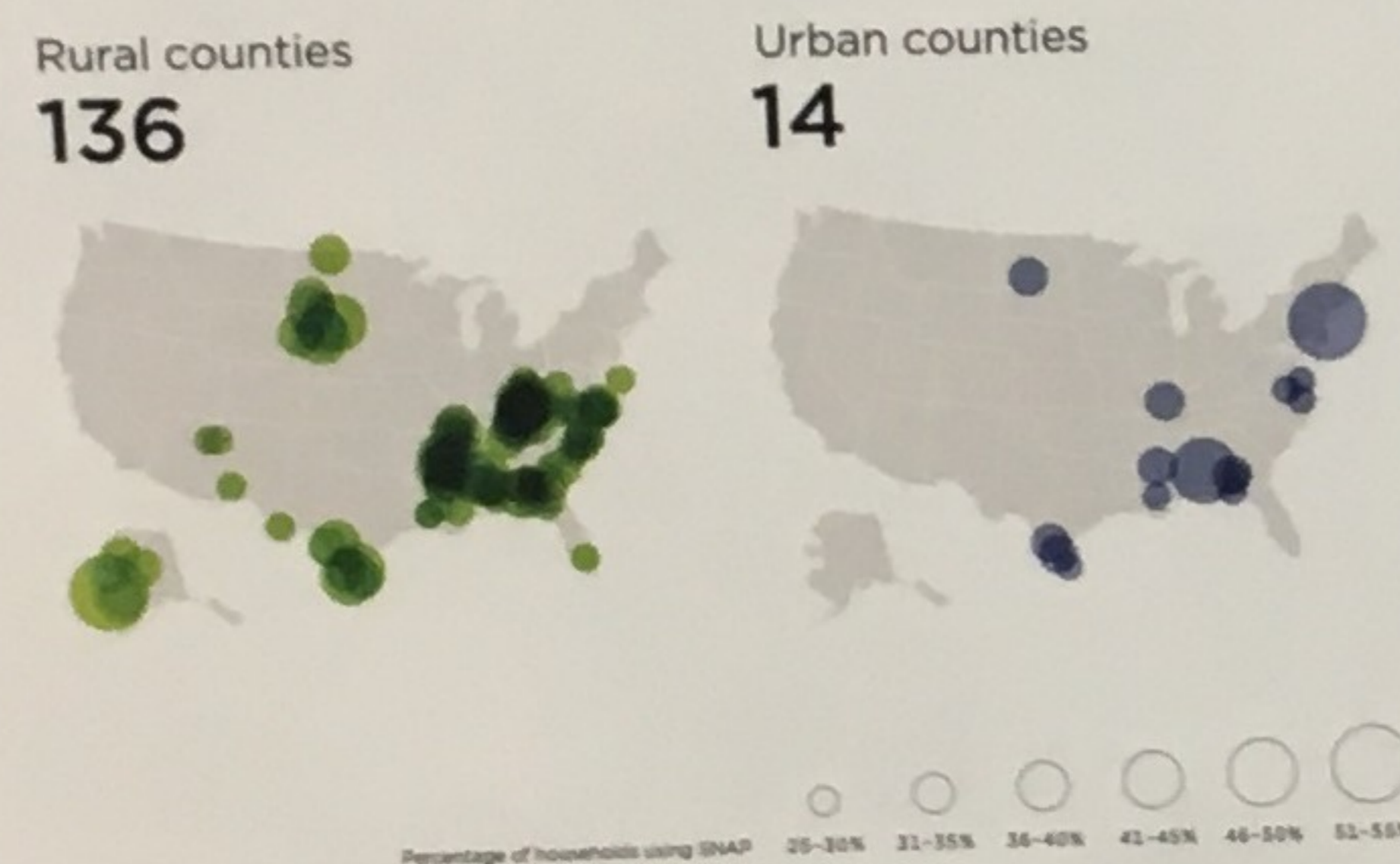
As the largest nutrition assistance program in the federal safety net, SNAP is the first line of defense against hunger and a critical source of support for more than 21 million American households.¹ In 2016, the program lifted more than 3.5 million people out of poverty—nearly half of whom were children—and resulted in food insecurity rates up to 30 percent lower than would be expected in the absence of SNAP benefits.² Research has identified numerous health benefits of program participation, particularly among infants and children.³ Meanwhile, the economic impact of SNAP spending is felt throughout the region, as the program generates an estimated \$1.80 in economic activity for every \$1 spent.⁴

Cultural and political narratives have typically portrayed SNAP as a program for the urban poor, rendering issues of rural food insecurity largely invisible in federal policy discussions and leaving policymakers unaccountable to the needs of their rural constituents. However, USDA data shows that rural households participate in the program at higher rates than their urban counterparts, despite rural counties producing a majority of the nation's food. It is essential that federal nutrition policy is grounded in science that reflects the reality of both urban and rural communities nationwide. New policy proposals should preserve the federal safety net while advancing solutions to address the social and economic root causes of poverty and food insecurity.

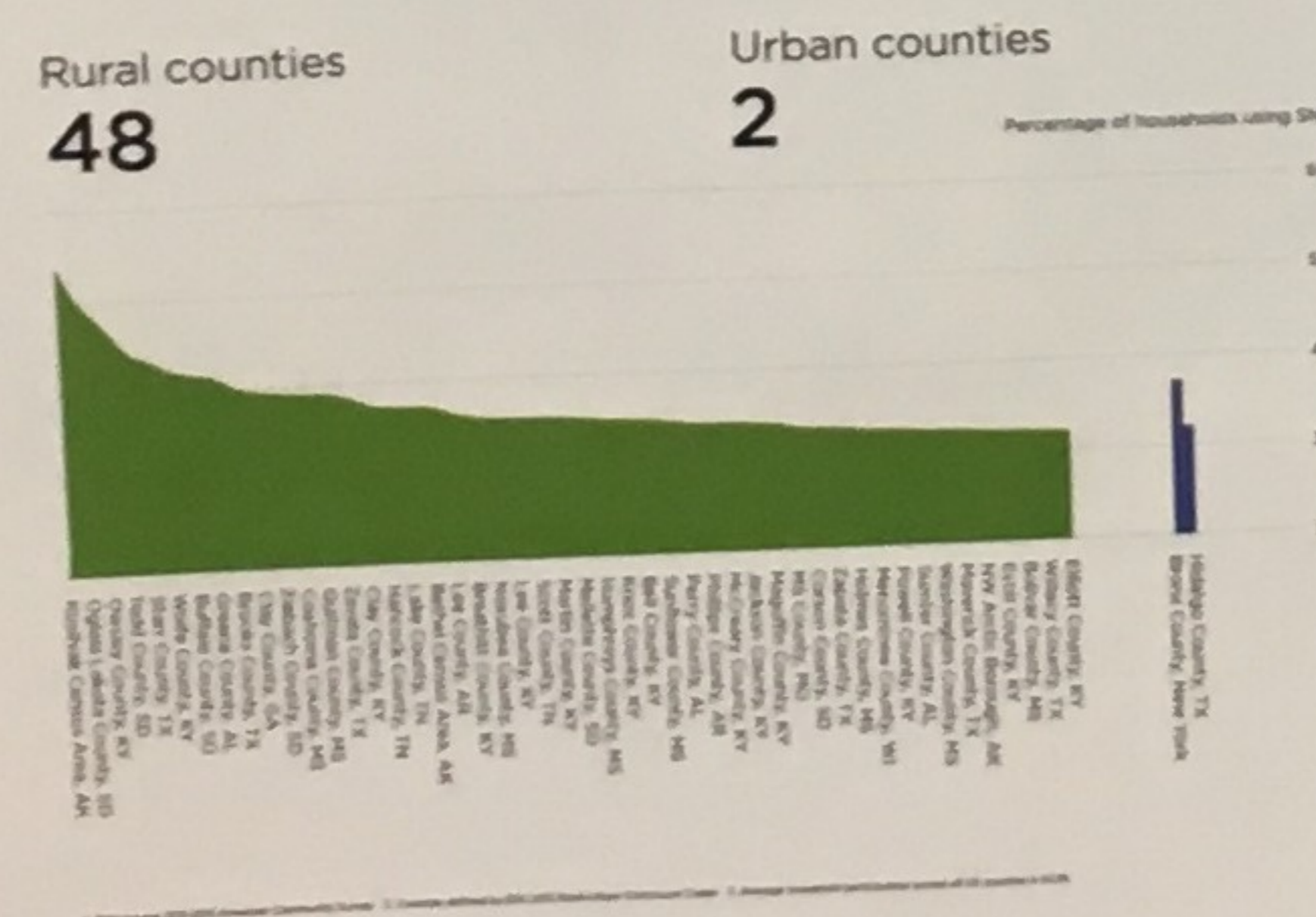
SNAP USE IN RURAL COUNTIES

SNAP benefits people of every age, race, zip code, and political persuasion across the US. Previous research highlighted differences in household SNAP participation by county type, showing that sixteen percent of households in small towns and rural areas use the program, compared to only thirteen percent of households in metropolitan areas.⁵ Though striking, these averages don't fully convey the extent to which SNAP supports families and economies in many rural communities across the country. Our analysis shows that of the 50 counties with the highest household SNAP usage, all but two of them are rural. Of the 150 counties with the highest household SNAP usage, a full 136 are rural. County definitions are consistent with the USDA 2013 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes.

Top 150 Counties by SNAP Participation



Top 50 Counties by SNAP Participation

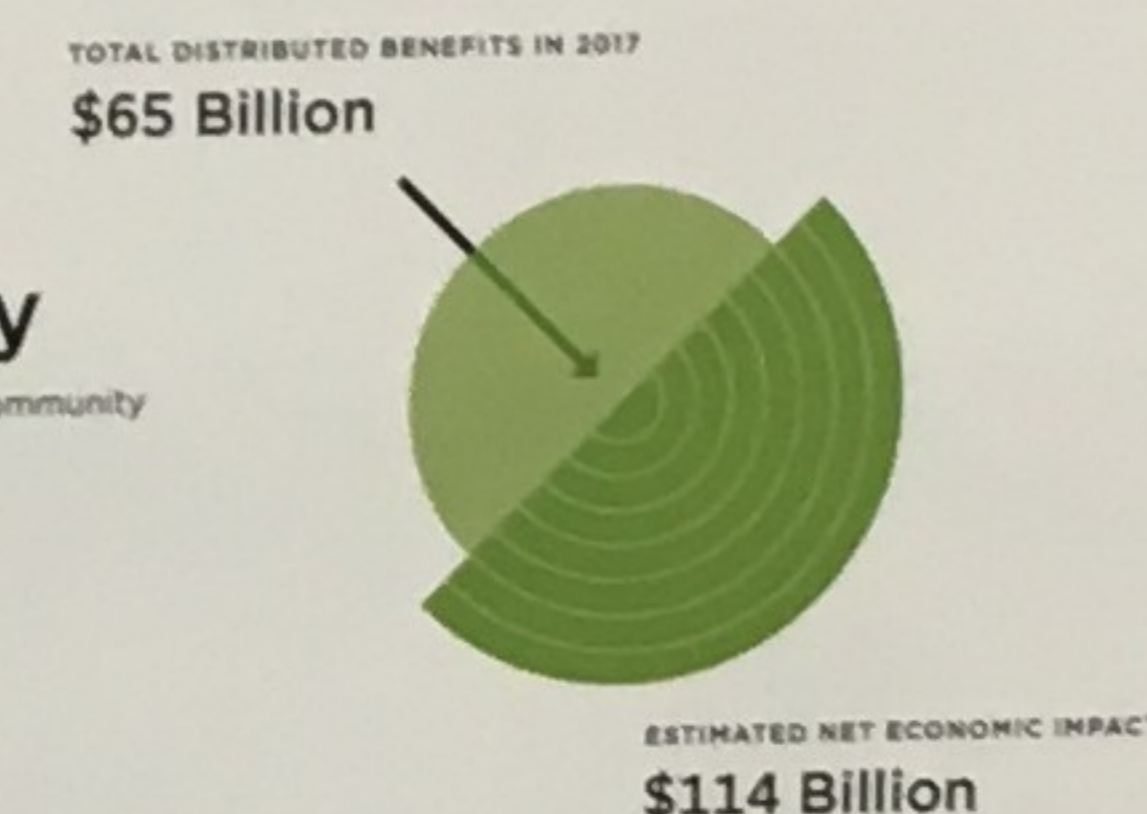


ECONOMIC IMPACT IN RETAIL AND BEYOND

The USDA Food Assistance National Input-Output Multiplier (FANIOM) Model explores the use of SNAP benefits as a fiscal stimulus.⁶ The analysis found that in a weak economy, an increase of \$1 billion in SNAP expenditures might increase economic activity by an estimated \$1.8 billion, with a jobs impact of approximately 8,900 full-time jobs, including self-employment. This would mean that the \$64.7 billion in SNAP benefits distributed in fiscal year 2017 could have generated up to \$114 billion in economic activity, creating and supporting more than 567,000 jobs across the country. According to the USDA model, nearly 50,000 of these jobs would be in the agricultural sector.

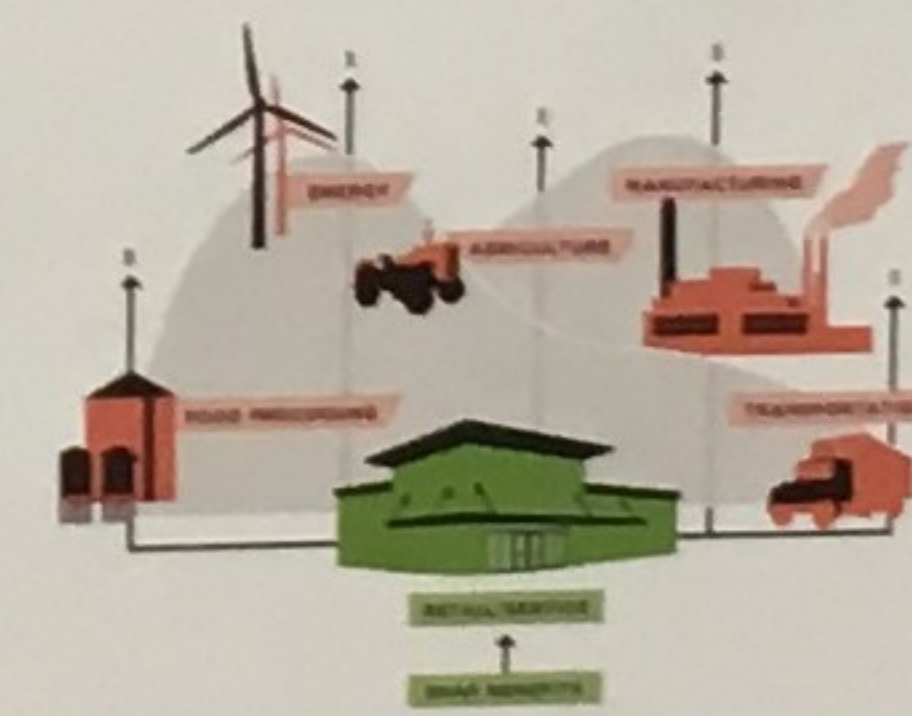
SNAP Stimulates the Economy

SNAP spending benefits the entire community by generating economic growth.



Learn more: ucusa.org/SNAPeconomy

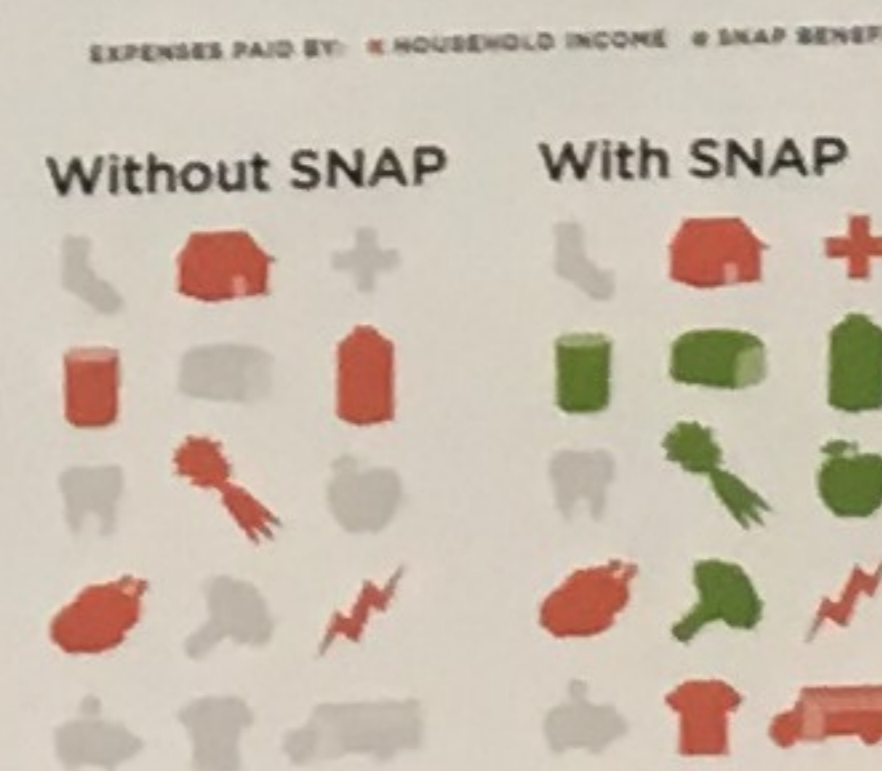
When a SNAP dollar is spent, the first industry to profit is typically the retail sector. (A small but growing percentage of SNAP dollars are spent at farmers markets, which allow farmers to sell goods directly to customers.) In many rural areas, local grocery stores play an important economic role, providing jobs and contributing local tax dollars, and also serve as community hubs. When a local grocery store generates greater profit, this profit can be passed on to other sectors throughout the supply chain, including distribution, food processing, manufacturing, energy, and agriculture. But the economic impact of a SNAP dollar extends even beyond the supply chain of a grocery store. Research has shown that each additional dollar received in SNAP benefits results in between 26 and 60 additional cents spent on food.^{6,7} This means that, in addition to supplementing the household food budget, SNAP dollars are also being used to free up household income that was formerly spent on food for necessary expenses such as medicine, housing, utilities, or transportation—generating economic activity in a wide range of industries.



SNAP Stimulates the Economy

Each additional SNAP dollar increases household food spending by 26–60 cents, enabling families to shift funds to cover medicine and other necessary items. These include expenses vital for securing and holding good jobs; education; stable housing; reliable transportation; and keeping the lights on.

Learn more: ucusa.org/SNAPeconomy



RURAL PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Much like urban SNAP participants, about 40 percent of rural participants are children, roughly 10 percent are elderly, and only about eight percent are considered able-bodied adults without dependents, or ABAWDs—the population broadly subjected to SNAP work requirements. However, in rural areas, SNAP users with disabilities make up 11.3 percent of participants, compared to just 9.5 percent in urban areas. The disparity is unsurprising, given that rural rates of disability are themselves higher; residents of rural areas tend to be older, poorer, and less healthy than their urban counterparts.⁸ But the same set of social, economic, and demographic factors that contribute to higher disability rates are likely among the factors that continue to drive higher rates of unemployment and underemployment in rural areas. These may all be considered symptoms of persistent poverty. These findings highlight that, even as SNAP serves as an effective anti-hunger program, it must also include or be paired with policy solutions that strengthen local and regional economies to target the root causes of poverty. Policy solutions that strengthen agricultural markets may be particularly effective in rural areas.

Demographics of Rural SNAP Participants

Nearly 7.8 million rural residents rely on SNAP during the course of a year. A majority are children, seniors, and adults with disabilities, and many more are caretakers.



Learn more: ucusa.org/SNAPdemographics

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The farm bill, the cornerstone legislation guiding food and farm policy, expires in September 2018. The current draft bill includes several policy proposals that could strengthen local and regional food economies, while helping SNAP participants achieve greater financial security and healthier diets. For example:

- The **Food Insecurity and Nutrition Incentive program (FINI)** helps to incentivize the purchase of fresh, local produce with SNAP dollars.
- The **Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI)** offers grants and loans to help establish locally-owned healthy food retail outlets in low-access areas.
- The **Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP)** invests in local and regional food infrastructure, including farmers markets, food hubs, and co-ops.

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