

SNAP Use Increased Slightly in 2012 In Struggling Economy, Both Traditional and New Populations Rely on SNAP to Avoid Hunger

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Although the Great Recession officially concluded more than three years ago, recent statistics show that the economy is still slow to recover.¹ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, poverty rates have not declined from the post-recession high of 15 percent, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows the national unemployment rate at 7.2 percent in September 2013, still substantially higher than the pre-recession rate of 4.6 percent.² Within this stale economic climate, safety net programs are particularly important, not only for populations who have traditionally benefited from them, but also increasingly for groups who—although historically considered more economically secure—may still be feeling the effects of the recession.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) is one particularly effective safety net program, reaching three-quarters of those who are eligible, generating \$1.70 in economic activity per \$1 increase in benefits, and boasting record-low administrative error rates in 2012.³ SNAP benefits were distributed to 46.6 million people last year, and the U.S. Census Bureau notes that, in 2012, “if SNAP benefits were counted as income, 4 million fewer people would be categorized as in poverty.”⁴ Alongside these indicators of success, however, concerns about federal spending have led to both the U.S. House and Senate passing reauthorization legislation that includes billions of dollars in cuts to SNAP, measures that will be finalized in the coming weeks. These cuts would come in addition to the November 1 benefits reduction when the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act’s (ARRA) temporary increase to benefits expired.

This brief uses data from the American Community Survey to examine rates of SNAP receipt in 2012, track changes since the onset of the recession, and monitor

KEY FINDINGS

13.6%

In 2012, 13.6 percent of American households reported receipt of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) benefits, suggesting that the multi-year trend of rising receipt rates may be slowing.



More than three quarters—76.7 percent—of families reporting SNAP receipt in 2012 contained at least one family member who was working, the same as before the recession.



Reports of SNAP receipt in 2012 increased among populations at particular risk for food insecurity, including households with children, seniors, the poor, and householders with a disability, showing that SNAP benefits still reached many traditionally targeted populations.



Households that are traditionally considered less economically vulnerable—such as married couples and those without children—also reported higher levels of SNAP receipt in 2012, suggesting that new groups may be in need of assistance in the wake of the Great Recession.

4X

Nearly 46 percent of unmarried mothers reported SNAP receipt, a rate nearly four times as high as that among married couples with children (12.3 percent).

receipt by region and place type (rural, suburban, or central city).⁵ In addition, this brief explores changes in SNAP receipt among households that may be at particular risk for food insecurity—including households

with children, seniors, people with disabilities, and the poor.⁶ Finally, the brief considers rates among some less traditionally at-risk populations, exploring changes in their rates of receipt over time.⁷

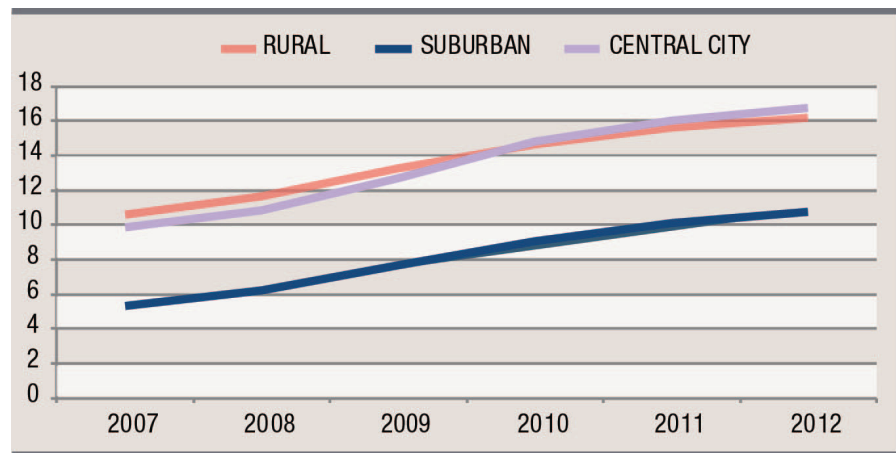
Growth of SNAP Appears to Slow in All Regions and Place Types

Nationwide, 13.6 percent of American households reported SNAP receipt in 2012, compared with 13 percent the previous year (see Table 1). All regions reported higher rates of SNAP receipt in 2012, although rates remained highest in the South at 15.1 percent. Reports of SNAP receipt also increased in all place types since 2011, with central cities retaining the highest rates, at 16.7 percent of households. Rural places closely followed, at 16.1 percent of households, while suburbs demonstrated a substantially lower rate (10.7 percent). Despite these widespread increases in reported rates of SNAP receipt, it should be noted that the increase in each place was fairly small over the year, at less than one percentage point each (though still statistically significant). Indeed, the overall trend of rising receipt may be slowing from the drastic increases recorded since the onset of the Great Recession in 2007 (see Figure 1), though some demographic subgroups still reported large increases, as discussed in the following section.⁸

Single Mothers Still Most Likely to Receive SNAP Benefits

Continuing an ongoing pattern, SNAP use was most prevalent among unmarried parents, particularly single mothers, whose rate of receipt topped

FIGURE 1: PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING SNAP RECEIPT BY PLACE TYPE, 2007–2012



Note: All year-to-year increases are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Source: American Community Survey, 1-year estimates, 2007–2012.

45 percent in 2012, compared to 28.3 percent among single fathers.⁹ Meanwhile, married couples with children had rates of receipt below the national estimate, at 12.3 and 13.6 percent, respectively. In 2012, both single and married parents in suburbs and central cities reported increased rates of receipt, although only single mothers experienced increases in rural places (see Table 1).

Populations at Particular Risk for Food Insecurity Still Rely on SNAP

Since 2011, households generally considered to be among the nation's most at-risk for food insecurity—those containing seniors, children, and householders with a disability—have increasingly relied on SNAP. More than one in ten senior households (10.2 percent) received SNAP in 2012, compared to just over one in twenty in 2007 (5.9 percent). More than one in five households (22.8 percent) with children and nearly one in four (24.2 percent)

with a householder with a disability reported receipt in 2012, compared to only 13.3 and 15.5 percent in 2007, respectively. Nearly half (48.3 percent) of poor households reported SNAP receipt in 2012, up from 36.6 percent in 2007. In sum, all of the at-risk households discussed here reported increased levels of SNAP receipt since 2011, and substantially higher rates than observed in 2007, as shown in Figure 2.

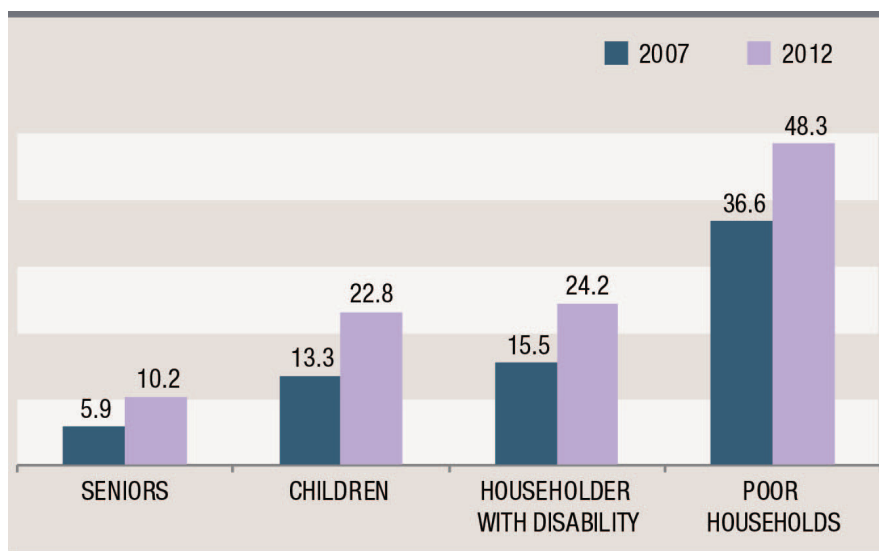
As SNAP receipt rose among these at-risk households, they comprised a large swath of all SNAP-receiving households in 2012. For example, though 22.8 percent of households with children reported SNAP receipt, 54.1 percent of all households reporting SNAP receipt contained at least one child. Similarly, 24.2 percent of households with a disabled householder reported SNAP receipt, while 43.7 percent of all SNAP households included a householder with a disability.¹⁰

TABLE 1. PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING SNAP RECEIPT BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE, 2012

	ALL PLACE TYPES			RURAL			SUBURBAN			CENTRAL CITY		
	Percent	Percentage Point Change Since 2011	Percentage Point Change Since 2007	Percent	Percentage Point Change Since 2011	Percentage Point Change Since 2007	Percent	Percentage Point Change Since 2011	Percentage Point Change Since 2007	Percent	Percentage Point Change Since 2011	Percentage Point Change Since 2007
ALL HOUSEHOLDS												
United States	13.6	0.6	5.9	16.1	0.5	5.5	10.7	0.6	5.4	16.7	0.7	6.9
Northeast	13.3	0.6	5.7	14.0	0.3	4.8	8.8	0.6	4.5	22.1	0.6	8.6
Midwest	13.6	0.4	5.3	13.5	0.1	4.6	10.2	0.4	4.7	19.4	0.7	7.0
South	15.1	0.7	6.4	18.9	0.6	6.0	12.5	0.8	6.3	16.7	0.7	6.9
West	11.4	0.8	5.8	15.0	1.4	6.4	10.1	0.6	5.5	11.9	0.8	6.0
HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN												
Married Couples												
United States	12.3	0.6	6.4	15.9	0.4	6.4	9.8	0.4	5.6	15.5	0.9	8.0
Northeast	9.6	0.7	5.3	12.5	0.3	5.2	6.2	0.6	3.8	18.8	0.9	10.0
Midwest	11.3	0.5	5.4	13.1	-0.3	5.1	8.6	0.4	4.7	16.3	1.4	7.8
South	14.0	0.4	6.8	18.7	0.7	6.9	11.9	0.4	6.5	15.4	0.2	7.5
West	12.6	0.7	7.3	16.6	1.0	8.4	11.0	0.3	6.7	13.7	1.2	7.9
Single Mothers												
United States	45.8	1.4	13.9	53.5	1.4	11.5	39.1	1.6	14.8	50.4	1.2	14.1
Northeast	44.9	1.6	14.6	48.2	1.6	11.5	34.5	1.0	14.0	56.2	2.2	16.8
Midwest	49.1	0.6	12.9	51.1	1.5	11.3	41.2	0.7	13.7	56.5	-0.1	13.1
South	47.8	1.6	14.2	56.5	1.0	11.0	41.7	2.2	16.2	50.7	1.2	13.8
West	39.5	1.8	14.0	50.4	2.5	13.9	36.3	1.9	14.0	40.6	1.6	14.1
Single Fathers												
United States	28.3	1.2	13.3	32.5	0.0	12.5	24.1	1.2	12.5	32.2	1.9	15.1
Northeast	26.1	1.2	11.7	28.5	-2.8	11.1	19.2	1.6	8.6	37.2	2.0	17.2
Midwest	29.2	0.8	11.8	30.0	-0.1	9.3	24.4	1.8	12.1	35.8	0.2	13.7
South	30.3	1.4	14.4	35.5	0.9	14.3	26.7	0.9	13.9	32.9	2.4	15.3
West	26.1	1.3	14.2	32.2	-0.3	14.6	23.6	0.7	13.3	27.2	2.2	15.1

Note: Bold typeface indicates a statistically significant change (p<0.05).
Source: American Community Survey, 1-year estimates, 2007, 2011, and 2012

FIGURE 2: PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING SNAP RECEIPT, BY RELEVANT DEMOGRAPHICS, 2007 AND 2012



Note: All changes are statistically significant (p<0.05).
Source: American Community Survey 1-year estimates, 2007 and 2012

Households generally considered to be among the nation’s most at-risk for food insecurity—those containing seniors, children, householders with a disability, and the poor—have increasingly relied on SNAP.

Less Traditionally Disadvantaged Populations Also Rely on SNAP

While these traditionally at-risk households make up a substantial share of households receiving SNAP, some of these populations actually comprised a slightly *smaller* share of SNAP households than they did in 2007. For example, whereas 43.7 percent of SNAP households included a disabled householder in 2012, these households made up 55.1 percent of all households receiving SNAP in 2007. Similarly, 52 percent of SNAP households were poor in 2012, as compared with 58.3 percent in 2007. Of course, as poor households shrank as a share of all SNAP households, the balance was increasingly comprised of near-poor households including those under 130 percent of the poverty line (\$30,268 for a family of four) between 2007 and 2012; elderly, disabled, or low-income

populations since the recession. For example, childless married couples—one population that is typically among the most economically secure—have experienced rising rates of SNAP receipt over time, and comprise a larger share of all households reporting receipt than they did in 2007. That is, while only 3.9 percent of all childless married couples reported SNAP receipt in 2012, this compares to 1.7 percent in 2007 (an increase of 129 percent). Over that same period, childless married couple households grew from 6.0 percent of SNAP-receiving households in 2007, to 7.8 percent in 2012, for an increase of 30 percent.

Finally, in both 2007 and 2012, more than three-quarters (76.7 percent in 2012) of households reporting SNAP receipt contained at least one person with a job. The growth of populations less often considered at-risk as a share of the SNAP

have slightly higher incomes than their typically at-risk counterparts) onto the SNAP rolls. It is important to note that, while median income may have risen for SNAP recipients, it is still well below the 2012 poverty threshold for a family of four (\$23,283), and just over one-third (36 percent) of the U.S. median for all households (\$51,371).

Growth in SNAP receipt is not solely attributable to additional households becoming eligible through reduced incomes, however: participation in SNAP can also increase when already-eligible households actually enroll in increasing numbers. Indeed, data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture show that SNAP participation rates rose from 65 percent of eligible households in 2007 to 75 percent of eligible households in 2010 (the most recent data available).¹² Indeed, it is possible that some already-eligible households may have resisted enrolling in SNAP until absolutely necessary, for example, having exhausted savings and family supports before turning to the nutrition safety net in the still-weak economy.¹³

Any cuts to program funding should consider the vulnerable populations that have increasingly relied on these benefits in a tenuous economy where the social safety net is already frail.

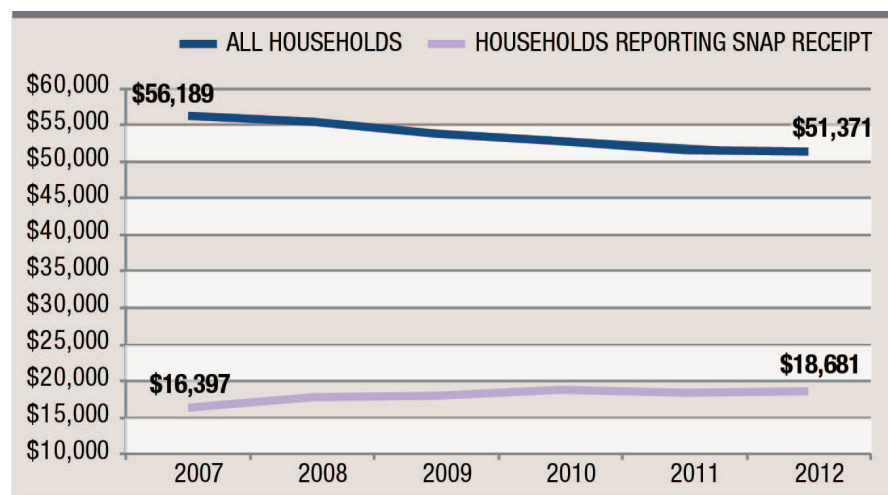
recipients whose net income after deductions leaves them under 100 percent of the poverty line; or a small group of low-income one- and two-person households that only receive the minimum benefit.¹¹

The increased reports of SNAP in 2012 shown in Figure 2 suggest that SNAP benefits continued to reach populations traditionally considered at-risk. However, these households comprise a smaller share of all SNAP-receiving households over time, suggesting that the weak economy may have resulted in increased need for SNAP among traditionally less-disadvantaged

caseload during a period when the share of working households receiving SNAP remained consistently high suggests that the recession's toll on work, including falling wages and reduced hours for some, may have resulted in employment and income that is insufficient for meeting some families' needs. Indeed, changes in median household income illustrate this trend, as shown in Figure 3. While median income fell for all households between 2007 and 2012, median income has increased slightly among SNAP recipients, perhaps impacted by the entrance of less-traditional households (who may

Policy Implications

Despite increased reliance on SNAP, the program is presently facing substantial cuts, and relevant legislation has been the topic of vehement disagreement in Congress. The Senate has passed a bill cutting about \$4 billion from SNAP in the next ten years as a part of legislation reauthorizing SNAP, while the House-passed legislation aims for \$39 billion in that same period.¹⁴ The House and Senate must now agree on the final level for SNAP funding in the reauthorization process.

FIGURE 3. MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME, 2007–2012

Note: All estimates inflation-adjusted to 2012 dollars. All single-year changes are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Source: American Community Survey, 1-year estimates, 2007–2012

These changes would come on top of cuts that went into effect November 1 with the expiration of the temporary increase in SNAP allotments (made effective under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act). Research suggests that this cut alone reduces the average benefit for a household of four by about \$36 per month, approximately the same cost as feeding a pre-teen child for a week, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Thrifty Food Plan.¹⁵ In addition, proposed cuts to SNAP funding (either those contained in the reauthorization legislation or different ones) may be included in the budget resolution which sets forth the plan for spending in fiscal year 2014; the budget conference (agreed to as part of the recent negotiations surrounding the debt ceiling and the shutdown of the federal government) is scheduled to report out a budget resolution by December 13, 2013. Of course, any cuts to program funding should consider the vulnerable populations that have increasingly relied

on these benefits in a tenuous economy where the social safety net is already frail.

Data

These analyses are based on U.S. Census Bureau estimates from the 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012 American Community Survey. Estimates presented here were produced by aggregating information from the detailed tables available on American FactFinder. These estimates are meant to give perspective on SNAP use, but because they are based on survey data, one should use caution when comparing across categories, as the margins of error may place seemingly disparate estimates within reasonable sampling error. All differences highlighted in this brief are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) as determined by a statistical test accounting for estimates and their standard errors.¹⁶

BOX 1: DEFINITION OF THE TERMS RURAL, SUBURBAN, AND CENTRAL CITY

Data for this brief are derived from the American Community Survey, which designates each sampled address as being located within one of several possible geographic components. As used here, “central city” designates households in the principal city of a metropolitan statistical area. “Suburban” includes those in metropolitan areas, but not within the principal city of that area, and “rural” consists of the addresses that are not within a metropolitan area at all.

Endnotes

1. The National Bureau of Economic Research, “US Business Cycle Expansions and Contractions” (Cambridge, MA: NBER, 2010), available at www.nber.org/cycles.html.
2. See Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica C. Smith, “Income Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2012,” Current Population Reports P60-245 (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), available at www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p60-245.pdf; “Unemployment Rate” (Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013), available at www.bls.gov/home.html; and “Unemployment Rate, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey (Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013), available at http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNU04000000?years_option=all_years&periods_option=specific_periods&periods=Annual+Data.
3. Dottie Rosenbaum, “SNAP Is Effective and Efficient” (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013), available at <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=3239>, and “FY 2012 Error Rates,” Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Quality Control (Washington, DC: Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013), available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/qc/default.htm>.
4. Food and Nutrition Service, “Annual Summary of Food and Nutrition Service Programs,” Program Data Overview, (Washington, DC: Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013), available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/annual.htm>. See also page 21 in “Income Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2012.”
5. Note that the data used throughout this brief are not drawn from administrative sources, but, rather, are survey respondents’ reports of SNAP receipt. Existing research shows that household surveys tend to underreport benefit receipt, including SNAP receipt. For specific details on variation between household surveys’ reporting rates and an overview of the implications of these patterns, see Bruce D. Meyer, Wallace K.C. Mok, and James X. Sullivan, “The Under-Reporting of Transfers in Household Surveys: Its Nature and Consequences,” Working Paper 15181 (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2009), available at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w15181>.
6. Note that, while the Census Bureau measures poverty at the family level, data on SNAP receipt are largely collected at the household level. Thus, references to “the poor,” “those below the poverty line” or “poor households” throughout this brief, technically refer to households that contain one or more poverty units (a person or family) with an income below the poverty threshold. Thus, a “poor household” might, for example, contain one family below the poverty threshold, or two roommates, one of whom is below poverty and the other of whom is not. For more on the Census Bureau’s official poverty measurement techniques, see “How the Census Bureau Measures Poverty” (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/about/overview/measure.html>.
7. For more on who is at risk for food insecurity, see, for example, Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Mark Nord, and Anita Singh, “Household Food Security in the United States in 2012,” Economic Research Report No. 155 (Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013).
8. It should be noted that legislative changes to SNAP in 2008 and 2009 have likely contributed to some of the increase in reported SNAP receipt since 2007. For example, in 2008, changes were made to benefits levels and asset rules; in 2009, as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, states were allotted additional funding for administrative costs and some changes were made to eligibility for jobless adults. For a historical overview of SNAP trends and legislation, see “SNAP/Food Stamp Historic Trends: 1998–2010” (Washington, DC: Food Research and Action Center, 2010), available at <http://frac.org/federal-food-nutrition-programs/snapfood-stamps/historic-trends-1998-2008>. However, the Congressional Budget Office suggests that “the primary reason for the increase in the number of participants [between 2007 and 2011] was the deep recession from December 2007 to June 2009 and the subsequent slow recovery.” See page 4 of “The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program” (Washington, DC: Congressional Budget Office, 2012), available at www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/cbofiles/attachments/04-19-SNAP.pdf.
9. Note that these estimates refer specifically to households with, for example, “a female householder, no husband present, with children in the household.” Since the majority of these householders are the parents of the children in the household, the colloquial “single mother” is used here for purposes of readability.
10. Carsey Institute analysis of American Community Survey data; not shown, but available upon request.
11. Note that any households receiving SNAP that are not poor are mostly *near poor*, given the rules governing SNAP eligibility, which state that a household’s net income must be below 100 percent of the poverty line in order to be eligible. In most cases, households must also have gross income below 130 percent of the poverty line, though some exceptions are made for households with disabled or elderly members, or via the state option of broad-based categorical eligibility. Research shows that even with these exceptions, “only 2 percent of SNAP households had monthly disposable income (that is, income after SNAP’s deductions for expenses such as child care and high housing costs) above the poverty line.” See Rosenbaum, “SNAP Is Effective and Efficient.”
12. Cited in Dottie Rosenbaum, “SNAP Is Effective and Efficient.”

13. Indeed, Rosenbaum notes this possibility as well, suggesting in particular that the long-term unemployed may be more likely to exhaust their unemployment benefits before turning to the SNAP. See Dottie Rosenbaum, “SNAP Is Effective and Efficient.”

14. The relevant Senate legislation is “S. 954: The Agriculture Reform Food and Jobs Act of 2013,” passed in June 2013, and the House’s version is “HR 2642: Federal Agriculture Reform and Risk Management Act of 2013,” passed in July 2013. See www.govtrack.us for more detail.

15. Stacy Dean and Dottie Rosenbaum, “SNAP Benefits Will Be Cut for All Participants in November 2013” (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013), available at www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=3899; The Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) is a low-cost food plan designed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which identifies the types and amounts of food necessary for providing adequate nutrition. The TFP is calculated monthly from data drawn from the consumer price index, and is the basis for determining food stamp allotments. The most recent TFP, from July 2013, shows that the weekly cost of feeding a child aged 9–11 under the TFP was \$35.40. For comparisons to other food plan costs and costs for families and individuals of other ages and sexes, see “Official USDA Food Plans: Cost of Food at Home at Four Levels, U.S. Average, July 2013,” USDA Food Plans, Cost of Food – 1994 to Present (Alexandria, VA: Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013), available at <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/USDAFoodCost-Home.htm>.

16. For more detail, see “A Compass for Understanding and Using American Community Survey Data” (Washington, DC: U.S. Census, 2008), available at www.census.gov/acs/www/guidance_for_data_users/handbooks.

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