A PRIMER · ASHEVILLE, NC

When the Aid *Stops*

In 2021, with government aid at its peak, American hunger was the lowest USDA had measured since 2001. In 2023, ending one piece of that aid measurably pushed hunger back up. In 2025, the country chose to cut food aid again, this time permanently.

By Step Up AVL

Published June 14, 2026 · Updated November 22, 2026
stepupavl.org
Sources & notes (29 linked documents) · PDF version

In this piece · 4 sections

The low
The rerun
The proof
Here

THE CLAIM

Most policy debates are about what would happen if you changed something. The current round of food-aid cuts is unusual: the country ran this experiment once before, and the result has already been measured and written down. To better understand how food insecurity works, see How to Think About Food Insecurity.

This is not a prediction. It is a rerun.

THE LOW

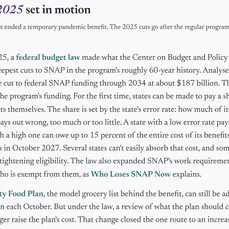
What help bought in *2021*

Hunger stayed low through the middle of a pandemic, which should have pushed it up.

In 2021, the share of U.S. households that were food insecure was 10.2 percent, the lowest USDA had measured since 2001. That was about the same as in 2019, before the pandemic. The economy was still unsteady, so it wasn't a boom that kept hunger low. An unusual stack of public support was in place: expanded SNAP, stimulus checks, an enlarged Child Tax Credit, free school meals. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities says the SNAP increases and other temporary policies helped keep hunger from rising. Money reached households, and the pandemic didn't leave more of them short of food.

The experiment, at a glance

Share of U.S. households that were food insecure, 2020 to 2024. Drawn to scale.



Hunger hit a low in 2021, when aid was highest, then climbed as pandemic aid was withdrawn and prices rose. Source: USDA Economic Research Service.

THE PROOF

What *2023* showed

When one specific benefit ended, researchers could watch what happened next.

During the pandemic, SNAP added temporary emergency allotments: extra benefits of between $95 and more than $250 a month for a household. In March 2023, those allotments ended in the 35 states and territories still paying them. That created a natural experiment. A large group of families lost at least $95 a month in food money at about the same time. A group of people with incomes low enough to qualify, but not on SNAP, saw no such change.

A peer-reviewed study in *Health Affairs* tracked the result with Census survey data. The study counted a household as having marginal food insufficiency if it said that, in the last seven days, it sometimes or often didn't have enough to eat, or had enough but not always the kinds of food it wanted. The study estimated that ending the emergency allotments raised marginal food insufficiency among SNAP participants in those 35 states and territories by 8.4 percentage points. In a second analysis that used each state's own income limits, it also found more food-pantry use and more trouble paying other bills.

An earlier study by University of Pennsylvania researchers examined the 18 states that ended the allotments early. It applied its results to the whole country and estimated roughly 2 million more Americans went without enough food once the extra benefit stopped everywhere. A permanent benefit increase from 2021 was already in place and did not prevent the rise. When the support was cut, hunger rose by a measurable amount within months.

10.2%
U.S. household food insecurity in 2021, the lowest USDA had measured since 2001, with aid at its peak
USDA ERS

+8.4 pts
estimated rise in marginal food insufficiency among SNAP participants after the emergency allotments ended in 2023
HEALTH AFFAIRS, 2024

~2M
more Americans estimated to have gone without enough food as a result
PENN / JAMA HEALTH FORUM, 2023

THE RERUN

What *2025* set in motion

The 2023 cut ended a temporary pandemic benefit. The 2025 cuts go after the regular program, and they're permanent.

In July 2025, a federal budget law made what the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities calls the deepest cuts to SNAP in the program's roughly 60-year history. Analyses of the law put the cut to federal SNAP funding through 2034 at about $187 billion. That's about a sixth of the program's funding. For the first time, states can be made to pay a share of the benefit costs themselves. The share is set by the state's error rate: how much of its benefit money it pays out wrong, too much or too little. A state with a low error rate pays nothing. A state with a high one can owe up to 15 percent of the entire cost of its benefits. The state share starts in October 2027. Several states can't easily absorb that cost, and some may meet it by tightening eligibility. The law also expanded SNAP's work requirements and changed who is exempt from them, as Who Loses SNAP Now explains.

The Thrifty Food Plan, the model grocery list behind the benefit, can still be adjusted for inflation each October. But under the law, a review of what the plan should contain can no longer raise the plan's cost. That change closed the one route to an increase beyond inflation.

The 2025 cuts are the 2023 experiment again, run deliberately and with no end date. The extra benefit that ended in 2023 had run for about three years. The 2025 cuts reach the regular program: they narrow who qualifies, lower some households' benefits, and shift costs to the states. If ending a temporary extra benefit produced a measurable jump in hunger, there's no question which way a permanent cut will push it. The only question is how far.

Supporters of the law argue it reins in federal spending and pushes more recipients toward work. The program's cost is real. The 2023 evidence shows only the price of pursuing those goals by cutting benefits: a measurable rise in hunger. It doesn't answer whether the goals themselves are good ones.

Between July 2025, when the law was signed, and March 2026, SNAP enrollment fell by more than 4 million people. That was a 10 percent drop, the steepest in decades.

In June 2026, the Senate's draft farm bill did not delay the new state share of benefit costs or restore any of the cuts. On September 16, 2026, the Senate Agriculture Committee passed a version that would push the usual start of that share back one year, to October 2028. For the states with the highest error rates, it would also raise the top rate from 15 to 20 percent of their benefit costs, starting in October 2030. The farm bill the House passed in April 2026 has neither the delay nor the higher rate. As of September 28, 2026, the full Senate had not voted on its version. Separately, the July 2025 law raised the state share of the cost of running the program on October 1, 2026. The committee's version would not have delayed that increase.

HERE

Why this lands hard *in the mountains*

A region still recovering from a flood is a bad place to run a hunger experiment.

Western North Carolina faces these cuts with little slack. About 25,000 Buncombe residents rely on SNAP, down from about 29,000 in April 2025. Some of the rural counties around it had a higher share of residents on SNAP in 2025: about one in six in McDowell and close to one in five in Rutherford. After Helene, MANNA FoodBank says need is at the highest level in its history. When Buncombe residents on SNAP faced a brief pause in their benefits during the federal shutdown in late 2025, the program's rescue was real, but the gap was too large for it to cover. That is the lesson of Why Food Banks Can't Fix Hunger. A permanent cut does not pause. It stays.

North Carolina has started to plan for its share. The state's first full budget since 2023 puts money toward carrying out the new federal rules and cutting payment errors. The legislature's fiscal analysts put the state's share of benefit costs at about $150 million for the first year, at the error rate the state posted for the year ending September 2025. NC Health News calculated that at the top rate of 15 percent the share could run to about $420 million a year. The budget hands that share to the counties in any year the state owes one. It does this by holding back part of each county's sales tax, starting in October 2027. The part held back comes out of money the counties split with their towns and special districts. Washington is paying less, and the state has passed its share on to the counties.

The same budget funds a restart of the Healthy Opportunities Pilot. The pilot used Medicaid dollars for non-medical help such as food, housing repairs, and transportation. It has been suspended since July 2025. The restart is funded with about $9 million in state money, against the roughly $80 million in state money that had been requested. Federal matching money brings that one-time funding to $25 million. On November 9, 2026, the state health department said the restart is expected in early 2027 and will cover only food. The rest of what the pilot paid for, such as housing repairs and transportation, is left out. The department says it may consider adding services if more money becomes available. Medicaid members in the pilot's three regions may get a box of healthy food delivered to their home each week if they face food insecurity and meet the pilot's criteria tied to pregnancy, diabetes or cardiovascular disease. One of the three regions still covers 18 western counties.

THE POINT

We have the result. We are choosing to *repeat the cause*.

From 2020 through 2023, the evidence was about as clear as it ever gets in social policy. When aid went up, hunger held near its 2021 low. When aid was partly withdrawn, hunger was measurably higher by 2023, with an estimated 2 million more people going without enough food. There's no mystery left about what aid does to hunger, and no need to wait and see.

So the 2025 cuts aren't really a gamble. They're a decision made with the evidence in hand. Hunger depends on how much the public helps cover the gap between wages and the price of food. That means the public can move it in either direction. We watched it stay low when we wanted it to. We are about to watch it do the opposite, on purpose, in a region that can least afford the lesson a second time.

Will YOU step up?

Every group in our directory is local, vetted, and doing this work right now. Pick one and back it. →

Read next

Why the Hunger Numbers Are Two Years Old
Hungry Kids Don't Show It
The Day MANNA Lost Everything

The library of 3,000+ vetted sources behind our reporting · Use my research →