Who *loses* SNAP now?

The 2025 budget law is already pushing people off food aid. Who is losing benefits and going hungry, why the work rules don't do what they promise, and why no food security report is coming.

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Sources & notes (44 linked documents) · PDF version

Picture a server in West Asheville whose hours slipped below 20 a week for two slow winter months. The **renewal notice** went to an old address. The proof-of-hours form came due the Friday she worked a double. The case closed the week after. She is a composite, not one person, but every step in her story is how the rules work.

The 2025 law moves a great deal of money. A law that big decides who eats, and the numbers already show it.

New to SNAP? Start with **what it actually is and how little it gives →**

THE SNAP REWRITE · A FIVE-PART SERIES
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THE NUMBERS

The rolls are *already shrinking*

Nationwide, SNAP enrollment fell to about 36.1 million people by July 2026, roughly 5.5 million fewer than a year before. That's a drop of about 13 percent. The count comes from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data as of October 9, 2026, and it's still preliminary.

North Carolina's rolls have fallen too, though less steeply than the nation's over the same year. USDA's table shows the state down about 8 percent from July 2025 to July 2026. By the state's own count, the rolls went from about 1.47 million people in March 2025 to about 1.24 million in October 2026. That's a drop of about 15 percent. It comes from several changes: the wider work rules, new limits on which noncitizens can get help, and the paperwork of renewal, where one missing form can close a case.

The work rules and the noncitizen limits both started when a decline was already under way. The state's rolls had been falling since early 2025, after a rise in the last months of 2024. Much of the state's drop since March 2025 came before North Carolina began applying the new work rules on December 1, 2025. So the 2025 law didn't cause all of it. What the law does is build that decline into the rules.

The **state health department** expects about 90,000 North Carolina adults to lose benefits under the new work rules alone. They don't only come off at once. Each adult is screened at their next renewal and loses benefits only after any three full months in a three-year period without meeting the work hours or having **good cause**. That's the **three-month limit**. Someone who would have met the hours but missed some for good cause is treated as meeting them, if the absence is temporary. The national count above stops at July 2026, and the state's at October 2026. So part of those losses shows in these counts, and part is still to come.

Supporters of the law see the drop in enrollment as the program removing people who never should have been on it. Some of it is exactly that. Ineligible cases and paperwork errors get cleared out, and USDA says it removes cases involving fraud, like benefits drawn using dead people's Social Security numbers. But the department hasn't shown how many of the people who left were actually ineligible. Researchers who went looking for a happier explanation found little sign the economy improved enough to account for a drop this size. The more likely story is much simpler: eligible people are losing benefits because the rules got harder to satisfy, not because they stopped needing food.

Supporters make one promise about the work rules that can be checked against evidence: that they move people from aid into jobs. Economists have studied earlier versions of the same rule. The most careful of those studies, from the National Bureau of Economic Research, found the requirement cut SNAP enrollment by about half among the adults it covered, with no measurable rise in employment. An April 2026 review of that research by the Brookings Institution's Hamilton Project reached the same conclusion: tougher requirements thinned the rolls and left employment flat. Even the studies most favorable to the rules find at most a small bump in work, and a shaky one. The rule moved people off the rolls but, on the whole, not into jobs.

A change outside SNAP may also keep eligible families away from it. A Department of Homeland Security rule took effect on September 18, 2026. It covers some noncitizens who apply for a green card from inside the United States, or ask to enter the country, on or after that date. Officers can now count an applicant's own SNAP benefits as one factor in deciding whether the person is likely to become a public aid. Their own application for SNAP on or after that date can also count. SNAP received before that date does not count. Benefits received by the applicant's family members generally do not count.

Homeland Security also says few of the people the rule applies to are eligible for SNAP. Even so, it projects a drop in benefits across seven programs, SNAP among them. Most of that drop comes from people the rule does not apply to, including U.S. citizens who live with a noncitizen.

-15%
NC SNAP enrollment, March 2025 to October 2026 (NCDHHS caseload)

~90,000
NC adults expected to lose benefits under the new work rules (NCDHHS)

~776,000
Fewer children on SNAP in 12 states that report enrollment by age (ProPublica)

THE EXEMPTIONS

The rule falls heaviest on people with *no address*

The work rules fall hardest on one group in particular: people without a stable home. In 2023, Congress added an exemption for homeless adults. The 2025 law repealed that exemption less than two years after states had to start applying it.

A second way out disappeared at the same time, and it never depended on the person at all. A state could ask the federal government for a **waiver** to pause the three-month limit across a whole area that did not have enough jobs to go around. The 2025 law removed that reason for a waiver. Outside Alaska and Hawaii, the only reason left is an area unemployment rate above 10 percent. On October 3, 2025, USDA told states that within 30 days it would end any waiver still based on the old reason.

The rules that remain are more generous than they look. A federal regulation says a state agency cannot require you to have a fixed mailing address to get food help. **Self-attestation** means your own word. In line with a federal rule, North Carolina's own **manual for caseworkers** says self-attestation "must be accepted" when someone claims an exemption from the work rules, "unless questionable." Not every claim can rest on your word. A claim that you get disability benefits still needs other proof. If you're unfit for work in a way that's not obvious, you need a statement from medical personnel.

The manual goes further than the federal rules. **Chronic homelessness** can establish that a person is **unfit for work** when their housing situation is what keeps them from working 20 hours a week. That's the caseworker's call. When someone is obviously unfit for work, caseworkers "must not request medical documentation." And the manual tells them to apply good cause "liberally."

So on paper the rules are generous. The question is whether they are applied the same way at the counter, when the office is short-staffed, the work of checking hours has grown, and a missing form is one of the quietest ways a case gets closed. A permissive rule and a permissive caseworker are not the same thing.

For more on that gap, see **Who We Call Homeless.**

THE YOUNGEST

Children are losing SNAP *in large numbers*

ProPublica looked at 12 states that report enrollment by age and found about 776,000 fewer children on SNAP. That was about 46 percent of those states' total drop. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities put the figure for those same 12 states at more than 700,000. In September 2026, using data on children from 28 states, the Center estimated that the number of children receiving SNAP nationwide had dropped by about 2 million since July 2025. Children are not subject to the three-month limit. They lose SNAP when their whole household's case closes, and that is happening to more households. Some experts ProPublica spoke to say the added paperwork of staying eligible may be pushing people off. Under the new limits on which noncitizens can get help, a noncitizen child who is no longer eligible can also lose SNAP while the household's case stays open.

OFF THE BOOKS

And the main measure *is gone*

The main way the government measured hunger is also gone. In September 2025, USDA ended the survey behind its **annual food security report.** That survey was made up of food questions the Census Bureau had asked households every year since 1995. The department called it redundant. The edition covering 2024 was the last one. What stopped is the benchmark, not every count. The Census Bureau still asks a short set of questions about whether a household had enough to eat, and it publishes the results. Those questions were never the measure the food security report was built on, and they can't be lined up against 30 years of it. There's no plan to measure hunger the old way for the years these changes take effect. Anyone waiting for the official numbers to show what happened will be waiting for a report that is not coming.

Is the law's new error-rate penalty really about accuracy? It scores a state the same for underpaying a hungry family as for overpaying one. The eligible people a state wrongly turns away do not count toward the score. Starting as soon as October 2027, if a state's error rate is 6 percent or higher, the penalty lands on its books. Under North Carolina's 2026 budget, the state pays that cost with sales tax money it holds back from the counties. But the cheapest way to shrink the penalty is to have fewer families on the rolls.

THE BOTTOM LINE

What it means for *Buncombe*

If you get SNAP in Buncombe County: your monthly benefit is set by a federal formula, and the law kept that formula. But the law says no future review can raise the cost of **the food plan behind the maximum benefit.** The Congressional Budget Office expects this change to make the average benefit lower than it would otherwise be, starting in 2027. The law also narrowed what counts toward **one of the deductions** inside the formula, the **shelter deduction.** It did so in two ways. First, a household with no older adult and no disabled member can no longer claim the **higher utility allowance** just by receiving heating aid. Second, an internet service fee no longer counts toward the shelter deduction. Losing either one can lower the monthly amount.

Who qualifies is still the bigger change. The new work rules reach more people. They now also apply to adults ages 55 to 64, adults in a household whose youngest child is 14 to 17, veterans, homeless adults, and young adults 24 or younger who were in foster care when they turned 18. All of these people were exempt before the 2025 law. Someone in one of these groups can still be exempt on other grounds, such as receiving disability benefits or being physically or mentally unable to work 20 hours a week. Even so, some people who get help today will lose it. Buncombe's share of the roughly 90,000 adults the state expects to lose benefits is not public yet, but the county is not exempt. If your case is still open, keep your proof of income and rent current. For adults subject to the three-month limit, work hours are also verified. Those adults have to report a drop below 20 hours a week by the 10th of the month after it happens.

If you do not get SNAP: this still reaches you. About 25,000 of your Buncombe neighbors are on it, roughly one in eleven people in the county. That number has fallen from about 29,000 in April 2025. Those neighbors spend roughly $50 million a year in benefits at the same checkout lines you stand in, from Ingles, the grocer headquartered up the road in Black Mountain, to the tailgate markets. When the rolls shrink, that spending shrinks with them. And you help pay for the changes. To see what all this costs the county and the state, read **Who Pays for SNAP Now →**

THE TAKEAWAY

The *counting* changed.

For 30 years, the government at least counted the hunger it was trying to prevent. Now its main measure is gone, in the same season it made food aid harder to get and keep. Enrollment is falling, and in the states that count by age, nearly half of the drop is children, who are not subject to the three-month limit. The counting changed, and so did how many people get fed.

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