Gone in a SNAP: North Carolina's Decline in SNAP Since H.R. 1

A Poverty Research Project Policy Brief | October 2026

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More than 1.7 million North Carolinians faced hunger in 2024, and that number is poised to grow. The federal reconciliation bill H.R. 1, enacted in July 2025, contains several sweeping measures which will shrink SNAP, the federal food assistance program. SNAP participation in North Carolina has already fallen sharply and more cuts are coming. Between August 2025 and August 2026, SNAP participation fell 8.5% statewide. Every county saw a decline; thirteen counties fell by 12% or more, three by over 15%. 116,000 North Carolinians who relied on SNAP in August 2025 no longer received the support that feeds kids and stocks pantries.

Key Findings

- **Expanded work requirements are curtailing access to SNAP.** H.R. 1 expanded the age for SNAP's work requirement from 54 to 64, ended the exemption for parents of dependents aged 14-17, and eliminated exemptions for veterans, people experiencing homelessness, and youth aging out of foster care.

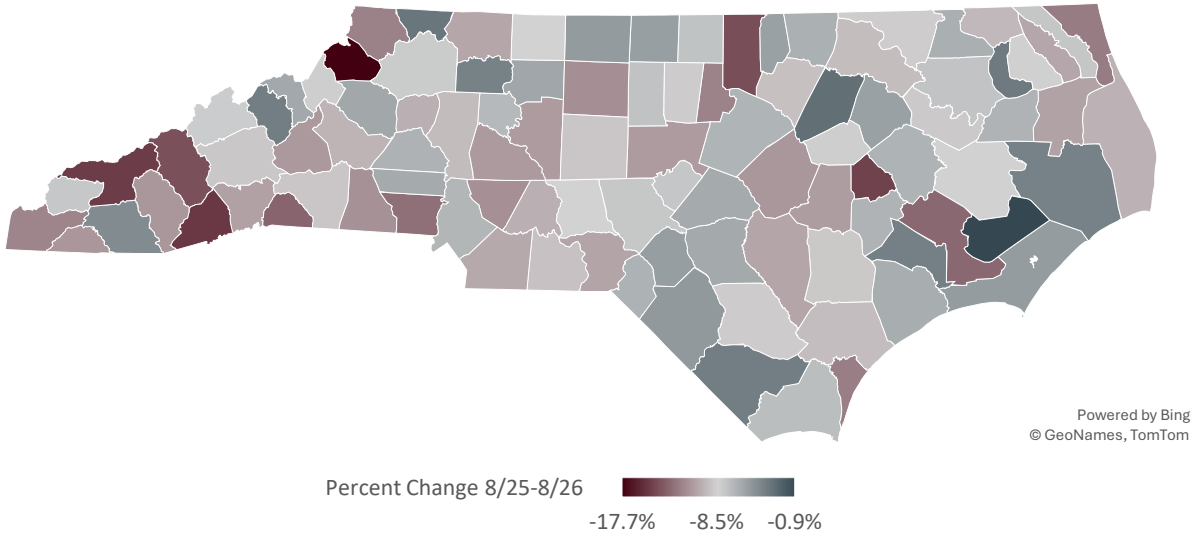
- **The timing of the decline aligns with changes to SNAP.** SNAP participation held relatively steady through the summer but started dropping in October 2026. The decline continued uninterrupted through August 2026 (the last month available). November 2025 experienced an especially sharp fall amid the federal government shutdown and the hurried rollout of H.R. 1's SNAP changes.

- **The decline breaks the pattern of recent years.** In previous years, SNAP enrollment typically rose in the last few months of the year, even in years of where the annual number declined. In 2025, it dropped straight through that period. Nearly 61,000 people fell off the rolls between August and December alone.

- **It's not the economy.** Unemployment and wages stayed essentially flat over this period, and the cost of living increased. SNAP applications showed no sign of slowing, indicating the number of North Carolinians who want to access SNAP remains unabated.

- **Rural counties are the hardest hit.** Although several urban and suburban counties saw large declines in SNAP participation, some of the steepest drops occurred in rural counties. Watauga County saw the biggest drop in the state, at 17.7%, and several western counties also posted unusually large declines. A larger share of rural residents use SNAP and these cuts may be especially painful for rural communities.

Change in SNAP Participation by County, August 2025 to August 2026



More Cuts Are Coming

New eligibility restrictions took effect October 1, 2026. At the same time, H.R. 1 is shifting more of the costs of operating SNAP from the federal government onto states and counties. Starting this fiscal year, North Carolina's counties—which administer SNAP locally—must absorb an additional $69 million in **administrative** costs. Beginning in October 2027, the state may also have to cover a share of SNAP **benefit** costs, depending on its payment error rate. The error rate is a volatile, unpredictable measure that fails to accurately capture a state's performance. North Carolina has already passed a law shifting this potential cost on to its counties, on top of the administrative costs they've already been handed.

H.R. 1 also revoked SNAP eligibility for some lawfully present noncitizens, froze the formula used to calculate benefit levels, and set in motion changes that will restrict the amount of SNAP

benefits. Separately, the USDA cut funding for farmers, schools and food banks, limiting the ability of these groups to provide healthy food, initiated a rule likely to push small retailers out of the SNAP program, and eliminated the federal government's own survey of hunger in America.

What's at Stake

Food banks and pantries cannot replace SNAP—for every meal a food bank provides, SNAP provides nine. Food banks in North Carolina are already reporting record numbers of people seeking assistance. As access to SNAP erodes, more North Carolinians will go hungry, inflicting preventable suffering now and exacting a cost all of us will pay in the future.

This brief is drawn from a full report, which includes more information and citations, available on the Poverty Research Project website.