

Older Adult Food Insecurity and SNAP



STATE FACT SHEET: TENNESSEE

In **TENNESSEE**, **11** percent of households with an older adult face food insecurity. Only **42** percent of eligible older adults in the state receive SNAP benefits. Removing administrative barriers could connect more older adults to nutrition assistance, reducing hunger, supporting health, and improving economic security.

» SNAP IS A CRITICAL SUPPORT FOR OLDER ADULTS

Many older adults in the state rely on fixed incomes and face rising costs for basic needs such as food, medicine, medical care, and housing. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps eligible older adults afford groceries by providing monthly benefits to purchase food, which reduces food insecurity and helps households avoid difficult tradeoffs, such as skipping meals to pay for medication.

 Research shows that SNAP participation among older adults is linked to improved nutrition, better health and medication adherence, lower health care costs, and reduced hospital and nursing home admissions.¹

» SNAP CHURN REFLECTS ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS TO BENEFITS

SNAP churn — when households temporarily lose benefits and reapply within 90 to 120 days — contributes to the SNAP gap among older adults.⁵ While some churn results from short-term changes in income, it most often stems from administrative hurdles, such as multistep application and recertification processes, complex eligibility rules, extensive documentation requirements, difficulty of reaching a caseworker, confusing notices, and easily missed paperwork during recertification, not from loss of eligibility. Churn disrupts access to food, increases stress, and creates added workload for state agencies.⁵



IN TENNESSEE HOUSEHOLDS WITH AN OLDER ADULT:

11%

face food insecurity.²

9%

participate in SNAP.³

THE OLDER ADULT SNAP GAP:

Despite SNAP's proven benefits, many eligible older adults in **TENNESSEE** do not receive assistance.

IN 2018, ONLY

42%

of eligible Tennesseans age 60 and older participated in SNAP.⁴



Most states do not measure SNAP churn or track it by age. This is explored in the Food Research & Action Center's (FRAC) research brief *[The Hidden Cost of Hunger: How SNAP Churn Harms Older Adults and Strains States](#)*.⁶

REDUCING CHURN AND STRENGTHENING SNAP ACCESS FOR OLDER ADULTS

Reducing churn is essential to maintaining consistent SNAP access for older adults and minimizing the administrative burden on both participants and state agencies. Proven best practices include:



SIMPLIFIED REPORTING AND LONGER CERTIFICATION PERIODS: Extending SNAP certification to 24 or 36 months for older adults with stable income and household circumstances helps reduce the frequency of paperwork and the risk of missed deadlines.⁷ Streamlining forms, reducing documentation requirements, and allowing phone or online interviews make it easier for older adults to stay enrolled.



IMPROVED COMMUNICATION: Sending clear, early reminders via mail, phone, or text about upcoming deadlines can help older adults complete recertification on time.



INCREASED CALL CENTER STAFFING: Ensuring that older adults can call the SNAP agency and speak to someone without waiting on hold for hours means people will be able to get answers to questions and resolve issues — such as missed benefits — quickly and easily.



COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: Leveraging trusted local partners — senior centers, health clinics, and food banks, for example — to provide one-on-one enrollment and recertification support can prevent unnecessary benefit loss.



STATE OPTIONS: States can adopt practices and policies to help ease barriers to SNAP enrollment, interviews, and applications, such as the Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP).



STATE OPTIONS IN ACTION⁸



Tennessee has not opted to participate in the **Elderly Simplified Application Project**, which simplifies the verification process and extends SNAP certification periods for older adults.



Tennessee does not use a **Standard Medical Deduction** for households with older adults.



Tennessee does not waive the **recertification interview for households with no earned income** where all members are over 60.



Reducing SNAP churn is essential to ensuring older adults maintain consistent access to food assistance. By addressing administrative barriers and ending avoidable churn, **TENNESSEE can help eligible older adults avoid unnecessary benefit loss and keep eligible older adults connected to the nutrition support they need to thrive.**

SNAP WORKS. STRONGER ACCESS MEANS HEALTHIER OLDER ADULTS, STRONGER COMMUNITIES, AND A MORE SECURE TENNESSEE.



1. Food Research & Action Center. (2019). *Hunger is a health issue for older adults: Food security, health, and the federal nutrition programs*. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-is-a-health-issue-for-older-adults-1.pdf> **2.** FRAC analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, 2021–2023. The data show the average percentage of households in Tennessee including those with older adults ages 60 and older that experienced food insecurity (low or very low) between 2021 and 2023. **3.** Older adult SNAP participation rates are based on FRAC's analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Estimates. **4.** Mathematica. (2021). *State estimates of SNAP participation rates for eligible elderly individuals, FY 2016–FY 2018*. Estimates developed for FNS under Task 51070-112. https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNAP_ElderlyPartRates_2016-2018.pdf **5.** Mills, G., Vericker, T., Koball, H., Lippold, K., Wheaton, L., & MEF Associates. (2014). *Understanding the rates, causes, and costs of churning in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) — Final report*. Urban Institute, USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/ops/SNAPChurning.pdf> **6.** Walcott, L., Plata-Nino, G., & Thrasher, D. (2026). *The hidden cost of hunger: How SNAP churn harms older adults and strains states*. Food Research & Action Center. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/SNAP-Churn-Harms-Older-Adults-Strains-States.pdf> **7.** For details on how these can be implemented, see Dean, O., Bleiweiss-Sande, R., and Gothro A. (July 2022). *Solutions: State policies associated with higher participation*. AARP Public Policy Institute. <https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/2022/12/solutions-state-policies-associated-higher-participation.doi.10.26419-2fppi.00166.003.pdf> **8.** U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2025). *State options report, 17th Edition*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/waivers/state-options-report>