

# SNAP Fell Short in Helping Families Afford Rising Food Prices in 2022

*The Latest Data on the Gap between SNAP Benefits and Meal Costs*

Elaine Waxman and Poonam Gupta

The fiscal year 2023 cost-of-living adjustment to SNAP narrowed—but didn't close—the gap between the maximum SNAP benefit and the cost of a modestly priced meal, despite significantly increasing benefits. The **adjustment decreased the share of counties with inadequate benefits from 99 to 78 percent.**

The average modestly priced meal cost \$3.14, **15 percent more than the average maximum benefit of \$2.74**, in the last quarter of 2022.

**Four of the five counties** with the largest gaps between the cost of a meal and the maximum SNAP benefit **were rural.**

The **gap was larger in urban areas than in rural areas.**

Record-breaking rising food costs<sup>1</sup> in 2022 made it hard for many people to adequately feed themselves and their families. Though the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP (formerly known as the Food Stamp program), helps families purchase the food they need, the maximum benefit rarely covers the cost of a modestly priced meal. As a result, many families receiving SNAP benefits remain food insecure.

In 2021, the reevaluated Thrifty Food Plan (the federal government's assessment of a minimal-cost, nutritionally adequate diet used for determining SNAP benefits) increased SNAP benefits and dramatically reduced the share of counties with a gap between the maximum benefit and the cost of a modestly priced meal to 21 percent, compared with 96 percent in 2020.<sup>2</sup> But because of unprecedented food inflation, the share of counties where SNAP benefits fell short increased in 2022—this time to 99 percent.

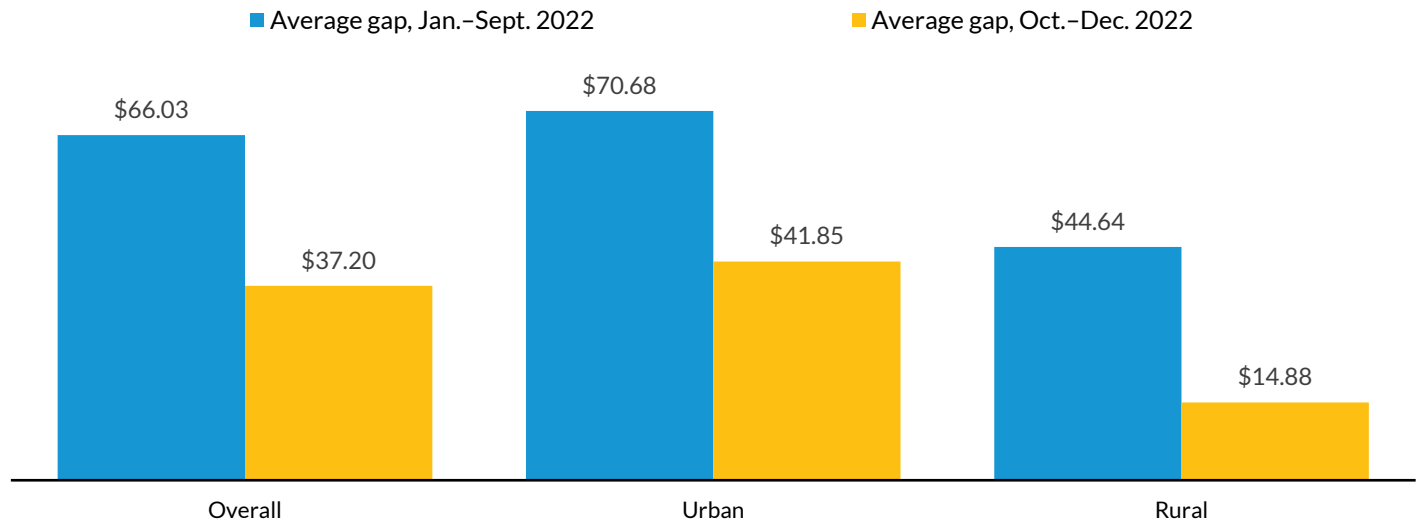
The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) modifies SNAP benefits at the start of every fiscal year through a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) in response to inflation's impacts on food prices. But was the COLA for fiscal year 2023 enough to keep pace with the increasing cost of a meal in 2022? To answer this question, we use county-level food price data from NielsenIQ to compare the cost of a modestly priced meal with the maximum SNAP benefit (excluding emergency allotments offered during the pandemic) before and after the USDA's fiscal year 2023 COLA took effect in October 2022. We find that the implementation of the 2023 COLA (which will remain in place until September 30, 2023) had some small positive effects.

- **The share of counties with a gap between SNAP benefits and meal costs decreased from 99 to 78 percent.** The number of counties with adequate benefits increased from 27 to 687.
- **Nationally, the gap between SNAP benefits and meal costs dropped from \$0.71 per meal (29 percent) to \$0.40 per meal (15 percent).** The monthly meal cost not covered by SNAP benefits dropped from \$66.03 to \$37.20 (figure 1).
- **The gap between SNAP benefits and meal costs in the five counties with the largest gaps declined from 75 to 50 percent.** The five counties with the biggest gaps were the same before and after the 2023 COLA; four of them were rural (Leelanau County, Michigan; Teton County, Idaho; and Lincoln County and Teton County, Wyoming).
- **The gap between the cost of a meal and the maximum benefit was larger in urban areas than in rural areas.** Before and after the 2023 COLA, the five urban counties with the largest gaps were New York County, New York; Marin County and San Francisco County, California; Butte County, Idaho; and Arlington County, Virginia.

FIGURE 1

## The Fiscal Year 2023 COLA Narrowed the Gap between SNAP Benefits and Meal Costs

Monthly food budget gap when comparing the maximum SNAP benefit per meal and a typical meal cost, 2022



**Source:** Authors' calculations of 2021 Census Bureau estimates of SNAP participation by county; Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap data, including NielsenIQ county-level food price data, adjusted for state and local taxes and Office of Management and Budget geographic classifications; fiscal years 2022 and 2023 US Department of Agriculture (USDA) maximum benefit allotments; and [Rural-Urban Continuum Codes](#).

**Notes:** COLA = cost-of-living adjustment. SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Monthly meal costs equal per meal cost multiplied by 3 meals a day for 31 days. Per meal cost equals weekly meal expenditures (using Current Population Survey data) divided by 21 (3 meals x 7 days a week).

### IMPLICATIONS

Despite inadequacies in benefit amounts, SNAP is the country's most effective tool for reducing food insecurity. In the Farm Bill—which is currently up for reauthorization—more than 80 percent of spending is earmarked for nutrition programs like SNAP. However, some policymakers have called for cuts to SNAP spending, and the recent debt ceiling agreement<sup>3</sup> reduced access to the program by expanding harmful work requirements and benefit time limits for many adults ages 54 and younger without dependent children, despite research suggesting these rules do not meaningfully improve employment outcomes and significantly reduce SNAP participation. For low-income households, losing SNAP could increase food insecurity, particularly as many pandemic protections expire and high food prices persist. To protect and strengthen SNAP, Congress could remove strict time limits on SNAP benefits, allow for two COLAs per year when inflation is high, and ensure SNAP benefits cover the cost of a modestly priced meal throughout the US.

An interactive map with county-level data on the gap between SNAP benefits and meal costs in 2022 is available at <https://www.urban.org/data-tools/does-snap-cover-cost-meal-your-county-2022>.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> USDA, "Summary Findings Food Price Outlook," last updated June 23, 2023, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings/>.

<sup>2</sup> See Olivia Fiol, Elaine Waxman, and Craig Gundersen, *Persistent Gaps in SNAP Benefits Adequacy across the Rural-Urban Continuum* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> *Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023*, H.R. 3745, 118th Cong. (2023).

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