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SNAP Rollbacks and Houston's Most Vulnerable Households

We examine the reliance on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits across households in the Greater Houston area, and the potential implications of the federal government shutdown. Responses to the the Hobby School SPACE City Panel reveal that 18.5% of Harris County respondents participate in SNAP. Moreover, 75.6% of SNAP recipients indicate that inflation has significantly influenced their spending decisions, particularly on food and energy. These results highlight how reductions in SNAP support could exacerbate food insecurity, increase financial strain, and adverse health outcomes, especially among already vulnerable populations in the region.

SPACE CITY PANEL

Center for Public Policy
Hobby School of Public Affairs

Key Takeaways

1. Almost one-in-four households rely on food assistance from the SNAP program: 18.5% of Harris County respondents report receiving SNAP benefits compared to 15.27% in the greater Houston area.
2. Black households are disproportionately more affected by SNAP cuts than other races: 34.6% of Black respondents report receiving SNAP benefits.
3. SNAP cuts can lead to increased food insecurity and financial hardship, especially among those who depend most on the program: women, unemployed individuals, and households with three or more children.
4. Rising costs create strain among recipients of food assistance: 75.6% of SNAP recipients feel inflation concerns have affected their spending decisions related to food and energy prices.

The ongoing federal government shutdown has disrupted funding streams for critical social programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (DeGuzman and Huff, 2025). As a result, low-income households in the Greater Houston area—many of whom already face high energy costs, housing instability, and food insecurity—are particularly vulnerable to interruptions in SNAP benefits (Briggs, 2025). Understanding how households rely on SNAP, and the potential ripple effects of federal funding delays, is essential for assessing the broader economic and health impacts of the shutdown on Houston's most at-risk populations.

SNAP is the largest federal program providing food benefits to low-income families, allowing them to afford healthy and nutritious food (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2025). The program is overseen by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) but operated by state and local agencies that distribute the benefits to eligible households based on federal guidelines. A household in Texas can qualify for SNAP based on factors like their size (number of people in the household), gross monthly income (must be at or below 130% of the federal poverty line), and household composition (those with elderly or disabled members) (Texas Health and Human Services Commission, 2025).

SNAP aims to alleviate food insecurity, that occurs when "a household can not access enough food due to a lack of money and other essential resources" (Feeding America, 2023). SNAP distribution in the greater Houston area varies by county, with Liberty County (16.53%) and Harris County (14.22%) having the highest rate of recipients in the area(U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). According to Feeding America (2023), the food insecurity rate in Harris county was 18.2% in 2023. This number matches results from the SPACE City Panel, showing that 18.5% of respondents in Harris County receive SNAP benefits.

In this brief report we analyze responses from the SPACE City Panel related to SNAP access. Our results show that on average 15.27% of the panelists in the greater Houston area receive SNAP or food stamp befits (black dashed line in Figure 1). There are also differences by demographic characteristics like race and gender, by number of children in the household, and by employment status. (Figure 1)

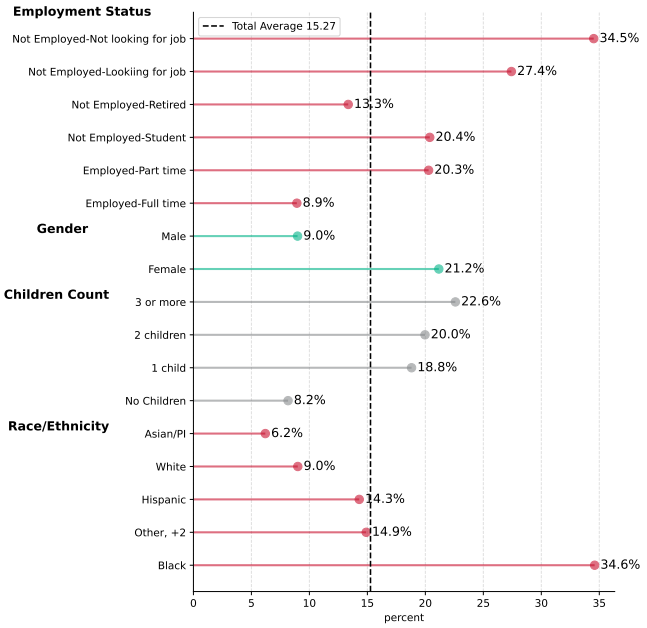

Figure 1 SNAP benefits by demographics and employment status

In terms of race/ethnicity 34.6% of Black respondents receive SNAP. In contrast, only 9% of whites rely on the program and 6.2% of Asian and Pacific Islander respondents. Hispanics (14.3%) and Other race or 2 or more races (14.9%), are closer to the average (15.27%).

Having children also contributes to differences in SNAP participation, with families that have three or more children showing the highest participation (22.6%) compared to 8.2% in households with no children. Those who identify as female respondents (21.2%) are also more likely to rely on SNAP compared to male respondents (9.0%).

SNAP appears to be critical not only for unemployed respondents but also for those that work part time. From the respondents that are not employed and not looking for a job,

34.5% receive SNAP assistance. This number contrast with 8.9% of those employed (full time) respondents.

Access to SNAP allows low income households more disposable income to defray other necessities including energy. This means that SNAP recipients are more likely to be able to cook healthy meals, refrigerate fresh food and perishables, or keep the A/C or heat on, depending on the season. In the case of Houston this is particularly relevant during extreme weather seasons during Summer and Winter. Figure 2 shows that 75.6% of SNAP recipients report that inflation concerns have affected their spending decisions related to food and energy prices a lot, compared to 47.3% of those who are not SNAP participants.

The absence of SNAP is a major concern for many families in Harris County particularly, where 18.8% said that rising costs forced them to choose between paying for energy or essentials such as food, medicine, or rent (Buttorff et al., 2025b).

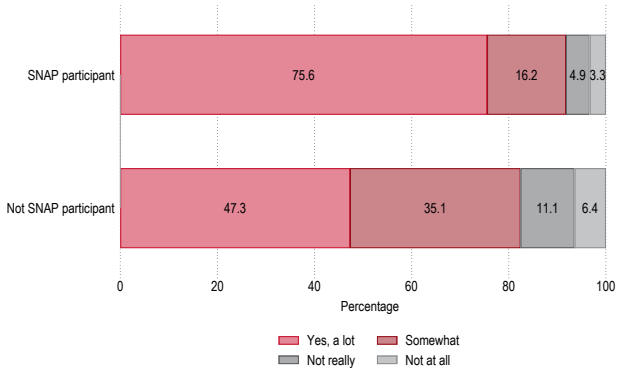

Figure 2 Have inflation concerns affected your spending decisions related to food and energy prices by SNAP participation

SNAP cuts can result in food insecurity, financial hardship, and worse health outcomes (Urban Institute, 2025). This can have a compounding in effect in the City of Houston which has the highest poverty rate a month the four largest cites in the country (20%), residents are feeling financial hardships and high cost of living (Buttorff et al., 2025a), and has one of the highest rates of medically uninsured population in the country (around 20%). Financial hardships may worsen in the absence of SNAP. Figure 3 shows that among households receiving SNAP benefits, 60.8% consider cost of living their top concern.

Rising costs of living further limit access to food and other necessities, impacting health and economic outcomes in the short and long run (Keith-Jennings et al., 2019). There is an overlap between SNAP participants and Medicaid recipients (61.5%) but a remaining 38.5% does not have government provided insurance (Figure 4).

Figure 3 What do you think is the top economic challenge facing Houston area by SNAP participation

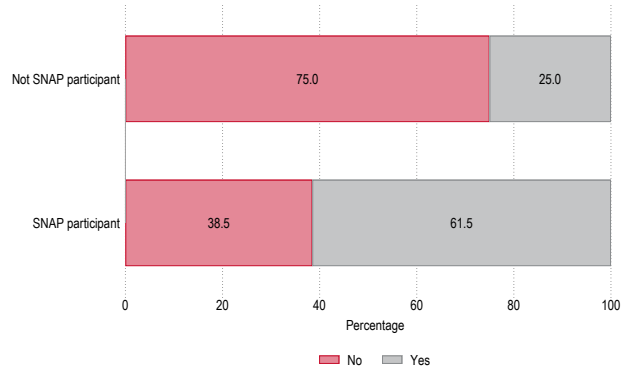

Figure 4 Does your household have government provided insurance (e.g. Medicaid)

These findings highlight that vulnerable households bear the burden from the reduction of SNAP benefits. For example, Low-income households, Black communities, and individuals without health insurance are disproportionately affected, facing heightened risks of food insecurity, financial hardship, and adverse health outcomes.

The risks faced by vulnerable households are compounded by the ongoing uncertainty at the federal level. The government shutdown has led to disruptions, funding freezes, and delay in SNAP disbursements. Families who already struggle with food, housing, and energy costs face additional hardship. For Houston—where poverty rates are high and inflation has intensified basic living expenses—the continuation of SNAP support during a shutdown is critical.

Our analyses underscore the need to safeguard and strengthen food assistance programs. Without sustained policy support, the lack of this safety net could increase hardship for those already struggling. Maintaining these benefits is not only a matter of food security but also a stabilizing force for household budgets, public health, and local economic resilience.

Methodology

Sample & data collection. *SPACE City Panel, Wave 2, Sep. 2025*; $N = 1{,}573$; mode: *online*. *MOE*. $\pm 2\%$.
Weights. *Post-stratified to age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, county*. Missing demographics imputed.
Exclusions. *Skipped* responses excluded from figures and analyses unless otherwise noted.

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