



Policy Blog: SNAP Participation Trends in Pennsylvania and in the Central PA Food Bank Service Area

by Zach Zook, VP/Director of Impact & Policy

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, is by far the largest and most important nutrition program in the United States and the most effective in reducing very low food security. SNAP helps low-income households buy groceries that suit their needs and provides nine meals for each one provided by the charitable food network.

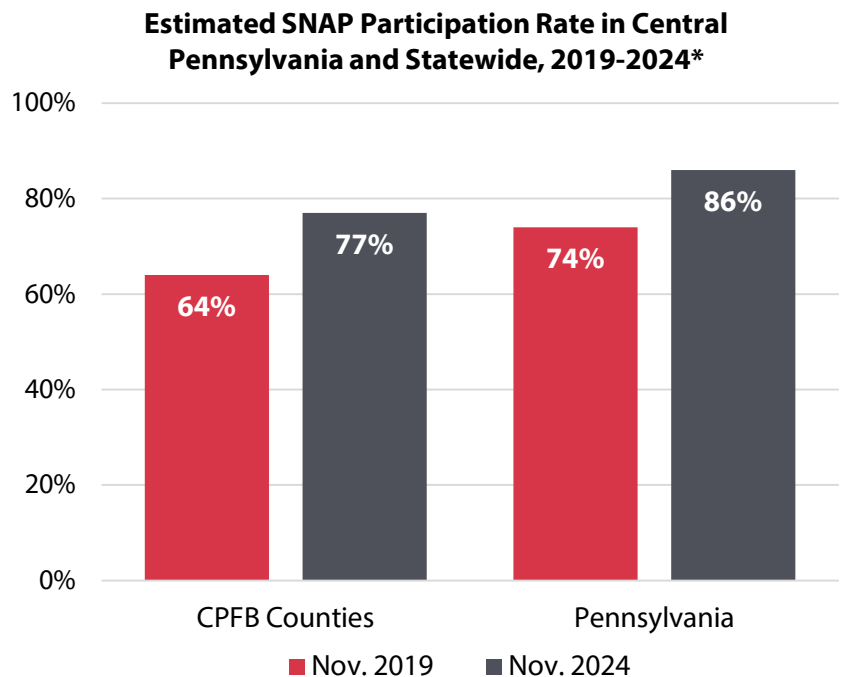
Pennsylvania is one of the highest performing states in terms of SNAP participation rates, outranking 45 other states according to a [recent USDA report](#). SNAP participation is at record highs for the Commonwealth in 2024; over two million Pennsylvanians, including more than 400,000 central Pennsylvanians, currently participate in SNAP.

However, there is still room to grow Pennsylvania's SNAP participation, especially within the CPFEB's service territory. Central Pennsylvania's SNAP participation rate lags the rest of the state by a wide margin. **At present, 120,000 Central Pennsylvanians are likely to be eligible based on their income but do not currently participate in the program. This SNAP participation gap represents a major opportunity to increase food access for neighbors in central Pennsylvania. SNAP benefits provided \$68 million in grocery support to central Pennsylvanians in November 2024, and increasing participation could activate up to an additional \$20 million in monthly food assistance.**

Research has shown SNAP effectively reduces experiences of food insecurity, including its most severe form, very low food security. Findings from neighbor surveys conducted by the CPFEB's Impact & Policy Research team at pantries across central Pennsylvania align with external research as well. Results published in the recent [Lebanon County Hunger Mapping report](#) show that for households below the poverty level, very low food security rates are 82% higher for SNAP non-participant households than for SNAP participant households.

To further understand opportunities to increase access and maximize the benefits SNAP can bring to individuals, the state, and to Central Pennsylvania, this analysis compares monthly participation data provided the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services to the most recent American Community Survey data on the number of individuals likely to be eligible for SNAP based on income. This method of analysis allows CPFEB researchers to develop an estimate of SNAP participation rates and the size and locations of participation gaps across Pennsylvania.

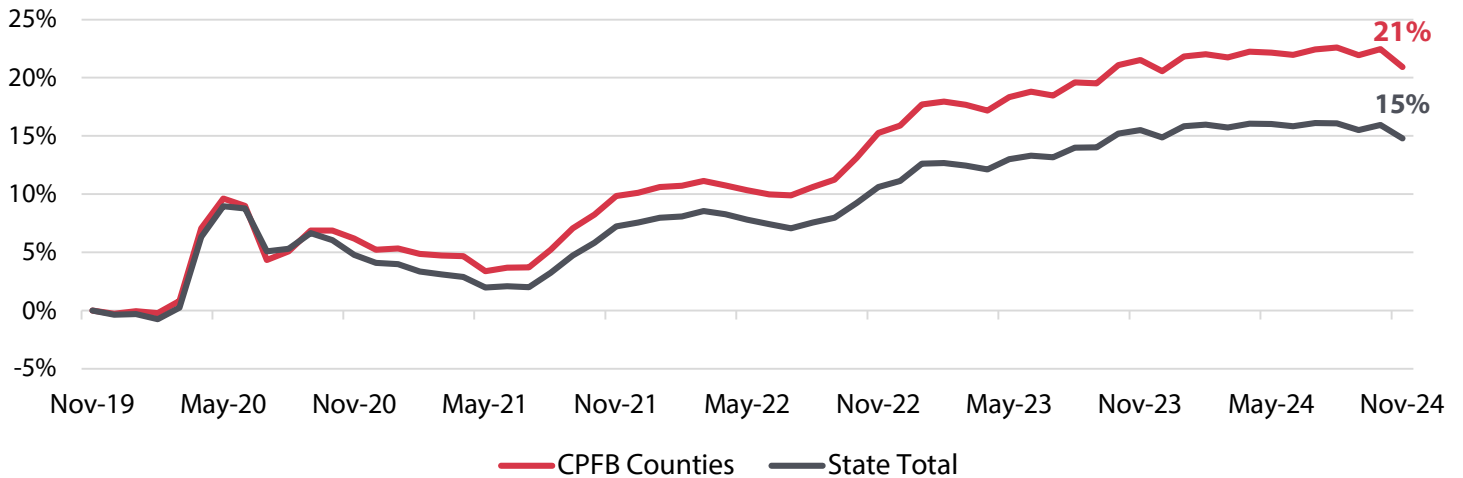
The results of this analysis for the last five years of data are shown in the graph at right. The trends over time clearly demonstrate that the 27 counties within the CPFEB's service territory consistently lag the Commonwealth's overall participation rate, even though SNAP participation has grown both regionally and statewide over time. In 2019, the SNAP participation rate was just 64% in central Pennsylvania compared to 74% statewide, for a 10-point gap. By 2024, SNAP participation had risen in both Pennsylvania and within the CPFEB's service territory with CPFEB counties now at 77% and the rest of the state at 86%.



*Maximum income of 150% FPL used to estimate likely SNAP eligible individuals

Over the last five years, SNAP participation across the 27 counties in the CPFB service territory has increased at a faster rate than in the rest of the state, indicating that central Pennsylvania is making progress in catching up to the rest of the Commonwealth in SNAP participation. Specifically, SNAP participation in central Pennsylvania has increased by 21% since November 2019 compared to 15% in Pennsylvania as a whole.

Estimated Percent Change in SNAP Participation in Central Pennsylvania and Statewide since November 2019



The evidence presented in this policy blog demonstrates that central Pennsylvania has a clear need for dedicated outreach to increase SNAP participation. CPFB is working to meet this need: it offers a SNAP application helpline, partners with healthcare providers to make referrals, and piloted a recent “SNAP Blitz” initiative in Lancaster County that trained skilled volunteers to process applications on site at food pantries. The CPFB Impact and Policy Research team continues to consider and develop creative and innovative partnerships with the CPFB SNAP team and other stakeholders to increase access and support our neighbors.

Methodology: This analysis uses 150% FPL as its maximum income rather than 200% FPL, the gross income limit for SNAP eligibility in Pennsylvania, in an effort not to overestimate SNAP participation. For a household of four, 150% FPL is \$46,800 as of 2024. SNAP eligibility is complex and involves both gross and net income tests; the maximum net income threshold after eligible deductions for expenses, such as housing and utilities, is 100% FPL. Because of the difficulty of estimating net income based on publicly available data, 150% FPL is used as the topline threshold for gross income. Individuals at or below this income level are much more likely to pass both the gross and net income eligibility criteria than are individuals with higher incomes.