

closing the SNAP gap: why young adults don't participate and what states can do about it

A brief for program managers, policy
leaders, and advocates

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the opportunity

Young adults aged 18 to 24 are significantly underrepresented among Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants. Nationally, only 1 in 5 college students is enrolled in SNAP despite much higher eligibility rates. The reasons go well beyond awareness.

Consider a composite drawn from real experiences we heard in our research: a 22-year-old former foster youth raising her 2-year-old daughter. She first applied for SNAP at 18 but was denied due to a paperwork overlap with her foster family's application, despite still experiencing food insecurity.

Years later, a community partner helped her successfully apply, though she struggled with confusing documentation requirements and an eligibility interview that left her feeling judged. She was approved, but ongoing administrative friction followed: a disconnected phone, a near-missed recertification, and eventually a move she forgot to report. With both her phone number and address outdated, the state couldn't reach her for the annual interview and terminated her benefits.

When she called for help, she was told her only option was to start over. Exhausted from work, childcare, and the memory of her first interview, she didn't.

“When they're getting those notices to recertify at the six-month mark, they kind of drop the ball because they're working, they're going to school. They're trying to get the kids situated.”

— Community partner

Through human-centered research, including interviews with young adults, community organizations, frontline caseworkers, and national subject matter experts, we identified four core dynamics that suppress SNAP participation in this age group. With federal policy changes such as H.R. 1 expected to increase administrative complexity, addressing these barriers is increasingly urgent to ensure that eligible young adults can access the food support they need.

insight 1: routine bureaucracy can feel intense and disrespectful

The years between 18 and 24 are a period of profound developmental transition. Young adults are building independence and navigating systems as adults for the first time while their cognitive and emotional development is still underway. Many young adults are highly attuned to how they are perceived and deeply desire to be treated with respect and autonomy. They're sensitive to social cues, exclusion, and perceived power imbalances, making interactions with authority figures, such as government staff or caseworkers, particularly delicate.

In the context of SNAP, this means routine interactions — a confusing verification letter, a caseworker's offhand comment, a denial for missing a document — can feel personal rather than procedural. One young student described calling to complete her eligibility interview and being questioned about how she was paying for school:

"She goes, 'Oh!' It was just unnecessary and mean. I was like, really? Do you think I'd be applying for this if I didn't need some help? Why are you judging me? This doesn't make me want to apply again, even though I need this."

— Young student

Caseworkers aren't trying to be hurtful; they're operating within large, constrained systems that can create experiences that feel impersonal or judgmental to young adults.

Community partners who work with this population see the pattern. When a denial arrives, young adults often don't read the fine print to understand what went wrong:

"Once they get denied, they feel like it's the end of the world. Sometimes it's something very basic, like you failed to submit your Social Security card, which is very easy to do. The way they react is they take it a lot harder than what it really is."

— Community partner

Young adults also tend to prioritize immediate outcomes over delayed rewards. When the path to benefits is full of friction, eligible young adults disengage after minor setbacks, even when doing so leaves them without critical food support.

What this means for practitioners:

Trusted intermediaries can help reframe procedural feedback as fixable steps rather than final decisions. Redesigned communications that build confidence, clarify next steps, and provide human support can also help applicants fix minor issues. The goal is to keep young adults in the process when the system's friction would otherwise push them out.

insight 2: young adult life doesn't fit SNAP's categories

SNAP applications are built around assumptions about households, income, and housing that often don't match the realities of young adult life. Many young adults live with roommates, in dorms, or in informal arrangements where costs are split unevenly and situations change frequently. For those young adults, SNAP's "household unit" question becomes genuinely confusing.

In addition, work for young adults is often gig-based, part-time, or seasonal, which can make income documentation difficult. Frequent changes in income can cause gaps in eligibility even when someone's overall financial need is consistent.

"The job I was working at the time kind of gave me variable hours sometimes. I think I had to wait until I could show that I was working consistently. They needed more than one week's worth of proof where I was meeting the requirement."

— Young parent

College students face an additional layer of complexity. Federal rules generally exclude students enrolled at least half-time unless they meet specific exemptions. These criteria are often poorly understood by students and campus staff alike. To meet SNAP requirements, students must work more hours, but working while in college is associated with a roughly 20% lower graduation rate compared to peers who work fewer hours.

"When I transitioned to being a student, it wasn't fine. That actually was probably the most stressful aspect of it, trying to figure out how I can still have benefits and be a student, because they don't tell you."

— Young student

Young parents face compounding burdens. Every child adds another layer of documentation. Parents must find and submit their children's birth certificates, Social Security cards, immunization records, and childcare expenses on top of managing school, work, and caregiving.

Frequent moves and disconnected phone numbers mean young adults routinely miss mailed notices, leading to procedural denials that have nothing to do with actual eligibility.

"As soon as it's a parent, it's not just their paperwork. It's their kids' birth certificate, their kids' Social Security, their kids' school record or immunization, their child support records."

— Community partner

What this means for practitioners:

Navigation support is essential. States, community partners, and advocacy groups should collaborate to make peer navigators available to help young adults interpret household rules, document irregular income, and maintain contact with agencies through periods of instability.

insight 3: digital tools don't meet young adult expectations

Young adults manage banking, shopping, and job applications through fast, mobile-first platforms. They expect something similar from government services.

“I feel like doing things online is kind of self-intuitive. But in the case of government websites, that’s just not the case. I would like for them to let me know, ‘hey, yep, we got it, processing it right here, right now.’ The process should take as long as a credit check.”

— Young adult

Instead, they encounter slow portals, login difficulties, and agencies that rely on mailed correspondence for critical updates. Even states with strong online platforms often lack two-way communication. Applicants can submit forms digitally but can’t confirm appointments, ask questions, or get status updates through the same channel.

Community partners see this disconnect up close. Young adults who are fluent on social media can be completely lost on a state benefits portal:

“This new generation definitely knows a lot about social media and navigating the web. But when it comes to state benefit portals, it’s like they have no knowledge, and it’s kind of shocking, honestly.”

— Community partner

This mismatch in skills and expectations contributes to missed renewals, lost eligibility, and procedural churn among people who are otherwise able to manage their lives using digital services.

What this means for practitioners:

Prioritize two-way text communication, mobile-optimized interfaces, and real-time status tracking. Embed interactive guidance, such as short explainer videos, scenario-based FAQs, and step-by-step roadmaps, directly in the platform. Build in pathways to live human help through chat, navigator referrals, or deadline alerts routed to community partners.

insight 4: second-hand knowledge shapes attitudes toward SNAP

Many young adults' perceptions of SNAP are powerfully shaped by prior experience or a total lack of exposure to the program. Those who grew up around benefits may carry memories of stigma and red tape that make them wary of applying.

"I heard about SNAP benefits through my brother, and he was talking just about how his benefits were cut off and he wasn't going to go reapply because it was taking too long for the communication and all of that."

— Young working student

Meanwhile, many young adults have no exposure to SNAP at all. Because outreach has traditionally focused on families with children, single individuals and students often don't realize they could qualify.

"I thought it was harder to get the benefits as a single person. And me, being a student, played a factor into it. I feel like a lot of the time, it's marketed as if families are the government's priority in getting assistance and not people without kids."

— Young student

And when young adults go looking for information, they often come up empty:

"I never had the information available to me or anyone in school telling me or family members. I haven't seen anything online either, on TV or anything."

— Young student

In a media environment that shapes what feels "normal," both silence and misrepresentation discourage participation in SNAP.

What this means for practitioners:

Outreach must be proactive and normalized, not framed as crisis-based assistance. Meet young adults on the platforms they already use. Embed SNAP screening into moments they already interact with: financial aid applications, Medicaid enrollment, and workforce program intake. Connect eligible individuals to benefits before food insecurity becomes acute.

recommendations for state and local action

These insights point to practical strategies that states and communities can begin implementing, many through administrative and operational changes rather than legislation.

proactive, cross-program outreach

Use data from financial aid systems, Medicaid, and workforce programs to identify likely-eligible young adults and reach them through trusted channels. Establish data-sharing agreements with clear consent processes and security standards. Pilot at a few sites, track results, and scale what works.

community-based navigation infrastructure

Recruit peer navigators with lived SNAP experience and embed them in colleges, workforce programs, libraries, and community centers. Authorize youth-serving organizations to serve as official mailing addresses for SNAP correspondence. Provide flexible touchpoints — in-person, phone, text, and secure messaging — so support stays available as young adults' circumstances shift.

modern digital tools

Move from one-way notifications to two-way text interactions. Build in-platform guidance, such as interactive roadmaps, peer-created content, and scenario-based FAQs, that reduce cognitive load. Monitor engagement data to refine features over time.

redesigned communications

Rewrite denial and verification letters to clearly distinguish full ineligibility from correctable issues. Use plain language, checklists, and visual cues to show what's missing and what to do next. Pair written notices with automated reminders and navigator follow-up so a single missed step doesn't become a permanent loss of benefits.

conclusion

Young adults deserve benefit systems that meet them where they are developmentally, digitally, and relationally. The barriers they face are real but not insurmountable. By embedding trusted navigation support into outreach, digital systems, and communications, states can reduce procedural churn and ensure that administrative complexity doesn't become an avoidable loss of benefits for the people who need them most.

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