

Home &gt; News

# 1 in 6 Rhode Islanders uses food stamps program

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PROVIDENCE — More than five years after the end of the recession, roughly one in six Rhode Islanders relies on food stamps to put food on the table.

According to the state Department of Human Services, 176,107 Rhode Islanders in December relied on the federal program, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

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Although the number of users fell to a 20-month low last year, more Rhode Islanders rely on food stamps now than before the recession, a sign that the state's economy has yet to rebound for some.

"Many people are still struggling," said Kathleen Gorman, director of the Feinstein Center for a Hunger Free America at the University of Rhode Island. Many are unemployed and many more are working for low wages, she said.

The number of individuals relying on SNAP peaked at 180,940 in the first quarter of 2013. Since then, the number of users has drifted downward — about a 3-percent decline from the peak.

"There's still an enormous need in Rhode Island, but the need does seem to be lessening" and could be leveling off, said Stephanie Geller, a policy analyst at Rhode Island Kids Count.

Providence, Pawtucket, Woonsocket, Cranston and Warwick topped the list for cities with the most SNAP participants by household. The average monthly SNAP benefit in December was \$133.

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## Food subsidy

Those using the federal food stamp program, SNAP, declined last year. Data reflects the number of individual SNAP users in December.

Year	Users
2007	80,138
2008	92,395
2009	128,766
2010	155,184
2011	170,547
2012	179,127
2013	179,336
2014	176,107

Source: R.I. Dept. of Human Services

The increase in SNAP use in the last decade has been dramatic. In December 2007, 80,138 people relied on the program to get by. That number nearly doubled by 2010.

The demand will likely continue, Gorman said. Rhode Island's unemployment rate remains one of the highest in the nation. "We continue to see dozens of people each week who we assist with applications," said Gorman, who oversees a SNAP outreach program.

Meanwhile, state workers are struggling with a backlog of cases, she said. "Participation goes up when the economy is bad, and the numbers go down when the economy improves."

In addition to other eligibility criteria, individuals and households must meet income tests to qualify. In Rhode Island, a family of four may qualify for benefits if the family's household income is less than \$1,988 a month, after certain deductions.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has not yet released national SNAP figures for November and December. In October, 46.6 million Americans received assistance from the federal program.

Two recent reports highlight the struggle some Rhode Islanders face.

On Wednesday, the Census Bureau said one in five children in the U.S. received food stamp assistance in 2014.

Last week, Rhode Island Kids Count said more than one in five children in Rhode Island lived in poverty in 2013.

Studies show that families who get SNAP help are healthier, Geller said. "It's an important program."

The state must do a better job, advocates say.

The state Department of Human Services needs to hire more case workers so "everyone receives the help they deserve and qualify for," Gorman said. Federal requirements and standards "are not being met due to shortages in staffing," she said.