

Updated February 26, 2018

SNAP Helps Millions of African Americans

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the nation’s most important anti-hunger program. SNAP lifts millions of low-income African Americans¹ out of poverty and helps them afford an adequate diet.

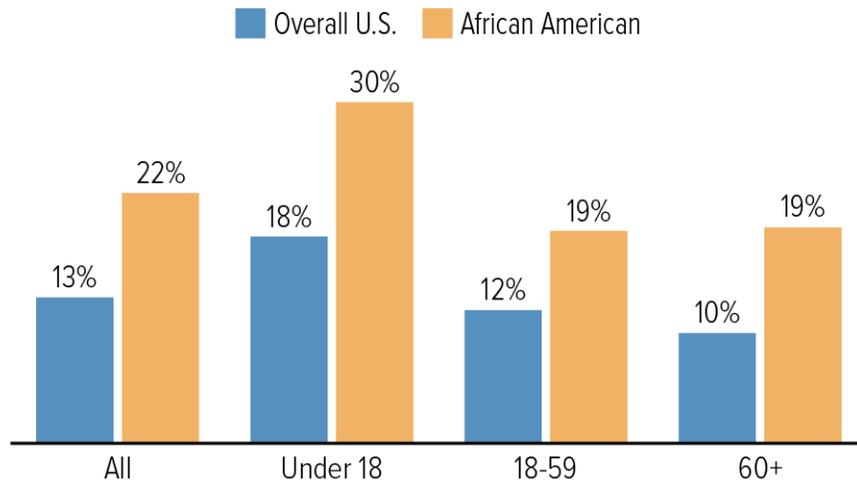
Poverty and Food Insecurity Are Higher Among African Americans

African Americans on average have the lowest household income among all racial/ethnic groups, except Native Americans. The poverty rate among African Americans is almost two times greater than that of the general U.S. population, and the disparity is even larger for African American children. (See Figure 1.)

FIGURE 1

African Americans Have Higher Poverty Rates Than Nation as a Whole

Poverty rates by age and race in 2016



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2017 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

The most recent Census data show that:²

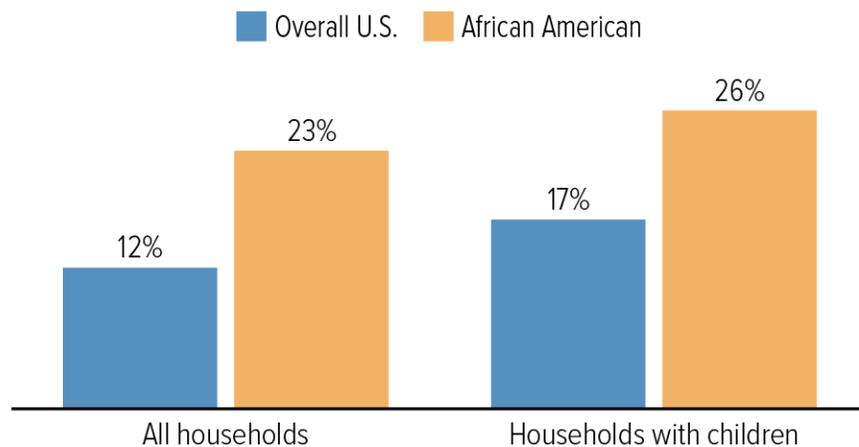
- About 1 in 5 African Americans (22 percent) live below the poverty line, compared with 1 in 8 (13 percent) in the general population.
- About 1 in 3 (30 percent) African American children live below the poverty line, compared with 1 in 6 (18 percent) U.S. children.
- About 1 in 5 (19 percent) African Americans aged 18-59 years live below the poverty line, compared with 1 in 9 (12 percent) among all such adults.
- About 1 in 5 (19 percent) African Americans aged 60 years and over live below the poverty line, compared with 1 in 10 (10 percent) among all such older adults.

African American households are also more likely to experience food insecurity, compared with all U.S. households. (See Figure 2.) The U.S. Agriculture Department (USDA) classifies households that lack consistent access to nutritious food at some point during the year because of limited resources as “food insecure.”

FIGURE 2

African American Households Have Higher Food Insecurity Than Nation as a Whole

Percentage of households that lacked access to adequate food at some point in the year, by race, in 2016



Source: Alisha Coleman-Jensen et al., “Household Food Security in the United States in 2016, Statistical Supplement,” USDA, September 2017

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The most recent USDA report shows that:³

- About 1 in 4 (23 percent) African American households were food insecure in 2016, compared with 1 in 8 (12 percent) for all U.S. households.

- About 1 in 4 (26 percent) African American households with children were food insecure in 2016, compared with 1 in 6 (17 percent) for all U.S. households with children.

How SNAP Responds

SNAP is a powerful anti-poverty program for African Americans. In a typical month of 2016, SNAP helped about 13 million African Americans put sufficient food on the table.⁴ Its benefits lifted about 2.1 million African Americans, including 1 million children, above the poverty line in 2015. SNAP also kept 1.2 million African Americans out of deep poverty (above half of the poverty line) that year.⁵ (See Figure 3.)

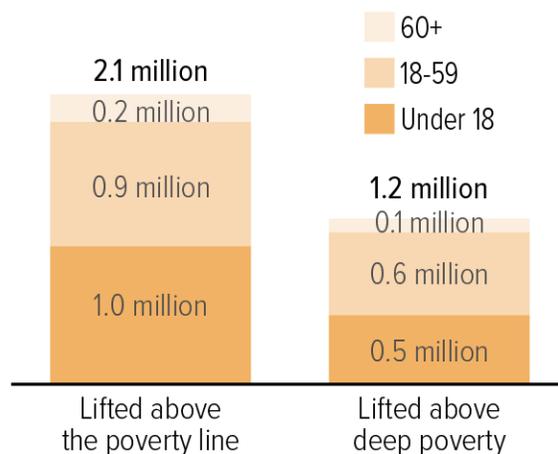
Approximately \$20 billion in SNAP benefits — about 30 percent of the total — went to African American households in fiscal year 2016.⁶

- On average, African American households that participate in SNAP receive \$260 in SNAP each month.
- A typical participating African American family of three has an average monthly income of \$940, or 56 percent of the poverty line. When their \$390 SNAP benefit — the average for a family of three — is added to their cash income, total monthly income rises by 29 percent, to \$1,330.

FIGURE 3

SNAP Lifted Millions of African Americans Out of Poverty and “Deep Poverty” in 2015

By age



Note: “Deep poverty” is defined as having income below half of the poverty line. Figures use the federal government’s Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM). Unlike the Census Bureau’s official poverty measure, the SPM counts the effect of non-cash government benefits and tax credits.

Source: CBPP analysis of Census Bureau data from the March Current Population Survey; corrections for underreported benefits from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Urban Institute TRIM model

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¹ Figures for people lifted out of poverty by SNAP and for household food insecurity refer to people identifying themselves as African American alone, non-Hispanic. For all other figures in this fact sheet, African American refers to African American alone or in combination with one or more other races and includes African Americans with Hispanic origin.

² U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2017 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

³ Alisha Coleman-Jensen *et al.*, “Household Food Security in the United States in 2016, Statistical Supplement,” USDA, September 2017, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84973/err-237.pdf>.

⁴ The source for these data is the U.S. Agriculture Department’s fiscal year 2016 SNAP Households Characteristic data. Reporting of race/ethnicity is voluntary and is missing for 15.5 percent of SNAP participants. Some 11.5 million SNAP participants self-identified or were coded by an eligibility worker as “African American.” They represented about 26 percent of all SNAP participants. The cases with missing race/ethnicity information are concentrated in 23 states. For example, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington each were missing the data for more than two-thirds of SNAP individuals. As a result, we relied on another data source, the March 2017 Current Population Survey, to estimate that another 1 million African Americans, 2-3 percent of all SNAP participants, should have been included as African American.

⁵ CBPP analysis of Census Bureau data from the March Current Population Survey; corrections for underreported benefits from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Urban Institute TRIM model.

⁶ An African American household is defined as a household with at least one African American SNAP participant. About \$19 billion, 28 percent of total SNAP benefits, was issued to African American households based on the U.S. Agriculture Department's fiscal year 2016 SNAP Households Characteristic data. Due to missing race/ethnicity data discussed above, we estimate that an additional \$1 billion was issued to African American households that did not report race/ethnicity data.