

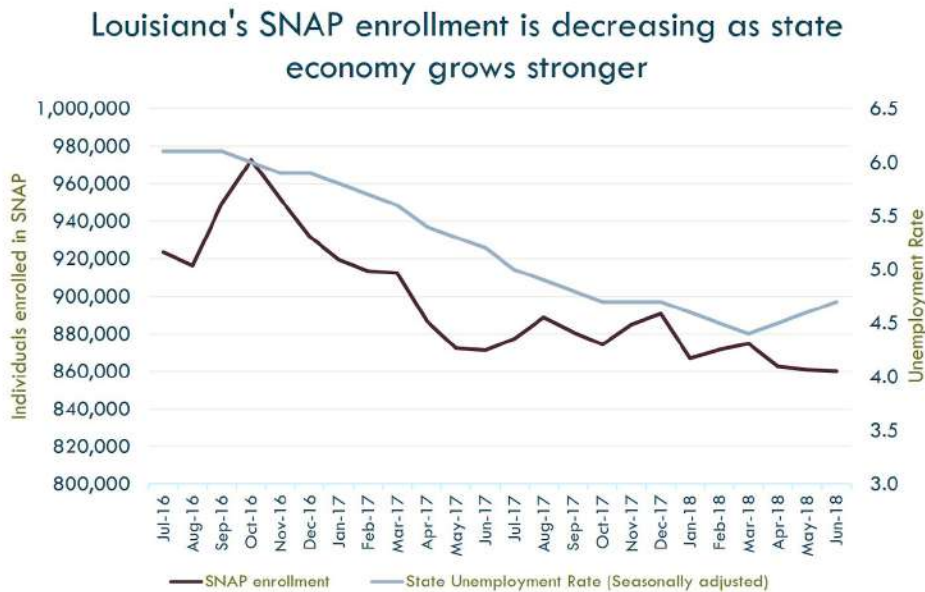


Fewer people need food stamps each month, as Louisiana’s economy strengthens

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has a proven track record of helping families weather times of financial hardship, but the program’s effectiveness in fighting hunger and poverty is threatened by harmful changes proposed in the House version of the federal farm bill. Sweeping, punitive work requirements are the centerpiece of the House’s SNAP proposals. Proponents claim the changes will help more Louisiana families become financially secure, when in fact the opposite is true.

The reality is that many work-capable adults who receive SNAP *are* working, but often with volatile hours and low pay. A [recent analysis](#) by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) showed that many work in the restaurant and retail industries and are prone to losing their job or having their hours cut when the tourist season ends or the holiday shopping season subsides. As the economy strengthens, more of these work-capable adults are able to find better-paying, more stable work and no longer qualify for SNAP.

That’s the case in Louisiana, where the declining unemployment rate is closely tied to a decline in SNAP participation. As more Louisiana families get back to work or find better jobs, they earn enough to provide food for their families without SNAP. The number of Louisianans receiving SNAP decreased by more than 63,000 people between June 2016 and June 2018. The state’s unemployment rate also decreased from 6.1 percent of 4.7 percent during that time period. That means SNAP is working as the safety net it was designed to be, keeping families from severe hunger and destitution when times are tough and helping them stay healthy enough to get back on their feet when times are better.



Source: Department of Children and Family Services; Bureau of Labor Statistics

That concept is lost on supporters of work requirements included in the the House farm bill, which would take food assistance away from families at the time they need them most - a period of unemployment or job transition. Under the House proposal, if a parent saw their work hours reduced from 25 hours per week to 18 hours per week, they would lose their eligibility for SNAP and could be "locked out" of the program for up to three years. While the children would remain eligible, the total amount of food assistance the family receives would be substantially reduced, forcing a parent to spread their limited food budget even more thinly. Proponents of the harsh changes don't seem to be fazed by this reality - that Louisiana's already shamefully high [child food insecurity rate](#) (24.1%) would be made worse by the farm bill proposals they support.

The opponents of federal food assistance include Sen. John Kennedy, who recently, on the Senate floor, criticized Gov. John Bel Edwards' 2016 [executive order](#) related to adults without dependents who receive SNAP, arguing that the Governor's order doesn't go far enough in requiring SNAP recipients to work. The executive order requires them to report to Louisiana's Business and Career Solutions Centers for help with job training and other work-related needs in order to keep their food assistance. Most parishes have just one of these centers, which creates a challenge for people who don't have a reliable vehicle and live in one of the many areas of the state without public transportation. It also creates challenges for individuals with mobility or mental health issues who cannot prove their exemption to state officials over the phone. The requirements, in other words, have erected barriers to food assistance and thousands have lost critical food support as a result.

But that's not enough for Sen. Kennedy and others in Congress who favor a strict 20-hour per week work requirement that would pose great challenges to workers in industries with irregular hours or seasonal positions. CBPP estimates that as many as [192,000 low-income Louisianans](#) would be impacted by the proposed changes - many of whom are parents who are already struggling everyday to put food on the table for their children.

These families are not struggling because they choose not to work, or don't work hard enough. They are falling behind because low-wage work does not provide them with enough economic stability to care for their families. Regrettably, an understanding of the lives of these Louisianans — and their true circumstances — is nearly absent from the current debate.

**By Jeanie Donovan
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