

2026 KIDS COUNT® REPORT: Child Nutrition & Hunger in Kansas



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For more information about the national 2026 KIDS COUNT® Data Book, go to aecf.org/resources/2026-kids-count-data-book. Visit the Data Center for Kansas-specific numbers at datacenter.aecf.org/locations.



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2026 KIDS COUNT® REPORT:

Child Nutrition and Hunger in Kansas

In homes across Kansas, too many children go to bed hungry. Child food insecurity isn't just about empty plates; it's about kids lacking the nutrition needed to keep them learning, growing, and thriving. Unfortunately, as the data show throughout this report, that's out of reach for thousands of Kansas families.

No child should go hungry, especially in the Breadbasket of the World. This report examines that challenge in our state – from children's access to food to the systems that can fill in the gap when families face tough times – and what we can do about it.

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1 IN 5 KANSAS KIDS ARE FOOD INSECURE¹

In 2024 (the most current year available), 1 in 5 children (20.9%) in Kansas experienced food insecurity. This means more than 143,000 Kansas kids went hungry and didn't know where their next meal might come from. The food insecurity rate hasn't been this high in more than a decade, when the rate was 21.3%.

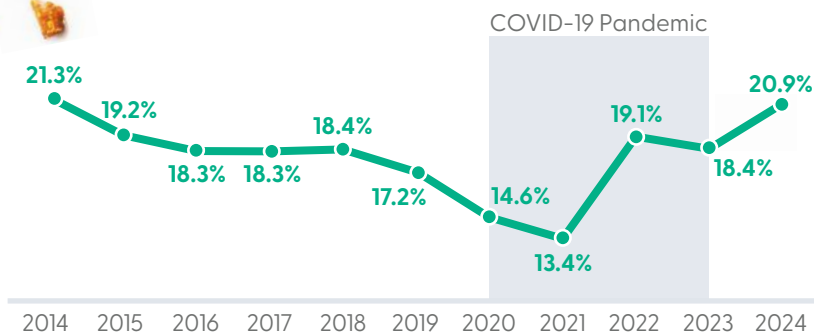
CHILD FOOD INSECURITY IN KANSAS IS INCREASING¹

While urban food insecurity is often more visible due to larger populations, addressing food insecurity remains an equally challenging battle in rural communities. Rural counties with significant numbers of children experiencing food insecurity include Crawford (29.2%), Decatur (28.8%), and Elk (28.2%).

Urban counties with a high level of child food insecurity include Geary (33.1%), Wyandotte (26.0%), and Riley (24.5%). For food-insecure Kansans in non-metropolitan areas, accessing food is often more limited than it is for people in metropolitan areas (urban) due to fewer full-service grocery stores.

No matter the type of community a struggling family lives in, they have similar challenges to afford enough food due to their income. Nearly 60% of food-insecure children in 2024 lived in households with incomes below 185% of the federal poverty line (FPL). For reference, in 2024, 185% FPL for a family of four was just \$57,720 a year.²

FOOD INSECURITY IN KANSAS FOR KIDS UNDER 18¹

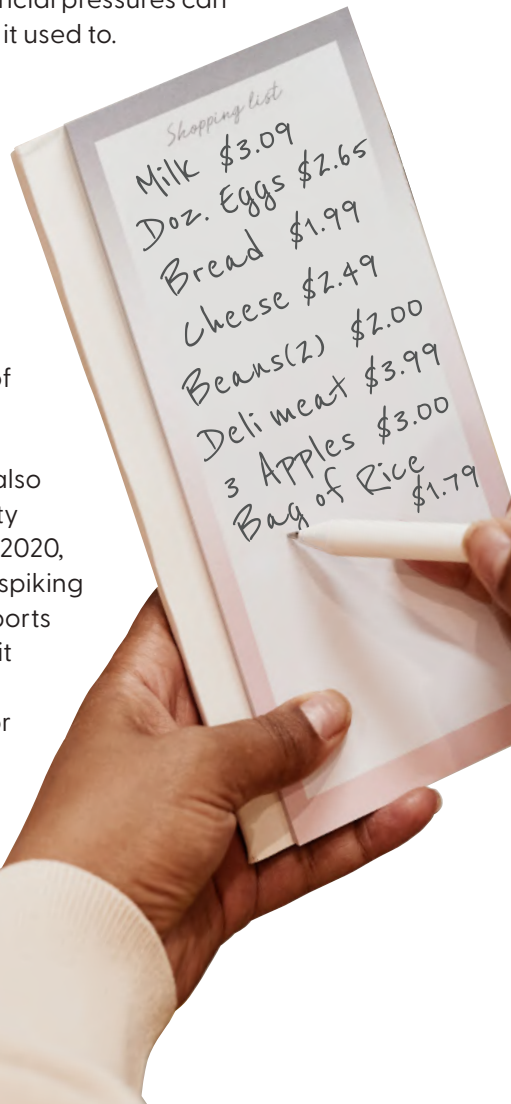


It's also getting more difficult for struggling families to stretch their budgets at the grocery store like they may have been able to even one year ago. From July 2025 to July 2026, food prices increased in the Midwest by 2.8%.³ Rising food costs of any magnitude make accessibility to food more difficult for households already experiencing an inability to purchase all the groceries they need to keep their family fed.

Feeding America looks at national survey data to find how much more money a food-insecure person would need to afford enough food for every meal. In Kansas, someone experiencing food insecurity needs \$21.77 more each week to be food secure.¹ But that number isn't the same for everyone. A bigger household needs more money to cover the gap. Rising food prices and other financial pressures can also make that \$21.77 stretch less than it used to.

While families have experienced rising food costs over the past several years due to the pandemic, there were more family supports available during early COVID years compared to today, including cost-free school meals, easier-to-access food assistance, and the enhanced federal child tax credit that put a bit of extra cash in families' wallets.

So even though food expenses were also climbing five years ago, food insecurity among Kansas children decreased in 2020, and further decreased in 2021 before spiking nearly 6 points in 2022.¹ As family supports continue to be cut and underfunded, it is up to policymakers to pass policies that alleviate food insecurity issues for children and families.



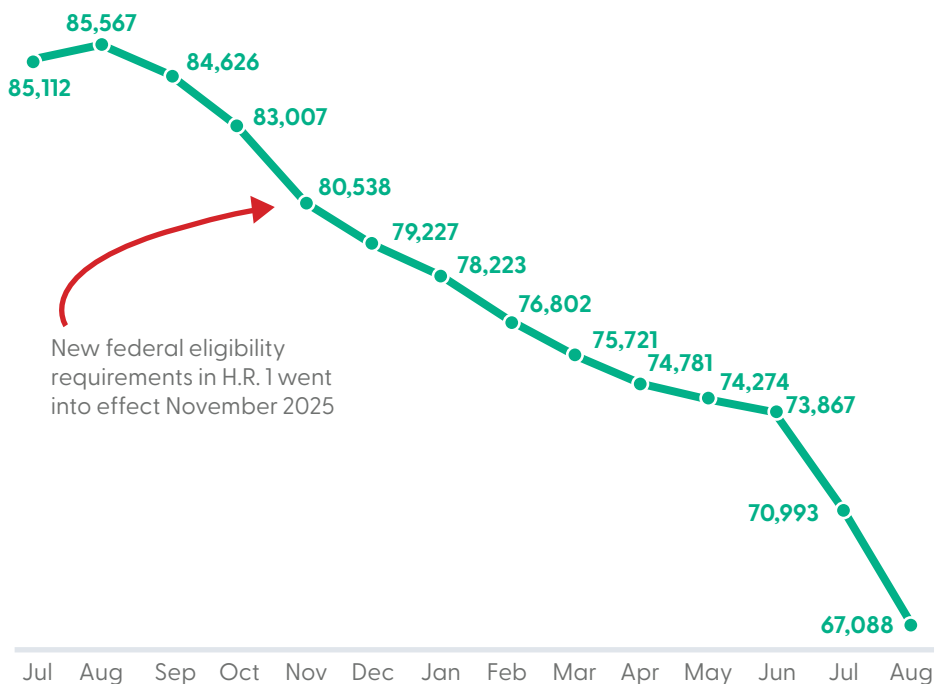
FEDERAL IMPACTS ON KANSAS KIDS ENROLLED IN SNAP

In July 2025, Congress passed H.R. 1, otherwise known as the “One Big, Beautiful Bill Act.” This federal legislation is estimated to cut more than \$187 billion from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) over the first 10 years of implementation.⁴

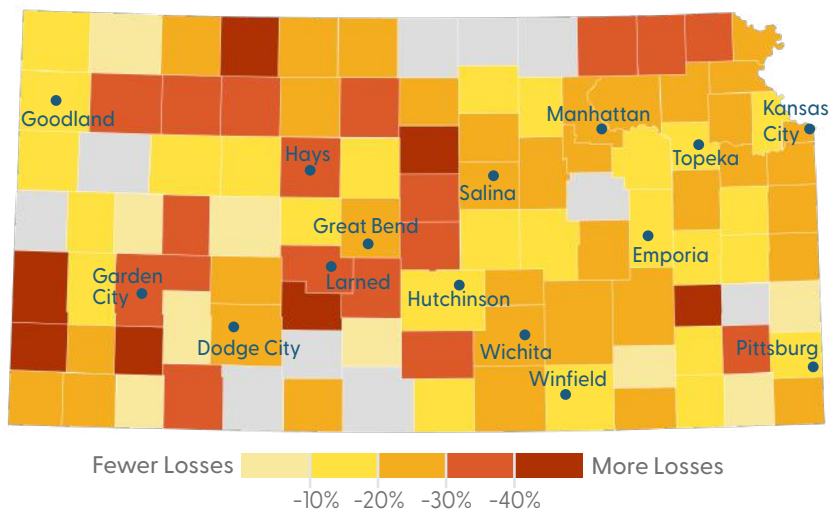
These federal budget cuts are caused by cost shifts to the state, as well as new eligibility requirements that were projected to affect millions of individuals across the country struggle to maintain program eligibility.⁵

Kansas is already seeing a sharp decline in the number of people enrolled in SNAP because of new requirements under H.R. 1. Between July 2025 and August 2026, there were 18,000 fewer Kansas kids enrolled in SNAP.⁶

MONTHLY NUMBER OF KANSAS CHILDREN ENROLLED IN SNAP (JULY 2025-AUGUST 2026)⁶



PERCENTAGE CHANGE AMONG KANSAS CHILDREN ENROLLED IN SNAP (JULY 2025–AUGUST 2026)⁷



Note: **Gray** counties stayed the same or experienced an increase in enrollment.

Nearly 1 out of 5 Kansas children (21%) using SNAP a year ago no longer have access to grocery assistance.⁶ Similarly, Kansas adults enrolled in SNAP decreased by about 23,000 (23%) from July 2025 to August 2026.⁶ Although the rate of adults losing SNAP is slightly higher than children, the decline in children receiving SNAP is especially concerning because children have no control over their families' financial circumstances or how to plan where their next meal will come from. Behind these numbers are Kansas children's lives and their families who likely have fewer resources to put food on the table.

The trend of declining SNAP enrollment is not over – and may reach an even worse crisis point in the coming year. SNAP benefits have always been fully funded by the federal government. But under H.R. 1, Kansas will have to pay a portion of these benefits starting October 2027 if the state has a payment error rate above 6% in either its Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2025 or FFY 2026 rate, whichever is lower.

If the Kansas Legislature can't (or won't) pay the tens of millions of dollars to keep SNAP running in the state, more than 146,000 Kansans – including nearly 67,000 kids – are at risk of losing all SNAP benefits if the state cannot keep the program without federal dollars.⁶ This will push these families into further instability and uncertainty about how to keep their families fed.



NUTRITIOUS FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

When a family experiencing food insecurity goes to the grocery store, every dollar must be carefully budgeted, with families often having to sacrifice highly nutritious foods (like fresh fruits and vegetables) for cheaper meals that might be more calorie dense.

To help increase the intake of healthy produce, schools can step in to provide fruits and vegetables to students with the help of federal dollars. Since 2008, the federal Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) has offered free fresh produce as snacks to students in elementary schools (public and private) with a high rate of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. It's important to note that this program provides additional nutrition outside of breakfast and lunch.

Research shows exposure to fruits and vegetables to children at a younger age could help teach children to eat healthier.⁸ The U.S. Department of Agriculture has found just that, as students provided with fresh produce through the program will continue eating more fruits and vegetables than students who don't participate.⁹ This program has also been seen as a catalyst for combating childhood and teen obesity.

In the 2025-2026 Kansas school year, 167 schools participated in FFVP, bringing about \$3.6 million worth of fresh produce directly to Kansas kids.¹⁰



INSTANT NOODLES

\$0.69/Package



STRAWBERRIES

\$3.49/1LB

Costs based on full prices found at local grocery store as of Aug. 31, 2026.



1 IN 2 KANSAS STUDENTS RECEIVE FREE AND REDUCED-PRICE MEALS (2025-2026)¹¹

The Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program benefited around 232,031 Kansas kids in the 2025-2026 school year, providing nearly half of Kansas accredited school students with healthy and accessible meals.

Of these 232,031 children, 197,612 were eligible for free meals, while 34,419 were approved for reduced-price meals.¹¹



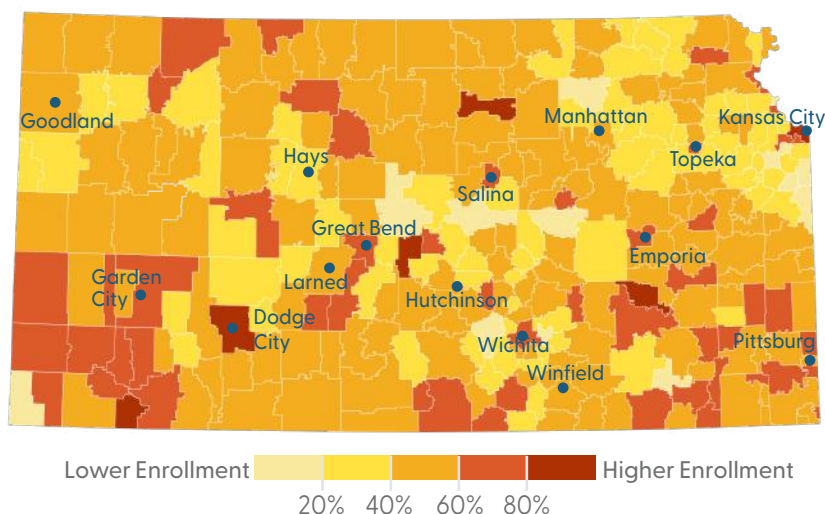
SCHOOL MEALS ARE A STEADY SOURCE OF NUTRITION FOR KIDS

For children to successfully learn in school, they must have access to nutritious meals. In 1946, the National School Lunch Act established that schools participating in the National School Lunch Program could provide free or reduced-cost meals to eligible students who were unable to pay.

For 80 years, the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program has given struggling students the ability to learn on a full stomach, resulting in better focus as they participate in class. The eligibility threshold to receive free school meals is up to 130% FPL, while the threshold for reduced-price meals is between 130%-185% FPL. In 2026 for a family of four, 130% FPL is \$42,900 and 185% FPL is \$61,050.¹² In Kansas, kids enrolled in SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or income-based Medicaid are automatically enrolled to receive free meals, unless the household declines. Foster children are also eligible for free meals.

Based on school year 2025-2026 data, 125 out of 285 public school districts have 50% or more of their students approved for free and reduced-price lunches.¹¹ School districts with the highest number of students approved for free or reduced-price meals included Hamilton (100%), Chase-Raymond (86.5%), Liberal (85.8%), Southern Cloud (85.0%), Dodge City (83.1%), and Kansas City (81.7%).

PERCENTAGE OF KIDS ENROLLED IN FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE LUNCH BY SCHOOL DISTRICT (2025-2026 SCHOOL YEAR)¹¹



EXTRA FEDERAL DOLLARS TARGETING THE HUNGRIEST SCHOOLS

Schools have an additional option to feed hungry students: the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). This program was created by Congress in 2010 to increase students' access to free school meals and reduce paperwork burdens on schools and families.

CEP is available to schools with a high percentage of students who are eligible for free lunch. If an eligible school opts into the program, the school will receive federal dollars to cover free meals for all students, regardless if a student has previously been deemed eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

With CEP, eligible schools do not need to collect or process household applications, reducing economic strain because schools spend less on meal costs and have lower administrative burden.¹³

Since students benefiting from CEP have free access to breakfast and lunch options, they are shown to better engage with their academics¹⁴ and are more likely to have good school attendance.¹⁵ Additionally, students are less likely to experience school meal stigma than at non-CEP schools because the absence of school meal debt means there is less of a perceived “otherness” from parents and students. At home, parents' monthly purchases on grocery spending also decrease when the district closest to them is participating in CEP.¹⁶

In Kansas, there are 835 total private and public schools that are CEP eligible.¹⁷ There were only 192 schools in the 2025-2026 school year that chose to utilize CEP. CEP implementation at these schools benefited 60,637 students.¹⁷

ONLY 1 IN 5 CEP-ELIGIBLE SCHOOLS OPTED IN DURING THE 2025-2026 SCHOOL YEAR¹⁷



THOUSANDS MORE KANSAS KIDS COULD HAVE BENEFITTED FROM CEP (2025–2026 SCHOOL YEAR)¹⁷

 = 10,000 Students

60,637 Students Received Meals through CEP



209,271 More Students Could Have Received Meals through CEP



If all eligible schools participated in CEP, an estimated 269,908 Kansas kids would receive free meals.¹⁷ This would be a huge financial benefit for many families, especially those who make just barely too much to qualify for free or reduced-price meals. For example, a family of four with a household income of \$62,000 per year and has elementary two kids in the Shawnee Mission School District would save \$1,637 on breakfast and lunch over the course of an 186-day school year.¹⁸ That's a significant amount of money that can be spent on food at home and other everyday necessities.

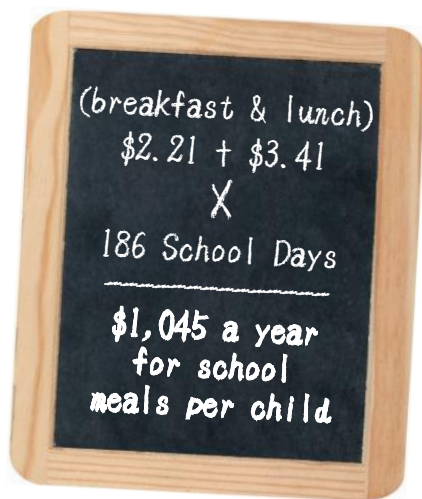
Unfortunately, with the past year seeing 18,000 fewer Kansas kids enrolled in SNAP (which is one of the programs used to measure CEP eligibility) since July 2025,⁶ some schools may be at risk of losing their CEP eligibility if the rate of eligible children drops significantly.¹⁹

Despite the benefits that CEP offers, districts may have competing priorities that don't make CEP adoption clear cut. Some districts find that relying on the National School Lunch Program rather than adopting CEP is the more financially sensible option for their budgets, especially since Kansas' school funding formula bases a school's at-risk funding on the number of students enrolled in free and reduced-price meals.

For schools ineligible or not opting into CEP, they will continue processing household applications to determine a family's eligibility for free or reduced-price meals. But families who may not meet the threshold for free meals may struggle to pay, which can contribute to unpaid meal balances, and, ultimately, school meal debt.

SCHOOL MEAL DEBT

As with any form of debt, school meal debt is one that can create shame and inequality for students whose families struggle financially. In Kansas, the average cost of school breakfast is \$2.21 and the average cost of school lunch is \$3.41.²⁰ For a child to have both meals throughout the school year, a family would need to dedicate around \$1,045 to just one child's school meal accounts. Regardless of the reason that a family faces financial hardship and resulting school meal debt, children shouldn't feel the repercussions.



Yet, Kansas does not have statewide policies prohibiting schools from punishing children or treating them differently if they don't have enough money to pay for their school meal, and most schools don't have policies protecting students if they cannot afford their school meal. Kansas Appleseed has found several examples of schools providing minimal alternate meals (like pretzels and fruit), isolating students from their classmates during meal times, disallowing students from participating in activities, or delaying grades until the meal debt is paid.²¹

Some schools may receive donations to alleviate the school's meal debt balance. Winfield Schools, a district that has more than half of their district's total enrollment qualifying for free or reduced-price meals, received a generous \$15,000 anonymous donation in January 2026 to pay off meal debt.²² While these types of donations are helpful, they do not address the root cause of the issue.

Unfortunately, data about school meal debt in Kansas is difficult to obtain, which makes it challenging to quantify the impact it has on Kansas families. While the quantitative data on school meal debt can be difficult to measure, schools should have open communication about school meal debt with families and policymakers. With families' budgets becoming increasingly stretched thin, easing school meal debt could relieve financial stress for many Kansas kids and parents.

SCHOOL'S OUT: ADDRESSING HUNGER IN THE SUMMER MONTHS

Summer EBT, otherwise known as “SUN Bucks,” provides a once-a-year benefit of \$120 per eligible school-aged child during the summer. This federal program is a lifeline for families who struggle to access food support when their child is on summer break.

Summer is typically the season when rates of food insecurity spike because children don't have access to the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program like during the academic year.²³ The Summer EBT program – the benefits of which are fully federally funded – helps bridge the hunger gap while kids are out of school.

Parents of children who qualify can apply directly for the program through the Department for Children and Families (DCF), but many children are auto-enrolled and do not need to apply. Auto-enrollment is possible because the income threshold to qualify for Summer EBT is higher than or equal to the threshold required for school-aged children to qualify for other programs, like SNAP. However, eligible children enrolled in Medicaid and Free and Reduced-Price School Meals are not currently being auto-enrolled because a technology upgrade is needed to allow for data to be shared between state agencies.

By mid-July 2026, Kansas had issued SUN Bucks to 133,584 children.²⁴ This year, households were sent text messages from Kansas DCF reminding parents about the program to ensure their child was enrolled.

STATE INVESTMENT IN SUMMER EBT BRINGS MILLIONS TO STATE ECONOMY AND FEEDS 133,000 KIDS (2026)^{25, 26}



State Administrative Cost: **\$825,000**



Federal Dollars Flowing to Kansas Families: **\$16.0 million**

As awareness of the program grows and if the state creates more auto-enrollment efficiencies, we could see around 232,000 Kansas kids benefit from the program and stay fed during the hungrier summer months.²⁷



A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS: POLICY SOLUTIONS TO REDUCE CHILD HUNGER IN KANSAS



Kansas kids are relying on key decision makers in the state and in communities to act now to reduce food insecurity, lessen financial strains on families, and protect the programs that keep families fed every day. All kids deserve access to enough healthy food so they can learn, grow, and thrive inside – and outside – of the classroom.

PASS UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS

Serves: 498,063 Pre-K to 12th Grade Students²⁸

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress covered the cost of school meals for all students across the country, regardless of their circumstances. But once Congress let this expire after the pandemic, child food insecurity increased.

The pandemic showed us just a glimpse of what child nutrition could look like when every student is guaranteed a free school meal. Since 2021, nine states have implemented statewide universal free school meals.²⁹ For parents who have school-aged children, 75.6% support permanent free school meals.³⁰

Federal funding still exists to lessen the financial burden of passing universal free meals. There are 645 schools across the state who are eligible for CEP but not yet participating. Federal reimbursement for meals is available to each of those schools, ranging from 40% to 100% reimbursement rate, depending on how many students are already auto-enrolled in free and reduced-priced meals. Full utilization of CEP would bring in tens of millions of dollars in federal funding to pay for meals, reducing the remaining cost for the state.

Reimagining school meals is not just about students receiving food. In states with universal school meal policies, it is proven that students are showing up to learn with more energy and retaining focus in the classroom. When students arrive at school and are offered free breakfast, they are more likely to have improved attendance and academic performance.³¹





ELIMINATE THE REDUCED-PRICE COPAY

Serves: 34,419 Students¹¹

**Cost: \$2.5 Million (Lunch Only) to
\$4.5 Million (Breakfast + Lunch)³²**

Across the state, thousands of Kansas students are above the income threshold to access free meals through the National School Lunch Program. For enrolled students whose family makes between 130% to 185% FPL, those children pay \$0.40 for lunch and \$0.30 for breakfast, amounting to around \$130 per child per school year. For four-person households making between \$42,900 and \$61,050 per year,¹¹ this amount could still put significant financial pressure on families struggling to keep up with other bills.

To help these families, the state can absorb a family's share of their reduced-price meals, covering the copay for all 34,419 students.



This would add around \$2.5 million to the state budget if the state absorbed the cost of the lunch copay, or around \$4.5 million if the state paid both the breakfast and lunch copays.³² While this is a relatively small budget item compared to other state expenses, it would have a large impact, saving these families meaningful dollars every year.



PROHIBIT “LUNCH SHAMING” PRACTICES

**Serves: 498,063 Pre-K to 12th
Grade Students²⁸**

“Lunch shaming” is the practice of treating students differently, either intentionally or unintentionally, if they have meal accounts with a negative balance. Schools may have policies and practices that shame kids to varying degrees. This includes students going without a meal, being given a different meal than their peers, picking up their meal from the school's main office, or being forced to eat away from their peers.

School meal debt is the main reason why school districts resort to these harmful practices, as the district may not be able to absorb that debt with their limited budgets. The state has the ability to relieve the stress of meal debt for both families and school districts and mandate that policies be updated to prohibit meal shaming.



RESTORE KIDS' SNAP BENEFITS

Serves: Up to 18,000 Children (0-17)⁶

Given the rise in childhood food insecurity, SNAP is more crucial than ever. Not only does SNAP provide food for families who can't afford a full grocery budget, but it also provides a path for auto-enrollment in free school meals. Kids losing SNAP benefits has cascading effects that exacerbates the struggles that many families face.

While the state has been unable to provide concrete data on why around 18,000 kids have lost access to SNAP since July 2025,⁶ an overwhelming number of family experiences tell us that backlogs at the Department for Children and Families (DCF) are a driver for many of the recent losses. Legislation passed at both the state and federal levels has increased the administrative burden at DCF so greatly that it has caused lengthy backlogs in the processing of applications and renewals.

Eligible Kansans who are applying to renew their benefits are not having their applications processed efficiently, and their benefits are being discontinued as a result. The Legislature and DCF should work together to find a way to restore SNAP benefits to all the families who have lost them due to administrative hurdles and delays.



ESTABLISH FOOD TRACKING SYSTEM

Serves: 683,000 Kids (0-17) (2025)³³

The loss of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Household Food Security Report leaves a gap in the nation's ability to track food insecurity. Without comprehensive and consistent data, policymakers will have fewer tools to identify communities experiencing hunger and measure the effectiveness of anti-hunger programs.

Kansas should consider a statewide food security data system to help measure food insecurity. This would require the state to create surveys, collect and analyze data, and build partnerships with Kansas universities and other community organizations to engage participants. By having this data system, Kansas will better understand children facing food insecurity, allowing policymakers to better target investments in nutrition and food assistance programs.



RESOLVE SUMMER EBT AUTO-ENROLLMENT ISSUE

Serves: Up to 60,000
School-Aged Kids³⁴
Cost: \$300,000 to \$400,000³⁴

Summer EBT has been a great addition to the lineup of support programs, ensuring kids maintain access to food during the summer months when school is out. And because kids who qualify for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch also qualify for Summer EBT, the federal government allows states to auto-enroll those students into the Summer EBT program, doing away with the need for paper applications and lengthy processing.

Around 60,000 more kids could be auto-enrolled with a simple technology upgrade.³⁴ Because DCF doesn't have access to other agencies' data (such as Medicaid data within the Kansas Department of Health and Environment and Free and Reduced-Price Lunch data within the Kansas State Department of Education), they cannot automatically enroll all children who are already deemed eligible for other programs based on their household income.

In January 2025, DCF estimated it would cost \$300,000 to \$400,000 to upgrade its technology to allow for the Medicaid population to be auto-enrolled.³⁴ The agencies should work with the Legislature to upgrade this technology so up to 60,000 more kids can access Summer EBT over the summer months.

FOR BEST RESULTS

Don't Delay Passing policies in the next legislative session could go into effect for the 2027-2028 school year.

Use Federal Funding Take advantage of federal funding so those dollars flow to Kansas families.

Create Efficiencies Ensure food programs help all eligible children enroll – and stay enrolled – in benefits.

SNAP CHALLENGE: WHAT'S ON YOUR MENU FOR \$6 A DAY?

Could you have all your nutritional needs met for just \$6 per day? That's the daily reality for more than 42.1 million people who rely on SNAP benefits to supplement their grocery budget.³⁵

While SNAP benefits are a lifesaving resource for participating individuals and families, the average allotment of SNAP benefits is not enough for most people to have a well-balanced and nutritious diet. This SNAP Challenge offers insight into the reality of the millions of people who must stretch their benefits every month.

Although spending \$6 a day on food may seem manageable, doing so while trying to meet all nutritional needs demonstrates the limited choices available to those who rely on SNAP. By participating in the SNAP Challenge, we hope to bring more awareness to the issue of food insecurity and accessibility in Kansas communities.

6

Breakfast

Two Scrambled Eggs, Two Pieces of Plain Toast, Banana,
Served with Black Coffee

\$1.10

Lunch

Bean and Rice Bowl, Served with Frozen Peppers and Onions,
Topped with Modest Amount of Cheese

\$1.58

Dinner

Chicken Quesadilla, Served with Rice, Corn, and Side of Salsa

\$3.25

Snacks

Unavailable

Note: Tax not included

Here are some guidelines for trying the SNAP Challenge in your home.

How long should I participate in the SNAP Challenge?

Participants can choose however long they would like to participate and may opt in or out at any time. It is encouraged that for one month, participants follow the \$6 per-day per-person food budget on the weekdays and use the weekend to reflect on their experiences.

How much can I spend on food each day?

Spend approximately \$6 per person per day, as reflected in the average SNAP benefits.

What can participants buy?

Fruits, vegetables, meat, poultry, fish, dairy products, breads and cereals, non-alcoholic beverages, snack foods, and seeds and plants that can produce food for the household to eat. Ready-made hot foods, such as rotisserie chicken, are not permissible for purchase with SNAP benefits per federal law.

Donate to Your Local Food Bank or Pantry

Even as the number of Kansans enrolled in SNAP decreases each month, the need does not. When struggling families lose access to SNAP benefits, food banks and pantries help fill the gaps as much as they can.

If you are inspired by this challenge and report, donate food, money, or your time to organizations that provide food to their communities. Doing so directly supports individuals and families who are experiencing food insecurity while gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges that surround food accessibility in the state.



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