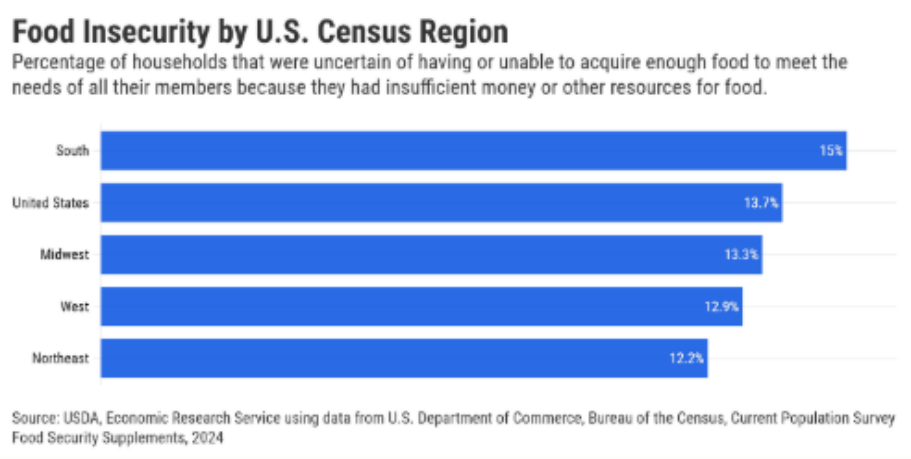
State of the South

Food Access in the South

Food Insecurity in the South

Food insecurity in the South impacts nearly 1 in 6 Southerners each year, over 18.7 million people. Yet, Southern households make up more than 40% of SNAP-receiving households. Our overrepresentation in this program means that the changes made in 2025's H.R. 1, misnamed the "One Big, Beautiful Bill", will impact Southerners more severely. About 41.9 million people nationwide are currently eligible for SNAP benefits, but about 7 million are expected to lose SNAP benefits as a result of the changes in H.R. 1. Additionally, the federal government has historically carried the full cost of SNAP benefits, but the recent legislative changes shift a portion of that responsibility for benefit funding onto the states. Several states have warned that they will be unable to fund these unexpected costs and may choose to opt out of the program entirely, which will leave millions more without access to critical food assistance. These reductions will also directly affect farmers, large and small.



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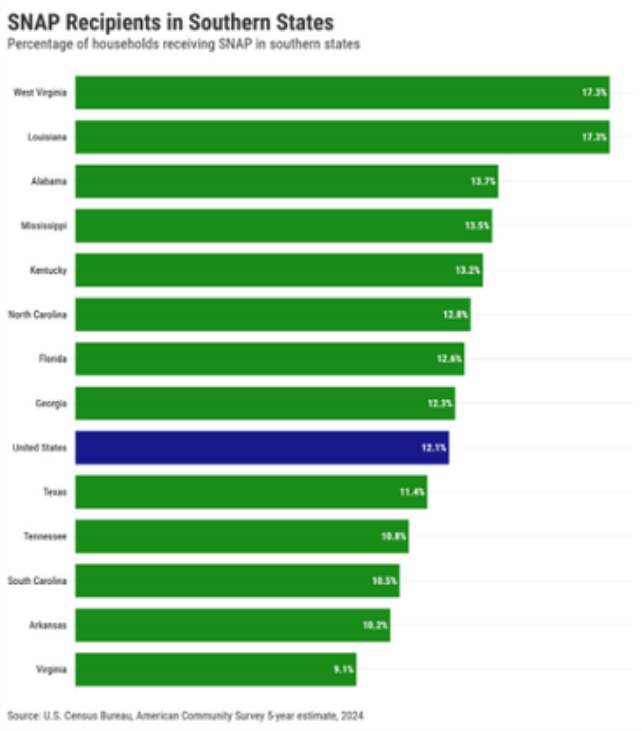
Physical access to food is more difficult as well. Over 19 million Southerners live in areas where access to groceries is challenging in terms of both money and distance. Rural communities face a median distance of 3.2 miles to a grocery store, and without adequate public transportation, it can be difficult or impossible to access food sources, let alone afford the food. Urban farms, like Bush Hill Community Garden & Urban Farm in Birmingham, AL, traveling grocery stores like The Mobile Grocer in Memphis, TN, and delivery or pick-up of affordable produce boxes from FarmsShare North Carolina are creative solutions helping to make access to fresh produce easier in some communities, but they are unable to meet the full demand.

In the absence of sufficient support from the federal government and states, Southerners will need to support each other and lean into community resources. Communities have been taking care of each other for generations, and we can learn from groups throughout the South who have been offering mutual aid to ensure their neighbors are fed. Check out these creative ways to reduce food waste and ensure that the food we produce is going to those who need it most:

Community Fridges

Many local neighborhoods are now home to community fridges, where folks can drop off extra food and pick up what they need. Fridges can be open at all times and do not require constant monitoring by a sponsoring organization, which allows for shoppers to pick up food at times that work for them without needing to engage in burdensome eligibility verification processes. Cities like Richmond, VA; Durham, NC; New Orleans, LA; and many others in the South have fridges for community members in need.



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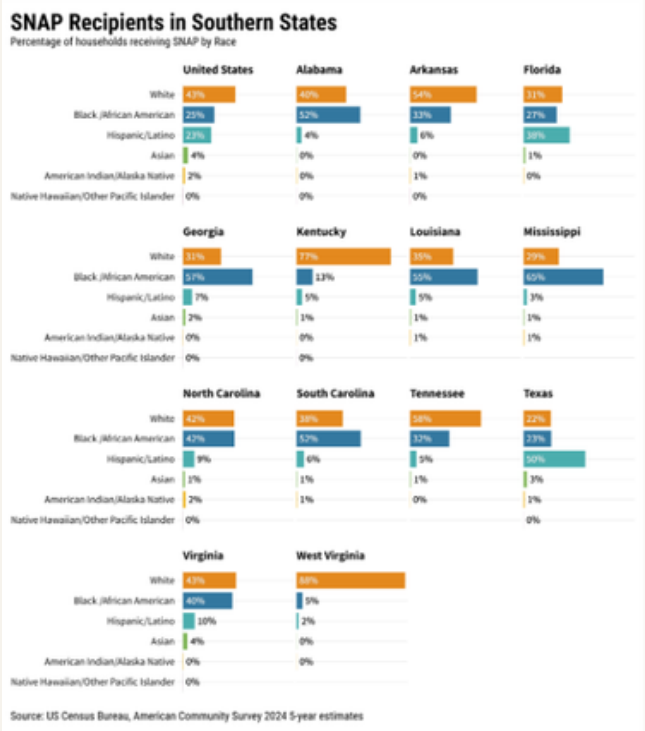

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Community Gardens

Community gardens offer opportunities for folks to grow their own produce and offer fresh, healthy foods for community members. Many cities offer to let residents rent garden plots for a low cost, and other gardens, like Rosie's Garden and Third & Spruce Community Garden in Mississippi, are free to partake in and serve as community gathering spaces as well as providing a valuable source of fresh produce. Some community gardens, like Jeremiah's Community Garden in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, partner with local food banks to distribute the produce they grow. In addition to offering plot rentals and a community garden, Eartha's Farm & Market in Jacksonville, Florida, offers a farmer's market and skill-building workshops for community members.

Seed Libraries

Seed libraries are another resource for Southerners with the ability to start their own gardens. More and more public libraries are offering seed libraries, offering patrons seed packets to plant with the expectation that when plants reach maturity, the patrons return some seeds back to the library for others to grow. This option works well for those with access to land and space to garden, even if this is just in a small pot or window box. Seed libraries are growing in popularity across the South and are available in cities including Athens, Georgia, and Little Rock, Arkansas.

Gleaning

Gleaning is the practice of handpicking surplus crops left after commercial harvesting has concluded. The food is often perfectly edible, and it would go to waste if not for gleaning. Groups like the East Tennessee Gleaners Co-Op and the Society of St. Andrew glean produce from farms and share it with food banks and other hunger relief agencies. This practice prevents waste and supplies fresh produce to food pantries, which often only receive canned or boxed goods as donations.

Community-Supported Agriculture

Community-supported agriculture (CSA) allows households to buy a share of a farm's harvest in advance of the season. This allows farmers and community members to bypass mark-up from the grocery store and share in the risk and reward of increasingly unpredictable growing seasons. This security can be particularly important for Black and Brown farmers who experience more barriers to economic supports for their small businesses. Tall Grass Food Box in North Carolina sources directly from Black farmers in central NC and is able to provide farmers with retail payments for wholesale quantities, allowing them to more readily sustain and grow their businesses. While fresh, local vegetables can be expensive even when purchased directly, some programs like FoodShare South Carolina, covering 33 out of 46 counties in SC, accept benefits from SNAP/EBT and WIC or offer sliding scale or reduced-cost boxes to increase accessibility.

15% of households in the South experienced food insecurity in 2024 - higher than any other region in the U.S.

Right-to-Garden Laws

In 2019, Florida became the first Southern state to pass a "right-to-garden" law, preventing local governments from regulating or banning vegetable gardens on residential properties. This law protects Southerners who plant gardens in their front yards, which may be subject to complaints or restrictive policies in other places, and allows families to cultivate their own food as the cost of living continues to rise. Ensuring that local regulations and zoning ordinances do not prohibit gardening would offer protection for families who choose this sustainable, cost-effective method of gaining fresh produce.

Conclusion

Communities will continue to stand together as budgets tighten and policies shift, but the creative resources like those listed above will not make up for the reduction in federal and state benefits. Policies that support families like a federal minimum wage increase, right-to-garden laws, and expanded, more flexible food assistance are needed to reduce food insecurity and ensure no Southerners go hungry. Until such policies are in place, mutual aid programs connecting community members to resources and preventing food waste are important measures to strengthen the social fabric of Southern communities and feed our neighbors.

The State of the South program connects community members, artists, policymakers, and nonprofit and philanthropy professionals around data, art, and stories to move toward policy and narrative change for a more vibrant, equitable Southern future. To learn more, visit www.stateofthesouth.org or email stateofthesouth@mdcinc.org.