More than one-third of New Yorkers struggle to put food on the table at some point each year. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, commonly known as food stamps) is widely considered one of the most effective hunger-fighting interventions, supplementing millions of New Yorkers’ food budgets and pulling millions above the poverty line nationally every year.

Yet, new data from the Robin Hood Poverty Tracker — a groundbreaking study of well-being and disadvantage in New York City that follows people over time — shows that approximately 1 in 4 eligible New Yorkers does not take advantage of SNAP. This adds up to more than 700,000 New Yorkers who are leaving food on the table. New York is falling behind the rest of the country; nationwide, the number of people missing out is 1 in 5.

Columbia University researchers collected new data to understand which eligible individuals were not receiving SNAP benefits. This brief highlights the findings about this participation gap, including the demographics of those New Yorkers who miss out on SNAP, as well as the links between major life events and SNAP enrollment.

Approximately 1 in 4 New York City households eligible for SNAP benefits does not receive them.
Who is forgoing SNAP?

Over 700,000 New Yorkers are eligible for SNAP benefits but are not enrolling. These New Yorkers share key characteristics. They are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living in low-poverty neighborhood</th>
<th>Young</th>
<th>Single</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individuals living in low-poverty neighborhoods are 25 percent less likely to enroll in SNAP as compared to individuals living in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates.</td>
<td>Individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 are 28 percent less likely to enroll in SNAP than those age 45-64.</td>
<td>Those without a spouse or partner are 9 percent less likely to enroll than those with a spouse/partner in the household.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Childless</th>
<th>Foreign-Born</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Those without children in the household are 21 percent less likely to enroll in SNAP than those who have children in the household.</td>
<td>The foreign-born are 18 percent less likely to enroll in SNAP than the U.S.-born.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>Male</th>
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<tr>
<td>Men are 20 percent less likely to enroll in SNAP than women.</td>
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Generally, the Poverty Tracker survey demonstrates that the more advantaged a New Yorker is (e.g., college-educated, higher income, living in a less-poor neighborhood, etc.), the less likely they are to apply for SNAP even though they are eligible and could use the support. This pattern suggests that people who could benefit from the program either do not know about the program or do not want to take advantage of a program they perceive as being exclusively for “the poor.”

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9 When we use the term “enroll,” we are referring to all New Yorkers who received SNAP and those who applied for SNAP but did not receive SNAP benefits despite their eligibility under the income test. Future research will examine why the latter group did not receive the benefit.
When do New Yorkers turn to SNAP?

New Yorkers who experience major life events or shocks are more likely to participate in SNAP. This suggests that the safety net is helping individuals when they need it most. Key shocks that had a statistically significant impact on SNAP uptake among those eligible included:

### Change in child care

- **Changes in child care**: 84%
- **No changes in child care**: 68%

Those who had changes in child care arrangements were more likely to avail themselves of SNAP (84 percent) compared to those who did not have a change in their child care situation (68 percent).

### Accident, illness, or injury

- **Experienced shock**: 79%
- **Did not experience shock**: 67%

Those who had a significant accident, illness, or injury were more likely to enroll in SNAP (79 percent) compared to those who did not experience any such shocks (67 percent).

### Victim of a crime

- **Victim of crime**: 77%
- **Not a victim of crime**: 69%

Those who were victims of crimes were more likely to enroll in SNAP (77 percent) compared to those who weren’t crime victims (69 percent).
The table above shows how an individual’s likelihood of enrolling in SNAP changes following a major life event or shock. Experiencing either an increase or decrease in income and starting or losing a job did not have a statistically significant impact on an individual’s likelihood of applying for SNAP. This surprising outcome may merit further investigation.

**Conclusion**

This new study finds that the SNAP program serves many New Yorkers in need and is working to help buffer those who face shocks. But it also reveals that many needy New Yorkers — over 700,000 — are missing out on SNAP, perhaps because of lack of knowledge or worry that it is a program just meant for the poor. Closing the participation gap in SNAP could help put more food on New Yorkers’ tables, relieving one source of hardship in New York City.