SNAP participation has increased sharply over the last 20 years, largely due to structural changes in the economy.

Participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has increased sharply over the past 20 years. Average monthly participation grew from 17.3 million people in 2001 to a peak of 47.6 million people in 2013. Although participation declined somewhat as the economy recovered from the Great Recession, SNAP participation remains well above its pre-recession level.

Kelly D. Edmiston investigates the forces driving long-term patterns in SNAP participation as well as its cyclical variation. He finds that three structural factors—legislative and programmatic changes, poverty, and a rising share of the working population not in the labor force—have made the largest contributions to SNAP participation over time. His results suggest growth in SNAP participation is unlikely to unwind in the near future.

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