

IDEA Collective: January 2026

How Is Poverty Measured—and What Do the 2026 Iowa SNAP Changes Mean for Food Access?

January is National Poverty Awareness Month in America, an opportunity to reflect on how federal poverty definitions and Iowa nutrition assistance policies impact food access for individuals and families across the state.

How Is “Poverty” Defined?

U.S. Census Bureau (Official Poverty Measure)

- *A family is considered in poverty if total pre-tax money income falls below the established threshold.*
- In 2024, poverty thresholds were **\$21,100** for a **two-person** family and **\$32,130** for a **four-person** family.

Source: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html>

U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services (HHS)—Poverty Guidelines

- *HHS creates simplified poverty guidelines used to determine eligibility for many public programs.* In 2025, the guideline for a two-person household was \$21,150.
- Eligibility Benchmarks:
 - SNAP (130% of poverty guideline): **\$27,495**
 - WIC & Reduced-Price School Meals (185%): **\$39,127**

Source: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines>

Poverty in Iowa

- About **1 in 9 Iowans live in poverty**. County rates range from **20.4%** (Appanoose) and **5.4%** (Warren).
- Explore county-level data using this interactive map: <https://www.iowadatacenter.org/index.php/data-by-source/american-community-survey/poverty-rates-iowa-counties>

2026 Iowa SNAP Healthy Foods Waiver: What’s Changing?

- A recent article in the *Des Moines Register* titled, “[‘Confusing’ new food restrictions come to Iowa’s SNAP program in 2026](#),” highlights the confusion and concerns surrounding the new SNAP food restrictions.

- Key concerns include:
 - **Prepared food eligibility** is determined by specific retail and packaging conditions, not just the food item itself.
 - **Inconsistent interpretation** of food eligibility at checkout
 - **Retailers opting out of SNAP** due to the confusion and difficulty implementing new restrictions
 - **Reduced food access** for individuals with limited kitchen equipment, time, or grocery access
- Examples of SNAP eligibility challenges:
 - A fruit cup is **not eligible** if it includes an attached utensil—but is eligible without one.
 - A sandwich becomes **ineligible** if purchased in a store with a self-service heating device, even if the sandwich is not heated.
- **Official Guidance**
 - Iowa HHS Prepared Food Taxable (Not SNAP Eligible) and Non-Taxable (SNAP Eligible) Guide: <https://hhs.iowa.gov/media/16847/download?inline>

Learn More & Grow Your Network

- Overview of state and regional efforts and infrastructure to support food and nutrition security. https://chronicdisease.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Iowa-FNS-State-Profile_Oct-2024.pdf

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<https://forms.gle/W3zeAH7d1prS7rwD9>

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