



Expand Community Voice Final Report Federal Fiscal Year 2023

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Acknowledgements

This material was funded by USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – SNAP. This institution is an equal opportunity provider. We would like to thank the Evaluation Working Group with participants from Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina Implementing Agencies who supported recruitment, tool development and review, and review of the final report.

Evaluation Working Group Participating Implementing Agencies

State	Implementing Agency
Georgia	<u>Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH)</u>
	<u>HealthMPowers</u>
	<u>Open Hand Atlanta</u>
	<u>The University of Georgia College of Family and Consumer Sciences</u>
North Carolina	<u>Alice Aycock Poe Center for Health Education</u>
	<u>Down East Partnership for Children</u>
	<u>Durham County Health Department</u>
	<u>East Carolina University</u>
	<u>North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University</u>
	<u>North Carolina State University</u>
	<u>Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest North Carolina</u>
	<u>University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill</u>
	<u>University of North Carolina at Greensboro</u>
South Carolina	<u>Clemson University, Youth Learning Institute (CYLI)</u>
	<u>Lowcountry Food Bank (LCFB)</u>
	<u>South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC)</u>
	<u>University of South Carolina Arnold School of Public Health</u>

Background

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education ([SNAP-Ed](#)) administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is the largest federal nutrition education program. SNAP-Ed is a federally funded grant program that supports evidence-based programs that provide nutrition and physical activity education, environmental changes using public health approaches, and social marketing campaigns to increase awareness and nudge behavior change. As part of the national movement toward more equitable practices and policies, set forth by President Joe Biden [Executive Order 13985](#), the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Services (USDA FNS) *Actions on Nutrition Security* report (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2022) included increasing equity as one of the four pillars for improving nutrition security among Americans. As such, guidance states that agencies should adopt approaches to deliver SNAP-Ed activities with an equity lens.

Public Health Institute's Center for Wellness and Nutrition (PHI CWN) in coordination with Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina embarked on the **FFY2023 Expand Community Voice project** to capture the lived experiences of the SNAP-Ed eligible community. The goal of the project was to identify equitable practices in the communities being served, assess unmet needs of the communities, and provide recommendations for SNAP-Ed programming to increase food and nutrition security for all populations.

Methods

The creation of the data collection tools for this project was grounded in research highlighting the five dimensions of access to care: acceptability, affordability, availability, accessibility, and accommodation (McLaughlin and Wyszewianski, 2022).

Figure 1. Dimensions of Access to Care



An additional dimension was added for this project – awareness – based on the previous year's assessment recognizing awareness as a barrier. In addition, an equitable evaluation approach was incorporated using the guidance set forth in the W.K. Kellogg Foundation practice series for doing evaluation in the service of racial equity (2021) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Guidance from W.K. Kellogg Foundation Practice Guide Series for Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity



This project included a mixed-methods approach consisting of an online survey of SNAP-Ed eligible respondents (household income that is less than or equal to 185% of the federal poverty level) as well as qualitative feedback groups and key informant interviews with SNAP-Ed participants. Using multiple data collection methods can allow for various perspectives, as well as go beyond the data to tell the story of the community around food and nutrition security and SNAP-Ed.

Online survey questions were included to assess SNAP and SNAP-Ed access and food and nutrition security and to determine if results varied by demographic groups. The themes and sub-themes used to code the qualitative feedback group and key informant interview data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Qualitative themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
Experiences with SNAP-Ed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive experiences with SNAP-Ed Negative experiences with SNAP-Ed Experience providing feedback for SNAP-Ed
Facilitators that promote participation in SNAP-Ed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-centered SNAP-Ed Culture reflected in SNAP-Ed Easy access to SNAP-Ed
Barriers to participating in SNAP-Ed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community not centered in SNAP-Ed Culture not reflected in SNAP-Ed Lack of access to SNAP-Ed
Recommendations for SNAP-Ed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Future ideas to improve direct education Future ideas to improve Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) changes Future ideas for how each state can better reflect the community in their SNAP-Ed programming

The Expand Community Voice project was reviewed and determined to be exempt research by the Public Health Institute Institutional Review Board. Additional details about methods used for the Expand Community Voice project can be found in Appendix I.

Findings

Demographic characteristics

SNAP-Ed eligible population

Approximately 30% of each state's population is SNAP-Ed eligible or lives below 185% of the federal poverty line (Table 2). Nationally, the rate of SNAP-Ed eligibility is around 26%, excluding Puerto Rico.

Table 2. SNAP-Ed Eligible Population by State

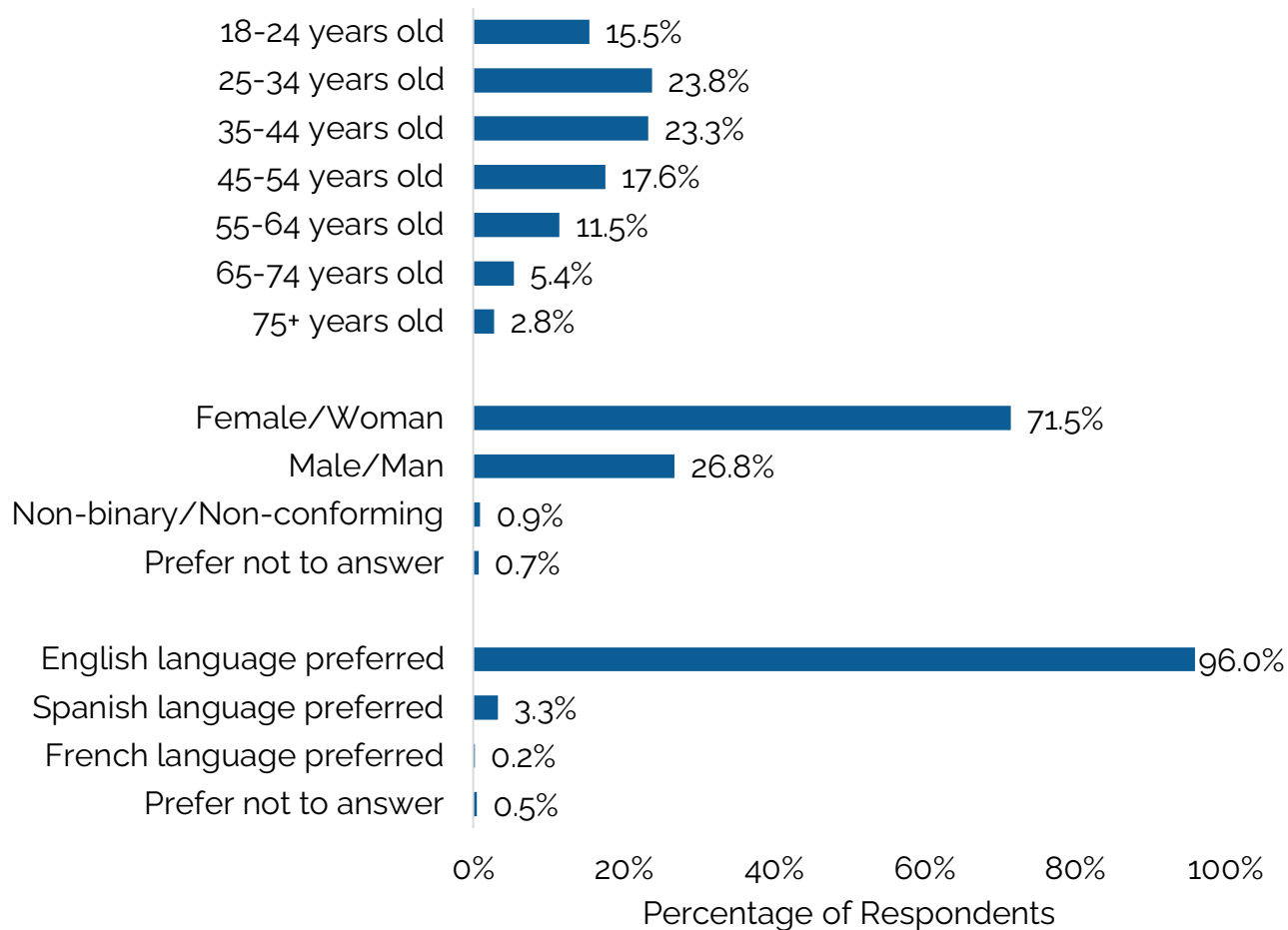
State	Total Population	Percent of Population SNAP-Ed Eligible
Georgia	~10.2 million	30.0%
North Carolina	~10.1 million	30.2%
South Carolina	~5.0 million	31.1%

**U.S. Census Bureau, 2020*

Online survey sample

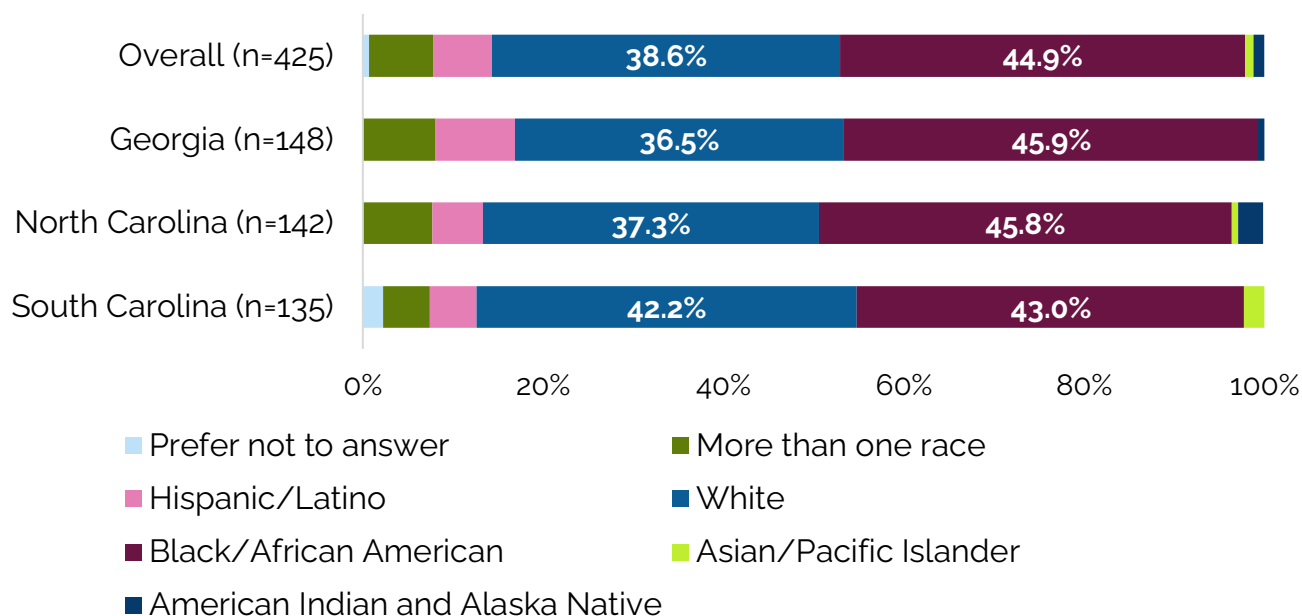
There were 425 SNAP-Ed-eligible respondents to the Expand Community Voice Survey across Georgia (n=148, 34.8%), North Carolina (n=142, 33.4%) and South Carolina (n=135, 31.8%). The average household size was 3.04 (SD=1.6). Shown in Figure 3, most respondents identified as female/woman (n=304, 71.5%), and most were between 18-54 years of age (n=341, 80.2%) with 19.8% (n=84) being 55 years or older. The primary language of respondents was English (n=408, 96.0%).

Figure 3. Description of Online Survey Respondents (n=425)



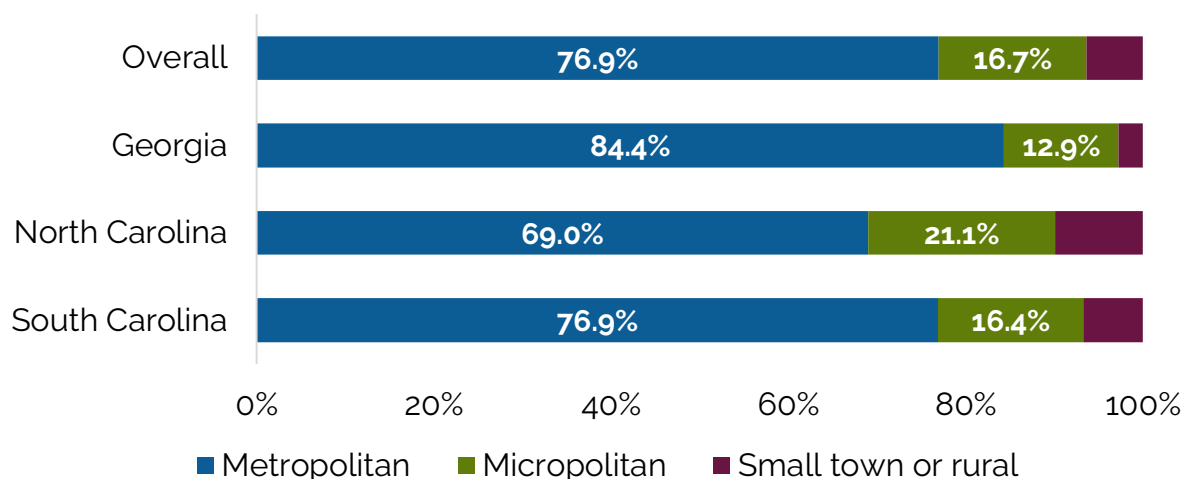
By race and ethnicity, overall, most respondents identified as either Black/African American (n=191, 44.9%) or White (n=164, 38.6%). Additional racial and ethnic groups were represented including 7.1% (n=30) identifying as biracial or more than one race, 6.6% (n=28) identifying as Hispanic/Latino, 1.2% (n=5) identifying as American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 0.9% (n=4) identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander. Self-identified race and ethnicity of respondents were fairly similar across the three participating states. (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Race/Ethnicity of Online Survey Respondents (n=425)



To better understand the environment of the survey respondents, Economic Research Service Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes were matched with respondents' reported zip codes to categorize participants' locales into metropolitan (e.g. urbanized areas), micropolitan (e.g. small towns or urban clusters), and small town or rural (USDA, 2010). Most respondents reported living in metropolitan areas across the three states, with North Carolina having the largest segment in small town or rural areas (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Rural-Urban Commuting Area of Online Survey Respondents (n=425)



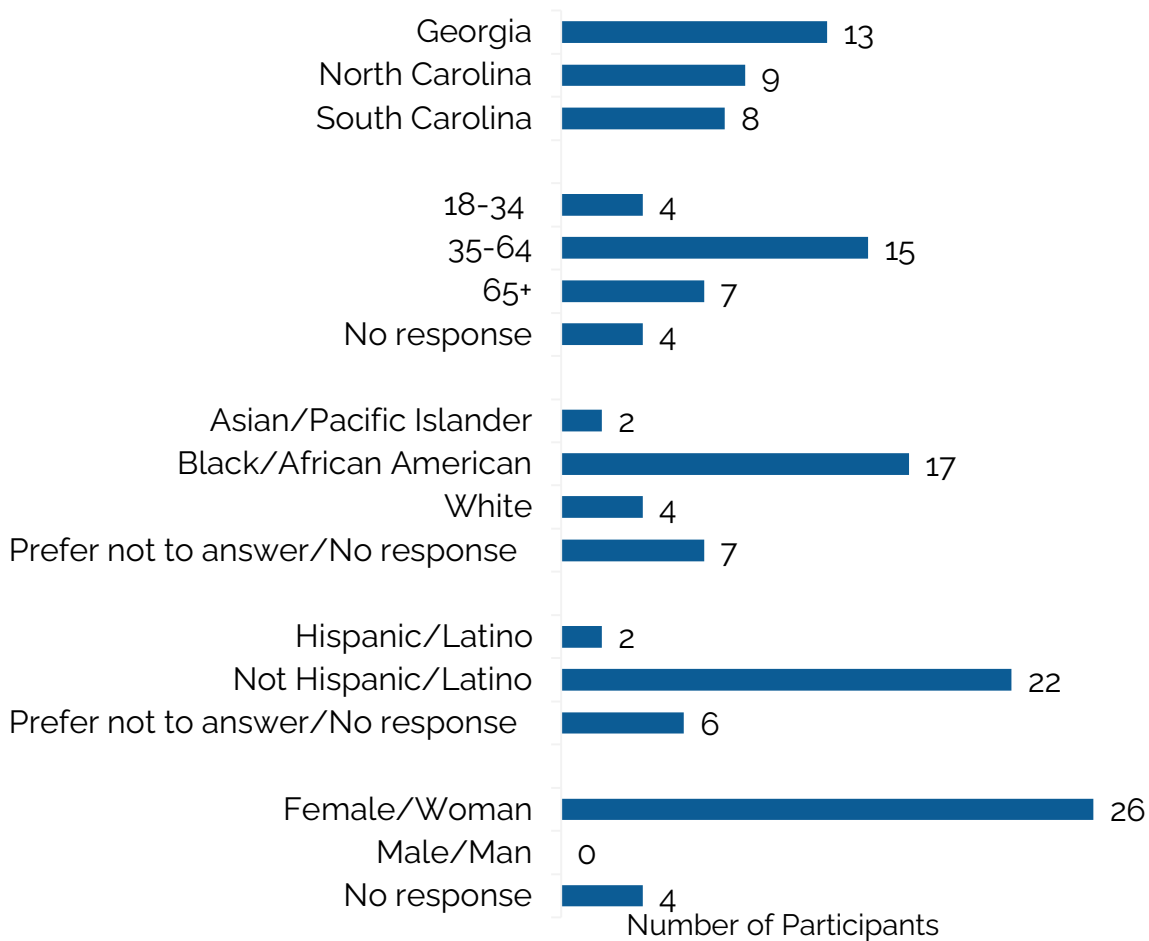
Note: Metropolitan categorized as area core within an urbanized area, high commuting and low commuting areas with up to 30% flow to urban areas. Micropolitan categorized as 10% of primary flow to an urban cluster to primary flow within an urban cluster of 10,000 to 49,999. Small town or rural categorized as primary flow within an

urban cluster of 2,500 to 9,999 (small UC) to rural areas with primary flow to a tract outside of an urban cluster (USDA, 2010)

Feedback group and key informant interviewees

Six feedback groups were conducted across all states and an additional seven interviews in Georgia and North Carolina were conducted, comprising a total sample of 30 participants. Of the 30 participants, 50% (n=15) were between the ages of 35 to 64 years old, 57% (n=17) were Black/African American, 7% (n=2) identified as Hispanic/Latino, and all identified as female/woman. Participant demographics are presented in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6. Feedback Group Participant and Key Informant Interviewee Demographics (n=30)



To better understand how to improve equity in SNAP-Ed, it is important to know more about participants' communities. People define community in multiple ways. Community could refer to where one lives, their race or ethnic group or other common characteristics or interest groups they find important. The majority of participants described being from **racially diverse communities**. Other communities reported include predominately Black/African American, senior communities, areas

with a variety of age groups, a military community, a Native American community, and a college community.

“My community is more than just my friends. It’s the people I come in contact with regularly that I talk to when I’m at the same regular food events or back to school things... Community is the people around me that are in my life, that I experience my life with.”

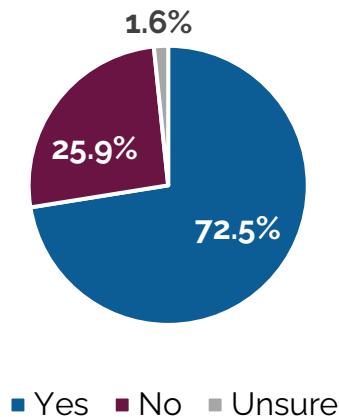
-North Carolina participant

SNAP and SNAP-Ed Experience

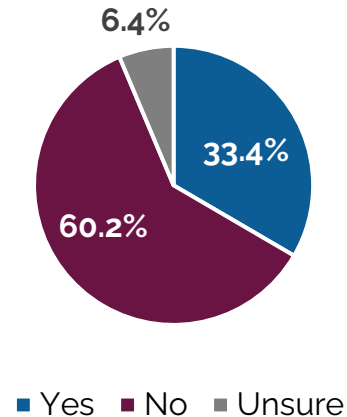
Online survey respondents were asked if they had ever used SNAP benefits to buy food and if they had ever participated in SNAP nutrition education classes, such as Cooking Matters, Food Talk and Farm to Fork Nutrition Lessons. Overall, 72.5% of respondents (n=308) reported using SNAP and 33.4% (n=142) reported participating in SNAP nutrition education classes or SNAP-Ed. (Figure 7). There were no significant differences by race/ethnicity for participation in SNAP or SNAP-Ed.

Figure 7. SNAP and SNAP-Ed Usage among Survey Respondents (n=425)

Ever used SNAP to buy food



Ever participated in SNAP-Ed



As an initial question to encourage conversation, feedback group participants and interviewees were first asked to share their experience taking a SNAP-Ed class including their favorite aspects of the class and what lessons they found most useful. Many participants shared that their favorite things about taking a SNAP-Ed class were **learning new recipes** and **trying new foods**. Participants also reported the two most useful SNAP-Ed lessons were **reading labels** and **maximizing SNAP benefits while shopping**. While the online survey results indicated that more respondents participated in SNAP (72.5%, n=308) compared to SNAP-Ed (33.4%, n= 142), most interviewees and feedback group participants across all states had a positive experience with taking a SNAP-Ed class. Additional details about participants SNAP and SNAP-Ed experience can be found in Appendix 2.

Favorite Aspects of Taking SNAP-Ed Classes & Useful Lessons

- Learning new recipes
- Trying new foods
- Meeting new people
- Sharing recipes with the community
- Participating with children and learning child-friendly recipes
- Appreciating the knowledgeable, patient, and helpful instructors
- Reading labels
- Maximizing SNAP benefits
- Learning how to cook and prepare healthy food safely

Access to SNAP and SNAP-Ed

Access to SNAP and SNAP-Ed means each individual has an equal opportunity to fully participate in programs and services. Various dimensions of access have been examined, including barriers, facilitators and recommendations for how each state could better reflect the community in SNAP-Ed programming and ensure equitable access to food and opportunities for healthy, active living.

While most online survey respondents reported participating in SNAP, the most frequent reasons for those that did not participate or were unsure about participation (n=117) were “*do not think I qualify for SNAP*” (n=56, 48.3%), “*do not want to apply*” (n=19, 16.4%) and “*it is too difficult to apply*” (n=18, 15.5%).

Even though most feedback group participants stated that SNAP-Ed classes were easily accessible to their community, 60.2% of online survey respondents reported not participating in SNAP-Ed. The main reasons among those who did not participate or were unsure if they participated (n=283) included *lack of awareness of SNAP-Ed classes* (n=167, 59.0%), *not wanting to attend SNAP-Ed classes* (n=42, 14.8%), and *that it is too difficult to attend SNAP-Ed classes* (n=28, 9.9%). There were no significant differences by race/ethnicity for reasons for not participating in SNAP or SNAP-Ed.

Acceptability

Participants were asked whether they perceived that SNAP-Ed classes were designed with their community in mind and if the race, ethnicity, and culture of their community were reflected in these classes. The majority of participants reported that SNAP-Ed classes **equitably reflected their culture and communities**.

Participants mentioned that the classes were racially and ethnically diverse, kid friendly, varied across all age groups, and open to everyone.

"I feel like they were designed for all different cultures, ethnicities whatever. Because it's simple stuff that you can make. So, anybody can do it, whether you're rich, poor, or whether you are receiving food. I think it's something that could really help... So, I think, that it's definitely designed for all of us, and we can all benefit from it."

-Georgia participant

Additionally, some participants mentioned how classes providing ingredients helped families with young children (who may not have the time to buy the ingredients) and people whose first language is not English (who may not know where to buy the right ingredients for each meal) to be able to fully participate in the classes. More specifically, many of the Hispanic/Latino and Black/African American participants felt their culture was reflected in the SNAP-Ed classes because classes were targeted to their community. One participant recalled how well the curricula were designed and **how the marketing and materials reflected African American communities and other communities of color**. Another participant in South Carolina noted how she wasn't asked specifically about race or ethnicity before completing the course but noted that her community is predominantly African American and believes classes may have been targeted ***"to help us get a hold on health issues by eating healthy and learning about nutrition and different ways to consume a larger variety of foods and vitamins."***

All Hispanic/Latino participants (n=2) felt the SNAP-Ed classes were reflective of their community because the class materials were translated into Spanish and the instructor was from their community and able to relate to the class. Some participants also mentioned how the SNAP-Ed instructors centered their culture by teaching them healthier ways to prepare the foods they already eat in their households.

"...las clases de cocina, y uno aprende que es lo que puede comer así ¿Cómo puede combinar ciertos alimentos? Eso sirve de mucho, porque algunas veces cocinamos y como nuestra cultura hispana, pues que los taquitos que la pupusa que el tamal, o sea, pero la persona que nos dio la clase también nos dio ideas de cómo podemos si no dejar de comer lo que nos gusta pero cómo podemos hacerlo saludablemente para nuestro bienestar..."

"...the cooking classes, and you learn what you can eat, so how can you combine certain foods? That helps a lot, because sometimes we cook and like our Hispanic culture, well, the taquitos or the pupusa then the tamale, that is, but the person who gave us the class also

gave us ideas of how we can eat what we like but how we can do it healthily for our well-being....” -Georgia participant

Additionally, participants noted how important it was to have **connected communities** and how **class diversity** increases the strength of a participant's support group. Although most participants believed the classes to be equitable for their culture and communities, some participants mentioned that there is room for improvement when it comes to engaging different cultures and providing diverse foods.

“I feel like I would have liked to see more cultural people there, too...those [classes] help benefit us and it helps show areas where we could save money.” -Georgia participant

Some feedback group participants and interviewees noted how not all cultures were centered during SNAP-Ed classes because of the **lack of diversity** in the food and recipes provided.

“I think there could be room to improve, I think. Because all the food the program provided was not Asian food. So it would be better if they could do like Asian food like once in a while and a more better variety of food like Mediterranean food, or like Asian food....But like different kind of food would be good. Like French or German or Thai or Vietnam or Korean food. -North Carolina participant

Additionally, a few participants in North Carolina that did not identify as Hispanic/Latino mentioned the **lack of engagement** with the Hispanic/Latino community in their area. They noted how they have a large Hispanic/Latino population but there did not seem to be a facilitator or translated materials for them to engage in the SNAP-Ed classes.

Additionally, other participants stressed the importance of having SNAP-Ed instructors who look like them. They felt it would be easier to trust an instructor who looks like you and thought it would bring in more people who had not previously participated in SNAP-Ed classes.

“I want to add to having people that look like you teaching the classes as well. So, I think people will go, you know, if I see somebody who is from my community, and looks like me that I know and see throughout the community, church, or school, I think it's a trust factor and just representation matters.” -Georgia participant

Another area of importance for improving equity in SNAP-Ed included learning how to prepare healthier versions of meals participants already ate. As mentioned above, this would help to make the **meals more culturally relevant to the audience** and reduce the likelihood of someone in the family not liking the meal.

“...look at the food that they typically eat and incorporate foods that they eat, because they have lots. And we see lots of Latino/Hispanic options in the grocery stores that we ourselves may not use as a part of our culture but getting that information that's very transparent for them and using the foods that they typically buy would be awesome.” -North Carolina participant

Another suggestion for improving equity in SNAP-Ed is to **target classes to seniors and youth participants**. For youth and older adult communities (i.e., age 60+), it is especially important to have an instructor who is patient and can meet people where they are physically and mentally to ensure they are able to retain the information. Specifically, when it comes to youth, participants across all groups believed that youth should be targeted because it is important to instill healthy eating and physical activity habits at a young age.

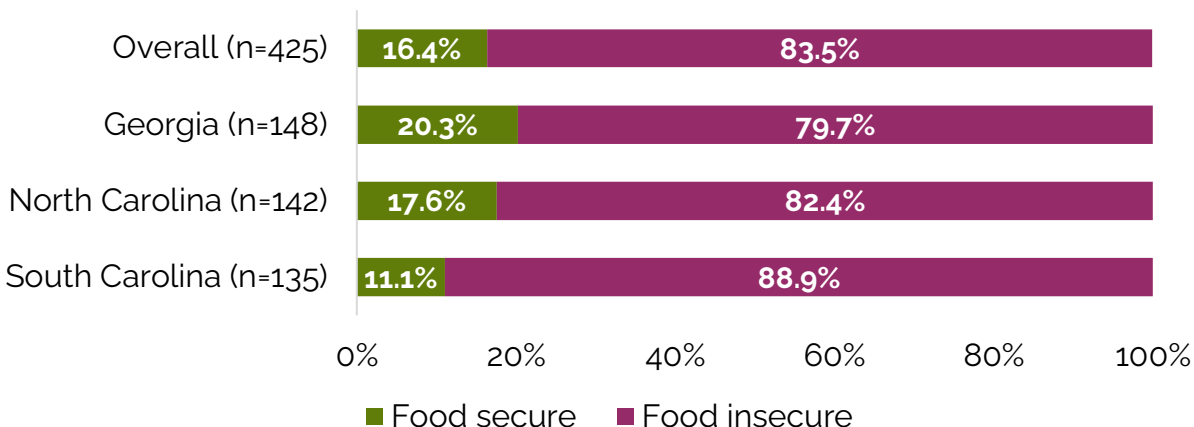
“I'm a firm believer in this needs to start when people are really young. And I would like to see more of a push for education programs in the schools. And a lot of schools are growing vegetables but if we can start a mindset when people are young, it's going to be a live skill. They're going to take it all the way up to their adulthood.” -South Carolina participant

Affordability & Availability

Food and nutrition security are rooted in access, availability and affordability of having enough nutritious food to eat. Food insecurity is defined as “*consistent lack of access to enough food to lead a healthy and active life.*” According to Feeding America, all three states have similar overall rates of people considered food insecure (Georgia: ~11%; North Carolina: ~12.5%; South Carolina: ~10%) (Feeding America, 2023). Some feedback group participants affirmed that there are difficulties in accessing food, mentioning the “**astronomically high**” price of food and that “**there's been times we cannot afford food.**”

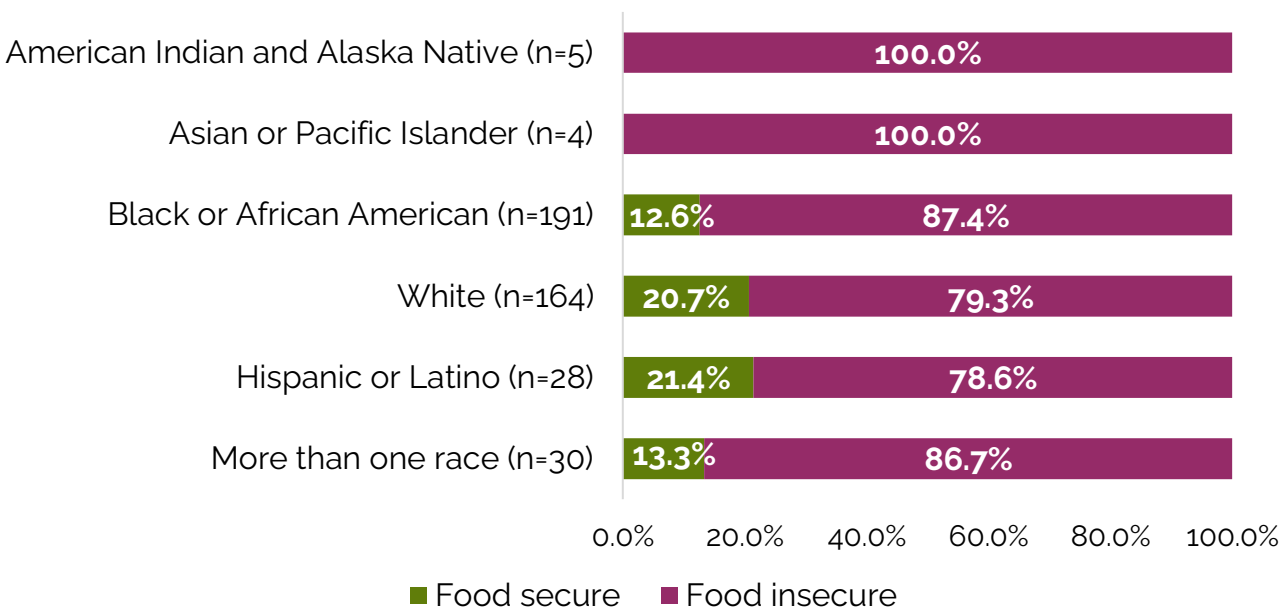
As shown in Figure 8, most online survey respondents (n=355, 83.5%) were characterized as food insecure, with South Carolina having the highest rates of food insecurity across the three participating states (88.9%). These rates are considerably higher than the national average and highlight the need for programming to improve food and nutrition security.

Figure 8. Food security status of online survey respondents (n=425)



As shown in Figure 9, however, the burden of food insecurity is not equivalent across racial and ethnic groups. Food insecurity impacted all the American Indian or Alaskan Natives (n=5) as well as the Asian and Pacific Islanders (n=4) who responded to the survey. Respondents who identify as Black/African American most frequently reported being food insecure (87.4%, n= 191) while Hispanic/Latino respondents were least likely to report being food insecure (78.6%, n=28).

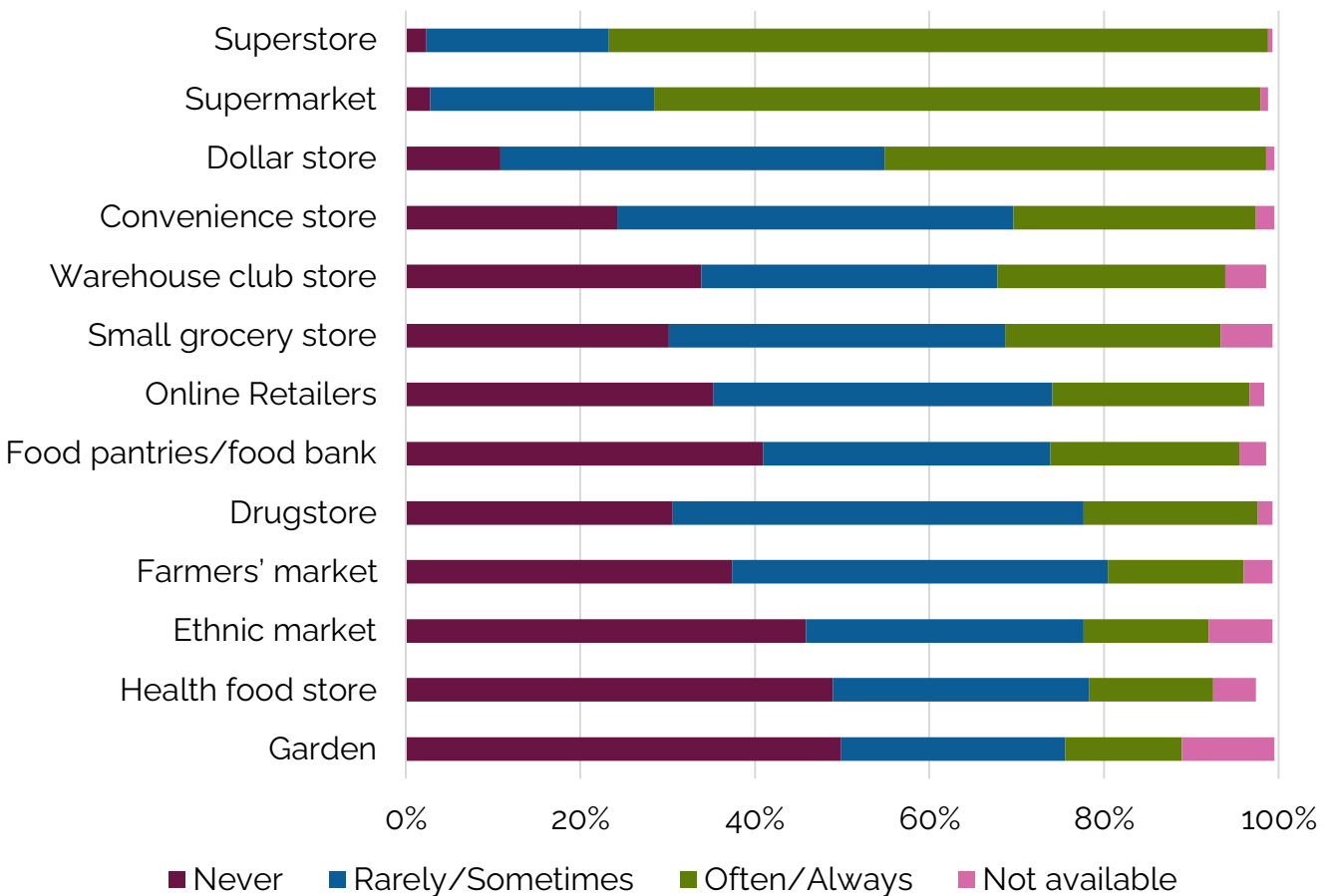
Figure 9. Food security status of online survey respondents, by race and ethnicity (n=425)



Questions about nutrition security were also asked of online survey respondents to understand equitable access to nutrition, including where people shop and ability to access fresh produce and culturally relevant foods. Nutrition security is defined as “having consistent access, availability, and affordability of foods and beverages that promote well-being and prevent (and if needed, treat) disease” (USDA NIFA).

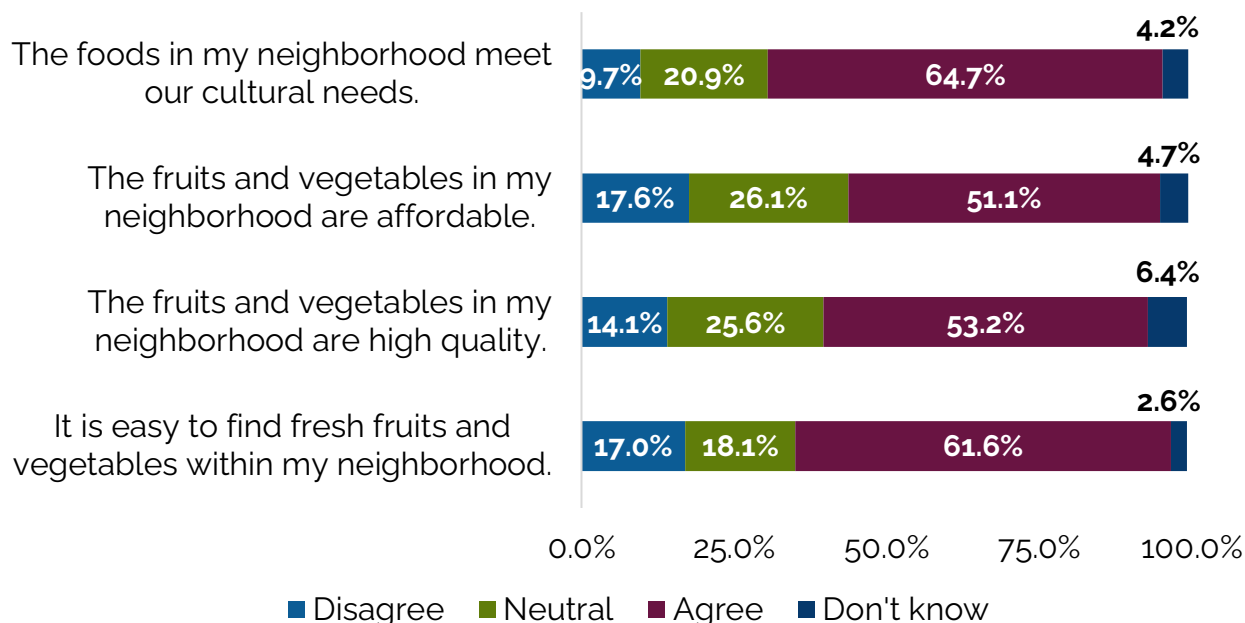
Respondents primarily shop at superstores, like Walmart or Target, and supermarkets like Kroger, Publix, Aldi, Food Lion or Piggly Wiggly. Gardens, health food stores, and ethnic markets that provide culturally specific foods were the most underused places that respondents reported accessing food. Drug stores, convenience stores and dollar stores were shopped at rarely or sometimes (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Food Access among Survey Respondents (n=425)



Respondents were also asked about the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables in their neighborhood as well as foods that meet their cultural needs that are locally accessible. About half of respondents reported that fruits and vegetables are affordable (51.1%) and high quality (53.2%). And about two-thirds of respondents reported that it is easy to find fresh fruits and vegetables in their neighborhood (n=61.6%) and that the food met their cultural needs (64.7%) (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Access to Culturally Appropriate Food & Fresh Fruits and Vegetables (n=425)



Both online survey respondents, feedback group participants, and interviewees raised concerns about the cost of healthy foods in their communities. The number one idea to improve access and availability of food among survey respondents was to **lower prices and make food more affordable** (n=69), followed by more access to options (n=29), such as closer stores, healthier stores and more locations. One respondent stated:

"I think the food should be more affordable, while we always have food, it's just so expensive that eating healthy sometimes isn't possible. The healthier food is more expensive than the fatty unhealthy food." -Georgia respondent

Several online survey respondents reported they think an increase in SNAP benefits would help improve access and availability to food (n=18). **"Quit cutting food stamps,"** said one North Carolina respondent. Feedback group participants and interviewees also want to see more affordable options in the community, which would include more produce and less fast food.

"...But if we had more accessible things that weren't so pricey, I think that would help. That's honestly a part of why half of us are obese. The cheapest things are the most unhealthiest things in the world, and it's so easy to eat that crap." -North Carolina participant

When asked what was needed to improve the community's access to healthy food, the top three responses from online survey respondents included **more farmers' markets or farm stands** (49.1%, n=207), **better variety of produce** at local stores (37.4%, n=158), and **higher quality produce** at local stores (35.1%, n=148).

Survey respondents gave actionable ideas to increase food access and availability by having more food banks (n=22), farmers' markets or farm stands (n=18), gardens (n=18) and food pantries (n=14) which also align with SNAP-Ed's national goals. One person stated, "**use city land to make local gardens**" (South Carolina respondent) and another said:

If more communities acknowledge the need, there could be more pantries open to service the community, possibly polls or surveys so that the local government will provide food where it is needed most.
– Georgia respondent

Similarly, feedback group participants and interviewees mentioned that incorporating a **community garden** could help improve equity by allowing community members to come together and cook food, learn from one another, and bring the community together in a healthy, beneficial way.

Accessibility

Most participants cited that the SNAP-Ed classes were accessible because they were offered virtually. It was noted that virtual classes allowed participants more freedom to attend without having to worry about childcare. The virtual classes also allowed their children to take part in the courses.

"I definitely think they're accessible because my class was virtual... You don't have to worry about transportation or schedules, you know. I was able to do [the class] in the evening, even with my children, so I don't need to worry about accommodation for my children." -Georgia participant

One participant also mentioned how virtual classes allowed them and others with mobility challenges to attend classes without having to worry about accessibility accommodations.

"I would like to add in there it is also great for those that have physical challenges, wheelchairs, rollers, walkers, what have you,

even a cane. This makes it much better...This works very well for me and for others that may have those challenges.” -Georgia participant

Some participants noted that classes are only offered during the day, which can be a challenge for working adults or those with children in school.

Additionally, a few online survey respondents suggested that transportation should be covered by SNAP and one person provided another solution, given the complex food landscape:

“Increase [the] amount given for those without reliable or easily accessible] transportation. I can get on [the] bus to go to [the] store, but [I] can't carry groceries. I usually order online for Walmart delivery, which is more expensive...Therefore, I spend more EBT because [I] can't get to the food, which would help EBT last longer. Also [I] can't get to Food Pantries due to transportation.” -North Carolina respondent

Accommodation

Many feedback group participants and interviewees noted how the courses were free, open to the public, and provided all the ingredients needed for the cooking classes, alleviating the financial burden that is often associated with class. Some participants also noted that the classes were centrally located to the community, while others noted that the instructor would come into the community to provide cooking classes.

“They were very convenient and offered at two different times. There was an evening offering, and there was also another time, I guess, for different people that may not work. They had morning hours that you could go and just stay in the class...It was convenient. It was in our community, and it was at a central location within my area of the town. So it worked for most people in this area.” -South Carolina participant

While participants thought SNAP-Ed instructors were knowledgeable, one respondent noted that literacy can be a possible barrier to accessing SNAP-Ed classes.

“Leer no sabe... Más, entonces se le dificulta un poco más. He visto algunos casos.

“There are many people who don't know how to read...More, then it becomes a little more difficult for them. I have seen some cases.” - Georgia participant

Online survey respondents reported that two of the three main ideas for how to improve access to SNAP-Education were *classes closer to home* (n=110, 26.3%) and *classes offered at convenient times* (n=109, 26.1%). Their recommendations could improve access to programs and services by meeting the needs and preferences of people eligible for SNAP-Education.

Awareness

Although the majority of participants perceive SNAP and SNAP-Education to be accessible to their communities, both online survey respondents and feedback group participants and interviewees cited the **main barrier to participating in SNAP-Education is a lack of awareness, due to lack of communication and marketing around the SNAP-Education classes**. Nearly all participants noted how there are many people in their communities who are unaware of SNAP-Education programming. Most participants reported only hearing about the SNAP-Education classes through word-of-mouth and/or their close network (e.g., friends, acquaintances, etc.).

“There's a lot of people from different places here, but I find that a lot of people just don't know these [SNAP-Education classes] exist.” -North Carolina participant

Among online survey respondents, the most frequently cited idea to improve community access to SNAP-Education was to provide more information about nutrition education classes (n=172, 41.1%) More effective communication about the qualifications for SNAP and SNAP-Education is needed to ensure these resources are accessible to all community members.

“I think the SNAP education program is a good concept. But I think definitely we just got to work on getting it to the people that really need it and can benefit from it.” -Georgia participant

In addition to increasing the marketing around SNAP-Education, many feedback group participants and interviewees provided ideas about ways to promote SNAP-Education classes in the community, such as using social media, schools, community champions, mail, other social services (e.g., the housing authority), and farmers' markets.

“I think it’s a marketing issue also. If there is an event, or a class, maybe it can be shared a variety of ways like Facebook or at places people are going like a farmer’s market. They could have flyers there or have a representative from SNAP-Ed.” -Georgia participant

Additionally, participants mentioned the idea of partnering with other services, organizations, and community leaders to advance SNAP-Ed.

“There are a lot of different programs out there, like, for example, yesterday I was just driving and I saw something about American Heart Association. It was an advertisement for a program for people to eat better... so many times, everybody’s going out and doing their own things. If there was more coming together, these different programs, they could efficiently and effectively target the people that they need to for these programs. If we’re working together, I think we would reach a whole a lot more people.” -South Carolina participant

Overall, community members gave valuable feedback for the states to have a thorough understanding of how to reflect their community needs in improving SNAP Ed programming. Ideas were shared on how to ensure equitable access to food and spaces for active living.

Community Recommendations to Improve Equity of SNAP and SNAP-Ed

- Hire SNAP-Ed instructors with similar race/ethnicity as participants
- Cook culturally relevant meals during classes
- Target seniors and youth for SNAP-Ed
- Keep offering virtual and in-person classes
- Make materials for low-literacy populations
- Promote/market SNAP-Ed
- Make food more affordable, including more produce and less fast food
- Offer affordable farmers markets/farm stands
- Improve variety and quality of produce
- Create community gardens

Limitations

There are a few limitations to consider when reviewing the findings from the Expand Community Voice project. The online survey used a web panel as a means of data collection. While this option was efficient and cost-effective, there is the possibility of self-selection bias. Even though the web panel only included SNAP-Ed eligible participations and quotas for race/ethnicity were reflective of the SNAP-Ed population, participants may have had survey fatigue from regularly participating in surveys.

For the feedback groups, the process of recruiting and retaining participants posed additional challenges. Several individuals who initially expressed interest in participating did not attend the scheduled feedback sessions. Email reminders were sent to participants; however, PHI CWN started calling participants to remind them of the upcoming feedback groups, which helped to increase attendance.

There is a risk that those who chose to engage in the feedback process were already champions of the program, thus skewing the feedback towards a more positive perspective.

In addition, this project relied on online, digital methods for both the survey and feedback groups. Not all individuals have access to the internet or may not prefer to participate in online activities, which likely excluded some people from participating in the online survey or the virtual feedback sessions.

The results that are shared in this report were developed without direct input or sensemaking from SNAP-Ed participants. While there are plans to share this work with community members in FFY2024, the absence of participant involvement in the interpretation of findings for this report may overlook important perspectives.

Conclusions

Results of the Expand Community Voice survey as well as the feedback groups corroborate that participants find SNAP-Ed services to be generally equitable across the Southeast Region's states of Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina, with some identified areas for improvement.

In the Expand Community Voice survey, there were limited differences by race/ethnicity for participation in accessing SNAP and SNAP-Ed services and limited differences in reasons for non-participation. The feedback groups echoed the results of the survey, whereby SNAP-Ed direct nutrition participants shared satisfaction with the services provided and emphasized the importance of expanding awareness about SNAP-Ed to reach a broader audience.

However, survey respondents experienced higher rates of food insecurity than the national average and about only half of respondents reported they had access to fresh, high quality, affordable culturally specific produce. Both SNAP and SNAP-Ed programming can help to address the issues of food and nutrition security, through the actionable recommendations stated above by community members themselves.

While the online survey results indicated that only 33.4% of respondents reported ever participating in SNAP-Ed, the majority of interviewees and feedback group participants across all states had a positive experience with taking a SNAP-Ed class. The top two reasons identified in the survey for not participating in SNAP-Ed were lack of awareness of SNAP-Ed classes and not wanting to attend SNAP-Ed classes. This was mirrored in the feedback groups, whereby participants shared they only heard about the classes through word-of-mouth and recommended more marketing of the programs for increased attendance. Increasing creativity and reach of marketing strategies, by including community champions to support recruitment for example, will be important to reach priority populations as highlighted in the USDA FNS FY2024 Priority Areas for State Outreach Plans. Target marketing and recruitment towards students, older adults, Veterans, Immigrants and mixed status households, will be important to expand equitable access to programming (USDA FNS, 2024)

Recognizing there are also areas for improvement to make programs more equitable, one feedback group emphasized that "*representation matters*" in terms of having class instructors that are from the same community as participants and/or are from the same race/ethnicity group. Various studies affirm this assertion, in that increasing the diversity of those working to deliver programs can better reflect the target populations, increase cohesion, and contribute to better outcomes (Hofhuis, van der Rijt & Vlug, 2016).

Another recommendation to improve SNAP-Ed is to engage different cultures and provide diverse foods, specifically making meals more culturally relevant to the audience. Many Implementing Agencies may be already using curricula and resources such as A Taste of African Heritage or My Native Plate. However, utilizing available curricula from the SNAP-Ed toolkit or developing new resources are both helpful strategies to meet the needs of various cultures and communities.

Finally, a few participants mentioned that SNAP-Ed is not engaged with the Hispanic/Latino community in their area. Since the Hispanic/Latino community comprises 10% of the SNAP-Ed eligible population in Georgia and North Carolina and 50% in South Carolina, it is important to further investigate strategies to recruit Hispanic/Latino populations, culturally tailor or develop new curricula to reach this population, and also consider barriers to access that may be different for Hispanic/Latino populations.

Recommended Actions to Improve Equity in SNAP-Ed

In order to continue to provide equitable practices within SNAP and SNAP-Ed, several key recommendations are proposed:

- **Embed Feedback Systems into SNAP-Ed Nutrition Education and PSE Changes:** To close the feedback loop and encourage continuous improvement, it is recommended to integrate feedback systems into regular program activities, encouraging participants to share suggestions for

improvement as well as areas of strength. Feedback data should also be aggregated and shared with Implementing Agencies and states (e.g. consider the Program Evaluation And Reporting System or PEARS), so that programming can become more responsive to ongoing needs. In addition, the 2024 USDA FNS PSE Toolkit states that Implementing Agencies and state agencies should meaningfully involve community residents in the design, implementation and evaluation of PSE initiatives (USDA FNS, 2024). Through community involvement, PSE strategies can be community-owned and therefore more equitable.

- **Further Explore Equity Among Hispanic/Latino Populations:** Because of the low-turnout of Hispanic/Latino populations in the feedback groups and sentiments that services could be improved for this population, it is important to delve deeper into understanding and addressing equity issues within Hispanic/Latino populations. State-level needs assessments or listening sessions, for example, could help to better tailor program elements to address the needs of this population.
- **Design Programs for Low-Literacy:** While it was stated in the interviews that SNAP-Ed is designed for a broad audience, it is important to recognize the impact of literacy on participation and engagement. According to the World Population Review, 20% or more of the population in Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina are considered to have low-literacy (World Population Review, 2023). SNAP-Ed programs can address low-literacy through use of accessible materials, alternative communication channels, and varied educational strategies.
- **Market SNAP-Ed Classes Through Multiple Strategies:** Diversifying marketing strategies is crucial for reaching a wider and more diverse audience for SNAP-Ed programming. Implementing a multi-faceted approach, including radio broadcasts, listservs or community-level applications (e.g. USO, schools), and in-person outreach at schools and clinics.
- **Assess the Equity of SNAP-Ed and SNAP through Multiple Dimensions of Access:** Access is multi-dimensional and requires a systems-thinking approach to ensure that programs are equitable and reaching the individuals that need the programs the most. By examining program acceptability, affordability, availability, accessibility, accommodation and awareness, program administrators can assess the equity of programs and develop strategies to meet the needs and preferences of the population.
- **Meet People Where They Are:** This is a well-known strategy for public health programming – such as offering times that are convenient for participants (not organizations), holding classes in places where many people already gather, and using data-collection methods that are convenient for participants. This involves meeting participants in community-based settings, such as community centers, churches, schools, workplaces, and public spaces to accommodate participant schedules and preferences. Also, continuing to

hold virtual nutrition education classes will be important to reach individuals with differing needs and preferences.

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Appendix I: Methods

Expand Community Voice Online Survey

Sample. PHI CWN utilized a web panel of SNAP-Ed eligible individuals across the three states to complete the online survey in English or Spanish through a contract with Dynata, a research marketing firm. Potential respondents were screened for eligibility based on their household income and household size (Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2023). To achieve a 5% margin of error in outcomes across the three states assuming a 95% confidence interval and a population size of at least 400,000, a total sample size of at least 375 was desired, approximately 125 per state. The target sample included 135 respondents from each state to account for incompletes, with no more than half of the sample identifying as White/Caucasian. Furthermore, a quota of Hispanic/Latino participants and/or participants taking the survey in Spanish was established as 10% for Georgia and North Carolina and 5% for South Carolina. These criteria mirrored the percentages for the SNAP-Ed eligible population in the three states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Measures. Survey questions were included to assess the level of food and nutrition security in the participating states and to determine if access varied by demographic groups. The following measures were included in the online survey:

- **Demographics:** Information about survey participants including age, gender, race/ethnicity, household size and household income
- **Nutrition Assistance and Nutrition Education:** Participation in SNAP and SNAP-Ed programs, including reasons for lack of participation.
- **Food and Nutrition Access:** Where people shop, access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and access to culturally specific food (Colasanti et al, 2019)
- **Food security:** Two questions based on the Economic Research Service food security module were included to assess food insecurity. Responses of sometimes or often true to either of the following questions, indicated that a respondent was experiencing food insecurity: "We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more," or "The food that we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more," (Hager et al., 2010).

Data collection and analysis. Surveys were programmed into SurveyMonkey for each state in English and Spanish. Dynata shared the survey link with their web panel of potentially eligible respondents. There were two screener questions to determine if respondents were SNAP-Ed eligible based on household size and income. Survey responses were monitored to maintain quotas set based on the intended sample.

Survey data were examined for completeness and missing data were excluded from analyses. Descriptive statistics were produced for all variables overall and by demographic groups. Comparisons in outcomes of interest were made between demographic groups by first examining 95% confidence intervals around point estimates to identify where they did not overlap, a conservative estimate of

statistically significant differences at the alpha = 0.05 level. Data cleaning and analyses were completed using R programming language for statistical computing and IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 29.0 (R, 2023; IBM Corp, 2023)

Community Feedback Groups and Key Informant Interviews

Sample. Each state aimed to recruit two feedback groups of approximately 8-10 SNAP-Ed participants – one group consisting of all races and ethnicities and one group specifically for Black/African American community members. The Black/African American community members represent a large segment of the SNAP-Ed-eligible population with important perspectives on racial equity in these states. Studies have shown that in qualitative research groups solely focused on one racial or ethnic group can be more effective at gaining sincere insights (Greene, Holsten et al, 2023; Greene, Houghtaling et al, 2023). Further, SNAP-Ed and similar programs have the potential to be especially impactful because research has shown that people that identify as Black/African American experience higher rates of obesity, poverty, and food insecurity when compared to White Americans (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, et al, 2022; Gundersen, Dewey, et al, 2018; Hales, Carroll, et al, 2017).

Recruitment. In collaboration with the SER EWG members, PHI CWN developed flyers to recruit current or previous SNAP-Ed participants to take part in feedback groups. Recruitment was conducted through coordination with workgroup members and local implementing agency representatives (i.e., nutrition educators). Feedback groups had lower than anticipated participation, therefore some key informant interviews (KII) were also conducted to supplement the feedback groups and obtain adequate data for analysis.

Measures. In collaboration with the EWG members, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to understand more about participants' SNAP-Ed experience and their perceptions of equity in SNAP-Ed. The two main sections of the interview guide included:

- **SNAP-Ed Experience:** Participants were asked to describe their favorite aspects of taking a SNAP-Ed class, what lessons they found most useful, and how they have applied these lessons into their daily lives. Additionally, participants were also asked what lessons were not as useful and if they had previously been asked to provide feedback about SNAP-Ed programming.
- **Equity in SNAP-Ed:** Participants were asked to describe their community to inform subsequent questions on equity, accessibility and community-centered and culturally appropriate SNAP-Ed. To better understand participants' perceptions of how to improve equity in SNAP-Ed, questions grounded in appreciative inquiry were used. Appreciative inquiry uses an asset-based approach to help participants identify strengths and opportunities in their communities (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

Data collection and analysis. Feedback groups were conducted virtually, recorded, and transcribed using Zoom. Transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy by the PHI CWN research team. All transcripts were de-identified to ensure participant

confidentiality. Once cleaned, transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose for coding. Thematic content analysis was used to analyze both the feedback group and key informant interview data. A priori codes were developed and tested by the PHI CWN research team to ensure intercoder reliability. The themes and subthemes that guided the code development from the feedback groups are listed below.

Qualitative themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
Experiences with SNAP-Ed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive experiences with SNAP-Ed • Negative experiences with SNAP-Ed • Experience providing feedback for SNAP-Ed
Facilitators that promote participation in SNAP-Ed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-centered SNAP-Ed • Culture reflected in SNAP-Ed • Easy access to SNAP-Ed
Barriers to participating in SNAP-Ed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community not centered in SNAP-Ed • Culture not reflected in SNAP-Ed • Lack of access to SNAP-Ed
Recommendations for SNAP-Ed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future ideas to improve direct education • Future ideas to improve PSE changes • Future ideas for how the state can better reflect the community in its SNAP-Ed programming

Qualitative data was quantified and disaggregated by state and race/ethnicity to show similarities and differences across the sample of community members in the Southeast Region.

Appendix II: SNAP and SNAP-Ed Experience

As an initial question to encourage conversation, feedback group participants and interviewees were first asked to share about their experience taking a SNAP-Ed class including their favorite aspects of the class and what lessons they found most useful. Some of the SNAP-Ed classes participants reported taking part in included Cooking Matters, Walk with Ease, and Faithful Families. Many participants shared that their favorite thing about taking a SNAP-Ed class was learning new recipes and trying new foods.

“My favorite thing is learning something new and being able to try something new. I like going to classes where either I get to cook or someone teaches us how to cook something, and we get to try it, because I'm a little bit of a picky eater, and I don't like to spend my money on things that I don't know if I'm going to like, but I'm up for trying things. So that's always been exciting for me.” -North Carolina participant

In addition to learning new recipes, participants enjoyed the social aspect of SNAP-Ed, including meeting new people through cooking classes and finding new walking buddies through the Walk with Ease program. Some participants mentioned how they had developed relationships with classmates and were able to share recipes with their community (i.e., families, friends, neighbors who could benefit from the information). Others mentioned how they enjoyed taking the courses with their children and learning child-friendly recipes. Some participants reported that they shared what they learned in the SNAP-Ed classes with others and also started to make healthy eating and physical activity a social activity among their community.

Additionally, participants thought the SNAP-Ed instructors were knowledgeable, patient, and helpful.

“[The instructor] was very good. She knew how to interact with the senior citizens because we all are senior citizens. She has the right personality, and that makes the difference. When you're communicating or doing something with older people, you know, she was smiling, she was friendly. She made the class enjoyable, she made it an enjoyable experience.” -North Carolina participant

Participants reported the two most useful SNAP-Ed lessons were **reading labels** and **maximizing SNAP benefits** while shopping. Learning about the health benefits of eating well and exercising were also mentioned by participants. Additionally, learning how to cook and prepare healthy food safely and properly were useful lessons for participants of all cooking levels.

“When I was in the Cooking Matters program, they showed me how to chop it, how to wash it, how to prepare the ingredients for the cooking step-by-step and then they give us time to follow-up...so that helps me a lot and kind of motivated me to cook more.” -North Carolina participant

Although most respondents had positive experiences with SNAP-Ed, many reported that learning some of the basics of cooking were not useful as they were already skilled in cooking and kitchen safety. While only a third of online survey respondents indicated that they ever participated in SNAP-Ed, most feedback group participants and interviewees across all states had a positive experience with taking a SNAP-Ed class.

This material was funded by USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – SNAP. This institution is an equal opportunity provider