

## Food stamp rolls swell in Georgia

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The number of people relying on food stamps in Georgia is on the rise.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program provided food assistance to a record 1.91 million people in the state a year ago. Nearly a quarter of them were 6 years old or younger. By this June, the program had added 40,000 more recipients.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported that those numbers have nearly doubled since the economy slid into recession in late 2007.

Georgia suffered more than most states and is still hundreds of thousands of jobs below its pre-recession levels. Additionally, many jobs that have been added are low-paying positions. About 58 percent of working-age food stamp recipients are employed.

Meanwhile, Georgia has surged from having the 15th-highest proportion of food stamp recipients to sixth-highest. About one in five Georgians in urban, suburban and rural areas are food stamp recipients.

"A lot of people who, before the recession, were above the food stamp level are now below," said Mike Konczal, a Roosevelt Institute fellow. "Food stamps in this recovery have been a much more fundamental part of the social safety net."

The federal nutrition assistance program now costs about \$78 billion a year. The U.S. Senate in June passed a farm bill that included \$4.1 billion in cuts to the program over a decade. The House of Representatives passed its own version of the bill that didn't include funding for food stamps at all. Congress is expected to revisit the issue and come up with a compromise on the divisive issue.

Critics of the program say food stamps offer short-term help but can be part of a harmful pattern.

"I think all of these programs, taken together, do create a broad disincentive for personal responsibility," economist Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "The more of these programs there are, the less incentives for moderate income people to rise above it and to improve themselves."

However, the Food and Nutrition Service estimates that every dollar in new benefits generates up to \$1.80 in economic activity, and a \$1 billion increase in benefits supports 18,000 jobs — including 3,000 on farms.

More than 642,000 food stamp recipients in Fulton, DeKalb, Gwinnett, Clayton and Cobb counties spend about \$900 million on food annually, According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.