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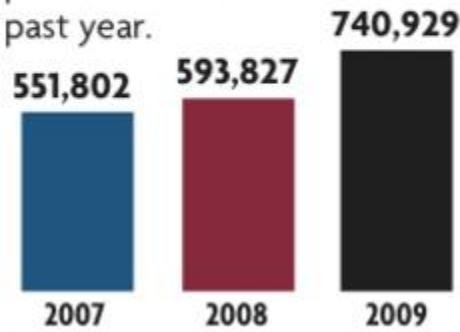
## One in six Alabamians get funds for food

By [Kim Chandler](#) -- The Birmingham News

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### FEEDING ALABAMA

Food assistance rolls in Alabama have jumped 24.8 percent in the past year.



Source: Alabama Department of Human Resources

[View full size](#) MONTGOMERY -- Nearly one in six Alabamians receive food assistance, according to the most recent numbers available from the state Department of Human Resources.

The troubled economy is sending Alabamians in record numbers to sign up for help in feeding their families.

"We've never seen this before. Ever. It just doesn't end," said Mary Lois Monroe, director of DHR's food assistance program.

"When you talk about hitting a record high, we hit it in October '07, and we've added 100,000 since then."

The rolls for Alabama's Food Assistance Program -- previously known as food stamps -- swelled from 551,802 in August 2007 to 740,929 at the end of this past August, according to state records.

"It shows the economy is putting a squeeze on family budgets. Canned goods from the food pantry help, but it's not enough," said Kimble Forrister, state coordinator for Alabama Arise, a coalition of 150 churches and civic groups that lobbies for poor people.

"It's not just people losing their jobs. It's people whose hours are cut back," Forrister said.

The overwhelming majority of people signed up for the food assistance program in Alabama are not welfare recipients. Only 17 percent are on welfare, according to DHR.

### PEOPLE ON FOOD ASSISTANCE IN BIRMINGHAM-HOOVER METRO AREA

COUNTY	PEOPLE ON FOOD ASSISTANCE AUG. 2009	% OF POPULATION
Bibb	3,606	16.7%
Blount	6,928	12%
Chilton	8,366	19.7%
Jefferson	96,139	14.6%
St. Clair	10,359	13%
Shelby	10,200	5%
Walker	9,470	13.7%
STATEWIDE	740,929	15.9%

Sources: Alabama Department of Human Resources, U.S. Census Bureau 2008 population estimates

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The program is open to families whose gross monthly income is 130 percent or less of the federal poverty line and who meet other requirements. A family of four making less than \$2,389 a month could qualify. Senior citizens and the disabled are allowed to deduct certain expenses, such as medications, when applying for benefits.

Alabama is mirroring a national trend.

From August 2008 to August 2009, the number of people nationally on food assistance jumped 23.9 percent to 36.5 million, according to preliminary numbers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In Alabama, the rolls jumped 24.8 percent during that time.

Monroe said in past years, there was a typical ebb and flow to food assistance enrollment. But for the past two years, the numbers have grown steadily.

Monroe said some of the increase might be attributable to greater efforts to get more eligible people enrolled -- such as a streamlined application process for senior citizens. "I just think it's the continued state of economy. Obviously, our unemployment rate is continuing to go up," Monroe said. "I keep thinking it will level off."

Forrister said he believes the dramatic rise in the number of people seeking food assistance is a sign the state should do something to help families.

While people buying groceries with food assistance do not pay sales tax, Forrister said removing the tax on food would greatly benefit other low- and moderate-income families: "There are many people in the lower-middle-income bracket that are struggling."

Removing the state sales tax on food was debated in the Legislature multiple times this past spring, but lawmakers could never agree on how to replace the lost revenue.