SNAP Payment Error Rates: Is there a solution?

Mississippi is now facing steep financial consequences because of persistent administrative issues in the management of SNAP benefits. In Fiscal Year 2024, the state reported a payment error rate of 10.69%, a critical threshold that has triggered penalties under the *One Big Beautiful Bill Act*, requiring Mississippi to cover 15% of SNAP benefit costs. These penalties are not just numbers on a balance sheet, they represent a system that is failing the very people it was designed to support.

The ACLU of Mississippi is closely examining how external policy decisions, outdated infrastructure, and systemic barriers contribute to rising error rates and declining program access. Rather than placing the blame on applicants or frontline staff, we urge state leaders to adopt a holistic, evidence-based approach to reform. Meaningful change will require investments in modernized systems, transparent governance, and stronger workforce support, so that no Mississippian is denied food assistance due to administrative failures.

From Accuracy to Escalation: A Look at Historical Trends

SNAP payment errors are due to over and under payments. Overpayments occur when eligible recipients receive more benefits than they are entitled to often due to errors such as failing to properly verify income or household size, delays in updating eligibility information, mistakes in data entry or case processing. Underpayments occur when eligible recipients receive less than they should. For example, missed updates to expenses or income, misinterpretation of eligibility rules, incomplete or incorrect documentation.

To provide context for Mississippi's payment error rates over time, we include a historical trend analysis originally presented in a previous blog post. Figure 1 illustrates the state's payment error rates from 2012 to 2024.

**Figure 1. Mississippi Payment Error Rates 2012-2024**
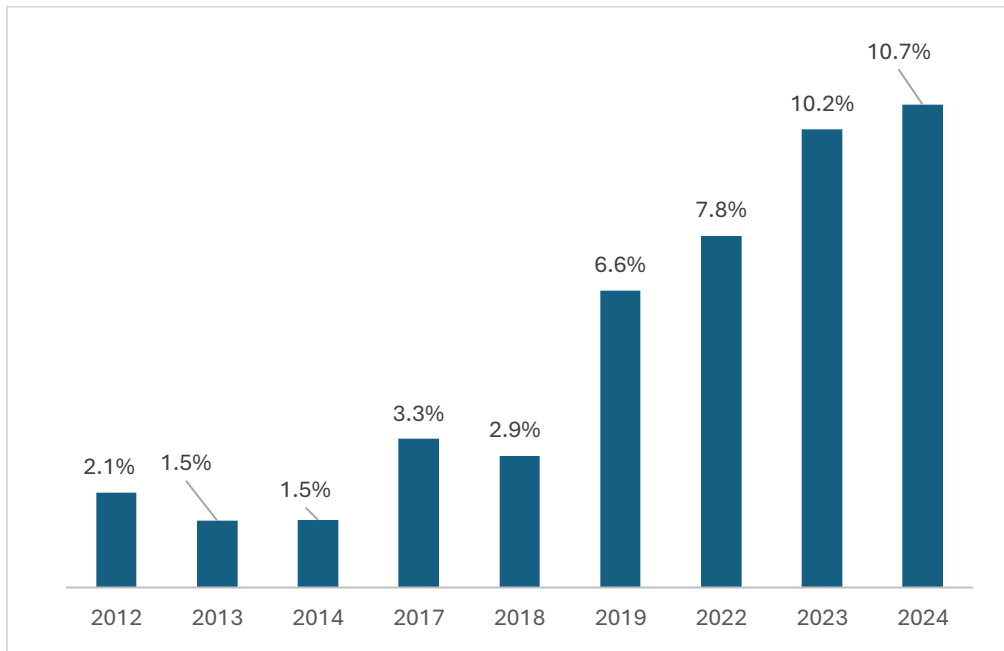
Note: Payment error rates for 2015, 2016, 2020, and 2021 were not available on the USDA website.

## External Impacts on SNAP Administration

Legislative Changes

According to the USDA, the Program Access Index (PAI) is designed to indicate the degree to which low-income people have access to benefits. "For most purposes, the participation rate among people eligible for benefits is a better measure of program performance" (USDA, 2005). Figure 2 presents Mississippi's Program Access Index (PAI) alongside the national average, providing a basis for comparative analysis.

Figure 2. Program Access 2003-2023
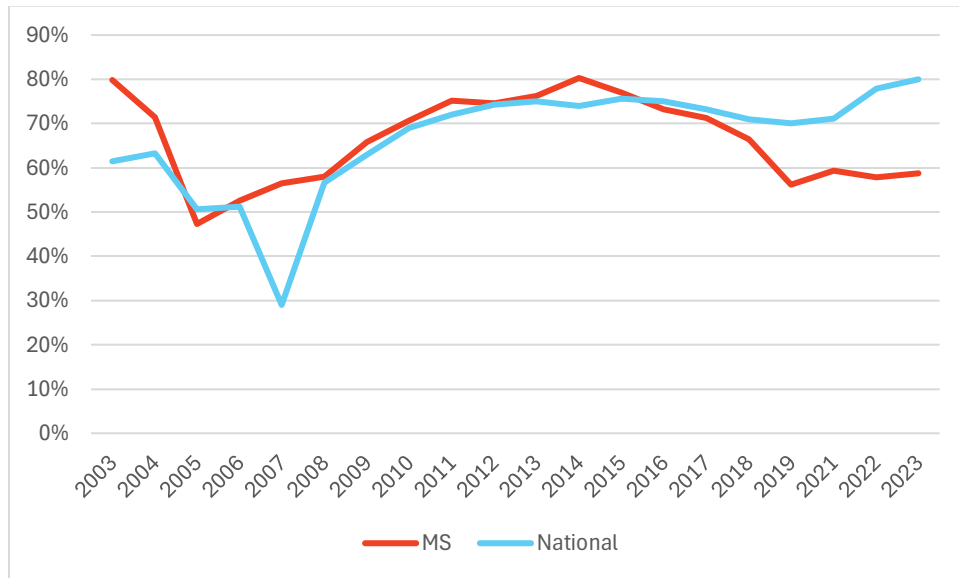
Procedural error rates refer specifically to mistakes made during the administration of the program such as incorrect data entry, improper documentation, or misapplication of policy. These errors can distort payment amounts in either direction, affecting both recipients and program integrity. Figure 3 illustrates the procedural error rate for Mississippi from 2012 through 2024.

Figure 3. Procedural Error Rate
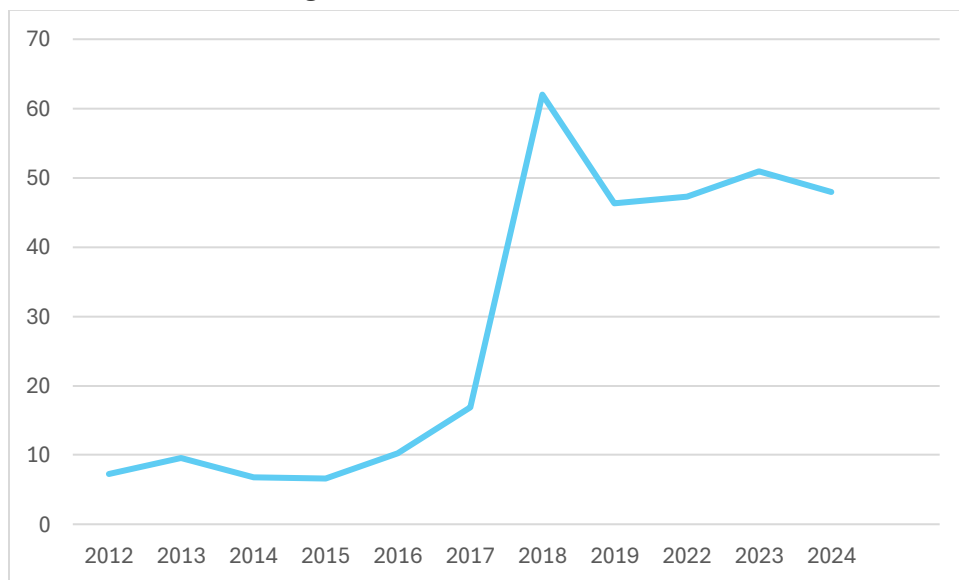
State-Level

The HOPE Act of 2017, formally known as the Medicaid and Human Services Transparency and Fraud Prevention Act, directed the Mississippi Division of Medicaid and the Department of Human Services to adopt real-time eligibility verification using private vendors. This policy change was intended to strengthen program integrity by improving fraud detection and reducing administrative waste.

However, subsequent data indicates that the implementation of the HOPE Act may have coincided with several administrative challenges. For example, as shown in Figure 2, access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) declined from 73% in 2017 to 66% in 2018, with a further decrease to 56% in 2019. Additionally, Figure 3 illustrates a significant rise in the procedural error rate, from 10.2% in 2016 to 16.9% in 2017, immediately following implementation.

While SNAP payment error rates encompass both overpayments and underpayments, these figures highlight the importance of evaluating the broader effects of eligibility verification reforms. A closer examination of the root causes of procedural errors is essential for understanding how administrative changes may influence program access and service delivery.

Federal-Level

The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 "required the USDA to update its regulations to ensure that the quality control system produced accurate, statistically valid results and to regularly review states' quality control process" (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2024). The USDA expanded the rule to include revisions to SNAP error rates for 2017 through 2019. "The USDA attributed the increase to an improved measurement process rather than an actual increase in improper payments" (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2024).

Additionally, the bill eliminated bonus payments to states for performance measures. Therefore, removing the incentive for states to invest in administrative activities to improve efficiency.

In addition to legislative changes, other external factors likely contributed to the increase in error rates. External factors that could affect the administration of SNAP are the following:

Technical vulnerabilities

"Although specific data on the proportion of SNAP payment errors directly attributable to EBT-related issues is not available, it is clear that technical glitches and fraudulent activities involving EBT can contribute to the overall error rate" (Mercatus Policy Center, 2025).

Errors and Fraud by Households

"An individual may fraudulently claim (1)to be unemployed or have a minimum income, (2) to purchase and prepare meals separately, and (3) to have a false identity or false eligibility" (Mercatus Policy Center,2025).

Errors and Fraud by State Agencies

"If such problems are unintentional, they are considered errors, but some of these problems may result from misconduct in the quality control of the state"(Mercatus   Policy   Center, 2025).

COVID-19 Pandemic

"Ending the program flexibilities implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in changing policies, readjusted operations, and case processing backlogs" (USDA, 2024).

Staff Turnover

"High staff turnover has meant loss of institutional knowledge; new staff and supervisors need time to learn the intricacies of SNAP" (USDA, 2024).

Duplicate Applications

"Applicants may submit multiple applications when they do not get timely feedback that their initial application was received. This leads to duplication applications in the state's queue, increasing the backlog"(USDA,2024).

Together this could cause payment error rates.

What's Next for Mississippi?

As highlighted in our previous blog post, when Mississippi is faced with increased financial pressure, it often responds by tightening eligibility requirements for food assistance programs. Unfortunately, this can create unnecessary hurdles for residents who already qualify, making it harder for families to put food on the table and overwhelming already stretched administrative systems.

To address these challenges and ensure that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) remains accessible and effective, the ACLU urges state legislators to take the following actions:

1. **Increase Transparency and Public Reporting**

   Mississippi must commit to transparency. Releasing regular, public-facing reports on SNAP error rates, corrective measures, and progress timelines is essential. Public accountability drives improvement and rebuilds trust with residents.

2. **Audit and Modernize Technical Infrastructure**

   Outdated systems are a major contributor to processing errors and access issues. Mississippi should partner with independent evaluators to conduct a comprehensive audit of technical systems, ensuring that the technology underpinning SNAP is accurate, secure, and user-friendly.

3. **Conduct a Root Cause Analysis**

   Quick fixes won't solve deep-rooted problems. A thorough analysis is needed to uncover the systemic causes of errors and inefficiencies in SNAP administration. Only by understanding these underlying issues can states implement meaningful, lasting reforms.

4. **Foster Cross-State Collaboration**

There's no need to reinvent the wheel. By building stronger connections with other states, agencies can learn from proven best practices, especially in modernizing data systems and improving office operations.

5. Invest in MDHS Personnel and Strengthen Training

Behind every successful program is a well-supported workforce. Offering competitive salaries and ongoing professional development is critical to recruiting and retaining skilled staff. Investing in agency personnel is investing in the long-term success and reliability of SNAP.