

## When full time isn't enough

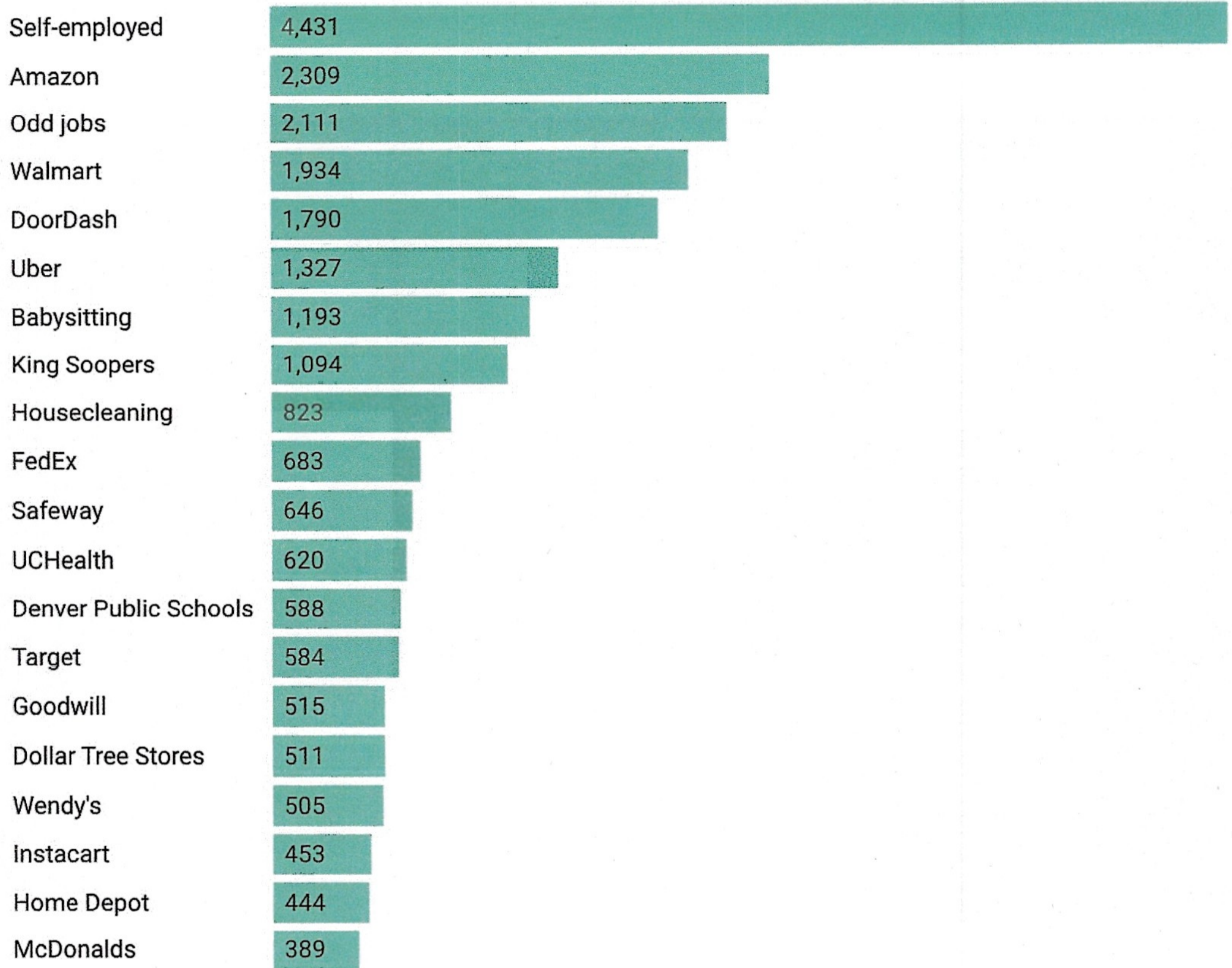
Thousands of employed Colorado workers need SNAP benefits to make ends meet



A worker loads boxes into a trailer of a truck to be shipped out at Amazon's Fulfillment Center in Thornton.  
HELEN H. RICHARDSON — DENVER POST FILE PHOTO

# Both national and Colorado-based businesses have employees on federal food benefits

More than 1,000 people who work for Amazon, Walmart, DoorDash, Uber or King Soopers received SNAP benefits.



Data is a snapshot of the number of employees receiving SNAP benefits as of October 2025. Full- and part-time employment was included in counts. Odd jobs is an employer category in the state data and not a title determined by The Conversation. Employers were captured in the state data once they had at least 100 employees on SNAP. THE CONVERSATION SOURCE: COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

CHART: THE CONVERSATION SOURCE: MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY LIVING WAGE CALCULATOR

BY JENNIFER C. GREENFIELD

## THE CONVERSATION

In Colorado, more than 600,000 workers received benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known as SNAP, in October 2025. This federal program protects low-income children, disabled adults and workers from hunger by providing money to help them buy groceries.

Thousands of Coloradans employed by major corporations, including 2,300 Amazon workers and more than 1,000 workers at King Soopers, use SNAP benefits.

There are also hundreds of recipients who work for local organizations, including nearly 600 employees of the Denver Public Schools system, according to data I evaluated after it was obtained by The Conversation from the Colorado Department of Human Services.

"The findings are a sobering reflection of the economic pressures facing Denver Public Schools staff and K-12 educators everywhere," said Scott Pribble, director of external communications for Denver Public Schools, in an email to The Conversation.

Denver Public Schools offers some of the highest teacher pay in Colorado and has a minimum hourly rate of \$20 for all staff, according to Pribble.

"While we are proud of our current compensation packages, we recognize the need to do more. We are constantly striving to provide higher wages for all staff members," Pribble wrote. The data provided by the state has limitations. It does not show how many hours each SNAP recipient works — so we don't know how many of the workers mentioned above are part-time or seasonal employees.

But the reality is that even full-time workers can receive SNAP benefits. Workers earning at or near the state minimum wage often qualify because their wages, even for full-time work, are still low.

As a social work researcher, I study policies that support working families. I have examined how health and household economic security are affected by paid family and medical leave, universal basic income and childcare subsidies for low- and middle-income workers.

### **National problem that's acute in Colorado**

More than 16 million workers across the U.S. rely on programs like SNAP to fill in the gaps.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office reported in October 2020 that more than two-thirds of people in the SNAP program work full time for 50 or more weeks per year. Using data I obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau, I confirmed that in 2024 there were more than 254,000 Colorado workers who received SNAP benefits, and they worked an average of 35 hours per week at an average of around \$17.70 per hour.

The reason so many full-time workers still rely on SNAP is rooted in a fundamental gap between wages and the cost of living. Even a single adult with no dependents working 40 hours a week at Colorado's minimum wage, which is \$15.16 per hour, may qualify for SNAP benefits. In fact, earning the state minimum wage and working 52 weeks, they would qualify if they missed just 14 hours of work in the entire year. Colorado law requires employers to provide a maximum of 48 hours of paid sick time to minimum wage workers, but more than half of workers at the minimum have no paid vacation time. As a result, missing more than seven days of work in a year due to illness or other unavoidable circumstances could push wages low enough to qualify a single worker for SNAP.

Households with dependents qualify for SNAP at even higher wages than the state minimum because the annual income threshold, which is \$31,320 for a single worker with no dependents, rises with household size.

In short, the state-mandated minimum wage is simply inadequate to meet families' basic needs, and many full-time workers must rely on SNAP to put food on the table.

Some employers, like Amazon, point to the federal minimum wage, and the differences in SNAP eligibility from state to state, as the root cause of the issue.

"Amazon pay is among the best in the industry – well over double the federal minimum wage and significantly more than other retailers," said Eileen Hards, an Amazon spokesperson, in an email. "As we've said for years, what really needs to happen is a significant and large increase in the federal minimum wage — that would be a big boost for American families." *Note*

With the federal minimum wage set at \$7.25 per hour, a rate established in 2009, doubling the minimum wage would still qualify many full-time Amazon workers for SNAP in 28 states, including Colorado.

## Colorado cost of living soars

Ten years ago, Colorado voted to increase the state's minimum hourly wage. Voters had already approved a constitutional amendment in 2006 tying the minimum wage to the cost of living, and the 2016 ballot initiative established a new floor of \$12 per hour, starting in 2020, which would increase annually to keep pace with inflation. Since the 2016 vote, as costs have soared, the minimum wage has kept pace with the official consumer price index for Colorado, rising from \$12 in 2020 to \$15.16 in 2026.

Some Colorado cities have increased it further. For instance, Denver's minimum wage is \$19.29, and Boulder's is \$16.82.

Employers like Amazon and Kroger, which operates King Soopers, offer higher wages than the state and local minimum wages. Kroger, which employs 24,000 people in Colorado, has an average hourly wage of \$24.58 and approximately \$32 an hour when benefits are included, according to Jessica Trowbridge, head of corporate affairs at King Soopers.

"Our associates also have an average tenure of 16 years, reflecting the meaningful, long-term career opportunities we strive to provide," she said in an email to The Conversation. "Additionally, supporting the communities we serve is central to our mission, and within a year we've donated more than 27 million meals locally to help address food insecurity." *Note*

But Colorado's cost of living has risen faster than the U.S. average, and even with yearly cost-of-living increases to the state's minimum wage, wages are not high enough to pay for basic needs. The Living Wage project at MIT estimates that a single worker with no dependents in Colorado needs \$26 per hour to meet their basic needs, while a family with two workers and two children needs \$34.04 per hour per worker. *Note*

Meanwhile, the median wage across all households in Colorado is \$23.77 per hour. *Note*

The mismatch between incomes and the cost of living is not only a problem for families trying to make ends meet. It is increasingly a problem for state budgets as well, especially as changes to the SNAP program, passed by Congress in 2025, take effect. An estimated 298,000 Coloradans will lose some or all SNAP benefits by January 2027 due to changes passed as part of tax and spending bill in July 2025. The changes will also add an estimated \$178 million to the Colorado state budget by shifting costs from the federal budget to states. *Note*

The broad eligibility for SNAP among even full-time workers highlights a fundamental issue: At the current minimum wage, workers are not making enough to pay for essentials like housing, food and childcare. Those with dependents face especially difficult choices about how to juggle working and parenting, especially when

childcare alone costs \$1,645 per month in some counties in Colorado - or about two-thirds of the income of a full-time worker earning the minimum wage in the state.

Colorado, and the U.S. overall, has a wage problem. Costs continue to rise, while incomes, even in states that have adjusted minimum wage guidelines, increasingly fail to bring households out of poverty.

Policymakers face a tough set of questions. Is adjusting the minimum wage the answer? Should major employers be held accountable when their employees rely on taxpayer-funded public programs to fill the gap between their paychecks and the cost of their basic needs? Or do other policy levers hold more potential to close the gap between incomes and household costs?

As Americans watch prices rise at the gas pump and on grocery store shelves, answers to these important questions are urgently needed.

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