

Summary

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) provides millions of Americans with the means to purchase food for a nutritious diet. The FSP is the largest of the 15 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). In an average month in fiscal year 1999, the FSP served approximately 18.2 million people. This report presents the characteristics of food stamp households nationwide in fiscal year 1999 (October 1998 to September 1999). This information on household characteristics comes from FSP household data for fiscal year 1999 collected by FNS for quality control purposes.

FSP Participation and Costs

In an average month of fiscal year 1999, the FSP provided benefits to 18.2 million people living in 7.7 million households across the United States. The total cost of the program over fiscal year 1999 was \$17.7 billion, \$15.8 billion of which were for food stamp benefits. The average monthly food stamp benefit per household in fiscal year 1999 was \$162. Compared with fiscal year 1998, the number of FSP participants decreased by 8 percent and FSP benefit costs decreased by 7 percent.

Characteristics of Food Stamp Households and Participants

In fiscal year 1999, slightly over half of all food stamp participants were children, 39 percent were nonelderly adults, and 9 percent were elderly people. About 68 percent of the children were school age, and 71 percent of adult participants were women. Approximately 89 percent of food stamp households lived in poverty, as measured by the fiscal year 1999 federal poverty guidelines issued by the

Department of Health and Human Services. Food stamp benefits were concentrated among poorer households: 35 percent of all food stamp households had a gross income less than or equal to half of the poverty guideline and these households received 55 percent of all benefits. If the value of food stamps is included as income, 7 percent of all food stamp households moved above the poverty guideline as a result of receiving food stamps, and 17 percent moved from below to above half of the poverty guideline.

Of all food stamp households, 89 percent contained either a child or an elderly or disabled person, and these households received 92 percent of all benefits. Households with children received a relatively large average monthly food stamp benefit (\$234), reflecting their relatively large average size (3.3 people compared with 2.4 people, on average, overall). Most of the food stamp households with children were single-adult households. Over half of these single-adult households with children received support from Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). About 42 percent of all food stamp households with children had earned income; 38 percent of single-adult households with children and 58 percent of multiple-adult households with children had earnings. Eleven percent of all households with children had both TANF and earned income.

Almost 80 percent of food stamp households with an elderly member consisted of an elderly person living alone. These individuals received an average monthly benefit of \$46, compared with a \$61 average monthly food stamp benefit for all households containing an elderly person. The relatively smaller benefit level for households containing an elderly person reflects their relatively small size (1.3 people).

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