

Background

In an average month in 2008, about 28.4 million people living in 12.7 million households participated in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the United States.¹

SNAP households are a diverse group. Because benefits are available to most low-income households with few resources, regardless of age, disability status, or family structure, recipients represent a broad cross-section of the Nation's poor. This report provides information about the demographic and economic circumstances of SNAP households in fiscal year 2008.

Findings: General Characteristics

Most SNAP recipients were children or elderly. Nearly half (49 percent) were children and another 9 percent were age 60 or older. Working-age women represented 28 percent of the caseload, while working-age men represented 14 percent.

Many SNAP recipients had jobs. More than 29 percent of SNAP households had earnings in 2008, and 40 percent of all SNAP participants lived in a household with earnings. For these households, earnings were the primary source of income.

The majority of SNAP households did not receive cash welfare benefits. Less than 11 percent of all SNAP households received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits and another 5 percent received State General Assistance (GA) benefits. Two other targeted benefit programs were major sources of income for the elderly and disabled: Supplemental Security Income (SSI), received by 26 percent and Social Security, received by 25 percent (10 percent received both).

SNAP households had little income. Only 13 percent had income above the poverty line, while nearly 41 percent had incomes at, or below, half the poverty line. Nearly 16 percent had no cash income of any kind. The typical SNAP household had gross income of \$701 per month. About 24 percent of monthly funds (gross income plus SNAP benefits) available to a typical household came from SNAP.

The average SNAP household received a monthly benefit of \$222. About 33 percent received the maximum benefit for their family size --\$542 for a family of four. Less than 7 percent received the minimum benefit of \$10 (which was available to households of one or two members in 2008); most (90 percent) of these households contained elderly or disabled members and were likely receiving Supplemental Security Income or Social Security.

SNAP households had few resources. The average SNAP household possessed only about \$25 in countable resources (including the nonexcluded portion of vehicles and the entire value of checking and savings accounts and other savings). Nearly three-fourths (73 percent) had no countable resources. However, it should be noted that over half of SNAP households are categorically eligible (households where all members receive TANF, SSI, or GA benefits) and thus neither subject to the asset test nor required to provide information about their assets.

Most SNAP households were small. The average SNAP household size was 2.2 persons, but varied considerably by household composition. Households with children were relatively large, averaging 3.3 members. Households with elderly participants were smaller, with an average of 1.3 members.

¹ On October 1, 2008, the Food Stamp Program changed its name to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Findings: Changes Over Time

There have been several notable changes in the characteristics of SNAP households over the 20 years from 1989 to 2008. Some of the most striking changes are noted here.

The primary source of income among SNAP participants shifted from welfare to work. In 1989, 42 percent of all SNAP households received cash welfare benefits and only 20 percent had earnings. In 2008, only 11 percent received cash welfare, while 29 percent had earnings.

The percentage of households with no cash income of any kind more than doubled. In 1989, 7 percent of SNAP households had zero gross income. This increased to 16 percent in 2008. Similarly, the percentage of SNAP households with zero net income, who received the maximum benefit, rose from 18 percent in 1990 to 33 percent in 2008.

The average SNAP household's income remained close to 60 percent of the poverty level. When SNAP participation levels decline, average household income rise slightly. Conversely, income falls when participation levels increase. However, the variation is small, ranging from an average income that is 56 percent of poverty, when caseloads were rising rapidly in 1993, to 63 percent of the poverty level in 2000, when caseloads were low.

Households have gotten smaller. In 1990, the average SNAP household contained 2.6 persons. In 2008, the average had fallen to 2.2 persons. During this period, households with one person rose from 32 percent of all households to 46 percent.

The percentage of participants who are children remained fairly steady. In 1990, half of participants were under age 18, about the same percentage as in 2008. However, the share of households with children fell from 60 percent in 1990 to 51 percent in 2007. This is primarily due to an increase in single-person households.

The number of households with elderly participants has increased in recent years. Factors that drive participation changes, such as the strength of the economy and welfare policies, typically do not affect the elderly as much. As a result, there has been little fluctuation in the number of elderly participants. However, between 2005 and 2008, the number of households with an elderly member rose from 1.8 million households to 2.3 million, a greater gain than the overall SNAP caseload.

Wolkwitz, Kari and Trippe, Carole (2009). *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2008*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the Food and Nutrition Service (available on-line at www.fns.usda.gov/ora).

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