USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service

FOOD STAMP PARTICIPANTS' ACCESS TO FOOD RETAILERS

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Background

For over 20 years the Food Stamp Program (FSP) has been the cornerstone of the national commitment to protect the nutrition, health, and well being of America's low-income families. By design and law, the program seeks to achieve its nutritional goals by working through "normal channels of trade". It is therefore critical to know whether food stamp families are in fact able to purchase a variety of quality food at a reasonable price from food retailers authorized to accept food stamps.

An earlier analysis, examined issues related to store access using Census data about the demographics of the populations in areas where authorized Food Stamp Program stores are located. The National Food Stamp Program Survey (NFSPS) obtained complementary information by asking respondents themselves about their food shopping experiences, their transportation to food stores, their food shopping patterns, and their perceptions of the adequacy of their food shopping opportunities. The NFSPS conducted in 1996 collected information on customer service, access to authorized food retailers, and food security and nutrient availability from the first nationally representative sample of Food Stamp Program participants and potential participants.

Findings

The findings suggest that most low-income households, including both FSP participants and those not participating in the program, have good access to food retailers. Most households in the sample shop in their neighborhoods and express high levels of satisfaction with their shopping opportunities. Further, for the average household, the round trip to the favorite store is only about 20 minutes. For most households, this trip is done by car. Other findings:

Food Shopping Experiences

Approximately one-third of low-income households usually shop for food within a mile of where they live while another third shop at stores between one and four miles away.

Transportation to Food Shopping

Most low-income households use the automobile as their principal form of transportation for food shopping, but fewer than half are able to use a car they own and have to rely on friends, family, neighbors etc.

Food Shopping Patterns

As with other Americans, the great majority of low-income households shop at supermarkets. However, considerable numbers of sample members supplement food from supermarkets with purchases at several other types of stores, including neighborhood grocery stores, convenience stores, bakeries, and produce stands.

Most of the low-income households in the sample reported that they frequently used such "careful shopping" techniques as stocking up on bargains, watching for grocery "specials," comparing prices across stores, and using shopping lists. At least 60 percent of respondents said that they did these activities "on most shopping trips" or at least "fairly often." Another 20 percent of respondents reported that they never did most of these activities.

Perceptions of Shopping Opportunities

For households who do not usually shop in their neighborhoods, the most common reasons for shopping elsewhere were high prices in their neighborhood (48 percent) and lack of stores (40 percent).

Among respondents who shopped within their neighborhoods, more than 85 percent characterized themselves as either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the neighborhood shopping opportunities. When asked about the types of improvements they would like to see in the shopping situations of their neighborhoods, respondents most commonly mentioned the introduction of more supermarkets, lower prices and better selection of foods.

Summary

While most households are basically pleased with their shopping opportunities, a minority do not perceive themselves as having good access to shopping. For instances, even of the households that shop in their neighborhoods, seven percent indicated that they were very dissatisfied with shopping opportunities near where they lived. Similar responses were given by about a fifth of recipients who did not shop in their neighborhoods. These estimates are broadly consistent with a separate finding that, depending on the criterion, approximately 10 to 20 percent of respondents failed to rate the stores where they shopped as at least “good.”