

Background

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps low-income individuals purchase food so that they can obtain a nutritious diet. One important measure of Program performance is the ability to reach its target population, as indicated by the fraction of people eligible for benefits who actually participate. This report is the latest in a series on SNAP participation rates. Estimates are based on the March 2009 Current Population Survey and program administrative data for Fiscal Year (FY) 2008. The findings represent national participation rates for FY 2008.

Findings

On average, 41 million individuals were eligible for benefits each month in 2008, and 27 million received them. While the program served 67 percent of all eligible individuals, the program provided nearly 84 percent of the benefits that all eligible individuals could receive. This is because the neediest individuals who were eligible for higher benefits participated at higher rates than other eligible persons.

The national participation rate among individuals increased 1 percentage point between 2007 and 2008. This increase was not statistically significant.

The rise in the participation rate is due to an increase in participating individuals that was greater than the increase in eligibles. While the number of eligibles rose by 5 percent, the number of participants rose by 7 percent.

Economic factors, including increases in the number of unemployed people and in the number of people in poverty, contributed to the increase in eligible individuals and participants.

With respect to the State program environment, States have taken multiple steps to make it easier

for eligible persons to apply for and receive SNAP. Many State agencies have increased outreach to low-income families, implemented program simplifications, and engaged community partners in the application process. At the same time, States are facing their own economic challenges when it comes to covering their share of administrative expenses.

Participation rates increased slightly for most economic and demographic subgroups between 2007 and 2008. Groups with the largest increases included the elderly (3 points), individuals in households with no cash income (5 points), and individuals qualifying for the maximum benefit (6 points).

Rates remained relatively high for children, individuals with incomes between 1 and 50 percent of poverty, and recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), following historical trends. At least 82 percent of all eligibles from these groups participated. In contrast, participation rates for eligible elderly adults, nondisabled childless adults, and individuals living in households with incomes above poverty were much lower – 41 percent or less. Rates for eligible noncitizens and individuals in households with earnings were 51 and 55 percent, respectively.

For More Information

Leftin, Joshua. (2010). *Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: 2001 – 2008*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the Food and Nutrition Service (available online at www.fns.usda.gov/fns).

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