

ENHANCING COMPLETION RATES FOR SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) QUALITY CONTROL REVIEWS (SUMMARY)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), developed the Quality Control (QC) process in 1977 to track and measure errors in both eligibility and benefit determination for USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). States conduct monthly reviews of a statistically representative sample of participating households to measure the validity of SNAP cases and benefit levels. A subsample of cases, including all incomplete cases, is re-reviewed by Federal QC staff to validate the State findings. The SNAP QC process serves as the basis for the SNAP payment error rates and also provides FNS with a probability-based national sample that supports research on the SNAP population.

National completion rates for SNAP QC reviews have generally declined since peak levels in the 1980s, and State-level completion rates vary widely. Excessive levels of incomplete reviews can reduce the accuracy of error-rate estimates. This study examines the factors contributing to incomplete reviews of cases and describes best practices associated with high SNAP QC completion rates.

Data Sources and Methodology

Data collection activities for this study included:

- Site visits to 6 States and 2 FNS Regional Offices,
- Online and telephone surveys of the remaining States and Regional Offices,
- Collection of extant administrative data from 5 States for fiscal years 2010 to 2012, and
- Field re-reviews of 75 incomplete cases from 3 States.

States and Federal Regional Offices are not identified in the study results. Instead, States were divided into three groups of equal size according to their QC completion rate.

Key Findings

Variation in the State SNAP QC review processes is associated with the completion rate.

- **Household interviews.** QC reviewers in States with high completion rates were more likely to routinely call clients prior to interviews to schedule or confirm appointments.
- **Nonresponse followup strategies.** Reviewers in States with high completion rates made more attempts to contact clients, used various means of contact, and identified creative ways to obtain updated contact information for households.
- **Staff workload.** Overall workloads of State QC Reviewers (SQCRs) in site visit States with low completion rates were generally higher and included other job responsibilities outside of SNAP QC.
- **Staff Training.** SQCRs in low-completion States were more likely to report their training had decreased or not changed over time. SQCRs in low-completion States were also more likely to receive training from a third party contractor.

Federal SNAP QC review methodology is less intensive than State QC review methods. The Federal review process consists of a desk review, in contrast to the face-to-face interviews and field work conducted during the State reviews. Although Federal reviewers are authorized to attempt to complete incomplete cases through followup, such attempts are uncommon.

Individuals included in incomplete cases tend to be younger, have no income, and receive SNAP benefits for a shorter period of time.

Analyses of administrative data from five States suggest differences in the characteristics of individuals represented by complete and incomplete cases. The individuals included in incomplete cases are more likely to:

- Have zero income and receive the maximum benefit level.
- Be headed by individuals younger than 25 and have fewer elderly members.
- Be newly certified and have shorter intervals since the most recent administrative action.
- Live in metropolitan areas.

As part of this study, field interviewers were able to complete 17 percent of incomplete cases. Field interviewers completed 11 of 64 incomplete cases selected for re-reviews. Among the 11 completed re-reviews, 3 contained payment errors, each the result of overissuance. The case error rate for these cases was 27 percent, and the payment error rate was 13 percent. Due to the very small sample sizes, these results are not generalizable to the overall QC sample.

Field interviewers used several strategies to successfully complete the cases previously designated as incomplete:

- Established verbal contact with clients before scheduling and conducting interviews.
- Showed greater persistence in contacting clients and used a wider array of contact methods, including text messaging, email, and home visits.
- Conducted interviews in clients' homes.
- Worked directly with collateral contacts to obtain missing documentation.

Recommendations

Recommendations for State and Federal Reviewers to Enhance Completion Rates

- Expand Federal efforts to complete incomplete cases through field work and followup.
- For both Federal and State reviewers attempting to complete incomplete cases:
 - Be persistent and use a variety of contact modes, including text messaging, to obtain household cooperation.
 - Schedule and confirm interviews in advance.
 - Consider conducting interviews at clients' homes.
 - Expand efforts to use collateral contacts in the absence of client interviews.
 - Use technology to improve the efficiency of State SNAP QC review processes, such as online workflow management systems, cellphones for SQCRs, and videoconferencing technology for client interviews.

Recommendations for Addressing Challenges Related to the SNAP Certification Process

- Increase awareness among clients about the SNAP QC process and its requirements. Use of phone and online applications may desensitize clients to the need for in-person interviews in the QC process.
- Educate eligibility workers about the SNAP QC process to enable them to inform clients and answer questions.
- Train eligibility workers to provide more documentation in case files to assist QC validations, even if not required for certification.

For More Information

McGill, Brittany et.al. (2015). *Enhancing Completion Rates for SNAP Quality Control Reviews: Final Report*. Prepared by Insight Policy Research for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, December 2015. Available online at www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.