

## Background

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) helps low-income individuals purchase food so that they can obtain a nutritious diet. One important measure of a program's performance is its ability to reach its target population, as indicated by the fraction of people eligible for benefits that actually participate. This report is the latest in a series on food stamp participation rates based on the March Current Population Survey, and presents national participation rates for fiscal year 2003.

## Findings

Of the 37 million individuals who were eligible for food stamp benefits in an average month of 2003, 21 million individuals (56 percent) chose to participate. There were approximately 16 million eligible individuals who did not participate in 2003. Although the FSP serves just over half of all eligible individuals, it provides 65 percent of the benefits that all eligible individuals could receive. As a result, the FSP appears to be reaching the neediest eligible individuals.

The rate of participation by demographic and economic subgroups continued to follow historical patterns in 2003. Rates were relatively high for children and individuals in the poorest households, as well as for recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), with at least three-quarters of all eligibles from these groups participating. On the other hand, less than a third of eligible elderly adults and individuals living in households with incomes above poverty participated and less than half of eligible noncitizens, citizen children living with noncitizens, and individuals in households with earnings participated.

Access to the FSP continued to expand in 2003 through the restoration of eligibility to certain noncitizens and the continued relaxation of

vehicle rules. The 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act restored eligibility for qualified noncitizens receiving disability benefits effective October 1, 2002, and to qualified noncitizens who have lived in the United States for over five years effective April 1, 2003. Recent expansions in vehicle rules began in 2001 and, while a majority of states implemented changes to their vehicle rules in 2001 and 2002, a small number changed their rules during fiscal year 2003.

These reforms are likely to lower participation rates in the short term for two reasons. First, it takes time for information about policy changes to make its way into communities, reach the people likely to be affected, and influence their decision to apply for benefits. In addition, the main beneficiaries of the new eligibility rules—immigrants and the working poor—tend to have lower-than-average participation rates.

Due to changes in the treatment of categorical eligibility and other technical improvements, the 2003 participation rates presented in this report are not strictly comparable with previous estimates. However, the impact of these changes is relatively small, and the direction of the trend is unaffected for the overall participation rates and most major subgroups. Nationally, the participation rate among individuals rose by nearly 2 percentage points between 2002 and 2003, the second annual increase after declining for seven years.

## For More Information

Cunnygham, K. (2005). *Food Stamp Program Participation Rates: 2003*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the Food and Nutrition Service (available on-line at [www.fns.usda.gov/fns](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns)).

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