

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 2005.

Findings

Of the 38 million individuals who were eligible for food stamp benefits in an average month of 2005, 25 million individuals participated. There were over 13 million eligible individuals who did not participate in 2005. The FSP served about 65 percent of all eligible individuals, but provided 80 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 2005. Rates were relatively high for children, individuals in the poorest households, and recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), with at least 80 percent of all eligibles from these groups participating. On the other hand, no more than a third of eligible elderly adults, nondisabled childless adults, and individuals living in households with incomes above poverty participated in 2005. Just over half of noncitizens and individuals in households with earnings participated.

The national participation rate among individuals increased by nearly 4 percentage points between 2004 and 2005, the fourth annual

increase after a 7-year decline. Almost every demographic and economic subgroup experienced a rise in participation rates. Children and the poorest households experienced the largest increase in participation rates. The participation rate among individuals living in working households has risen more rapidly than the overall participation rate since 1999, narrowing the gap from 13 points to 8 points during this period.

Since 2001, increased outreach and improved access to the FSP have contributed to the rise in participation rates. During this period, States increased outreach to low-income households and implemented program simplifications to make it easier for eligible persons to apply for and receive food stamps. Many State FSP agencies have extended hours of operations, waived the requirement for in-person interviews in hardship situations, and streamlined their overall application process. Most States have also reduced the amount of information that participants must report.

Minor enhancements to the methodology used to estimate eligibility have improved the accuracy of these estimates. These include updates to the model used to impute asset eligibility, to the net income equation used to determine eligibility, and to data used to impute undocumented status to some noncitizens. The estimation also incorporates rules regarding sponsor deeming when determining immigrant eligibility.

For More Information

Wolkwitz, K. (2007). *Trends in Food Stamp Program Participation Rates: 1999 – 2005*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the Food and Nutrition Service (available online at www.fns.usda.gov/fns/oane).

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