

Background

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) 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 food stamp participation rates. Estimates are based on the March 2007 Current Population Survey and FSP administrative data for Fiscal Year 2006. The findings represent national participation rates for FY 2006.

Findings

On average, 37 million individuals were eligible for food stamp benefits each month in 2006, and 25 million received them. While the FSP served just over 67 percent of all eligible individuals, the program provided 83 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 by 2 percentage points between 2005 and 2006. This represents the fourth annual increase and a cumulative 13-point increase since 2002.

Since 2002, States have 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 in order to maintain their eligibility and benefit levels.

Almost every demographic and economic subgroup experienced a rise in participation rates from 2005 to 2006. Increases were particularly large among individuals in households with Social Security income, individuals qualifying for the maximum benefit, and individuals in households with no children.

Rates remained relatively high for children, individuals in the poorest households, and recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), following historical trends. At least 80 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 – less than 41 percent. Rates for eligible noncitizens and individuals in households with earnings were 54 and 57 percent, respectively.

Among these subgroups, increases in participation rates were largest for individuals in households without children, elderly persons, and nondisabled childless adults. Participation increased between 4 and 5 percent for these groups.

Minor enhancements to the methodology used to estimate eligibility have improved the accuracy of these estimates.

For More Information

Wolkwitz, K. (2008). *Trends in Food Stamp Program Participation Rates: 2000 – 2006*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the Food and Nutrition Service (available online at www.fns.usda.gov/fns).

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