



# FOOD STAMP PARTICIPATION RATES AND BENEFITS: AN ANALYSIS OF VARIATION WITHIN DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

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## Central Issue

Previous studies have shown that participation rates are higher among people eligible for a relatively large food stamp benefit than among those eligible for a comparatively small benefit. This analysis seeks to determine whether or not this relationship between participation rates and benefits holds for different demographic groups within the food stamp population. This analysis confirms that the relationship holds for most demographic groups. Surprisingly, the analysis also shows that there are many nonparticipating individuals eligible for relatively large benefits.

## Background

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is the foundation of America's national nutrition safety net and the first line of the nation's defense against hunger. A primary means by which the success of the FSP is measured is the degree to which eligible individuals and households participate in the program.

Researchers have found that an expectation of low food stamp benefits is one of five causes why individuals who qualify for benefits do not participate in the FSP.<sup>1</sup> McConnell, Ponza and Cohen (1999) found that 35 to 45 percent of the people in the subgroups they surveyed indicate that one of the reasons they did not participate in the program was the belief that they were eligible for a low benefit amount. Analyses of household survey data confirmed that participation in the FSP is likely to increase with the size of the benefit households would receive (Martini, 1992; Cunyningham, 2002). This analysis examines the participation rates of varying demographic groups at different

food stamp benefit levels. Estimates of the number of eligible individuals were derived from March 2001 Current Population Survey (CPS) and estimates of participating households are based on food stamp administrative data for September 2000. The approach used in this analysis is similar to the method used to produce national estimates of overall food stamp participation rates.

## Findings

**Among most demographic groups, participants receive higher benefit amounts than would eligible nonparticipants.** Participating children and nonelderly adults receive twice as much as their eligible nonparticipating counterparts. Participating elderly and noncitizens also receive more than their counterparts. It is only among disabled nonelderly adults, that participants would

**Table 1**  
**Average Household Benefits of Participants and Eligible Nonparticipants (2000)**

Demographic Group	Partici- pants	Eligible Non- participants	Ratio*
All Individuals	167	73	2.29
Children (under 18)	247	117	2.11
Nonelderly Adults	194	97	2.00
Elderly (60 or over)	63	52	1.21
Disabled Nonelderly Adults	94	115	.82
Nondisabled Childless Adults	139	118	1.18
Noncitizens	195	129	1.51
Individuals in Households:			
With Children	247	117	2.11
Without Children	74	57	1.30
Individuals in Households:			
With Earnings	205	N/A	--

\*Average household benefit of participants divided by average household benefit of eligible nonparticipants.

<sup>1</sup> The other four categories are: perceived lack of need; lack of information; program features and administration; and stigma and other psychological reasons.

**Table 2**  
**Food Stamp Participation Rates By Benefit Level And Demographic Group (2000)**

Demographic Group	Household Benefit Level:				All
	\$0-\$26	\$26-\$50	\$51-\$200	over \$200	
All Individuals	28	45	58	76	59
Children (under 18)	21	34	66	81	72
Nonelderly Adults	37	46	59	73	60
Elderly (60 or over)	24	49	37	22	31
Disabled					
Nonelderly Adults	48	78	59	34	53
Nondisabled					
Childless Adults	10	26	31	22	27
Noncitizens	31	32	44	51	45
Individuals in Households:					
With Children	23	37	65	81	71
Without Children	29	50	48	21	38
With Earnings	15	24	47	68	50

receive a lower benefit than their eligible nonparticipating counterparts (Table 1).

**Participation rates rise with benefit levels for most groups examined.** Children, nonelderly adults, noncitizens and individuals in households with earnings follow the expected pattern. Participation rates among the elderly, disabled adults and childless adults peak at lower benefit levels (Table 2).

**A significant proportion of nonparticipants are eligible for relatively high benefits.** Participation rates at the highest benefit levels are not 100 percent. An unexpected finding is that there are 2.6 million nonparticipating individuals who are eligible for a benefit over \$200 (Table 3). Three-fourths of these are individuals in households with children and 60 percent are in households with earnings.

### Summary

This work supports previous findings that participation rates increase as benefit levels

increase. However, this is not the case in all subgroups: elderly adults and disabled nonelderly adults do not display the same pattern. These two groups' participation rates *decline* at higher benefit levels.

The analysis also shows that there are 2.6 million nonparticipating individuals eligible for benefits over \$200/month. Many of these nonparticipants eligible for higher benefits are in households with children and/or households with earnings. This could mean that when designing outreach strategies, it would be a mistake to assume that low participation rates occur because benefits would be low.

**Table 3**  
**Nonparticipants Eligible for a Monthly Benefit Over \$200**

Demographic Group	Number	Percent
All Individuals	2,663,000	100
Children	1,309,000	49
Nonelderly Adults	1,061,000	40
Elderly	294,000	11
Disabled	395,000	
Nonelderly Adults		15
Nondisabled	193,000	
Childless Adults		7
Noncitizens	285,000	11
Individuals in Households:		
With Children	2,020,000	76
Without Children	644,000	24
Individuals in Households:		
With Earnings	1,657,000	62

### References

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