

Background

On an average month in 2007, about 26.5 million people living in 11.8 million households participated in the Food Stamp Program in the United States. On October 1, 2008, the Food Stamp Program will change its name to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Food stamp households are a diverse group. Because food stamp benefits are available to most low-income households with few resources, regardless of age, disability status, or family structure, recipients represent a broad cross-section of the Nation's poor. This report provides information about the demographic and economic circumstances of food stamp households in fiscal year 2007.

Findings: General Characteristics

Most food stamp recipients were children or elderly. Nearly half (49 percent) were children and another 9 percent were age 60 or older. Working-age women represented 29 percent of the caseload, while working-age men represented 14 percent.

Many food stamp recipients worked. Nearly 30 percent of food stamp households had earnings in 2007, and 41 percent of all food stamp participants lived in a household with earnings. For these households, earnings were the primary source of income.

The majority of food stamp households did not receive cash welfare benefits. Only 12 percent of all food stamp households received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families benefits and another 5 percent received State General Assistance benefits. Two other major income sources were benefits targeted to the elderly or disabled: Supplemental Security Income, received by 28 percent and Social Security, received by 25 percent (11 percent received both).

Food stamp households had little income. Less than 13 percent had incomes above the poverty line, while 39 percent had incomes at, or below, half the poverty line. Nearly 15 percent had no cash income of any kind. The typical food stamp household had gross income of \$691 per month. Nearly one-fourth of monthly funds (cash income plus food stamps) available to a typical household came from food stamps.

The average food stamp household received a monthly benefit of \$212. Nearly one-third (32 percent) received the maximum food stamp benefit (\$506 for a family of four). Only 7 percent received the minimum benefit of \$10 (which is available to households of one or two members); most (90 percent) of these households contained elderly or disabled members.

Food stamp households possessed few resources. The average food stamp household possessed only about \$143 in countable resources (including the nonexcluded portion of vehicles and the entire value of checking and savings accounts and other savings). Over two-thirds (70 percent) had no countable resources. However, it should be noted that over half of food stamp households are categorically eligible and thus not subject to the asset test. The value of available assets is not collected for these cases.

Most food stamp households were small. The average food stamp household size was 2.2 persons, but varied considerably by household composition. Households with children were relatively large, averaging 3.3 members. Households with elderly were smaller, with an average of 1.3 members.

Findings: Changes Over Time

There have been several notable changes in the characteristics of food stamp households over the 18 years from 1990 to 2007. Some of the most striking changes are noted here.

The primary source of income among food stamp participants shifted from welfare to work. In 1990, 42 percent of all food stamp households received cash welfare benefits and only 19 percent had earnings. In 2007, only 12 percent received cash welfare, while 30 percent had earnings.

The percentage of households with no cash income of any kind doubled. In 1990, 7 percent of food stamp households had zero gross income. This increased to 15 percent in 2007. Similarly, the percentage of food stamp households with zero net income, who received the maximum benefit, rose from 19 percent in 1990 to 32 percent in 2007.

The average food stamp household's income remained close to 60 percent of the poverty level. Incomes rise slightly when participation levels decline and they fall when participation levels increase. However, the variation has been small, ranging from 56 percent of poverty, when caseloads were rising rapidly in 1993, to 63 percent of the poverty level in 2000, when caseloads were low.

Households have gotten smaller. In 1990, the average food stamp household contained 2.6 persons. In 2007, the average had fallen to 2.2 persons. During this period, households with one person rose from 32 percent of all households to 45 percent.

The percentage of participants who are children remained fairly steady. The number of children, however, rose and fell in step with overall participation. In 1990, half of participants were under age 18, about the same percentage as in 2007. However, the share of households with children fell from 60 percent in 1990 to 51 percent in 2007. This is primarily due to an increase in single-person households.

Fluctuations in both the number and percentage of elderly participants have been modest. Factors that drove participation changes, such as the strength of the economy and welfare policies, typically did not affect the elderly as much.

For More Information

Wolkwitz, Kari and Josh Leftin (2008). *Characteristics of Food Stamp Households: Fiscal Year 2007*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the Food and Nutrition Service (available on-line at www.fns.usda.gov/oane).

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