

## Background

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)<sup>1</sup> 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 SNAP participation rates. Estimates are based on the March 2008 Current Population Survey and program administrative data for Fiscal Year (FY) 2007. The findings represent national participation rates for FY 2007.

## Findings

On average, 39 million individuals were eligible for benefits each month in 2007, and 26 million received them. While the Program served 66 percent of all eligible individuals, it provided 81 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 fell 1 percentage point between 2006 and 2007. This decrease was not statistically significant.

The decline is due to an increase in eligible individuals that was greater than the increase in participants. While the number of participants increased by 2 percent, the number of eligibles increased by 4 percent.

Economic factors, including increases in the number of unemployed people and in the number of people in poverty, contributed to the

increase in eligibles. However, there is, historically, a time lag between economic downturns and SNAP participation growth.

With respect to the State program environment, States have taken multiple steps to make it easier for eligible persons to apply for and receive food stamps. Many State agencies have increased outreach to low-income families, implemented program simplifications, and engaged community partners in the application process. At the same time, States are facing their own economic challenges when it comes to covering their share of administrative expenses.

Participation rates fell slightly for most economic and demographic subgroups between 2006 and 2007. These decreases were not statistically significant.

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 40 percent. Rates for eligible noncitizens and individuals in households with earnings were 48 and 56 percent, respectively.

## For More Information

Leftin, J, and Wolkwitz, K. (2009). *Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: 2000 – 2007*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the Food and Nutrition Service (available online at [www.fns.usda.gov/ora](http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora)).

<sup>1</sup> On October 1, 2008, the Food Stamp Program changed its name to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of a person's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.)

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, DC 20250-9410, or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.