

Background

In fiscal year 2011, about 44.7 million people living in 21.1 million U.S. households participated in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), on average, per month.

SNAP households are a diverse group. Because benefits are available to most low-income households with few resources, regardless of age, disability status, or family structure, participants represent a broad cross section of the Nation's poor. This report provides information about the demographic and economic circumstances of SNAP households in fiscal year 2011.

General Characteristics

Most SNAP participants were children or the elderly. Nearly half (45 percent) of participants were under age 18 and nearly 9 percent were age 60 or older.

Many SNAP participants had jobs. Over 30 percent of SNAP households had earnings in 2011, and 41 percent of all SNAP participants lived in a household with earnings.

The majority of SNAP households did not receive cash welfare benefits. Only 8 percent of all SNAP households received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, and another 4 percent received State General Assistance (GA) benefits. Over 22 percent of SNAP households received Social Security, and 20 percent received Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits given to the aged and disabled.

SNAP households had little income. About 17 percent of SNAP households had gross income above the poverty line, while 43 percent had income at, or below, half the poverty line. The average household income was slightly less than 59 percent of the poverty line. Twenty percent of SNAP households had no cash income of any kind. The average gross income for all SNAP

households was \$744 per month. For a household with an average gross income and SNAP benefits, over 27 percent of monthly funds (gross income plus SNAP benefits) came from SNAP.

The average monthly benefit received by SNAP households was \$281. Forty-one percent of SNAP households received the maximum benefit for their family size – \$668 for a family of four. Only 4 percent received the minimum benefit (\$16) available to households with one or two members. Most households (80 percent) receiving the minimum benefit contained elderly or disabled members.

Most SNAP households were small. The average SNAP household size was 2.1 persons, but varied considerably by household composition. Households with children were larger, averaging 3.2 members, while households with elderly participants were smaller, averaging 1.3 members.

SNAP has a powerful anti-poverty effect. When SNAP benefits are added to gross income, 13 percent of SNAP households move above the poverty line. The impact is even greater on the poorest households, moving 15 percent of them above 50 percent of the poverty line.

Changes Over Time

Notable changes in the characteristics of SNAP participants in the last 20 years include:

The primary form of income among SNAP participants shifted from welfare to work. In 1991, 41 percent of all SNAP households received cash welfare benefits and only 20 percent had earnings. In 2011, only 8 percent received cash welfare, while 30 percent had earnings.

The percentage of households with no cash income of any kind more than doubled. The percent of households with zero gross income has gone from 8 percent in 1991 to 20 percent in 2011. The percentage of SNAP households with zero net

income, who received the maximum benefit, rose from 21 percent in 1991 to 40 percent in 2011.

SNAP households have gotten smaller. In 1991, the average household size was 2.6 persons. In 2011, the average had fallen to 2.1 persons. Households with only one person accounted for nearly half the caseload (49 percent) in 2011.

For More Information

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis, *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2011*, by Mark Strayer, Joshua Leftin, and Esa Eslami. Project Officer, Jenny Genser. Alexandria, VA: 2012. Available online at www.fns.usda.gov/ora.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all of its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex (including gender identity and expression), marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, political beliefs, genetic information, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual'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, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Stop 9410, Washington, DC 20250-9410; or call toll-free at (866) 632-9992 (English) or (800) 877-8339 (TDD) or (866) 377-8642 (English Federal-relay) or (800) 845-6136 (Spanish Federal-relay). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.