

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM HOUSEHOLDS: FISCAL YEAR 2012 – SUMMARY

Background

In fiscal year 2012, about 46.6 million people living in 22.3 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 2012.

General Characteristics

Over half of SNAP participants were children or elderly. About 45 percent of participants were under age 18 and 9 percent were age 60 or older.

Many SNAP participants had jobs. About 31 percent of SNAP households had earnings in 2012 and 42 percent of all SNAP participants lived in a household with earnings.

The majority of SNAP households did not receive cash welfare benefits. Only 7 percent of all SNAP households received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, and another 3 percent received State General Assistance (GA) benefits. About 23 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. Twenty percent of SNAP households had no cash

income of any kind. Only 18 percent had gross income above the poverty line, while 42 percent had income at, or below, half the poverty line. The average SNAP household income was slightly less than 60 percent of the poverty line. The average gross income for all SNAP households was \$755 per month. For a SNAP household with the average gross income, nearly 27 percent of monthly funds (gross income plus SNAP benefits) came from SNAP.

The average monthly benefit received by SNAP households was \$274. Forty percent of SNAP households received the maximum benefit for their family size – \$668 for a family of four. Only 5 percent received the minimum benefit (\$16) available to households with one or two members.

Most SNAP households were small. Slightly more than half of SNAP households contained only one person. 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 14 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

1992, 40 percent of all SNAP households received cash welfare benefits and only 20 percent had earnings. In 2012, only 7 percent received cash welfare, while 31 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 10 percent in 1992 to 21 percent in 2012. The percentage of SNAP households with zero net income, who received the maximum benefit, rose from 22 percent in 1992 to 38 percent in 2012.

SNAP households have gotten smaller. In 1992, the average household size was 2.6 persons. In 2012, the average had fallen to 2.1 persons. Households with only one person accounted for half the caseload (50 percent) in 2012.

For More Information

Farson Gray, Kelsey, and Esa Eslami. (2014) *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2012*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research for the Food and Nutrition Service (available online at www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis).