

Background

This report describes individuals' patterns of participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) from 2004 to 2006, a period of caseload growth and improving economic conditions. Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), the study explores reasons that individuals enter and leave SNAP, how long they receive SNAP benefits, and whether they return to the program after exiting. The report also examines whether participation patterns in the mid-2000s changed from earlier periods.

This report is a companion to *Determinants of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Entry and Exit in the Mid-2000s*.

Findings

SNAP participants tend to enter and leave the program frequently. From 2004 to 2006, half of all new participants received SNAP benefits for 10 months or less, and 58 percent left the program within 1 year. Of those who left SNAP, 42 percent returned within a year.

Participants who stay on SNAP for longer periods of time account for a high proportion of the caseload in any given month. Half of individuals receiving benefits in May 2004 were on SNAP for 7 years or more, and about 30 percent had received benefits for two years or less.

SNAP serves substantially more people over the course of a year than in the average month. About 40 percent more individuals participated over the course of a year than the monthly average number of participants, resulting in a turnover rate of 1.4.

Families with children are twice as likely to enter SNAP as families without children. Single parent families, families with no income, and families with Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

are also more likely to enter SNAP than families with married parents, positive income, or no SSI. Elderly individuals are the least likely to enter SNAP.

Elderly participants, on average, stay on SNAP longer than other age groups. The average spell length for elderly participants was 12 months. Other groups with longer-than-average spell lengths included single parent families, individuals with disabilities, individuals without a high school diploma, and families with no income. Groups with shorter spells were nonelderly adults, noncitizens, and families with earnings.

A change in family income is the most common reason for entering or exiting SNAP. Among entrants, nearly 40 percent experienced a decrease in earnings in the 4 months prior to entering SNAP and about one-quarter experienced decreases in other income sources. Nearly half of the individuals exiting SNAP experienced an increase in earnings in the past 4 months, and nearly one-third experienced an increase in another income source. Changes in family composition (e.g. household size) are also associated with both SNAP entries and exits.

SNAP participants, on average, received benefits longer in the mid-2000s than in the early 2000s (2001 to 2003).

- In the early 2000s, half of all new SNAP participants received benefits for 8 months or less. This increased to 10 months in the mid-2000s. In both periods, about a quarter of new entrants were still receiving benefits after 2 years.
- Among long-term SNAP participants, the median length of time on SNAP increased from 4 years in the early 2000s to 7 years in the mid-2000s.
- Sixty-three percent of participants had multiple spells in the early 2000s compared to 60 percent in the mid-2000s.

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- The turnover rate declined modestly from 1.5 in the early 2000s to 1.4 in the mid-2000s.

Data Source

The 2004 SIPP panel is a nationally representative, short-term longitudinal survey that collects detailed monthly data on family and household composition, labor force activity, earned and unearned income, and cash and non-cash assistance. It consists of approximately 51,000 households that are interviewed every 4 months over a 4-year period. Additional information on past history of employment and program participation is collected for individuals who are interviewed in the first 4 months of the survey.

For More Information

Mabli, James, Stephen Tordella, Laura Castner, Thomas Godfrey, and Priscilla Foran. *Dynamics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation in the Mid-2000s*. Prepared by Decision Demographics, for the Food and Nutrition Service. September 2011. Available online at www.fns.usda.gov/ora.

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