

TRENDS IN FOOD STAMP PARTICIPATION RATES: 1999-2001

Office of Research and Analysis

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Background

This report is the latest in a series on trends in Food Stamp Program participation rates based on the March Current Population Survey. This report focuses on changes in rates from 1999 to 2001. Two sets of participation rates are presented: one for September and the other an average for each fiscal year (FY). The September participation rates provide a point-in-time estimate whereas the FY rates provide an average rate over the course of a year.

While both sets of estimates provide useful information, the FY average rates have some methodological advantages. First, because there is a larger sample size of participants, the sampling errors are smaller, particularly for subgroup rates. Second, the FY average rates also use a consistent measure for participants and eligibles (a 12-month average), while the September rates use a specific month for participants and an average month for eligibles.

Findings

Overall Trends

The September series shows that the participation rate for individuals rose three points between September 1999 and September 2001, from 59 percent to 62 percent, following

five consecutive years of falling participation rates. The corresponding rates for the FY averages follow a somewhat different trend. The average number of people participating in the program fell slightly between FY 1999 and FY 2001 (participation levels in 2001 did not begin rising until summer 2001). As a result, the FY average participation rates fell one point - from 61 percent to 60 percent.

Trends Among Subgroups

Regardless of whether measured in September or FY average, participation rates remain high for individuals living in households with children (80 percent) and those with very low income (virtually 100 percent), while they remain low for the elderly (28 percent), United States born children living with non-citizens (34 percent), and individuals with income slightly above poverty (28 percent). The participation rate for those living in households with earnings (52 percent) is somewhat below the overall average.

Using either measure, participation rates rose for many groups, including children, individuals living in single-parent families, TANF participants, those living in households with earnings, and those with very low income. Participation rates fell for disabled non-elderly adults, citizen children living with non-citizen adults, the elderly, and Social Security Income participants.

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