

Background

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is the cornerstone of America's overall strategy for ensuring that all Americans have enough to eat. It plays an important role as a safety net for low-income elderly persons and working persons with low earnings, including those who have successfully made the transition from cash welfare to work. But it is estimated that in 1994 less than one-half of working households and less than two-fifths of elderly households that were thought to be eligible for food stamp benefits actually received them. Low participation rates are a concern because, depending on their cause, they may be an indication that the FSP is not fulfilling its mission of providing food assistance to everyone who needs it.

To increase its understanding of the reasons for nonparticipation, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) contracted with Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) to conduct a study of nonparticipation by low-income working and elderly households, entitled *Reaching the Working Poor and Poor Elderly*. This report summarizes what was learned and offers recommendations for how a national survey of the reasons for nonparticipation in the FSP should be designed and fielded.

Methods

The Working and Elderly Poor Study had three phases. First, we assessed what was known about FSP nonparticipation from existing surveys and focus groups and analyzed data on the characteristics and food security of FSP-eligible households. Second, we conducted 12 focus groups with FSP participants and nonparticipants from working and elderly households that were probably FSP eligible. Third, we developed questionnaires about the

reasons for nonparticipation and tested them using cognitive techniques on 16 low-income elderly and working persons. We then conducted a large pretest of the survey in the winter of 1998, administering the questionnaires to 451 respondents, mostly by telephone.

Findings

What We Know About FSP Nonparticipation by Working and Elderly Households

In January 1994, only about 46 percent of working FSP-eligible households and 35 percent of elderly FSP-eligible households participated in the program, compared with 69 percent of all FSP-eligible households. And the numbers of working and elderly households that did not participate were large--about 2.7 million working households and 3.5 million elderly households.

Existing research has identified five broad categories of reasons for FSP nonparticipation:

Lack of Information. Many low-income survey respondents and focus group members do not think they are FSP eligible. Some elderly and working nonparticipants have never heard of the FSP, and others do not know how to apply for food stamp benefits.

Perceived Lack of Need. A perception that the household "can get by" without food stamp benefits or that "others need them more" are frequently given as reasons for nonparticipation. Data on food security suggest that the degree of a household's need for food stamp benefits is an important determinant of FSP participation. However, evidence suggests that at least some households that say they do not need food stamp benefits are not food secure.

Expected Benefits Are Too Low. Analyses of household survey data have found that the

likelihood of households' FSP participation increases with the size of the benefit they would receive. Elderly households, though not working households, are typically eligible for only a small amount of benefits.

Reasons Related to Program Administration. Low-income households may be deterred from applying for food stamp benefits because of the time, money, or hassle involved in participating in the program. Concerns include: difficulty getting to the FSP office, applying and recertifying is time-consuming and complicated, questions at application and recertification are too personal, FSP office staff seem disrespectful, and the FSP office is unpleasant or unsafe.

Stigma or Other Psychological Reasons. Undoubtedly there is a stigma associated with applying for and using food stamp benefits. However, the extent to which stigma affects FSP nonparticipation is uncertain.

All existing research suggests that each of these reasons is applicable for at least some nonparticipants, that more than one is applicable for nearly all nonparticipants, and that these five reasons account for nearly all nonparticipation in the FSP.

Gaps in Our Knowledge About FSP Nonparticipation

We do not have a thorough understanding of the relative importance of each specific reason for FSP nonparticipation. Available evidence suggests that two reasons for nonparticipation are particularly important: a perception that a household does not need food stamp benefits and a perception that the household is FSP-ineligible. However, an important limitation of previous surveys and focus groups is that they used only simple income screens to determine FSP eligibility. Hence some survey respondents and focus group members may not be FSP eligible. Including FSP-ineligible households in the sample will bias upward the number of people reporting that they do not participate because they think (correctly) that they are ineligible or because they do not need food stamp benefits.

Previous surveys had three other limitations: (1) they asked general open-ended questions that elicited general answers, (2) most did not ask about food security, even though the question of whether low participation rates are a concern depends on the food security of nonparticipants, and (3) the sample sizes of working and elderly households were small.

Recommendations for Conducting a National Survey

Currently, we can only speculate on the appropriate policy response to the low FSP participation rates among working and elderly households. To determine whether the low participation rates are cause for concern and, if they are, to decide upon appropriate policy response requires a national survey of working and elderly nonparticipating households.

In the Working and Elderly Poor Study we designed a survey to collect information about FSP nonparticipation among working and elderly low-income households. The survey uses random-digit-dialing to identify FSP nonparticipants in working and elderly households. A short screening interview is used to check whether the respondents were likely to be eligible for food stamp benefits. FSP nonparticipants who pass the screening interview are administered a questionnaire by telephone that includes questions that: (1) ask directly about the reasons for nonparticipation and are structured and closed-ended; (2) collect information necessary to make a good determination of FSP eligibility; (3) ask about food security; (4) ask about sources of food assistance other than food stamp benefits; (5) ask nonparticipants about their previous experiences with the FSP; and (6) ask about the household's demographic characteristics. The Working and Elderly Poor survey was designed to include FSP participants so that comparisons could be made of their characteristics and experiences with the FSP with those of the nonparticipants. The participants are identified using lists of program participants obtained from the FSP as well as through random-digit-dialing.

The pretest of the Working and Elderly Poor Study survey showed that it is feasible to conduct this survey. However, the survey would require considerable survey resources. In the pretest, we called nearly 17,000 telephone numbers to identify 484 eligible nonparticipants. We estimate that it would take over 18,000 hours of interview labor to identify a sample of about 1,000 eligible nonparticipants from working households and 1,000 eligible nonparticipants from elderly households.

To meet the challenges inherent in a survey about nonparticipation, we also recommend that:

Efforts should be made to increase the survey's response rate. The response rate is the number of people who complete an interview as a proportion of the number of people with whom an interview is attempted. Response rates to random-digit-dialing surveys are typically low. With some changes to the Working and Elderly Poor Study survey (which are discussed in this report), we think the response rate to the survey could be between 63 and 67 percent.

Consideration should be given to excluding FSP participants from the survey. Conducting a survey of nonparticipants only would provide sufficient information to provide guidance on the appropriate policy response to the nonparticipation. While including participants in the survey adds richness to the data collected, the information collected from the participants may not justify the additional survey resources required to include them in the survey.

If FSP participants are to be included in the survey, lists of program participants are needed. Participants can be identified by random-digit-dialing or by using program-provided lists. However, because participants are rarer than nonparticipants among working and elderly FSP-eligible households, and because identifying each participant using random-digit-dialing takes many calls, it is more efficient to use both random-digit-dialing and lists of program participants.

Consideration should be given to including a small number of households without telephones.

Because non-telephone households may have different reasons for nonparticipation than telephone households do, they should be included in a national survey of nonparticipants, even though it would take considerable survey resources to locate even small numbers of them. We also recommend that the questionnaires ask households with and without working telephones about previous interruptions in telephone services. These data can be used to statistically adjust for the under-representation of non-telephone households.

Consideration should be given to adding a module about FSP nonparticipation to another household survey. This could significantly reduce the costs of collecting the data, the response rate may be higher, and if the survey collects detailed income information it could allow for a more accurate screening for FSP-eligible households.

The questionnaires developed in this study should be revised to address FSP nonparticipation issues arising from recent welfare reform. Although a one-time survey cannot fully explore the reasons for changes in the FSP participation rate as a result of welfare reform, it can explore the link between FSP participation and welfare reform. In particular, the questionnaires can explore whether the decision to stop receiving food stamp benefits was linked to no longer receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), whether respondents who had recently applied for TANF had been told about the FSP and encouraged to apply, and whether respondents feel that the desire to be self-sufficient was important in their decision not to participate in the FSP.

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