

Summary

The objective of the Food Stamp Program (FSP) is to “permit low-income households to obtain a more nutritious diet through normal channels of trade by increasing food purchasing power for all eligible households who apply for participation.” To target benefits to the most needy households, the FSP has in place a set of rules and procedures designed to allow only qualified people to participate. These present certain demands on eligible households which for some may make participation inconvenient or costly and may cause others not to participate despite being eligible.

The National Food Stamp Program Survey (NFSPS) conducted in 1996 collected information on customer service, access to authorized food retailers, and food security and nutrient availability from the first nationally representative sample of Food Stamp Program participants and potential participants. The NFSPS collected information from participants relative to: 1) client satisfaction with services provided and, 2) the monetary and non-monetary costs of participating. From eligible nonparticipants, the survey addressed their experiences with and reasons for nonparticipation in the FSP.

Client Satisfaction with the FSP

Overall, the findings indicate that participating households are pleased with the services provided by the program. Most FSP households were satisfied with the application, recertification and issuance processes, with the performance of their caseworkers, and with the FSP overall. Despite the overall degree of satisfaction, 10-20 percent of clients expressed some dissatisfaction depending on the measure. In general, dissatisfied households are:

- More likely to reside in urban areas and have low monthly FSP benefits compared with households that are satisfied;
- More likely to feel stigma associated with program participation; and
- More likely to incur higher participation costs (as measured by the time and out-of-pocket costs of applying for or being recertified for benefits).

Monetary and Non-monetary Costs of Participation in the FSP

The average application involves nearly 5 hours of client time, including at least two trips to the FSP office or other places; recertification requires 2.5 hours and at least one trip.

The average out-of-pocket monetary costs to apply for benefits is about \$10.31 or 6 percent of the average monthly benefit. Recertifications, which usually occur once or twice each year, are \$5.84 or 4 percent of the monthly benefit. Most of the costs are for transportation.

Reasons for Nonparticipation among Eligibles

About three-quarters of nonparticipating households estimated to be eligible said they were not aware that they were eligible for the FSP. Most non-participating households who had applied or participated in the past also reported being unaware of their eligibility.

Among those nonparticipants who believed they were eligible, the most important reason for not applying for benefits were time, cost of traveling to the FSP office or a belief that they did not need food stamps.

While not usually expressed directly, perceptions of stigma decreased participation by

eligibles. Although only 7 percent of eligible nonparticipants mentioned a stigma-related factor as their most important reason for not participating, nearly half answered affirmatively to at least one of the survey questions about stigma. After controlling for factors such as

benefit size and household composition, eligible households who associated higher levels of stigma with receiving and using food stamps were less likely to participate.

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