

CHARACTERISTICS OF USDA SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM HOUSEHOLDS: FISCAL YEAR 2016 (SUMMARY)

Background

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, about 44.2 million people living in 21.8 million U.S. households participated in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) 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 FY 2016.

General Characteristics

Nearly two-thirds of SNAP participants were children, elderly, or had disabilities. Forty-four percent of participants were under age 18, 12 percent were age 60 or older, and 9 percent were disabled nonelderly adults.

Nearly one-third (32 percent) of SNAP households had jobs. More than half (55 percent) of households with children had earnings in 2016. Overall, more than 44 percent of SNAP participants lived in a household with earnings.

SNAP households had little income. Twenty percent of SNAP households had no cash income of any kind in the month the data were collected. Only 18 percent had gross income above the poverty line, while 40 percent had income at or below half the poverty line. The average SNAP household income was 61 percent of the poverty line. Average gross income for all SNAP households was \$813 per month, up from \$793 in real terms in FY 2015.

The majority of SNAP households did not receive cash welfare benefits. Only 5 percent of all SNAP households received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families benefits, and only 3 percent received

State General Assistance benefits. Nearly 27 percent of SNAP households received Social Security, and 21 percent received Supplemental Security Income benefits given to the aged and disabled.

The average SNAP household received \$249 in monthly benefits. Nearly 39 percent of SNAP households received the maximum benefit for their family size. Only 8 percent received the minimum benefit (\$16), available to households with one or two members. For the average SNAP household, nearly one-quarter of monthly funds (gross income plus SNAP benefits) came from SNAP.

Most SNAP households were small. Fifty-three percent of SNAP households contained only one person. The average SNAP household size was 2.0 persons, but varied considerably by household composition. Households with children were larger, averaging 3.2 members, while households with elderly participants were smaller, averaging 1.2 members.

Most SNAP households live in major metropolitan areas, but a substantial number live outside of them. Eighty-two percent of SNAP households live in or near large cities, while about 10 percent live in or near smaller cities and towns and nearly 7 percent live in rural areas.

SNAP has a powerful antipoverty effect. When SNAP benefits are added to gross income, 10 percent of SNAP households move above the poverty line. The impact is even greater on the poorest households, moving 12 percent of them above 50 percent of the poverty line.

Changes Over Time

Notable changes in the characteristics of SNAP participants in the last 25 years include:

The primary form of income among SNAP participants shifted from welfare to work. In 1991, 41 percent of all SNAP households received

cash welfare benefits and 20 percent had earnings. In 2016, only 5 percent received cash welfare, while 32 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 increased from 8 percent in 1991 to 20 percent in 2016. The percentage of SNAP households with zero net income rose nearly two-fold, from 21 percent in 1990 to 37 percent in 2016.

SNAP households have gotten smaller. In 1991, the average household size was 2.6 persons. In 2016, the average had fallen to 2.0 persons. Households with only one person accounted for more than half the caseload (53 percent) in 2016.

For More Information

Lauffer, Sarah. (2017) *Characteristics of USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2016*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research for the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (available online at www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis).