



# CHARACTERISTICS OF USDA SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM HOUSEHOLDS: FISCAL YEAR 2017 (SUMMARY)

## Background

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2017, about 42.1 million people living in 20.8 million U.S. households participated in the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in an average month, a decrease from FY 2016, when 44.2 million people (21.8 million households) participated in SNAP.

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 2017.

## General Characteristics

**Approximately two-thirds of SNAP participants were children, elderly, or had disabilities.** Forty-four percent of participants were under age 18; 13 percent were age 60 or older; and nearly 10 percent were disabled, nonelderly adults. Nearly 8 percent of participants were able-bodied adults age 18-49 in childless households.

**Nearly half (44 percent) of SNAP participants lived in a household with earnings in FY 2017.** These households made up about one-third (31 percent) of the SNAP caseload. More than half (55 percent) of households with children had earnings.

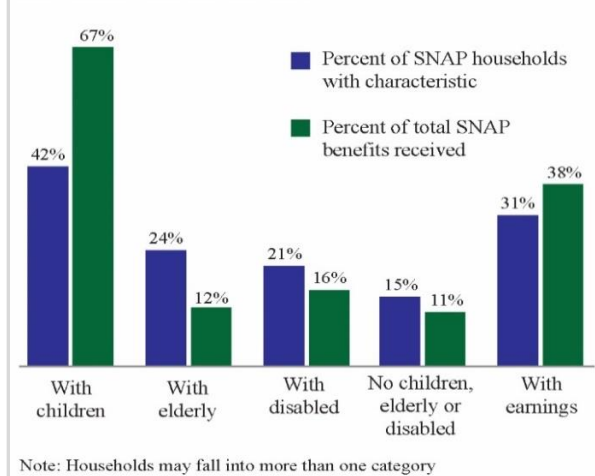
**SNAP households had little income.** The average SNAP household income was 63 percent of the poverty line. Nineteen percent of SNAP households had no cash income of any kind in the month the data were collected. Only 19 percent had gross income above the poverty line, while 38 percent had income at or below half the poverty line. Average gross income for all SNAP households was \$836 per month, up from \$831 (in inflation-adjusted dollars) in FY 2016.

**The vast majority (92 percent) 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 29 percent of SNAP households received Social Security, and 22 percent received Supplemental Security Income benefits given to the aged and disabled.

**The average SNAP household received \$245 in monthly benefits.** About 37 percent of SNAP households received the maximum benefit for their family size. Only 9 percent received the minimum benefit (\$16) available to households with one or two members. For the average SNAP household, nearly 23 percent 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 this varied considerably by household composition. Households with children were larger, averaging 3.3 members, while households with elderly participants were smaller, averaging 1.2 members.

Share of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits received by households with select characteristics



**Most SNAP households lived in major metropolitan areas.** Eighty-one percent of SNAP households lived in or near large cities, while about 10 percent lived in or near smaller cities and towns and nearly 7 percent lived in rural areas.

**When added to gross income, SNAP benefits brought total monthly funds above the poverty line for 10 percent of SNAP households.** SNAP benefits plus gross income brought total monthly funds above 50 percent of the poverty line for an additional 12 percent of SNAP households.

### 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 1992, 40 percent of all SNAP households received Federal cash welfare benefits and 20 percent had earnings. In 2017, only 5 percent received Federal cash welfare, while 31 percent had earnings.

**After more than doubling between 1992 and 2015, the share of SNAP households with zero gross income has begun to decrease.** In 1992, 10 percent of SNAP households had zero gross income. This share increased over the next 23 years, peaking at 22 percent in 2015. Since then, zero-income households have decreased to 19 percent of the SNAP caseload.

**The percentage of households with elderly individuals has increased nearly 10 percentage points over the past 25 years.** In 1992, 15 percent of SNAP households included one or more elderly members. By 2017, it increased to 24 percent. While overall SNAP participation has decreased since FY 2013, the number of elderly participants continues to grow.

**SNAP households have gotten smaller.** In 1992, the average household size was 2.6 persons. In 2017, the average had fallen to 2.0 persons. Households with only one person accounted for more than half the SNAP caseload (53 percent) in 2017.

### For More Information

Cronquist, Kathryn and Sarah Lauffer. (2019) *Characteristics of USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2017*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research Under Contract N. AG-3198-F-18-0005. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Project Officer: Jenny Genser. Available online at [www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis](http://www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis).