

DYNAMICS AND DETERMINANTS OF SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM PARTICIPATION FROM 2008 TO 2012 – SUMMARY

Background

Between 2008 and 2012, participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) increased 65 percent, a considerable rise that is largely attributable to the lasting effects of the economic recession. FNS recently completed two reports that analyze the U.S. Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to better understand the patterns of participation in SNAP during this time period and how these patterns may have shifted from the mid-2000s. One, *Dynamics of SNAP Participation from 2008 to 2012*, explores reasons that individuals enter and exit SNAP, how long they receive benefits, and whether they return to the program after exiting. The other, *Determinants of SNAP Participation from 2008 to 2012*, report uses multivariate regression to isolate the impact of various demographic and economic factors associated with participation decisions while holding other factors constant.

Findings

New SNAP participants receive benefits for a relatively short time. From 2008 to 2012, half of all new SNAP participants received benefits for 12 months, up from 10 months in the mid-2000s. About 47 percent of new SNAP participants returned to SNAP within one year, up from 42 percent in the mid-2000s, and an additional 12 percent returned within 2 years. Newly entering families with single parents, nonelderly disabled adults, or with no high school graduates tended to receive benefits for longer.

However, most participants on SNAP in any given month have participated for much longer periods of time. About half of individuals receiving benefits in December 2008 had participated in SNAP for 8 years or less, with nearly 30 percent participating for 3 years or less. In contrast, during the mid-2000s, half the individuals had participated in SNAP for 7 years or less.

The number of people served by SNAP over the course of the year is higher than the number served in an average month because people enter and leave SNAP throughout the year. A turnover rate is used to estimate the total number of individuals served annually as compared to the number served monthly. Between 2009 and 2012, the turnover rate ranged between 1.3 and 1.4, meaning that total annual participation was roughly one-third higher than participation in an average month.

Families with children were more than twice as likely to enter SNAP as those without, while elderly individuals were the least likely to enter the program. Single parent families as well as those with disabled members, no income, or receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) were also more likely to enter SNAP on average.

Elderly individuals living alone, on average, stayed on SNAP for more than 51 months, longer than any other age group. Single parent families, individuals with disabilities, and families with no income also tended to have longer-than-average spell lengths. In contrast, nonelderly nondisabled adults, families with earnings, and families with TANF income had slightly shorter-than-average spell lengths.

A change in family income was the most common reason for entering or exiting SNAP. Among new participants, 30 percent experienced a decrease in earnings in the 4 months prior to entering SNAP and nearly one-quarter experienced decreases in other income sources. Almost 40 percent of the individuals exiting SNAP experienced an increase in earnings in the previous 4 months, with about 30 percent experiencing an increase in another income source.

Job loss within the previous four months was the most common trigger event leading households to

enter SNAP in the multivariate analysis. Similarly, households with an individual who recently lost a job were more than twice as likely to re-enter SNAP after a spell of nonparticipation as households without a recent job loss.

Other factors strongly associated with entering or returning to SNAP included:

- Drop in income other than from job loss,
- Increase in family size,
- Head of household age 18-29, and
- Receipt of benefits from TANF, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Medicaid, or housing subsidies.

Adults who participated in Medicaid or WIC or received housing subsidies received SNAP benefits for almost twice as long as adults not participating in these other programs. Holding all other factors constant, adults receiving WIC, Medicaid, or housing subsidies participated in SNAP, on average, for 15 months, as compared to 9 months for adults not receiving those benefits. While adults who receive TANF benefits are more likely to participate in SNAP, they do so for an average of only 8 months, as compared to 10 months for adults not receiving TANF benefits.

State program policies were associated with an increased likelihood for individuals to enter SNAP. Policies that were associated with higher rates of entry included using an expanded definition of categorical eligibility or exclusion of all or most vehicles from the asset limit.

Data Source

The 2008 SIPP panel is a nationally representative, short-term longitudinal survey of the noninstitutionalized civilian population that collects detailed monthly data on family and household composition, labor force activity, earned and unearned income, and cash and non-cash assistance. It consists of approximately 52,000 households that are interviewed every 4 months over a 4-year period. Additional information on past history of employment and program participation is collected for individuals who are interviewed in the first 4 months of the survey.

The 2008 SIPP panel ran from May 2008 to December 2012.

For More Information

Leftin, Joshua, Nancy Wemmerus, James Mabli, Thomas Godfrey, and Stephen Tordella, (2014). *Dynamics of SNAP Participation from 2008 to 2012*. Prepared by Decision Demographics for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service: Alexandria, VA. Available online at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis>.

Mabli, James, Thomas Godfrey, Nancy Wemmerus, Joshua Leftin, and Stephen Tordella (2014). *Determinants of SNAP Participation from 2008 to 2012*. Prepared by Decision Demographics for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service: Alexandria, VA. Available online at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis>.