

FOODS TYPICALLY PURCHASED BY SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) HOUSEHOLDS (SUMMARY)

Background and Objectives

Analyses using national survey data have shown that food purchases, consumption patterns, and dietary outcomes among SNAP participants and higher income households are more similar than different.

This study analyzes food purchase data collected at the point of sale (POS) to assess if such data offer a different or more detailed perspective on food choices of SNAP and non-SNAP households. It addresses the following questions: (1) What food items are purchased by SNAP households? and (2) How do foods purchased by SNAP households compare to food purchases made by non-SNAP households?

Methods

This study analyzed aggregated POS transaction data from calendar year 2011 from a leading grocery retailer. The data were drawn from supermarkets, grocery stores, and combination food and drug stores; warehouse club stores, specialized food stores, and convenience stores were not included.

On average, each month's data contained over 1 billion records of food items bought by 26.5 million households in 127 million unique transactions. In 2011, shoppers spent \$39 billion on food in these stores, or about \$3.3 billion per month.

SNAP households were identified in each monthly file if they had any transaction in which SNAP was used to pay for at least half of the total purchase. All transactions made by that type of household were linked to estimate total monthly spending. All other transactions were designated as non-SNAP household purchases.

Data were aggregated into three hierarchical categories from 1,792 subcommodities (e.g., bags of Fuji apples) to 238 commodities (e.g., apples) to 30 summary categories (e.g., fruits), designed to reflect sections or departments in a typical grocery store. Expenditures were also analyzed by USDA Food Pattern categories.

Data Caveats and Limitations

While the POS data provide a wealth of information, they have the following limitations:

- Since the data are derived from a single retailer group, they do not capture purchases made in all SNAP-authorized stores in any geographic area.
- In transactions made with both SNAP and cash or credit cards, these data could not differentiate between items purchased with SNAP benefits and those purchased with other funds. The data, therefore, represent food purchases made by SNAP households rather than the foods purchased specifically with SNAP. (Most SNAP households use a combination of benefits and their own funds.)
- The rankings of expenditure categories depend in part on how a wide variety of food products and package sizes are aggregated into summary categories, commodities and subcommodities. Each of these steps requires choices, some of which were made by the provider of this proprietary data.

Key Findings

Differences in the expenditure patterns of SNAP and non-SNAP households were relatively limited, regardless of how data were categorized.

- About 40 cents of every food purchase dollar was spent on basic items like meat, fruits, vegetables, milk, eggs, and bread.
- Another 20 cents was spent on sweetened drinks, desserts, salty snacks, candy, and sugar.
- The remaining 40 cents was spent on a variety of items such as cereal, prepared foods, other dairy products, rice, beans, and other cooking ingredients.
- The top 10 summary categories (Table 1) and top 7 commodities by expenditure were the same for SNAP and non-SNAP households, although ranked in slightly different orders.

Summary category data show that both SNAP and non-SNAP households focused their spending in a relatively small number of similar food item categories, reflecting similar food choices. The top five summary categories totaled about half of the expenditures for SNAP households and non-SNAP households (50 versus 47 percent).

Commodity-level data (in the full report) show that both SNAP and non-SNAP households made choices that may not be fully consistent with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

- Across all households, more money was spent on soft drinks than any other item. SNAP

households spent somewhat more on soft drinks than non-SNAP households (5 versus 4 percent).

- Both household groups were equally likely to purchase salty (bag) snacks (about 3 percent of food purchases), cookies (about 1 percent), and ice cream, ice milk, and sherbet (about 1 percent).

For More Information

Garasky, Steven, Kassim Mbwana, Andres Romualdo, Alex Tenaglio and Manan Roy. *Foods Typically Purchased by SNAP Households*. Prepared by IMPAQ International for USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, November 2016. Available at www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.

Table 1: Expenditures on Summary Categories by SNAP and Non-SNAP Households in Dataset in 2011

Summary Category	SNAP Household Expenditures			Non-SNAP Household Expenditures		
	Rank	\$ (millions)	% of total	Rank	\$ (millions)	% of total
Meat, Poultry and Seafood	1	\$1,262.90	19.2%	1	\$5,016.30	15.9%
Sweetened Beverages	2	\$608.70	9.3%	5	\$2,238.80	7.1%
Vegetables	3	\$473.40	7.2%	2	\$2,873.90	9.1%
Frozen Prepared Foods	4	\$455.20	6.9%	8	\$1,592.30	5.1%
Prepared Desserts	5	\$453.80	6.9%	6	\$2,021.20	6.4%
High Fat Dairy/Cheese	6	\$427.80	6.5%	3	\$2,483.20	7.9%
Bread and Crackers	7	\$354.90	5.4%	7	\$1,978.20	6.3%
Fruits	8	\$308.20	4.7%	4	\$2,271.20	7.2%
Milk	9	\$232.70	3.5%	9	\$1,211.00	3.8%
Salty Snacks	10	\$225.60	3.4%	10	\$969.70	3.1%
Prepared Foods	11	\$202.20	3.1%	14	\$707.00	2.2%
Cereal	12	\$186.90	2.8%	11	\$933.90	3.0%
Condiments and Seasoning	13	\$174.60	2.7%	12	\$878.90	2.8%
Fats and Oils	14	\$155.10	2.4%	13	\$766.90	2.4%
Candy	15	\$138.20	2.1%	15	\$701.40	2.2%
Baby Food	16	\$126.80	1.9%	27	\$198.20	0.6%
Juices	17	\$110.40	1.7%	16	\$605.40	1.9%
Coffee and Tea	18	\$83.40	1.3%	17	\$568.80	1.8%
Bottled Water	19	\$78.10	1.2%	22	\$377.40	1.2%
Eggs	20	\$73.80	1.1%	21	\$388.20	1.2%
Other Dairy Products	21	\$69.80	1.1%	18	\$549.50	1.7%
Pasta, Cornmeal, Other Cereal Products	22	\$66.40	1.0%	23	\$281.50	0.9%
Soups	23	\$62.70	1.0%	20	\$414.10	1.3%
Sugars	24	\$60.90	0.9%	24	\$260.30	0.8%
Nuts and Seeds	25	\$53.20	0.8%	19	\$445.90	1.4%
Beans	26	\$38.30	0.6%	25	\$234.50	0.7%
Rice	27	\$30.10	0.5%	28	\$131.00	0.4%
Jams, Jellies, Preserves and Other Sweets	28	\$29.10	0.4%	29	\$117.50	0.4%
Flour and Prepared Flour Mixes	29	\$18.70	0.3%	30	\$94.90	0.3%
Miscellaneous	30	\$18.60	0.3%	26	\$202.60	0.6%
Total Summary Category Expenditures		\$6,580.10	100%		\$31,512.50	100%