

ASSESSMENT OF STATES' USE OF COMPUTER MATCHING PROTOCOLS
IN THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) (SUMMARY)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) offers nutrition assistance to millions of eligible, low-income individuals and families. As required by Federal law, State SNAP agencies verify financial and nonfinancial information by matching SNAP applicant and participant information to various national and State data sources to ensure they meet the program's eligibility criteria. Data matching is an important tool for ensuring program integrity and benefit accuracy. SNAP agencies conduct data matching at the time of application and recertification, as well as other points during SNAP participation.

SNAP follows a set of Federal regulations for matching certain data elements and using required databases (denoted with asterisks in Figure 1). Beyond these requirements, States' approaches to data matching are highly diverse. Generally, there is limited information available on States' data matching practices and protocols. This study addressed this knowledge gap with three objectives: (1) identify and describe how each State uses data sources for verifying household information for SNAP eligibility, (2) inventory all data matches States use and plan to use in the near future, and (3) document the primary purposes and perceived effectiveness of each data source.

Findings

States reported using an average of 19 data sources (13 national and 6 State) for matching against SNAP applications and caseload data. Overall, there was a great deal of variation, with some States using as many as 30 or as few as 7 data sources for matching. These findings show an increase of five data sources on average from the last study of data matching in 2002¹.

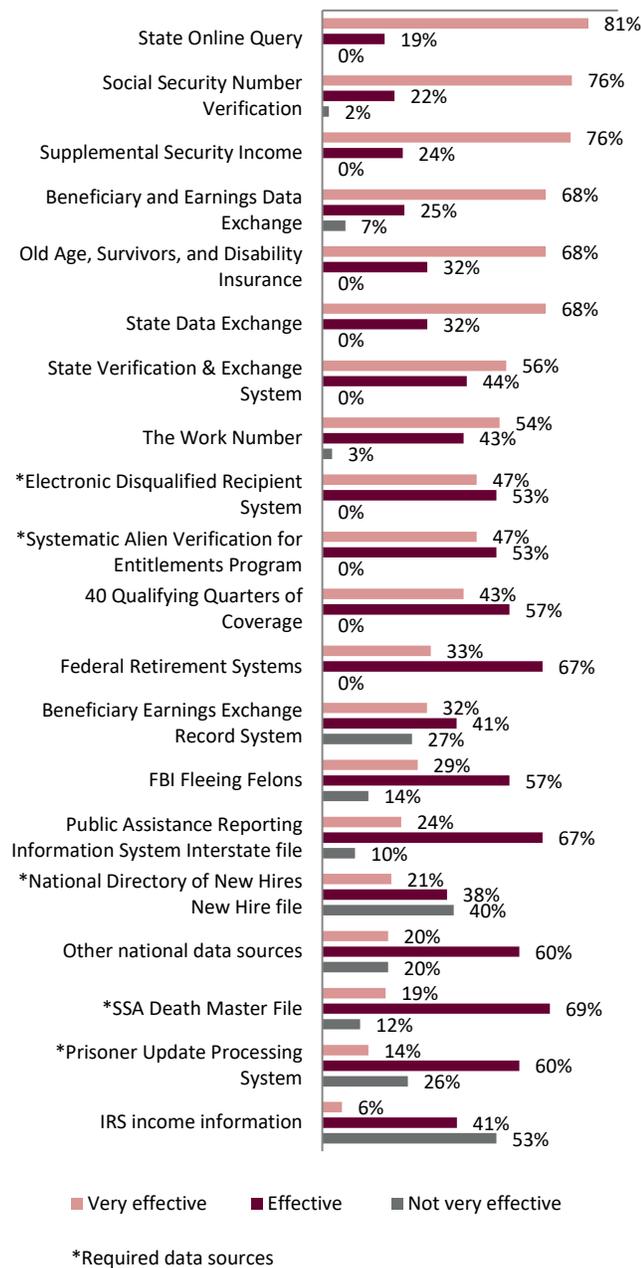
Verifying reported earned and unearned income was the most common purpose for which SNAP data matching sources were used. For example, North Carolina used 7 data sources to confirm unearned income eligibility out of the 19 total data sources used by the State. However, data sources often served more than one purpose and multiple sources were often used to confirm one piece of information.

States used an average of six data elements to match individual-level data across data sources. Social Security number was the most commonly used data element for matching individual-level data (used for 77 percent of data sources). Few States conducted SNAP data matches using household-level data elements such as a street address.

Most States have used most of their current data sources for at least 10 years. More recently adopted data sources include the National Directory of New Hires, The Work Number, and State lottery databases. States reported few additional data sources they plan to begin using in the future.

Required data sources were less likely to be rated "very effective" compared to optional data sources. States rated national and State data sources as more or less effective based on their perceptions of multiple factors, including the match rate and the frequency of updates to the data source. Three optional national data sources rated very effective by more than 75 percent of States include the State Online Query, Social Security Number Verification, and the Supplemental Security Income data. One optional national data source frequently rated as not very effective was Internal Revenue Service income information.

Figure 1. Perceived effectiveness of national data sources for matching as rated by States



Most States centralize SNAP data matching. Forty-three of the 51 States that responded to the survey conduct SNAP data matching at the State level only. States where SNAP is county-administered were more likely than those where SNAP is State-administered to conduct matching at the county level (5 of 10 county-administered States).

Methods

The primary data collection effort for the study was the National Survey of State SNAP Data Matching conducted in 2018. The survey was sent to 53 SNAP agencies, which included 50 States, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, and Guam. The self-administered web survey asked States to respond to questions about their matching process, data sources, match effectiveness, and future plans. Fifty-one States returned completed questionnaires.

States can either conduct SNAP data matching at the State level, or at both the State and county levels. If the State conducted matching at both the State and county levels, the survey allowed State administrators to answer for both the State and the counties or to ask county SNAP administrators to complete the county module for their own counties. Few counties responded to requests to complete the survey, and the report focuses on State-level findings.

The research team contacted some States in 2019 to verify information on required data matches reported in response to the survey. Twenty-eight of 32 States contacted responded by confirming or updating their survey responses. The State Profiles and Data Source Profiles report the updated information (see Appendices D and E of the report).

For More Information

Prince, Cynthia et al. *Assessment of States' Use of Computer Matching Protocols in SNAP*. Prepared by Avar Consulting, Inc. for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, August 2020. Project Officer: Danielle Deemer. Available online at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis>.

¹Borden, William S., and Robbi L. Ruben-Urm. (2002, January). "An Assessment of Computer Matching in the Food Stamp Program." Final Report. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.