

Background

In fiscal year 2010, about 40.3 million people living in 18.6 million U.S. households participated in the 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 fiscal year 2010.

Findings: General Characteristics

Most SNAP participants were children or elderly. Nearly half (47 percent) were under age 18 and another 8 percent were age 60 or older. Working-age women represented 28 percent of the caseload, while working-age men represented 17 percent.

Many SNAP participants had jobs. Nearly 30 percent of SNAP households had earnings in 2010, and 41 percent of all SNAP participants lived in a household with earnings. For most of these households, earnings were the primary source of income.

The majority of SNAP households did not receive cash welfare benefits. Only 8 percent of all SNAP households received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits and another 4 percent received State General Assistance (GA) benefits. Over 21 percent of SNAP households received Social Security and nearly 21 percent received Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits given to the aged and disabled.

SNAP households had little income. Only 15 percent had income above the poverty line, while more than 43 percent had incomes at, or below, half the poverty line. Nearly 20 percent had no cash income of any kind. The average gross income for all SNAP households was \$731 per month. For a household with an average gross income and SNAP benefit, more than 28 percent of monthly funds (gross income plus SNAP benefits) came from SNAP.

The average monthly benefit received by SNAP households was \$287. Forty percent of SNAP households received the maximum benefit for their family size – \$668 for a family of four. Less than 4 percent received the minimum benefit (\$16) available to households with one or two members. Most households (75 percent) receiving the minimum benefit contained elderly or disabled members and were likely to receive Supplemental Security Income or Social Security; another 20 percent had earnings.

While three-fourths of SNAP households were categorically eligible, almost all would also have been eligible for SNAP under standard rules. Households are categorically eligible for SNAP if all household members receive TANF, SSI, or GA benefits or the household resides in a State that has implemented a broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE) policy, which confers eligibility for SNAP if the household receives a TANF-funded service. Twenty-four percent of SNAP households were categorically eligible by virtue of their TANF, SSI, or GA benefits and another 51 percent lived in a State with a BBCE policy.

Most SNAP households were small. The average SNAP household size was 2.2 persons, but varied considerably by household composition. Households with children were larger, averaging 3.3 members. Households with elderly participants were smaller, averaging 1.3 members.

Findings: Changes Over Time

There have been several notable changes in the characteristics of SNAP households between 1990 and 2010. Some of the most striking changes are:

The primary form of income among SNAP participants shifted from welfare to work. In 1990, 42 percent of all SNAP households received cash welfare benefits and only 19 percent had earnings. In 2010, only 8 percent received cash welfare, while 30 percent had earnings.

The percentage of households with no cash income of any kind nearly tripled. In 1990, 7 percent of SNAP households had zero gross income. This increased to nearly 20 percent in 2010. Similarly, the percentage of SNAP households with zero net income, who received the maximum benefit, rose from 19 percent in 1990 to 38 percent in 2010.

Households have gotten smaller. In 1990, the average household size was 2.6 persons. In 2010, the average had fallen to 2.2 persons. During this period, households with one person rose from 32 percent of all households to nearly 48 percent.

The percentage of participants who are children remained fairly steady. In 1990 nearly half of participants were under age 18, about the same percentage as in 2010. However, the share of households with children fell from 60 percent in 1990 to 49 percent in 2010. This is primarily due to an increase in single-person households.

For More Information

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis, *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2010*, by Esa Eslami, Kai Filion, and Mark Strayer. Project Officer, Jenny Genser. Alexandria, VA: 2010. Available online at www.fns.usda.gov/ora.

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