

## REACHING THOSE IN NEED: FOOD STAMP PARTICIPATION RATES IN THE STATES IN 1998

Office of Research and Analysis

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### Background

This is the third report in a series of publications presenting estimates of the percentage of eligible persons, by State, who participate in the Food Stamp Program (FSP). This issue presents food stamp participation rates for States in September 1998 and the change between September 1994 and September 1998. This information can be used to assess recent trends in program performance and focus efforts for improvement. This report also presents revised estimates of FSP participation rates for States in September of 1994 to 1997. These estimates are different from those previously reported because of improvements in data and estimation methods.

### Findings

Food stamp participation rates varied widely among States. In September 1998, about 59 percent of eligible people in the United States received food stamps. Estimated rates in some States fell below 50 percent; in others, the estimated rates exceeded 80 percent. Participation rates fell in every region of the country and in most States between September 1994 and September 1998. Nationwide, the food stamp participation rate fell by 11 percentage points – from 71 percent to 59 percent.

Participation rates in 35 States were significantly lower in 1998 than in 1994. Participation rates were significantly higher in 1998 than in 1994 only in the District of Columbia and Hawaii.

A few States have had consistently high participation rates relative to other States. In at least four of the five years, for which estimates are derived, Hawaii, Maine, Vermont and West Virginia have had significantly higher participation rates than two-thirds of the States. Arizona, Idaho, Massachusetts and Nevada have had significantly lower rates than half of the States in at least four of the five years.

The estimates are derived using a statistical approach known as shrinkage estimation that draws on data from the Current Population Survey, the decennial census, and administrative records. The shrinkage estimator averages direct sample estimates of participation rates with predictions from a regression model that is based on indicators of socioeconomic conditions. Shrinkage estimates are substantially more precise than direct sample estimates from the Current Population Survey. Nevertheless, the estimated participation rates are based on fairly small samples of households in many States, and the uncertainty associated with these estimates is substantial. Users of these data should take the estimated confidence intervals into account when interpreting differences between States and within a State over time.

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