

## Background

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps low-income individuals purchase food so that they can obtain a nutritious diet. One important measure of program performance is the ability to reach its target population, as indicated by the percentage of people eligible for benefits who actually participate. This report is the latest in a series on SNAP participation rates. Estimates are based on the March 2010 Current Population Survey and program administrative data for Fiscal Year (FY) 2009. The findings represent national participation rates for FY 2009.

## Findings

On average, 45 million individuals were eligible for benefits each month in 2009, and 32 million received them. While the program served 72 percent of all eligible individuals, the program provided nearly 91 percent of the benefits that all eligible individuals could receive.<sup>1</sup> This is because the neediest individuals eligible for higher benefits participated at higher rates than other eligible persons.

The national participation rate among individuals increased 1 percentage point between 2008 and 2009 from 71 percent to 72 percent.<sup>2</sup>

The rise in the participation rate is due to an increase in participating individuals that was greater than the increase in eligibles. While the number of eligibles rose by 15 percent, the number of participants rose by 18 percent.

The increase in the number of participants and eligibles was likely caused by the severe economic recession and legislative changes that expanded eligibility. The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 increased the minimum SNAP benefit and the standard deduction, eliminated the cap on the dependent care deduction, and excluded most educational and retirement accounts from the resources test in determining eligibility. In addition, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 raised SNAP benefits across the board and suspended time limits on program participation for unemployed, nonelderly, nondisabled adults without dependents.

Participation rates increased slightly for most economic and demographic subgroups between 2008 and 2009. Among those with the largest increases were children: the SNAP participation rate increased 4 points. The rate for individuals in households with earnings increased 2 percentage points to 60 percent.

Participation rates fell between the 2 years for a few groups. For example, rates for the elderly fell 2 points to 34 percent, while rates declined 4 points among those with no income to 71 percent.

Participation rates were relatively high for children, individuals with incomes between 1 and 50 percent of poverty, and recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), following historical trends. At least 90 percent of all eligibles from these groups participated. In contrast, participation rates for eligible elderly adults and individuals living in households with incomes above poverty were much lower – below 40 percent.

## Methodological Notes

The participation rates cited in this report are not directly comparable to those presented in prior year reports because of some improvements to

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix D of the report for methodological improvements since last year.

<sup>2</sup> The rate for 2008 differs from the estimate published last year due to the methodological improvement discussed below.

the methodology. These improvements include the following:

- Estimating eligibles for the fiscal year rather than the calendar year, consistent with the way participants are counted;
- Improving estimation of the SNAP household composition;
- Simulating Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and TANF receipt to correct for underreporting; and
- Improving the imputation of net income and asset eligibility.

While the impact of each of these enhancements individually may have increased or decreased the participation rate, when combined, the net impact was to increase the participation rate several percentage points.

#### **For More Information**

Leftin, Joshua. (2011). *Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: 2002 – 2009*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, for the Food and Nutrition Service (available online at [www.fns.usda.gov/ora](http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora)).

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