

Office of Research and Analysis

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Background

Less than one-half of working households and less than two-fifths of elderly households that are thought to be eligible for food stamps actually received them in 1994. One way of increasing our understanding of the reasons for these low rates of participation in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) would be to conduct a national survey of nonparticipants who are eligible for the program. Because such a survey would have to overcome conceptual and operational challenges, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture contracted with Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. to design and test a survey of the reasons for nonparticipation among low-income working and elderly households. This report discusses our experiences conducting a pretest of this survey and our recommendations for the design and fielding of a larger national survey about the reasons for nonparticipation in the FSP.

Findings

We faced three major challenges in designing a survey of the reasons for nonparticipation in the FSP. The first challenge was to identify people who were eligible for the FSP but did not participate in the program. No lists of these people exist, so we needed to start with a random-digit-dialing (RDD) sample frame. Second, to identify persons who were eligible for food stamps, we needed to strike a balance between asking detailed and often sensitive questions to make an accurate determination of eligibility, and keeping the screening interview short and the response rate high. The third challenge was to develop questionnaires that collected sufficient information to identify the reasons for nonparticipation.

An RDD frame was used to identify FSP nonparticipants who were likely to be eligible for food stamps. We called nearly 17,000 telephone numbers to identify 484 nonparticipants who were likely to be eligible for food stamps and met our other criteria for inclusion in the sample. We also identified 92 FSP participants using RDD. Another 86 FSP participants were identified from a list of program participants provided by state FSP agencies. A short screening interview was used to check whether the respondents met our criteria for inclusion in the sample. The survey pretest began in January 1998 and lasted about three months.

A main questionnaire was administered to 451 respondents who met our criteria for inclusion in the sample. The questionnaires asked about characteristics of the households, attitudes, experiences with the FSP and, if the respondents were nonparticipants, about the reasons they did not participate in the program. We developed eight different versions of the questionnaire. Each type of respondent--working nonparticipant, working participant, elderly nonparticipant, elderly participant--was administered a different questionnaire. And for each type of respondent, we used two different lengths of interviews--a short and a long version.

All the initial screening interviews were conducted by telephone. To test whether the questionnaires could also be administered in-person, we administered about 15 percent of the questionnaires in-person. The pretest took place in six urban sites and two rural sites.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our experiences and findings during the pretest suggest the following conclusions and recommendations regarding conducting a national survey of the reasons for nonparticipation.

It is Feasible to Conduct a Stand-Alone Survey on the Reasons for Nonparticipation

The pretest showed that it is feasible to conduct a stand-alone survey about the reasons for nonparticipation. However, the survey would require considerable survey resources, mainly because of the difficulties identifying survey respondents. We estimate that it would take just over 18,000 hours of interviewer labor to identify a sample of about 1,000 FSP-eligible nonparticipants from working households and 1,000 eligible nonparticipants from elderly households.

A List-Frame is Needed if the Survey is to Include FSP Participants

If RDD is being used to identify nonparticipants, identifying participants at the same time requires little additional interviewer time. However, identifying participants by RDD once the sample of nonparticipants has been identified is many times more costly than identifying participants using the list-frame. As we found working and elderly participant households were not as prevalent in the population as working and elderly nonparticipant households, a mixed-frame design would be the most efficient one if participants are included in the survey.

A Final Response Rate of About 65 Percent Could Be Achieved on a Stand-Alone Survey on the Reasons for Nonparticipation

Nonresponse is a concern because, if the factors that determine whether a person responds to the survey are related to the reasons for nonparticipation, the survey findings may be biased. The overall response rate to the pretest survey was about 51 percent--the response rate to the screening interviews was just under 60 percent; the completion rate to the main questionnaires was 85 percent. With the recommended changes to the survey, the response rate to the screening interviews in a national survey could be as high as 70 percent and the completion rate to the main questionnaire as high as 90 or 95 percent, yielding an overall response rate to the survey of 63 to 67 percent. The recommended changes to the survey that would have the most effect on the response rate are:

Changing the order of the questions on the RDD screening interview, so that the interviewer begins with questions directly related to the FSP and does not ask about income until the fourth or fifth question.

- Adding more interviewer probes to the screening interview to assure respondents of confidentiality.
 - Sending an advance letter about the study to persons on the RDD sample frame with listed addresses.
 - Lengthening the field period to increase the number of RDD telephone numbers for which the residential status can be determined.
 - Increasing the likelihood that the respondent to the screening interview can also respond to the main questionnaire by relaxing the criteria for determining the household member who can respond to the main questionnaire.
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- Administering a main questionnaire shorter than the long version used in the pretest.

The RDD Screening Interview Used in the Pretest Strikes the Right Balance Between Determining Eligibility and Minimizing Nonresponse

Most previous studies of FSP nonparticipation used crude screening rules to create samples of nonparticipants who were likely to be eligible for food stamps. The RDD screening interview used in the pretest used more sophisticated screening rules that required data on income, vehicles, and assets. Even so, we estimate that 38 percent of the respondents found eligible by the RDD screening interview seem to be FSP-ineligible based on information given later in the interview. The screening interview used in the pretest, with some changes, hits about the right balance between the two objectives of keeping the interview short and simple and predicting FSP eligibility well.

The Screening Interview and Main Questionnaires Should be Administered Using Computer Assisted Survey Methods

A national survey about nonparticipation should use computer assisted survey interviews (CASI) for both the screening interviews and the main questionnaires. CASI supports sample management and scheduling, aids the interviewer in conducting complex skip logic, and automatically determines whether the respondent is eligible for the sample. Using CASI will shorten the administration times of the main questionnaires.

A Survey About the Reasons for Nonparticipation Should Include a Small Sample of Households Without Telephones and Ask Telephone Households About Telephone Interruptions

About 20 percent of low-income households do not have working telephones. Because households without telephones may have different reasons for not participating in the FSP than households with telephones, a national survey of the reasons for nonparticipation should include a small sample of respondents without telephones. Interviewers would administer both a screening interview and the main questionnaire in-person.

Because working and elderly FSP-eligible households that do not have telephones are not common, considerable survey resources would be needed to identify such households. For this reason, the sample of non-telephone households would need to be small and screening for them should take place in areas with a high concentration of non-telephone households.

To reduce the required sample size of non-telephone households, we recommend collecting data about past interruptions of telephone service from households currently with telephones. If non-telephone households and households with interruptions in telephone service have similar reasons for not participating in the FSP, data on interruptions in telephone service can be used to statistically adjust for the under-representation of non-telephone households.

We also recommend that both FSP participants and FSP-eligible nonparticipant non-telephone households be administered the main questionnaires. By interviewing all FSP-eligible non-telephone households, information would be collected to determine the FSP participation rate among non-telephone households. It may be that the participation rate is so high among non-telephone households, that nonparticipation among non-telephone households is not a concern.

A Questionnaire About Nonparticipation Should Include Closed-Ended Structured Questions About Nonparticipation

In previous surveys, the questions about nonparticipation were typically broad and open-ended and elicited responses that were too vague to inform policy decisions. Hence, we designed a series of direct closed-ended questions about the reasons for nonparticipation. Each question asked whether a particular reason was applicable to the respondent. At the end of the series of questions, we asked whether there were other reasons why the respondent did not participate and which was the most important reason that the respondent did not participate. For some reasons, more detailed follow-up questions were asked. Even on their own, these questions could provide much detailed information about the reasons for nonparticipation.

A Questionnaire About Nonparticipation Should Include Questions to Determine FSP Eligibility, Food Security, and Sources of Food Assistance

Questions to determine the likely FSP eligibility of the respondent are important because including persons who are not eligible for food stamps in the sample may bias the survey findings. Because of concerns about the response rate, the screening interview cannot ask all the detailed questions required to determine FSP eligibility. However, some of these questions can be asked later in the main interview when the interviewer has established rapport with the respondent.

Data on food security are important because if most nonparticipants are food secure, the FSP may be meeting its mission of providing food assistance to those who need it, and low rates of participation are not a cause for concern.

The findings from the pretest suggest that many working and elderly households do not participate in the FSP because they feel they did not need food stamps. It is important to determine whether the lack of need is because nonparticipants are receiving food assistance from other sources such as other government programs, charities, family, or friends.

The Questionnaires Developed for this Study should be Revised to Address FSP Nonparticipation Issues Arising from Recent Welfare Reform

Changes associated with recent welfare reform may have affected the likelihood that working households and, to a lesser extent, elderly households participate in the FSP. FSP participation may have been affected in three ways. First, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) clients who discontinue TANF receipt because they find work, reach the time limits for TANF receipt, or are sanctioned for not meeting TANF work requirements may discontinue receipt of food stamp benefits at the same time even if they are still eligible for food stamp benefits. Second, welfare reform may have reduced the likelihood that persons applying for TANF also apply for food stamp benefits at the same time, because TANF applicants are not made aware of their eligibility for food stamp benefits at this time. Third, welfare reform may have increased the importance of psychological factors, such as the stigma of FSP receipt or use or the desire to be self-sufficient, as reasons for nonparticipation. With some minor revisions, the questionnaires could collect information on how welfare reform has affected the reasons for nonparticipation in the FSP.

A 20-Minute Main Questionnaire Would Collect Sufficient Information About Nonparticipation To Make Policy Decisions

Because of concerns of respondent burden and response rates, we recommend using a slightly shorter version of the long questionnaires that would take about 20 minutes to administer. It would include

questions about the reasons for nonparticipation, previous experiences respondents have had applying for and using food stamps, food security and sources of food assistance, the demographic composition of the household, and questions about income, expenses, and vehicles.

If Survey Resources are Limited, Consideration should be Given to Excluding Participants from the Survey

We recommend that FNS consider conducting a telephone survey of only nonparticipants. A survey of nonparticipants would save considerable survey resources and could provide sufficient information about the reasons for nonparticipation to inform policy. Comparisons of participants and nonparticipants yield findings that are suggestive of reasons for nonparticipation but rarely provide firm evidence that a particular reason is important. If resources permitted, surveying participants does allow comparisons between participants and nonparticipants of economic and demographic characteristics and previous experiences with the FSP which are useful in identifying types of persons who are most likely to not participate. It also allows an exploration of the ways in which participants overcame real or perceived barriers to participation. However, comparisons between participants and nonparticipants of household demographic and economic characteristics, sources of other food assistance, and food security can be made from existing data.

Consideration Should be Given to Adding A Module About FSP Nonparticipation to Another Household Survey

An alternative to conducting a stand-alone survey would be to add a short module about the reasons for FSP nonparticipation to another household survey. The module would begin with the screening questions, and only persons who meet the criteria in the screening interview would then be asked questions about nonparticipation. At a minimum, we recommend a 15- to 20-minute module that includes: (1) the screening questions, (2) the direct questions about nonparticipation, (3) questions about whether the respondent has previously applied for or used food stamps, (4) questions about food security and sources of food assistance.

Adding a module to an existing household survey would significantly reduce the costs of collecting the data since only the additional costs associated with a longer interview would be incurred. Depending on the survey to which the module is added, the response rate to the questions may also be higher. Some household surveys contain detailed questions about income by source, and these data could be used to screen for eligibility for the add-on module on nonparticipation. However, the household survey that the module is added to must be large enough to ensure sufficient samples of FSP-eligible nonparticipants in working and elderly households.

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