

THE CHARACTERISTICS AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF ZERO-INCOME SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM HOUSEHOLDS- VOLUME II (SUMMARY)

Background

The proportion of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) households with zero gross income has been increasing at a faster rate than the overall SNAP caseload. Volume I of this study used survey data to examine trends in the zero-income population. Volume II examines the circumstances leading to a household having no income or cash benefits and how these households are coping with extremely limited resources.

Methods

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to explore the strategies and informal resources relied upon by zero income SNAP families. The project team conducted fifty interviews with SNAP participants in Washington, DC, Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia. Respondents were selected from State lists of SNAP participants who had applied for or had been recertified for SNAP benefits in late 2011 or early 2012. Approximately 70 percent of interviews were conducted over the telephone and 30 percent were conducted in person.

Findings

Many respondents had unsteady employment history that lead to periods of zero-income. Several respondents noted that they frequently relied on personal networks for support and that they hoped to rejoin the workforce in the near future. Very limited resources often lead to periods of food insecurity throughout the month.

Characteristics of Interviewed Sample

Characteristics	Interviewed Sample
Age	
Nonelderly adults 18–59	47
Elderly adults 60+	3

Characteristics	Interviewed Sample
Sex	
Male	22
Female	28
Marital Status	
Single	33
Divorced/Separated	6
Married/Partner	11
Living Arrangements	
Homeless/Shelter	4
Living alone	10
Living with others	30
Transient	6
SNAP Unit Size	
1 person	41
2–3 people	8
4 people	1
Family Composition	
No children	
Parent with child over age 18	23
Parent with child under age 18	10
	17

Many respondents were in temporary housing or living with others. About three-fifths of the respondents were living with others when they were interviewed. Six respondents were in living situations where they could not stay in a single place for more than a few months at a time. Several of them discussed leaving food behind that was purchased with SNAP benefits as a form of payment or thanks for temporary hospitality. Of the 50 respondents, 17 had children younger than 18, and nine of those participants were the primary custodial parent.

Respondents were evenly divided between those who had participated in SNAP on multiple occasions and those for whom the current spell was their only spell. Multiple-spell participants reported various events, such as job loss or failure to recertify on time, as

triggers to their repeated entry into and exit from SNAP. Most single-spell participants had enrolled in SNAP within the past four years.

Most respondents were receiving some non-cash benefits from another federal assistance program. Approximately three-fifths of respondents reported participation in Medicaid. Five mothers who were interviewed were receiving Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits, and two of these women were also participating in Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF), although not receiving a cash TANF benefit. Only seven people reported receiving subsidized housing, though several more had applied. Many respondents described debilitating health conditions that were preventing them from working, but most of them were not receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits.

Employment was typically unsteady, with workers cycling in and out of jobs. Approximately half of the respondents were able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs), while the other half were either elderly or caring for dependent children. Most respondents had previously been employed, but had little job security. Many respondents worked in jobs that were physically demanding and had suffered injuries. Some respondents were experiencing unemployment for the first time and were unprepared for the ramifications of losing a job. Five respondents had stopped seeking employment at the time of the interview, but nearly all said they planned to return to the workforce.

In addition to looking for work, several respondents sought employment and training opportunities from community-based organizations and American Job Centers, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor. A few respondents were working to improve their long-term employment prospects by participating in unpaid internships and volunteer work or taking classes.

Multiple barriers with compounding effects led to difficulty finding employment. Nearly every respondent reported at least one event or barrier that undermined their ability to work and led them to apply for SNAP benefits. These events frequently had a cascading effect, where one event gave way to additional challenges that made it difficult to find or keep a job.

Personal networks and informal assistance were critical to survival. Respondents recounted strategies for stretching very limited resources in order to survive. Many respondents had access to a social network that provided a personal safety net for housing, informal occasional earnings, and job leads. Most respondents reported staying with friends and family. More than half of those interviewed reported earning money from informal work, mostly from providing occasional services to family or friends.

Data Limitations

While the findings of this study illustrate some circumstances and experiences that may relate to the zero-income condition, respondents are a small, nonrandom sample of zero-income SNAP participants, these findings are not generalizable to the larger zero-income SNAP population. Respondents who could not be contacted may differ systematically from those who were reached and agreed to be interviewed.

For More Information

Wilson, Claire & Brian Estes, (2014). *Examining the Growth of the Zero-Income SNAP Caseload: Characteristics, Circumstances, and Dynamics of Zero-Income SNAP Participants. Volume II: In-Depth Interview Findings.* Prepared by Insight Policy Research for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service: Alexandria, VA. Available online at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis>.