

TRENDS IN USDA SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM PARTICIPATION RATES: FISCAL YEAR 2010 TO FISCAL YEAR 2015 (SUMMARY)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps low-income individuals alleviate hunger and purchase food so they can obtain a nutritious diet. This report is the latest in a series on SNAP participation rates, which estimate the proportion of people eligible for benefits under Federal income and asset rules who actually participate in the program. This report presents estimates of participation rates for fiscal year (FY) 2015, comparing them to estimates of participation rates for FYs 2010 through 2014.

Findings

On average, 50 million individuals were eligible for benefits each month in 2015, and nearly 42 million received them. Overall, the program served 83 percent of all eligible individuals in 2015, unchanged from 2014, but up from 72 percent in 2010.

As in past years, the neediest individuals – those eligible for higher benefits – participated at higher rates. While virtually all individuals in households eligible for the maximum allotment participated in SNAP, only 28 percent of those eligible for the minimum benefit (\$16 in 2015) or less participated in SNAP. Participation rates were also higher for children and for individuals in households with incomes below the poverty line.

In contrast with these rates, but consistent with past years, participation rates for the elderly and for individuals in households with incomes above poverty (but still eligible) were much lower – 42 percent and 40 percent, respectively. The participation rate for individuals in households with earnings was lower than the average at 72 percent.

Participation rates for individuals in households receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) were close to the overall average, at 83 and 79 percent, respectively.

While participation rates varied considerably among subgroups of eligible individuals, rates increased between 2010 and 2015 for every subgroup except TANF recipients. The participation rate among TANF recipients declined from 84 percent in FY 2010 to 79 percent in FY 2015. Participation rates fell slightly or held steady for most groups between 2014 and 2015.

Methodological Notes

Estimates of participants (numerator) in this report are based on SNAP administrative data for FY 2010 through FY 2015, while estimates of eligible individuals (denominator) are based on Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement data for calendar year (CY) 2010 through CY 2016. Differences between these two data sources result in some estimated participation rates exceeding 100 percent.

Individuals in households with income or assets above the Federal SNAP limits are removed from the participant count unless every member receives cash benefits from SSI, TANF, or State general assistance.

For More Information

Farson Gray, Kelsey and Karen Cunyningham. (2017). *Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Year 2010 to Fiscal Year 2015*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research for the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (available online at www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis).