

Characteristics of U.S. Department of Agriculture's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2020

Background

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, about 39.9 million people living in 20.5 million U.S. households participated in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in an average month. This report provides information about the demographic and economic circumstances of SNAP households in FY 2020 (October 2019 through September 2020). Because the coronavirus COVID-19 public health emergency affected data collection starting in March 2020, this summary only covers the prepandemic period of October 2019 through February 2020; additional information about the characteristics of SNAP households from June through September 2020 can be found in the full report. Following the publication of this report, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) will publish a supplemental report that examines in more detail key differences between household characteristics in the prepandemic and waiver periods.

Key Findings

- Four in five SNAP households included either a child, an elderly individual, or an individual with a disability.
- The average SNAP household received a monthly benefit of \$230 in the prepandemic period of FY 2020.
- Eighty-one percent of households had gross monthly income less than or equal to the poverty line.
- More than one quarter of SNAP households—and half of households with children—had earnings.

Methods

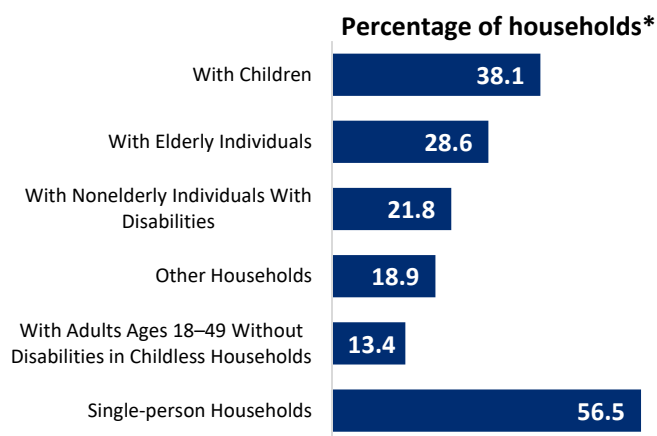
Analyses in this report utilize SNAP Quality Control (QC) data, which is an annually collected sample of SNAP administrative data from State agencies. The sampled data undergo a QC review in which States verify case information. In March 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 public health emergency in the United States, FNS provided temporary waivers on conducting QC reviews. Analysis of QC data for the prepandemic period determined that sample sizes for the initial 5 months of FY 2020 were sufficient for producing precise estimates of SNAP caseload characteristics for that period.

Findings

Four in five (81 percent) SNAP households included a child younger than age 18, an elderly individual (aged 60 or over), or an individual with a disability in the prepandemic period (See Figure 1). These households contained 90 percent of all participants and received 85 percent of all SNAP benefits.

Sixty-five percent of participants were in a household with children; 18 percent in a household with elderly individuals; and 20 percent in households with non-elderly adults with disabilities. Eight percent of participants resided in childless households with able-bodied adults ages 18–49.

Figure 1: Households receiving SNAP by composition, prepandemic



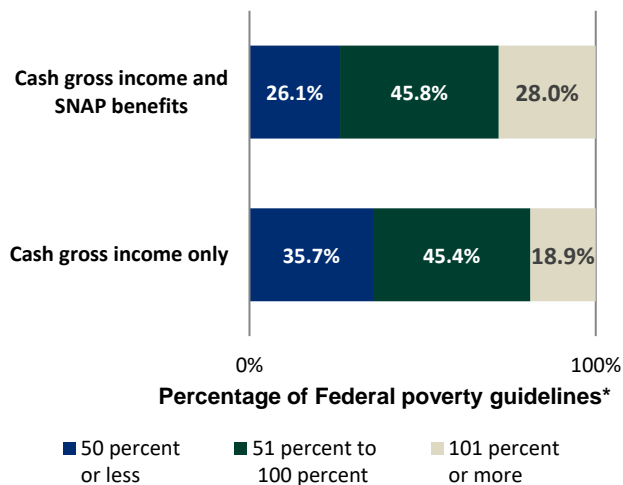
*Categories are not mutually exclusive and do not add to 100%.

Most SNAP households were small. The average SNAP household size was roughly two people, with over 56 percent of SNAP households containing only one person. Households with children were larger, averaging 3.3 members, while households with elderly participants were smaller, averaging 1.2 members.

The average SNAP household received a monthly benefit of \$230 in the prepandemic period of FY 2020.

About 36 percent of SNAP households received the maximum benefit for their family size. Only 11 percent received the minimum benefit (\$16), which is only available to households with one or two members.

Figure 2: Effect of SNAP benefits on the poverty status of SNAP households in the prepandemic period



*"Cash gross income" does not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Most SNAP households were living at or below the poverty line. In the prepandemic period, 81 percent of households had gross monthly income—cash income without SNAP deductions—less than or equal to the Federal poverty line. In the same period, 36 percent of SNAP households had gross monthly income that was less than or equal to half of the poverty line, and these households received 54 percent of all SNAP benefits. When including SNAP benefits with cash gross income, the program lifted over 9 percent of SNAP households out of poverty. See Figure 2.

Average gross income for all SNAP households was \$890 per month, which was slightly less than 65 percent of the Federal poverty line. About 19 percent of SNAP households reported no countable income.

Over a quarter of SNAP households reported earnings from employment. Prepandemic, nearly 28 percent of SNAP households had countable earned income from employment and received an average of \$1,242 in monthly earnings.

Roughly 63 percent of SNAP households received income from at least one source of income from a source other than employment earnings. Social Security was the largest source of unearned income: 32 percent of SNAP households received an average of \$907 in Social Security monthly. In the prepandemic period, 25 percent of households received Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits (an average of \$631 in SSI monthly), about 4 percent received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits (an average of \$506 monthly), and only 4 percent received State General Assistance (GA) benefits (an average of \$342 monthly). See Table 1.

Earnings from employment varied among SNAP household subgroups. More than half (53 percent) of households with children had earned income from employment, while 6 percent of SNAP households that included elderly individuals had earned income. Additionally, 27 percent of households with adults ages 18–49 without disabilities in childless households had earned income.

Table 1: Percent of SNAP households receiving select income sources and average amount received

Income Source	Percent of households	Average income from source (\$/month)
Countable earned income	27.7	1,242
TANF	3.6	506
GA	4.1	342
SSI	25.0	631
Social Security	31.8	907
Unemployment income	1.1	1,093
Veterans' benefits	0.7	576
Workers' compensation	0.1	718

Most SNAP households lived in metropolitan areas, with very few living in rural areas. Over 82 percent of SNAP households lived in or near large cities, while about 10 percent lived in or near smaller cities, and under 6 percent lived in rural areas.

For More Information:

Cronquist, K.; Eiffes, B. (2022). Characteristics of U.S. Department of Agriculture's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2020, Contract No. 12-3198-21-F-0034. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Kameron Burt. Available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.