

Background

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) helps low-income individuals purchase food so that they can obtain a nutritious diet. One important measure of a program's performance is its ability to reach its target population, as indicated by the fraction of people eligible for benefits that actually participate. This report is the latest in a series on food stamp participation rates based on the March Current Population Survey, and presents national participation rates for fiscal year 2004.

Findings

Of the 38 million individuals who were eligible for food stamp benefits in an average month of 2004, 23 million individuals (60 percent) chose to participate. There were approximately 15 million eligible individuals who did not participate in 2004. Although the FSP served more than 60 percent of all eligible individuals, it provided 71 percent of the benefits that all eligible individuals could receive. As a result, the FSP appears to be reaching the neediest eligible individuals.

The rate of participation by demographic and economic subgroups continued to follow historical patterns in 2004. Rates were relatively high for children and individuals in the poorest households, as well as for recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), with at least three-quarters of all eligibles from these groups participating. On the other hand, less than a third of eligible elderly adults, nondisabled childless adults, and individuals living in households with incomes above poverty, and only slightly more eligible noncitizens, participated in 2004. Just over half of citizen children living with noncitizens and individuals in households with earnings participated.

Nationally, the participation rate among individuals increased by just under 5 percentage points between 2003 and 2004, the third annual increase after declining for 7 years. Almost every demographic and economic subgroup experienced a rise in participation rates, with particularly large increases in the participation rate of children, of individuals in households with very low income, and of individuals receiving the maximum benefit.

Expanded eligibility continued to affect participation rates for some subgroups, although it had less of an effect than in previous years. The 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act restored eligibility for qualified noncitizens receiving disability payments effective October 1, 2002; to qualified noncitizens who had lived in the United States for over 5 years effective April 1, 2003; and to all legal noncitizens under the age of 18 years effective October 1, 2003. This expansion of eligibility helps explain why noncitizens are one of the few subgroups not experiencing a significant change in its participation rate in 2004. The number of participating noncitizens increased 28 percent over 2003, but the number of eligible noncitizens also increased in the same time period, so the change in the participation rate was not statistically significant.

For More Information

Barrett, A. and Cunnygham, K. (2006). *Food Stamp Program Participation Rates: 2004*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the Food and Nutrition Service (available online at www.fns.usda.gov/fns).

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