

SNAP Participant Perspectives: Employment Challenges and SNAP E&T Engagement Decisions

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides food assistance to eligible individuals with low incomes. Some SNAP participants may also receive employment and training services to help improve their economic self-sufficiency and to meet work requirements, when applicable. States are required to operate a SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) program, but they have considerable flexibility in determining who to serve and what components (or services) to offer. Many States provide some type of education, training, and employment services, but the specific components, the number of SNAP participants served, and the supports such as reimbursements for child care and transportation provided vary across States.

This brief describes the experiences of SNAP participants in finding employment and deciding to participate in the SNAP E&T program. It includes information directly from SNAP participants in four States participating in the SNAP E&T Rapid Cycle Evaluation (RCE) study. The brief focuses on their employment challenges, what motivates or deters them from enrolling in SNAP E&T, their satisfaction with different aspects of SNAP E&T program offerings, and suggestions for ways to strengthen or expand offerings to bolster participation. Although participants' barriers and experiences with SNAP E&T have been described in prior studies and contexts, this brief provides information in the post-COVID economy and at a time when providers are incorporating new ways to deliver E&T services.

SNAP E&T RCE Project

FNS contracted with Mathematica to conduct the SNAP E&T RCE project, which aimed to test new, low-cost, small-scale interventions in SNAP E&T operations or service delivery in seven States and localities. Reports from each of the States participating in the project can be found at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis>.

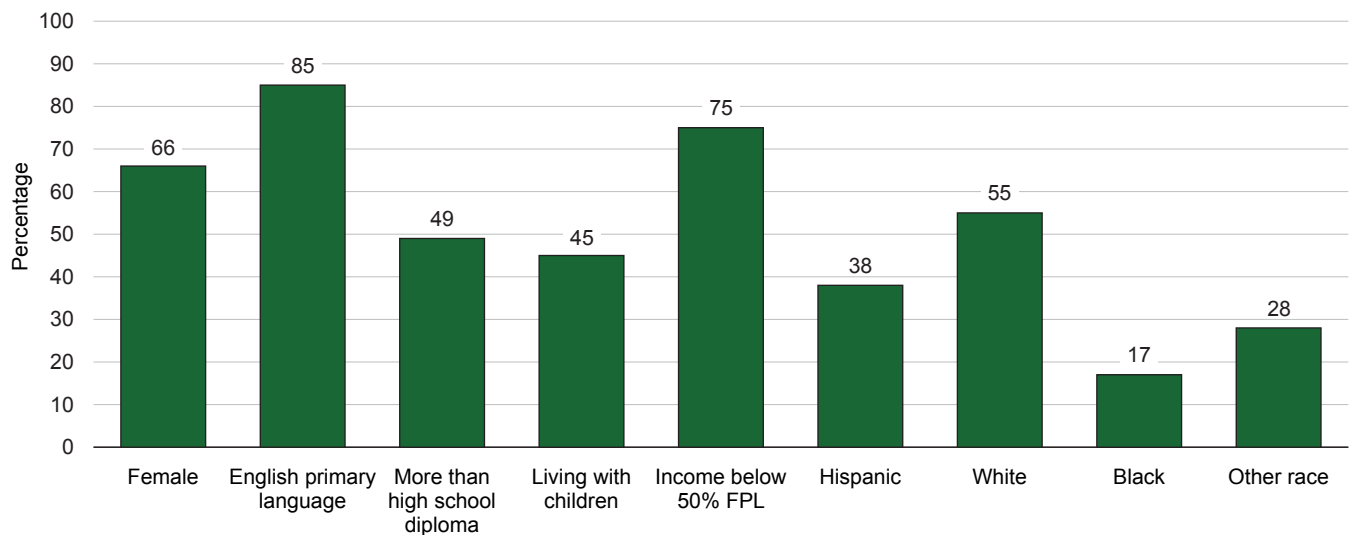
The information in this brief comes from a combination of surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews with SNAP participants in four sites.¹ Those included were eligible to receive SNAP E&T services and met the criteria of the study's target populations within each site.² The target population in:

- Colorado was all work registrants in three participating counties;
- Massachusetts was any SNAP participant over the age of 18 who was not receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or Social Security Insurance benefits and who agreed to receive communication from the State through text messages;
- Rhode Island was work registrants excluding those already in the SNAP E&T program and those who lived in a small number of areas without waivers for time limits for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWD); and
- Connecticut was community college students who had signed up to participate in SNAP E&T.

Characteristics of SNAP participants

The survey collected information on the characteristics of SNAP E&T eligible participants in the study (3,386 completed the survey). Most eligible individuals were women (66 percent), and 45 percent lived in a household with children. Their average age was 39 (not shown). The majority of individuals' primary language spoken was English, with 15 percent reporting another primary language. Nearly half (49 percent) of individuals had completed a level of schooling higher than a high school diploma, including a two- or four-year postsecondary degree or a vocational or technical degree or certificate. Seventy-five percent had a household monthly income below 50 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL). Most SNAP participants identified their race as White (55 percent), with 17 percent identifying as Black and 28 percent as other races including Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, or multiple races. Thirty-eight percent identified as being of Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin.³

Exhibit 1. Key characteristics of SNAP E&T-eligible participants

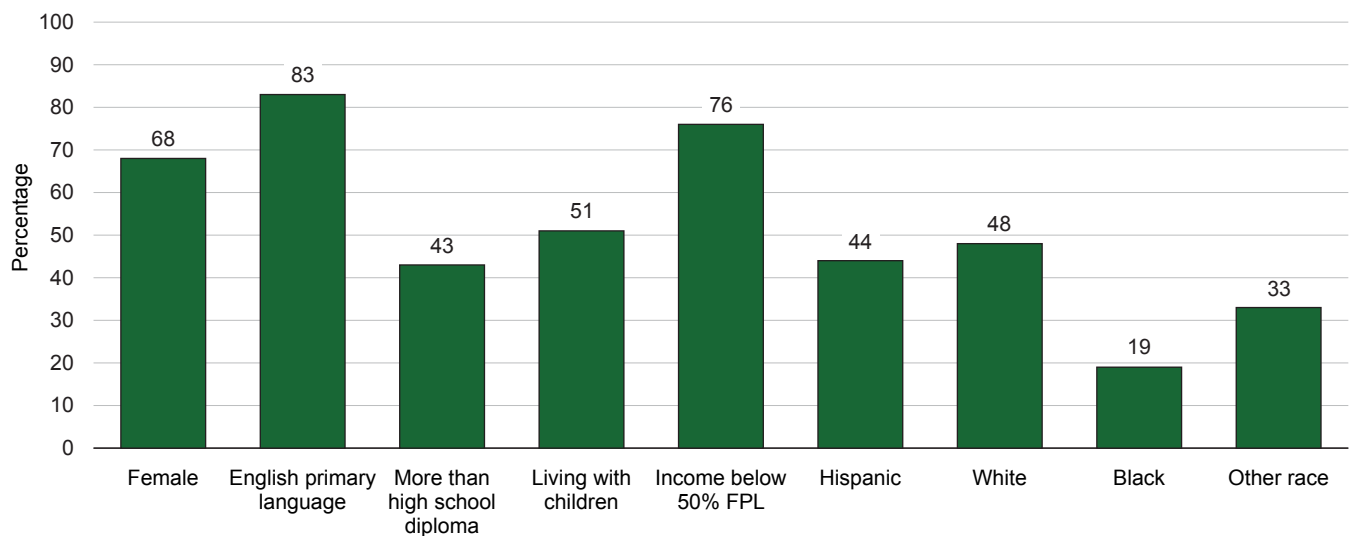


Source: SNAP participant survey

Note: Based on data for 3,386 SNAP participants

Most of those who completed the survey did not choose to participate in SNAP E&T, but we looked separately at the characteristics of those who reported enrolling in services (1,006 completed the survey); about 26 percent of eligibles reported receiving SNAP E&T services at the time of the survey and 6 percent reported having received services in the three months prior to the survey. This group had similar characteristics to all of those who were eligible to participate in E&T with a few exceptions. They were slightly older with an average age of 40 (not shown) and slightly more likely to be female. They also were more likely to live in a household with children (51 percent compared to 45 percent) and less likely to have a high school diploma (43 percent compared to 49 percent; Exhibit 2). Those enrolled in SNAP E&T were also less likely to identify as White (48 percent compared to 55 percent) and more likely to identify as being of Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin (44 percent compared to 38 percent).

Exhibit 2. Key characteristics of participants enrolled in SNAP E&T



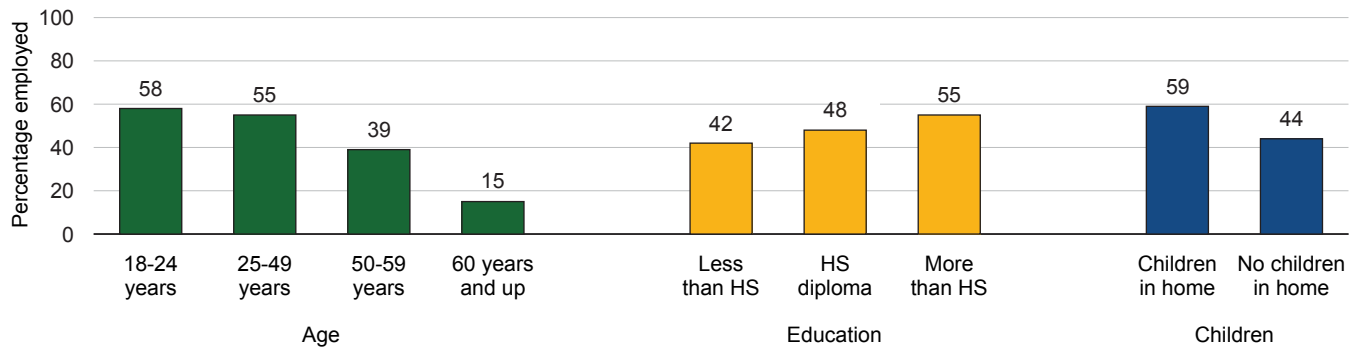
Source: SNAP participant survey

Note: Based on data for 1,006 SNAP participants

Challenges finding and keeping employment

Fifty percent of those surveyed were employed at the time of the survey or in the three months prior to it. The employment rate varied by age, education level, and presence of children (Exhibit 3), with the lowest rates among those ages 60 and older and those with less than a high school education.

Exhibit 3. Employment rate of SNAP E&T-eligible participants, by key characteristics

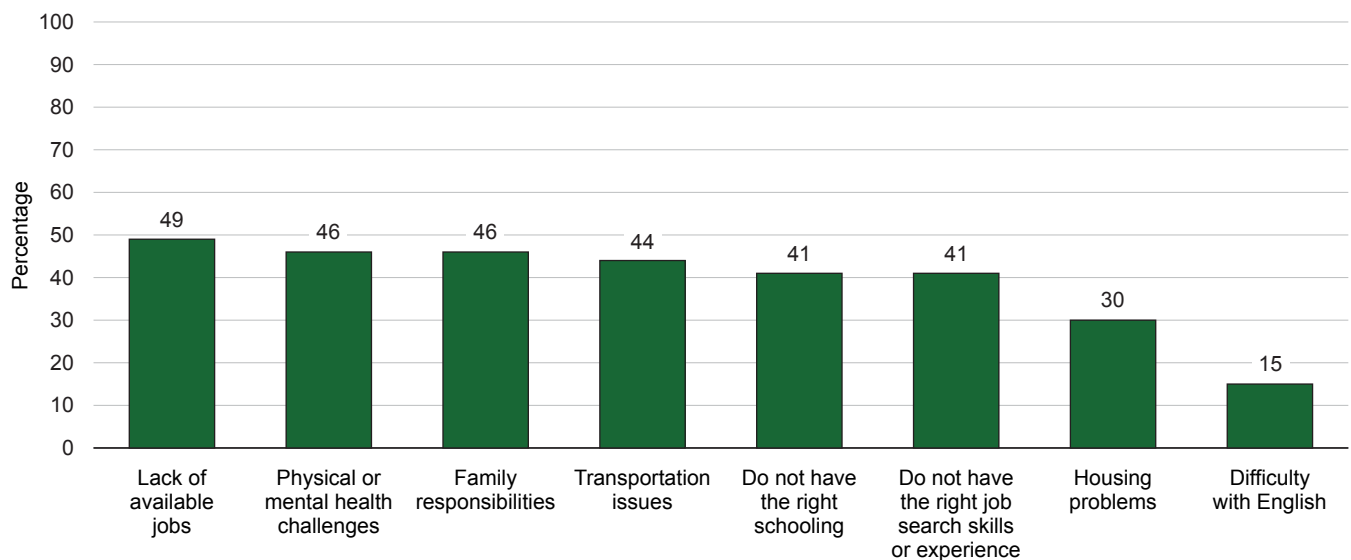


Source: SNAP participant survey

Note: Based on data for 3,386 SNAP participants. HS=High School

Given these rates of employment, all of those surveyed were asked about any challenges in finding and keeping jobs (Exhibit 4). They could select multiple challenges that applied to their circumstances, but several were frequently reported. Lack of available jobs was the most commonly reported challenge (49 percent of those surveyed). Other challenges to finding or keeping jobs that were frequently reported were physical or mental health challenges (46 percent), family responsibilities (46 percent), transportation issues (44 percent), and not having the right schooling or experience (41 percent each).

Exhibit 4. Percentage of all SNAP E&T-eligible participants reporting challenge that makes it difficult to find or keep a job



Source: SNAP participant survey

Note: Based on data for 3,386 SNAP participants



SNAP participants that took part in focus groups and in-depth interviews shared many of the same challenges reported in the survey. The most frequently cited challenges surrounding finding and keeping employment included:

Physical or mental health challenges. SNAP participants frequently discussed how a physical and/or mental health challenge made it hard for them to find a job. Some specifically discussed addiction-related challenges. For example, one participant shared that despite other factors that make them a good job candidate, their openness about addiction recovery might play a role in their challenges finding a job: *“My resume is good, but I’m also very transparent about my program, working my program, the fact that, you know, destigmatizing addiction all of that... I think that that may have been a factor.”* Others found it hard to keep a job because of health reasons: *“I have mental illness and whenever things get disrupted, I mean, I’ve lost, it’s hindered me from having a long-term successful career for sure.”*

Family responsibilities. Family responsibilities, especially child care, present many challenges to SNAP participants. One challenge is the trade-off between working and paying for child care versus not working and caring for children at home. This can be especially difficult for participants whose children have special needs. Some were able to find adequate child care but had trouble keeping a job because they needed to stay home when their children were sick, such as this SNAP participant who shared: *“[my children] would be getting sick a lot and if they’re sick they can’t go to the child care center because [they] can’t get everyone else’s kids sick. So, just stuff like that. I had to call out of work.”*

“...child care is astronomical and because I commuted, it was extended hours. It was almost an entire paycheck for two children. So I had to make the decision. Do I work 12 hours a day, come home and take care of two kids and let somebody else raise them or try to live off my savings and raise my own kids for a little while and struggle?”

Lack of available jobs. Several SNAP participants discussed how the limited availability of jobs negatively impacted their ability to find a job. They also discussed that even when jobs were available, the amount of money was insufficient or they may not be stable, long-term jobs. For example, one participant noted that *“most jobs for men in Denver are disposable, low-wage, temporary jobs. So it doesn’t support the kind of living that I need,”* while another shared that *“you don’t really get calls back when you apply places.”*

Lack of work experience or training. Some SNAP participants felt their lack of training or experience was a barrier to finding suitable employment. For example, one participant shared that *“in searching for jobs, I’m going back to the things that I know, which is home health care, customer service, retail, and these are things that are not gonna pay the bills ...”* Others shared that while they would like to get training, they simply could not put off finding employment.

“I used to work as a medical assistant many years ago, but I never had a certification...I would want a time to get a certification in order for me to [believe in] myself again... I don’t know how long I have to wait. I always have to get another job.”

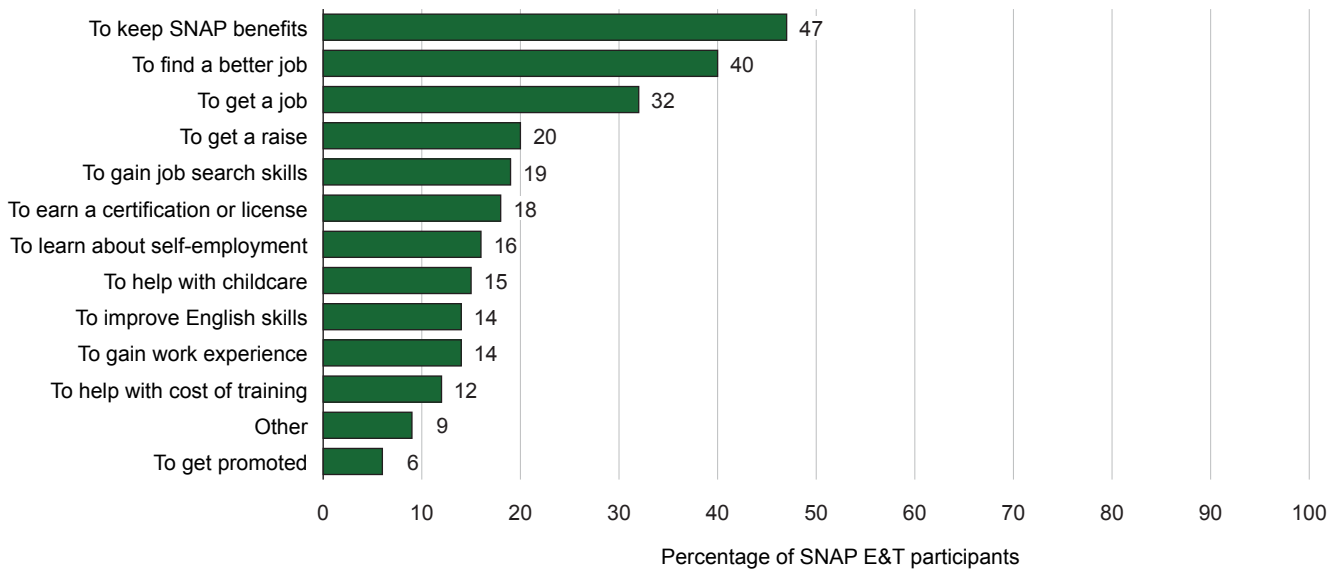
Transportation issues. Access to reliable transportation was a common challenge for SNAP participants in finding or keeping a job. It was challenging for participants to make it to work when public transportation was not available at certain times: *“sometimes it would be too early to catch the bus...I would have to get there by 3:30 in the morning to open up for 4:00 [AM]. So, no buses run around that time.”* In addition, some said they had to restrict their job search to areas they could walk to because they felt unsafe on public transit, which further limited their job prospects. One participant described this situation, saying: *“There just isn’t anything for me to easily get to. I’m very leery about taking buses and stuff like that...I’m paranoid about my safety.”* Others noted they had been turned down for jobs because of unreliable transportation. As one participant explained: *“I wasn’t able to find a job, a lot of places were like that they want people who have experience and who have solid transportation.”*

Criminal record. A few SNAP participants mentioned they had trouble getting a job “because of my criminal record.” As this SNAP participant explained: “I can literally build a house from the ground up, but because of my record, they always overlook me, like, well, we’ll get back to you.” Another SNAP participant lamented that an unqualified person with no criminal record would get selected for a job above someone who is overqualified but who has a criminal record. Some with a record said they dreaded the job application process because they constantly hear “oh, well, we’re going to have to check your records. And I don’t know if you’re going to be able to work here or not.”


Participation in SNAP E&T: motivation to enroll and satisfaction with services

The eligible SNAP participants who reported participating in SNAP E&T in the survey were asked about their reasons for enrolling and their satisfaction with program services. The most frequently reported reason for enrolling in the program was to keep their SNAP benefits (47 percent; Exhibit 5). Although SNAP E&T is voluntary in all four States, SNAP participants may have been required to meet ABAWD work requirements or may have misunderstood some of the messaging they received about general work requirements. Finding a better job (40 percent) and getting a job (32 percent) were also common reasons for deciding to enroll.

Exhibit 5. Reasons for participating in SNAP E&T, among those enrolled



Source: SNAP participant survey
 Note: Based on data for 1,006 SNAP participants

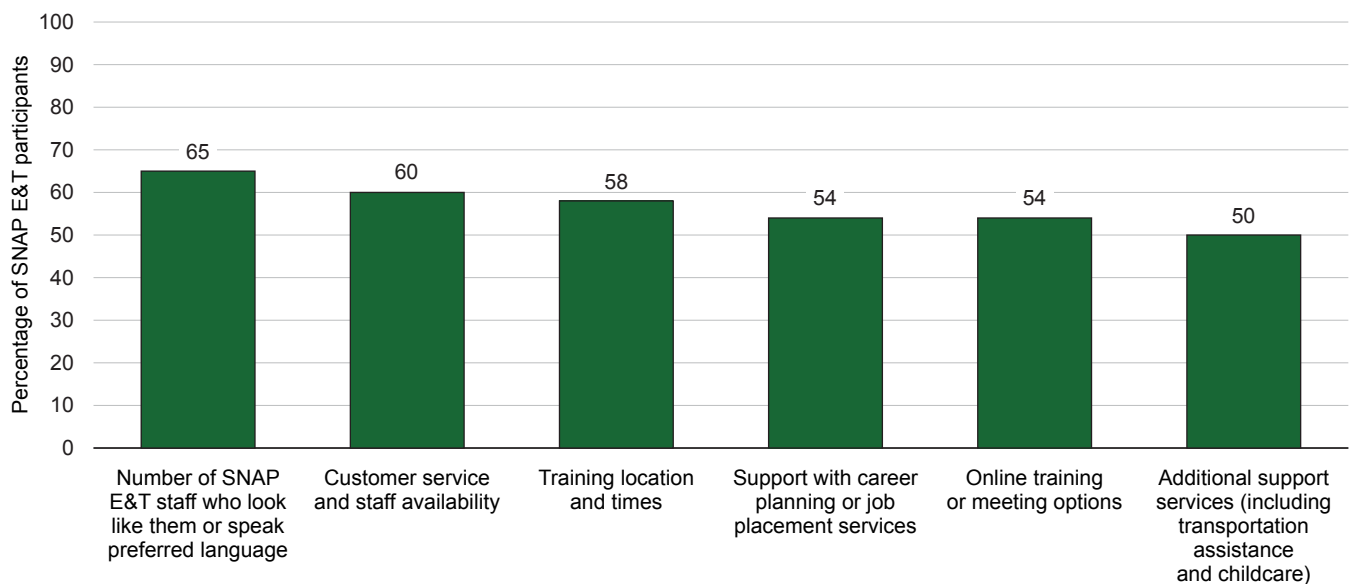
 When asked about their motivation to enroll in SNAP E&T, focus group or in-depth interview participants generally discussed their desire to get help finding a job. Some wanted to acquire specific skills to help them move up in their careers, including the opportunity to participate in training courses, such as culinary or pharmacy technician programs. Interestingly, individuals participating in focus groups and in-depth interviews did not mention they were motivated to enroll to keep their SNAP benefits.

“I need these computer skills and I need these programs so I could get better [jobs]. I’ve had plenty of jobs but they dead-end jobs.”

Satisfaction with SNAP E&T services

Those surveyed who indicated that they had received E&T services were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with various program offerings or features (Exhibit 6). They were most likely to report being satisfied with program staff and representation, with 65 percent reporting satisfaction with the number of SNAP E&T staff who looked like them or spoke their preferred language, and 60 percent reporting satisfaction with customer service and staff availability. Over half also reported being satisfied with training locations and times (58 percent), support with career planning or job placement (54 percent), and online training or meeting options (54 percent).

Exhibit 6. Percentage of SNAP E&T participants reporting they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with specific aspects of SNAP E&T

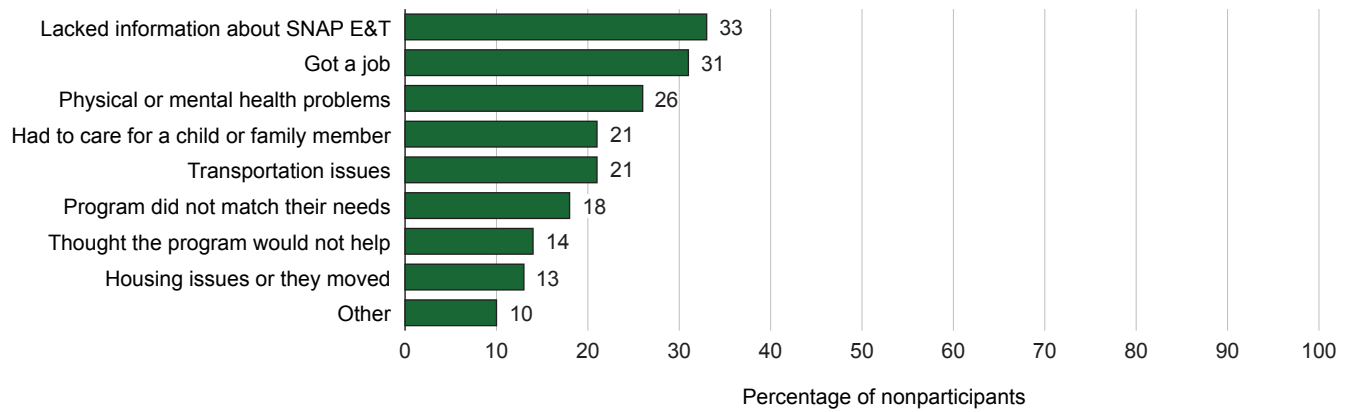


Source: SNAP participant survey
 Note: Based on data for 1,006 SNAP participants

Nonparticipation in SNAP E&T: reasons for not enrolling and offerings that could increase participation

Those surveyed who were not receiving SNAP E&T services were asked their reasons for not participating (Exhibit 7). The most frequent reason was lacking information about SNAP E&T (33 percent) and already having a job (31 percent). Other common reasons for not participating in SNAP E&T included having physical or mental health problems (26 percent), to care for a child or family member (21 percent), or transportation issues (21 percent). A smaller number suggested the program did not match their needs (18 percent) or they thought it would not help them (14 percent). Thirteen percent reported housing issues or moving as reasons for not participating.

Exhibit 7. Reasons for not participating in SNAP E&T, among nonparticipants



Source: SNAP participant survey

Note: Based on data for 2,380 SNAP participants. ‘Other’ responses included reported reasons such as difficulty contacting SNAP E&T staff, not receiving a call back after initial outreach, or receiving services through another program.



The reasons that those in the focus groups and in-depth interviews discussed for not enrolling in SNAP E&T where similar to what was reported in the survey. When asked about their decision not to participate in E&T, SNAP participants identified the following issues.

Challenges understanding the enrollment process or contacting SNAP E&T staff.

Several participants felt they did not know how to begin the enrollment process or get started with a provider. They said they would have liked more guidance in their initial interactions with SNAP E&T staff. Some described waiting for weeks to hear back from SNAP E&T staff after initially expressing interest in receiving services, at which point they were no longer interested. These individuals said that the lag time before hearing from SNAP E&T staff discouraged them from signing up. Others wished the outreach they received that sparked their initial interest included a link to program offerings, or a phone number to call to begin registering, rather than having to wait for a call from SNAP E&T staff.

“I’m sure I could go back to the website that I was at and look into it and find it that way... But other than that, I don’t know who exactly to reach.”

Lack of knowledge about the SNAP E&T program. Participants often shared that they did not know about SNAP E&T programs or realize they were eligible for services. Some said that they wished they had heard about E&T when they initially applied for SNAP, with one individual summing up the important communication role that SNAP staff play: “if your [SNAP] case manager don’t know about it, then it doesn’t exist to you.”

“I just know I’m not the only person that didn’t know that because you have food stamps, you can get job training also...If you could figure out a way of being able to really get it out there more... because I know that a lot of people need it.”

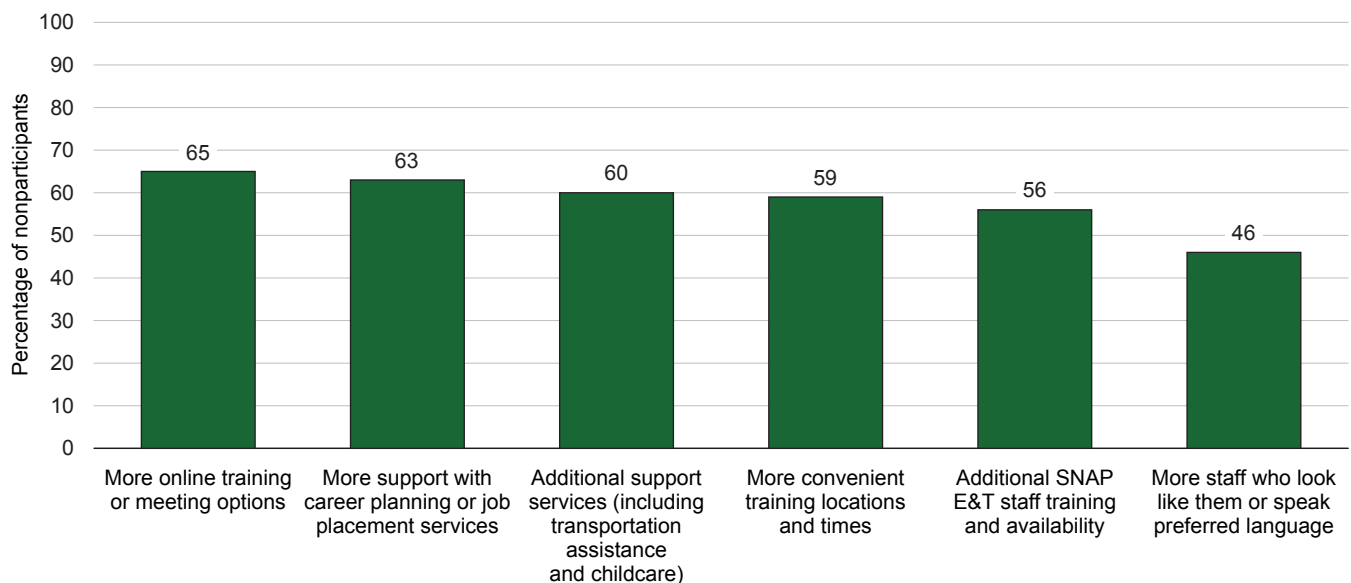
Lack of flexible hours for accessing the program. SNAP participants who mentioned scheduling conflicts as a barrier to engagement with E&T often cited difficulties attending daytime training. A few participants felt that SNAP E&T would be more accessible if they could take training courses virtually from home or if there were more night classes available. Others felt attending training on top of their existing job would be too challenging, with one participant explaining: “Since I have the job already...I was like, why would I compromise myself saying that I’m going to go to a training, or I’m going to look for another job, since I already have one right now.” Many SNAP participants shared that balancing day care schedules for their young children and E&T program offerings was infeasible. Some noted they were interested in E&T but figuring out the right training and enrolling “slipped my mind because [of] everything else that was going on around me.”

Program offerings not matching participants’ needs. Some participants shared they did not participate in E&T because the training opportunities offered by E&T were not in industries they were interested in or that paid well. One participant shared: *“when it came to the Allied Health courses, it was just CNA, or phlebotomy. And honestly the salary rate for that is nothing. I can’t support a family of three, and myself, on a CNA salary.”* Others felt they were overqualified for the training programs offered because they already had a GED or even a college degree.

“Give me some classes for [people] that already have college education... more variety of classes, and some upper-level classes we’ll call it, because a lot of people are already technologically literate. So if you’re not illiterate at technology, then, intro to computers—what good is that gonna do?”

Offerings that would make them more likely to enroll. When asked in the survey what offerings would make them more likely to participate in SNAP E&T, SNAP participants most frequently cited offering more support services (such as transportation assistance or child care), more online training or meeting options, and additional staff training or availability (Exhibit 8). Some participants shared that training programs they were interested in were far away and would be costly to attend without transportation assistance. Others felt that child care assistance or providing meals for participants in training programs would have encouraged them to participate in E&T.

Exhibit 8. Percentage of nonparticipants reporting offerings that would make it more likely for them to participate in SNAP E&T



Source: SNAP participant survey

Note: Based on data for 2,380 SNAP participants

Conclusions

Across States, a small share of those eligible for SNAP E&T programs participate. Understanding both who is participating and is not, as well as what factors may affect these decisions can better help SNAP E&T administrators and providers target programs to the needs of the broader eligible population. The findings from this brief provide important information directly from this population exploring their needs, barriers, and interests.

Although the findings for those enrolled in SNAP E&T are important, this is a group to which program staff have the most access to understand who they are and what they need. It is the group who chose not to enroll that helps to fill an information gap, to better understand who this population is and why they are not enrolling. The

findings from this brief point to two factors that highlight the need for better targeting of messaging. First, the most common reason for not participating was that people did not know about the program. Despite all the States in the study having policies requiring that E&T is discussed with eligible participants at determination and many having some form of outreach materials available to the public, many SNAP participants are not receiving or absorbing this information. There could be a variety of reasons for this. It could be the timing of messaging—at the point of interview families are often in crisis and may not be able to focus on E&T until they are more food secure. It could also be related to the head of the household receiving the information for all members of the household: some of those who are eligible may not be learning about E&T from the household head or may not have understood the services available to them. The type of outreach materials may also be overlooked by some participants, if outreach materials are primarily electronic (online) or alternatively only in the form of flyers or mailers.

Second, nearly a third of those surveyed said they did not participate because they had a job. Several of those in focus groups and in-depth interviews also discussed not needing the program because they were already employed, even though it may not have been a job that was fully supporting their family. For these SNAP participants, the idea of improving their skills through E&T to obtain a “better” job did not resonate or was not clearly messaged as a core component of the program. There is promise, though, as 40 percent of those who did enroll in E&T discussed that they participated because they wanted to find a better job. Messaging focused on skill attainment and providing more flexible training for working participants could increase participation.

Finding ways to better target and message to the eligible E&T population will be an important step in engaging a larger group. The findings from this brief help provide a roadmap for where a more focused approach could grow the program. The findings also reinforce the importance of tailoring SNAP E&T programs to a variety of participant needs and addressing these barriers to engagement using case management and other approaches.

Endnotes

¹ Data for this brief were collected in four SNAP E&T RCE study sites through survey interviews with 3,386 SNAP participants, focus groups with 48 SNAP participants, and in-depth interviews with 77 SNAP participants. Surveys were conducted with treatment and control group members in four sites between December 2023 and July 2024. Focus group and in-depth interview data were collected between October 2023 and May 2024.

² Each State operated a voluntary SNAP E&T program. In these States, E&T services are optional for all SNAP participants, including work registrants (SNAP participants who have not met any Federal exemptions from SNAP work requirements and are therefore required to register for work and meet general work requirements).

³ The survey included a question that asked, “What is your race?” and allowed respondents to select all that apply from the following categories: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, White, or Other (specify). Respondents could write in their response for Other. In Exhibits 1 and 2, the Other race category includes those who selected multiple races. Another question asked, “Are you of Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin?” and allowed respondents to select either No or Yes.

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