Approaches for Understanding the SNAP E&T Target Population

This resource for State agencies explores one part of the growing and strengthening series to build stronger SNAP E&T programs—approaches to better understand the characteristics and needs of potential and current SNAP E&T program participants.

Understanding who your Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) employment and training (E&T) program serves and the services and supports that program participants seek is a necessary first step to operating an effective program. If programs are not designed to offer what SNAP participants want or need, participants will not enroll or stay engaged.

There are many ways SNAP agencies can collect and use data to better understand the needs of SNAP and SNAP E&T program participants and use that data for continuous improvement of State SNAP E&T programs. State agencies can use existing administrative data to better understand the characteristics of those who do and do not choose to participate in E&T programs. In addition, conducting surveys, focus groups, and listening sessions with SNAP participants allows agencies to better understand what participants think is working well and not as well in the SNAP E&T program and to include participants' voices in the program design. Many SNAP State agencies are already working with program participants to bring the lived experiences of participants into conversations about program design and operation, as are many service providers. The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is interested in better supporting this work.

Use SNAP administrative data to understand program reach

All States have a rich data source in their SNAP administrative data. These data, provided by SNAP applicants and participants, include detailed information about each SNAP participant, including those eligible for SNAP E&T. Although you may not have direct access to these data, you may be able to obtain administrative data through ad hoc report requests, a data warehouse, or SNAP eligibility staff. You likely also have SNAP E&T specific data, which may be in their own system, combined with the SNAP eligibility system, or in a manual format (such as an Excel file). Reviewing some common data elements from SNAP administrative data will provide important insights to help you better design and target your E&T programs.

For example, if the data show that 20 percent of those whom the program has been targeting are non-English speaking, but the SNAP E&T program does not provide robust services that accommodate English language learners, you will find engaging these individuals difficult. This gap indicates that a change should be made to the program, either by narrowing the target population to those who the program can serve well or designing services for a broader population.

SNAP and SNAP E&T administrative data can provide useful insights into the types of people who are participating compared to those who are not. The following are tips for identifying and using administrative data for program improvement.

Select who to include

Once you can access SNAP administrative data, you will need to decide which part of the SNAP population you have questions about. You may have general questions about SNAP participants or more targeted questions about a subset of participants.

The types of SNAP participants that you include in your data should be based on your program's target population. For example, if your program primarily targets able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs), you will likely limit the data you are looking at to ABAWDs in your State. The data you examine may be further defined by the questions you are asking. For example, if you want to know about outcomes for ABAWDs who participate in SNAP E&T, you may narrow your data set to those ABAWDs who have participated in SNAP E&T. But if you want to know why some ABAWDs participate in SNAP E&T and some do not, you would include all ABAWDs in your State.

Whichever groups you select, you should talk to your eligibility and data staff to ensure that you understand how certain participant indicators are developed in the data system and that you will include the exact people that you need during the period of interest.

Choose relevant data elements

Administrative data systems have numerous data elements, so selecting only the data that are needed will make it easier to understand the results. The characteristics you choose should help you understand your target population and be relevant to the question you are asking. Also, using individual-level data, as opposed to aggregate data, gives you flexibility to answer more and specific questions you have.

Key eligibility elements typically included in SNAP administrative data appear in Box 1. It also identifies SNAP E&T data you can link to the characteristics of people currently participating in SNAP E&T or who have participated in the past.

Box 1. Key administrative data elements

SNAP eligibility data:

- Age
- Gender
- Race and ethnicity
- Educational attainment
- Presence of children in the household
- Presence of earned income
- Disability status
- Primary language spoken
- Geographic locations (zip codes and/or county)
- ABAWD status
- Work registrant status
- Sanction due to E&T (if applicable)

SNAP E&T data:

- Start/end date of participation
- Assessment data
- Participant reimbursements (amount, type, frequency)
- Components and length of engagement
- Provider and location
- Employment and wage information

Identify data trends

After you have SNAP administrative data, you can begin to explore whom the program is serving and those who could be served. For example, you could look at the average age and gender of work registrants who are not participating in SNAP E&T compared to those who are participating to determine if there are large differences. If, for instance, your program targets ABAWDs but you find your program is mostly serving women with children, this difference may reflect a gap in your program design. This does not mean there is anything wrong with the program serving this group—but you may want to explore why ABAWDs are not taking advantage of your program services.

Many examples of how you could use these data to learn more about your participants appear in Table 1. The suggested analyses may lead you and other leaders to realize you should explore the data further, or your findings may highlight immediate changes that should be made to the program.

Table 1. Examples of analysis

Characteristic	Analysis
Age	• Average age of SNAP E&T participants compared to eligible participants • Average age of SNAP E&T participants in each component • Employment outcomes by age of SNAP E&T participants
Gender	• Gender of SNAP E&T participants and eligible non-participants • Gender of SNAP E&T participants by components • Gender of SNAP E&T participants by provider
Geographic location	• Location of SNAP E&T participants compared to provider locations based on zip codes or counties
Race and ethnicity	• Race and ethnicity of SNAP E&T participants • Race and ethnicity of SNAP E&T participants compared to eligible participants • Race and ethnicity of SNAP E&T participants by zip code • Race and ethnicity of SNAP E&T participants by components
Education level	• Education level of SNAP E&T participants compared to eligible participants • Education level of SNAP E&T participants by components
Primary language	• Primary language of SNAP E&T participants by components • Primary language of SNAP E&T participants by providers
Presence of children	• Presence of children in household of SNAP E&T participants by components
ABAWD status	• ABAWD status by components • ABAWD status by completers compared to non-completers in SNAP E&T • Employment outcomes by ABAWD of SNAP E&T participants

Engage participants to understand their needs and preferences

Administrative data can provide basic information about your target population, but they cannot tell you what participants want or need from your SNAP E&T program. You can engage participants in a variety of ways to solicit their feedback about what is working in your program and what is not. Some service providers may obtain feedback from SNAP E&T participants that they collect through conversations or satisfaction surveys. Obtaining and using this feedback are valuable activities, but this feedback is limited to those who are already participating in your programs and have remained engaged over time. As a result, this feedback limits your information to a small number of people, relative to all of those who are eligible but not participating or who participated and did not stay engaged in the program. Reaching this group and ensuring their voices are heard is important for shaping the program to meet their needs as well. You will likely learn about motivations, needs, or barriers that you would not anticipate but could be addressed through your SNAP E&T program. Not understanding participants' needs can result in low take-up of services, as the example in Box 2 describes.

This brief describes three approaches you can use to seek feedback from current or potential SNAP E&T participants: surveys, focus groups, and listening sessions. These approaches lend themselves to understanding what matters most to participants: they allow you to hear directly from the people potentially affected by the program. The information collected will also tell a fuller story about participants, your program, and operations.

Although SNAP agency staff already know how to interact with program participants, it is helpful to set expectations when engaging current and potential participants for their feedback on your program:

- **Treat participants as experts.** Although program staff may have ideas about what people do or do not need from the SNAP E&T program or what challenges they face, the people you seek out are the true experts. Because of this, staff should expect to compensate participants for the expertise they bring to program improvement. Compensating participants may be complicated because it could count as income for their benefits. Some alternatives to direct payments can be gift cards, vouchers, or meals.
- **Consider participants' time.** As you and your staff are busy, so are the participants you are engaging. They are juggling a lot and are taking their time to help you. Be sure to acknowledge and plan for that. You likely will have many questions for the group but prioritize what you want to get from them and ensure you are using their time efficiently. If holding discussions, be sure to start and end the meetings on time.
- **Build trust during discussions.** Key to any type of discussions with participants is establishing trust and ensuring participants understand that any feedback provided poses no threat to their continued receipt of benefits. Start discussions with "rules of the room" for everyone to show each other respect and allow all voices.
- **Ask questions that are accessible.** You will be talking with people from different backgrounds, with varying education levels. Ensure you are asking clear, easy to understand questions to obtain the best feedback. You also do not want to ask leading questions or to over explain your question. If holding discussions, consider offering some in non-English languages if there are large populations of English language learners in some of your program areas.

Box 2. Lessons from SNAP E&T pilots

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded pilot grants to 10 States—California, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington—to test innovative strategies for providing employment and training services through SNAP E&T. The majority of the States developed robust programs that focused on occupational training programs and education. States felt the quality of the services would attract participants, but most designed their pilots without input from their target population. As a result, many pilots found that take-up rates for education, occupational skills training, and work-based learning activities were lower than anticipated (Rowe 2021). Through a recent study, we learned that there was often a mismatch between what participants needed or wanted and what the program offered. For example, often people reported they were joining the program to find an immediate job to pay their living expenses and were not interested or able to enroll in training. Some also felt the training options did not align with their goals. Frequently, programs also found that participants faced extensive barriers that limited their ability to participate in the programs in the way they were designed. During the pilots, States had to pivot and adjust their programs to better meet participants where they were. Better understanding participants' interests and needs can help inform design decisions and lead to more promising outcomes.

Participant surveys

Surveys offer an opportunity for participants to anonymously share feedback and voice opinions that they may not share in person, especially related to their satisfaction. You can easily reach a larger number of people using surveys. Surveys can be administered just once or at multiple times, such as after a participant enrolls in SNAP E&T and after they complete services.

Although this section discusses implementing a participant satisfaction survey, the steps also apply to surveys focused on a variety of topics. Participant satisfaction surveys offer an opportunity to pose objective questions covering topics on customer experience and satisfaction, service quality, and experience with providers and employers. This information can help you determine if the program is operating as intended and meeting its goals.

Identifying participants

As you design your survey, you should know which and how many people you want to survey. You can start with the information you already have. From the administrative data, you know the total number of people who are participating in SNAP E&T that month. If you want to make sure to include a mix of participants—for example based on provider, geography, and demographics (such as gender or race)—you can also identify how many participants are in each category. You can then select an even number (or proportional) from each of those groups to ensure you hear from a diverse group of participants.

How many people you select will likely depend on the mode you use for the survey and how many completed surveys you expect. The burden of sending surveys to a larger group is low when using an electronic survey but is higher for paper surveys (see below). Consider that the completion rate, regardless of mode, is likely to be relatively low. If there is no follow-up, or nudging people to complete the surveys, fewer than 30 percent of the people who received it may complete the survey.

Designing the survey

Surveys should align to what you want to learn and be an appropriate length (how long it takes to complete). The shorter the survey, the easier it is for people to complete, and the more responses you can expect to receive.

Survey questions should be written without assuming what or how your participants may respond. Survey questions should allow participants to answer honestly and without influence (Box 3). To avoid writing leading questions, have a few people (ideally, SNAP participants) read the questions and ask them if they understood each question and if they thought it seemed like there was a "right or wrong answer." Use any feedback to adjust the wording before sending the survey.

Box 3. Tips for designing survey questions

Do ask objective questions	Avoid leading questions
☑ Rate your experience working with your case manager?	☒ How much do you enjoy working with your case manager?
☑ Rank your satisfaction with [X] component.	☒ Explain how [X] component helped you find a job.
☑ What were the main reasons you stopped receiving services?	☒ Did you leave our program because you did not like it?

As you design your survey questions, remember to write in a manner that is plain and understood by a variety of participants. Writing questions at a fifth or sixth grade reading level means your survey is accessible to the broadest group.

The format of the response is also an important consideration. There are several options, and each has benefits and limitations. For example, using yes/no responses is simpler than including rating scales and long options lists, but you will not be able to learn as much or gain as many insights from the results. Other formats, like open-ended questions, are easier to design but are more time intensive to review and difficult to summarize when assessing the findings. Each format has trade-offs that must be balanced; using a mix of formats can often address this need. Formats include the following:

- A Likert scale allows participants to select an option that best matches their feelings. For example, a 4-point scale could include the ratings *never, sometimes, often,* and *always.*
- A binary option such as *Yes or No*.
- A categorical scale includes a list of options. For example, respondents could choose one or more of the following: 1*. Transportation, 2. Child care, 3. Training supports,* and *4. Other.*
- Open-ended questions allow participants to write in their answers.
- Numeric value is a number associated with the value that could be a percentage, dollar value, or whole number.

Surveys should be transparent about their purpose and how the information will be used. Be clear that the survey is voluntary and anonymous and will not affect a person's receipt of benefits. Explain that the survey is an opportunity to share their experience so your SNAP E&T program can better serve them and their needs. The more trust that is established with participants, the more likely they are to complete the survey.

Sending the survey and assess the data

There are many options for collecting survey data, including using free or low-cost survey platforms, fillable PDFs, Word documents, or hard copies. Survey platforms provide links or QR codes that can be shared via email, letters, or text messages. Fillable PDFs and Word documents can be shared electronically as well, although hard-copy surveys would need to be mailed or handed out by E&T staff.

All of these are viable options, but you should consider the ease of collecting the data and reviewing them when selecting a mode. Survey platforms automatically synthesize the results, help monitor completion rates, and provide spreadsheets (and sometimes summary statistics) to download. However, if you are not familiar with the technology, it may be hard to develop the surveys. The other modes are more straightforward to develop, but information from fillable PDFs and Word documents would need to be collected and tracked manually and then transferred into spreadsheets. Hard copies would require more effort to collect and manually enter into a spreadsheet for analysis.

Once the data are in a format for review, you will have the ability to assess the results. You can identify how many people responded the same way for each question to identify agreement around topics. It will also help determine what works best for your program and ideas for improvement.

Focus groups

A focus group is a discussion with a small group of people who provide input. They are guided conversations with 6 to 10 people and, unlike a survey, these groups provide in-depth responses and context for people's decisions and opinions. They typically last 60 to 90 minutes, including introductions and wrap-up. A facilitator poses questions to participants and guides the conversation, giving everyone an opportunity to share but also keeping the conversation moving.

Box 4. Focus group recruitment approaches

- Identify people using administrative data and call, email, or text an invitation asking them to join the focus group. Additional follow-up ensures you have contacted the correct person, and you know who will attend.
- Ask providers to identify current participants to invite to join the focus group.
- Ask SNAP eligibility staff to identify people to join the focus group.

Designing the focus group

In designing the focus group, first identify what you wish to learn about for improving your program. The topics will guide whom to target for the discussions. For example, if you want to learn why eligible people are not enrolling in SNAP E&T, you will want to select people from your target population who were informed about the program but never enrolled. Alternatively, if you want to learn why people enroll in E&T but leave the program within the first month, you will identify this group from the administrative data and reach out to them (Box 4).

Although you may naturally want to ask many questions of participants when given the opportunity, you will have time only for about 5 to 10 substantive questions (for 60 to 70 minutes of discussion). You should consider depth over breadth for these discussions.

Create a discussion guide for each focus group. Your guide should begin by explaining the purpose of the discussion and the rules for the room—such as respecting others while they are talking, giving everyone an opportunity to speak, and turning off cell phones. The guide should remind facilitators to ask permission to record the discussion (if desired) and explain how the information collected will be used. It is a best practice to start with a warm-up question before moving into substantive questions, such as "please tell me about how you first learned about SNAP E&T." The guide should include questions that elicit in-depth discussion about participants' experiences by asking open-ended questions ("how," "why," "tell me about," "to what extent"). Keep the questions simple, using language that is easy to understand (Box 5). Questions that could be more sensitive should come later in the conversation, after you have built rapport among the group. The guide should end with a broad wrap-up question, such as "is there anything else you would like to share that we have not talked about today?"

Box 5. Example questions for those who have not participated in SNAP E&T

1. When you first heard about [program name], what did you learn about the program and the services that are available to you?
2. What were your reasons for not participating in the program?
3. What would you change about [program name] to make it more helpful for you?
4. What types of services are most important to you that could lead to you join a program like [program name]?
5. Would you say that finding a job has been easy or difficult for you? If difficult, what are some of the challenges you have experienced with finding a job? What could be helpful to you to overcome some of these challenges?
6. What has your experience been with keeping a job once you found one?

The discussion should end with thanking the participants for their time and any next steps, if appropriate.

Facilitating the focus group

When planning the focus group, you must identify a convenient time and venue. Consider what time of day will be easiest for participants; this may be in the early evening. Also, the location should allow for privacy (a room with a door) and be centrally located near public transportation.

To ensure participants feel comfortable responding, have a trusted program staff member facilitate focus groups. However, the facilitator should not be in a position of power over the focus group participants—for instance, someone who could affect their benefits. The facilitator should be relatable and have experience facilitating conversations. Box 6 includes additional tips for facilitation.

Summarizing the findings

After you conduct the focus groups, create summary reports that highlight the most salient points and identify themes. Try to find patterns in participants' responses; the more often participants express an experience or sentiment, the more likely their perception reflects a common reality. Focus groups help understand the "why" behind a decision or opinion. You are not necessarily going to know whether your program is working or effective from a focus group, but the information will help identify the places where you need more exploration.

Listening sessions

Listening sessions are like focus groups, but they often include larger groups that encourage open-ended feedback and brainstorming and involve actively listening to a variety of perspectives. For example, a focus group may be asked, "What would you want a program to offer that would make you more likely to participate?" A listening session may be asked, "How could we change the program to attract more people?" Both questions address the same idea: in the smaller focus group, people will share their personal experiences, but in the larger listening session, they may focus more on others and the community. The listening sessions also create a platform for people to share their ideas and concerns. Listening sessions can be a good way to get feedback about how people react to or understand a change in your program or to understand whether they would be interested in new components or services that you are considering.

Box 6. Tips for facilitating focus groups

- Manage your time. Let participants know when you need to move to a new question.
- Encourage quieter participants to share.
- Ask only one question at a time.
- Look for visual cues of agreement, disagreement, or confusion.
- Be willing to ask questions out of order to follow the flow of the conversation.

Designing and facilitating listening sessions is a process similar to designing and facilitating focus groups. However, for the listening sessions, the number and type of questions will generally be fewer and broader to allow the participants to drive the conversation. You could select your participants as you might for a focus group but simply include more people that meet your criteria. You could also broaden the criteria to include more types of participants, such as those who are currently participating in SNAP E&T, those who did in the past, and those who never participated.

Approach comparisons

Each engagement approach has benefits and limitations (see Table 2). Consider which approach best meets your goals when you select a method to learn more about your program participants' needs.

Table 2. Three approaches for collecting feedback from potential E&T participants

Approach	Benefits	Limitations
Participant satisfaction surveys	Are Anonymous. Are generally short and easy to answer. Offers feedback from a large group without much effort. More feedback may offer more accurate representation.	Some may not have access to online surveys. Does not explain the "why" behind participants' answers. Is harder to change questions or alter in real time, if needed. Can be harder for people without survey experience to develop and administer.
Focus groups	Offers in-depth insight to explain decisions and perceptions. Is easier to design and facilitate small group discussions for those with less experience. Uses flexible discussion guides to obtain needed content.	Are not anonymous. Recruitment takes direct engagement from staff. May take an hour or more of a participant's time. Involves planning and coordination to facilitate attendance and optimal engagement.
Listening sessions	Are flexible and open ended. Are less restrictive and less need for extensive discussion guides.	Are not anonymous. Recruitment takes direct engagement from staff. May take an hour or more of a participant's time. Involves planning and coordination to facilitate attendance and optimal engagement.

Conclusion

Using these approaches to learn about the needs of those you are and could be serving is the first step in thinking about changes you may want to make to your SNAP E&T program. You can use what you learn to better target your programs and make decisions about what the program offers. These approaches can also be used to obtain feedback from participants on a variety of topics, such as their experiences with specific providers. This kind of feedback can be beneficial as you make decisions each year about retaining and adding providers. You can also use your participant data in combination with other data sources, such as labor market information, to identify where there is crossover and to ensure your program is meeting the needs of both participants and employers.

References

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