

Questions and Answers: SNAP Longitudinal Data Project

The Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) will update the SNAP Longitudinal Data Project (LDP) Questions and Answers (Q&A) document periodically to ensure States have the most current information available. This document is the second release of the SNAP LDP Q&A. The table below documents each version and date of release.

| Edition | Date |
|-------------|------------|
| Version 1.0 | 09/30/2020 |
| Version 2.0 | 04/27/2023 |

1. What are the benefits of joining the SNAP LDP?

Response: By joining the SNAP LDP, State Agencies can utilize 100% grant funding to support State data cleaning and standardization efforts, participate in a State Agency cohort focused on improving SNAP data analysis and research capabilities, analyze SNAP participation and operations to improve program delivery, and expand their internal research capability.

Once a representative group of States are sharing data with the Census Bureau at the National level, researchers will be able to measure SNAP participation over time and across State lines, combine SNAP participation data with other Census-maintained micro datasets, enable cross-State analysis for identification of promising practices, and enhance research capabilities at the National level.

2. How is SNAP LDP administered at the Federal level?

Response: FNS administers the SNAP LDP, including the review of grant applications and management of awards. FNS partnered with the Census Bureau to leverage their secure personal identifier, data transfer process, and secure data storage for the establishment of a National longitudinal dataset.

3. Why are FNS and the Census Bureau collaborating on this effort?

Response: FNS is collaborating with the Census Bureau to leverage their secure process of protecting personally identifiable information (PII) using unique identifiers via the Protected Identification Key (PIK). Fundamental to this work is a method to link the same person across multiple administrative files, while de-identifying the data so that personal information is not available.

In addition, the Census Bureau has an established Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) process with States. States with an existing MOU can easily amend it to opt into the SNAP LDP. States without an existing MOU benefit from the support the Census Bureau provides throughout the MOU process and during the data sharing phase.

This approach is the least burdensome for State agencies and the most cost effective for State partners and FNS.

4. What is the PIK?

Response: The PIK is a unique identifier assigned to individuals using the Census Bureau’s proven Person Identification Validation System (PVS). The PVS is a technology developed by the Census Bureau that enables research using individual-level data, without the use of PII.

5. Are States required to connect with the Census Bureau before applying for a SNAP LDP grant? What if a State doesn’t receive grant funding for their proposed project(s)?

Response: FNS recommends that States connect with the Census Bureau early in the grant application process to establish their MOU. To avoid any interruption to grant funding, FNS advises States to begin the MOU process with Census within the first 30 days after grant award. Thus, to reduce the risk of delays, States should connect with the Census Bureau as early as possible.

If a State does not apply for or receive grant funds, they may still join the SNAP LDP by transmitting data to the Census Bureau via the MOU. Joining the SNAP LDP contributes to the overarching goal of conducting longitudinal research on SNAP participation. Further, States may reapply the next year and with an MOU already in place be a strong applicant for grant funding.

6. Is the grant program 100% Federal funding or a matching State grant?

Response: The SNAP LDP grant program is 100% Federal funding and there is not a State matching requirement. However, States may use the 50/50 match in the case that grant funds are not available or approved.

7. What is the timeline for releasing the Request for Application (RFA)?

Response: FNS anticipates releasing the Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 RFA by late spring of 2023. While RFA announcements may change year-to-year, States can reference the prior year’s RFA on grants.gov and the SNAP LDP Parameters for Participation (PPF) for insight on the participation requirements.

8. Are States required to participate in the SNAP LDP in order to receive grant funding?

Response: Yes, the SNAP LDP grant funds are specifically to support State participation in the project. A State must agree to transmit the specified data elements as part of the SNAP LDP in order to receive grant funding. The State does not need a signed MOU with the Census Bureau at the time they apply for grant funding; however, States must have a signed MOU in order to participate and should begin that process within 30 days from award notification. FNS highly encourages States to start the MOU process at the time they submit their grant proposals because the process can take several months.

9. Does a State have to apply for grant funding in order to participate in the SNAP LDP?

Response: No, applying for grant funding is optional. Any State may join the SNAP LDP by drafting, or amending, a State agreement with the Census Bureau to include the SNAP LDP. Grant funding is available as an additional layer of support to enable State participation.

10. Is grant funding available in future years for States who were not ready to apply in past years?

Response: Yes, \$5 million dollars in grant funding is available for each fiscal year after FY 2021.

11. Does participation in other research projects automatically register the State in the SNAP LDP?

Response: No, States interested in the SNAP LDP must inform FNS and the Census Bureau of their desire to participate. Once informed, the Census Bureau will work with the State to draft an MOU or amend an existing MOU to include the SNAP LDP.

12. Did the 2018 Farm Bill indicate how many years a project can run?

Response: The 2018 Farm Bill does not include an end date for SNAP LDP grant funding. The 2018 Farm Bill language specifically makes \$5 million in grant funds available every fiscal year.

Proposed grant projects may have a period of performance of up to four years. Proposals must include detailed project plans and budgets that include the allocation of funds for each year requested. Additionally, State data sharing agreements with the Census Bureau may be longer than the period of performance for the grant project. This ensures long-term sustainability in support of the SNAP LDP.

13. My State is currently replacing or modernizing our SNAP eligibility system. Can States apply for the SNAP LDP grant funding to support those efforts?

Response: No. The grant funds are for supporting State participation in the SNAP LDP.

For example, if the State already has a database software license for their eligibility system and needed to expand that license to support the addition of a separate SNAP LDP database, then grant funding is allowable for the additional incremental cost for the SNAP LDP. States may not request grant funding for obtaining or renewing a license in which the SNAP LDP would only be an incidental beneficiary.

Similarly, States may use grant funds to develop and implement processes that would “scrub” data from the eligibility system. This helps ensure a clean and complete data extraction to the Census Bureau and to the State’s own longitudinal database, if they are building one. States may not use grant funds to conduct data clean-up processes for their eligibility system or for system conversion, in which the SNAP LDP is only an incidental beneficiary.

14. How does a State join the SNAP LDP?

Response: To join the SNAP LDP, States must establish or amend an existing State data agreement (MOU) with the Census Bureau. This allows SNAP data submitted by the State to be used for longitudinal research purposes as part of approved projects.

15. What are the minimum requirements for participation in the SNAP LDP?

Response: To the extent that the data is available, States that join the SNAP LDP should submit the required data elements as part of their annual submission of monthly data files. The required data elements include demographic characteristics, income and financial resources, employment status, and household circumstances, such as deductible expenses.

Though optional, States are also encouraged to submit the additional optional data elements. The optional data elements include earnings and employment data from the State Department of Labor and health insurance program data. FNS encourages States to submit the required and optional data elements in the preferred standardized format, known as the SNAP Gold Standard.

16. What does the MOU process with the Census Bureau entail?

Response: Step 1: The State notifies FNS and the Census Bureau they wish to participate in the SNAP LDP. Upon receiving confirmation of the State's desire to participate, the Census Bureau will work with the State to update their existing MOU if they have one or draft a new MOU to include the SNAP LDP and associated data. States are encouraged to contact Kathy Reeves (Katherine.L.Reeves@census.gov) to confirm if their State has an existing data agreement/MOU or will require a new one.

Step 2: If the State has an existing MOU, they will review and negotiate any additional changes while including SNAP LDP as an approved project. This includes data usage and available data elements. If the State is establishing a new MOU, they will review and negotiate data usage and available data elements.

Step 3: After final review and approval of the agreement, the State and the Census Bureau sign the final agreement.

Step 4: After completing signatures, the State is ready for participation in the SNAP LDP and may begin working with the Census Bureau to provide the agreed upon data. Please note, the State's RFA response may be submitted prior or congruent to the development of the MOU; however, the MOU must be finalized within 90 days post-award.

Steps for Establishing or Amending an MOU



17. Can States develop their own longitudinal database?

Response: Yes, States may develop their own longitudinal database. States that receive grant funding for the SNAP LDP, including for the development of their own internal SNAP LDP, are required to have an MOU in place and send data to the Census Bureau for the National level SNAP LDP.

18. How long does it take to develop an MOU?

Response: The timeframe to develop and complete an MOU varies by State, but States should work diligently to begin working with the Census Bureau within the first 30 days of award notification. The timeframe is dependent on State responsiveness throughout the process. To reduce the length of time this takes, States should work closely with the Census Bureau, respond in a timely manner, and ensure they provide a point of contact who can coordinate communication.

19. What type of research can I do with my longitudinal data?

Response: Potential research ideas suggested by States in the past have included, but are not limited to:

- Leveraging longitudinal SNAP participation data to develop pilot projects intended to reduce project churn.

- Joining longitudinal SNAP participation data with Retailer EBT data to allow a State to understand benefits redemption patterns, particularly across different income levels, counties, or zip codes, and in response to the expansion of online purchasing during the Public Health Emergency.
- Combining longitudinal SNAP participation data with TANF, WIC, Medicaid, and Unemployment data to look at cross-program utilization over time.
- Aggregating longitudinal SNAP participation data with early learning, post-secondary, and workforce data to gain a more holistic view of recipients' life circumstances.

States that may wish to conduct research using Federal or other States' data in addition to their own must seek Special Sworn Status (SSS), receive formal research project approval from the Census Bureau, obtain approval from the States whose data they want to access, and work with the data solely within a Federal Statistical Research Data Centers (FSRDC). Additionally, States can conduct research internally, using SNAP LDP and other State-maintained datasets, so long as the data is housed securely within a State-maintained database and the State seeks FNS approval prior to publicly releasing any findings from the research.

20. Describe the process for review and publication of research and analysis using data from the national SNAP LDP dataset.

Response: Longitudinal research conducted using data from the National SNAP LDP dataset must be within the scope of the project descriptions and only for the purposes described within State MOUs. The Census Bureau and FNS will not approve proposals that do not align with that scope.

States must submit their proposed project to the Census Bureau. The Census Bureau Disclosure Review Board reviews the proposed project to ensure it meets specifications of the State data agreements. In addition, FNS reviews and approves all research related proposals to ensure the research relates to the scope of the project. If the research includes data from States other than the requesting State, the Census Bureau will request consent from those States before allowing access to the datasets.

Before researchers can publish any tabulations using the data, the proposed release goes through the Census Bureau's Disclosure Avoidance Review process to ensure that the confidentiality of individuals in the data remain protected. Finally, before the release of any publication, the Census Bureau provides States with the opportunity to review and comment before dissemination.

21. Will States get their data back? Will States have access to their data in the SNAP LDP? Are we getting anything back in exchange for our data?

Response: No. For security purposes, States do not get their data back after the Census Bureau removes all PII and adds a unique identifier, also known as the PIK.

FNS and the Census Bureau are working towards development of a SNAP LDP specific summary report, also known as table packages, to provide to States annually. The SNAP LDP table package will enable States to compare the longitudinal data on their SNAP program across States and over time.

If States want to conduct research or analysis on longitudinal data, they have several options:

- Develop or enhance a State-level longitudinal database allowing for State level analysis to see trends over times and/or between programs; or

- Perform research at one of the Federal Statistical Research Data Centers (FSRDC) after obtaining Special Sworn Status (SSS) and submitting a research proposal for approval to FNS and the Census Bureau. See the SNAP PFP for more information on this process.

22. What is a table package and what will the table package include?

Response: The table package is a summary report developed by the Census Bureau on an annual basis for States that provides data for research projects. FNS and the Census Bureau will develop a table package specific to the SNAP LDP that compares data across States and over time.

The content of the table packages has not been finalized; however, summary statistical information will be included. The Census Bureau received an initial list of requests from States and aims to include these requests, where feasible. As the number of participating States grows, the table packages will become more robust.

23. What does _____ (data element) mean or what does this field refer too?

Response: Appendix B in the SNAP PFP details the SNAP Gold Standard including business definitions for each field name. Additionally, it includes formatting details, example values, and a sample data set. If there are additional questions, States may reach out to the Census Bureau to discuss their data.

24. What is the SNAP Gold Standard?

Response: The SNAP Gold Standard is an optional standardized data format developed to facilitate the processing and use of SNAP data across States and over time. The SNAP Gold Standard file provides data definitions and an example format for both individual and case level files.

FNS and the Census Bureau highly encourage the use of the SNAP Gold Standard to streamline the process for incorporating State SNAP data into the national longitudinal database and as part of broader efforts across the agency to promote State data standardization. However, it is not mandatory that States use the SNAP Gold Standard to participate in the SNAP LDP or to receive grant funding.

25. What is the difference between the SNAP Gold Standard and NIEM?

Response: FNS and the Census Bureau developed the SNAP Gold Standard to encourage States to submit standardized data to the SNAP LDP. The SNAP PFP includes the SNAP Gold Standard tables, which contain the data elements, definitions, examples, and additional guidance.

The National Information Exchange Model (NIEM) is a national model used to support consistency in data sharing, but is not specific to the SNAP LDP. For more information on NIEM, review the information on the NIEM website under the [human services domain](#).

Both the SNAP Gold Standard and the NIEM help to make the data preparation and sharing processes consistent and improve data quality for research across State lines. The SNAP Gold Standard and NIEM are not required; however, grant funding is available for States to work towards either model.

26. Is approval required from CMS to share the Medicaid information in the SNAP Gold Standard?

Response: No. The requested data elements from the 2018 Farm Bill related to Medicaid information denotes whether a participant is enrolled in a CMS program, specifically, program name and enrollment dates. Detailed Medicaid information is not included in the request and therefore CMS approval is not required.

27. How will my State's SNAP LDP grant application be evaluated?

Response: Grant proposal evaluations are based on the criteria and instructions in the Request for Application (RFA) released on grants.gov. States should carefully read the evaluation factors for the grant and make sure to thoroughly address each section. Proposals that do not address each section or provide the required information will be evaluated and scored accordingly. The evaluation criteria in the RFA lists the points that each section is worth and therefore where States should concentrate their efforts. The SNAP LDP evaluation team reviews proposals for clarity, thoughtfulness, demonstrating a clear understanding of the goals and objectives and sustainability of the project after grant funding ends.

28. Can my State reapply if we did not receive a grant previously?

Response: Yes, FNS strongly encourages States to reapply if they were not previously awarded a grant. These States will receive special consideration. Additionally, States that do not receive grant funds may request a debrief from FNS to help address areas for improvement in their proposal.

29. Once I receive the grant, what administrative activities are required?

Response: Within the first 45 days post grant award, States must:

- (1) Finalize their grant award with FNS Grants Management;
- (2) Attend a grant kick-off call with FNS SNAP;
- (3) Begin work with the Census Bureau to initiate the MOU process; and
- (4) Determine a process and point of contact for submitting quarterly reports to FNS.

30. What do I need to do if my proposed approach requires changes?

Response: States must notify their FNS grants officer and program contact of any changes to their proposed approach, such as changes to staffing, budget, or timeline.

31. How can I get technical assistance for my SNAP LDP implementation?

Response: For all aspects of SNAP LDP grant administration, including changes to planned implementation approaches and questions about parameters for participation, please reach out Christine Daffan (christine.daffan@usda.gov). Technical assistance with MOUs or data is handled through the Census Bureau team.