



SNAP Quality Control Database: Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

Note: Sample programming code, in SAS, Stata, and R formats, is available at <https://snapqcdata.net>. The code provides examples of how to produce estimates of SNAP participant characteristics as well as standard errors of those estimates.



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SNAP Quality Control Database: Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

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I. GENERAL

1. What is the SNAP QC database and how does it differ from SNAP program operations data?

The SNAP Quality Control (QC) database is an edited version of the raw SNAP QC data file, a nationally representative sample of SNAP units generated by the SNAP QC System.

Each month, State agencies select a sample of SNAP cases for detailed review to measure the accuracy of eligibility and benefit determinations, as described on the Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA) SNAP Quality Control webpage (<https://www.fna.usda.gov/snap/qc>). These reviews collect information on household circumstances and case characteristics. FNA compiles information from these reviews into the SNAP QC database so that it can be used for research and policy analysis. In contrast, the SNAP program operations summary data reported by State agencies do not include demographic, economic, and SNAP eligibility information for SNAP units. Those data tables are available at <https://www.fna.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

For more information about the SNAP QC database and its construction, see Chapter II of the Technical Documentation for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Quality Control Database and the QC Minimodel, (SNAP QC Technical Documentation) available for download at <https://snapqcdata.net/datafiles>.

2. How are the SNAP QC data edited?

The SNAP QC data are edited, or reconciled, to ensure that measures of SNAP unit size, income, and benefits are consistent with program rules. This process also ensures that certain relationships hold for all cases subject to regular SNAP benefit determination rules, including that:

- Net income equals gross income minus the deductions for which the unit is eligible and must not be negative, and;
- The SNAP benefit level equals the maximum benefit for that unit size minus 30 percent of net income (or is the minimum benefit, if applicable) and must not be negative.

The data are also edited to remove units identified as ineligible by the QC reviewer, units with incomplete information, and units that do not appear to be eligible for a positive benefit after reconciliation.

In addition, certain variables are constructed to provide edited versions of reported variables. Others are constructed to allow users to easily identify units and individuals with certain characteristics or meeting certain policy criteria (refer to FAQ #10 for more information). Sampling weights and replicate weights are produced as well (see Section IV of the SNAP QC Technical Documentation from <https://snapqcdata.net/datafiles>).

Additional information about the SNAP QC data editing procedures and automated edits used to ensure internal consistency within SNAP units is available in Chapter III and Appendix B of the SNAP QC Technical Documentation.

3. Can I use the SNAP QC data for longitudinal analyses? Do variables change over time?

The SNAP QC database is not a longitudinal data set (that is, SNAP units are not followed over time). But because each year is a new representative sample of SNAP units, it allows for time-series analyses across fiscal years. Users interested in conducting time series analysis should carefully review Chapter I, Appendix A, and Appendix C of the SNAP QC Technical Documentation, available from <https://snapqcdata.net/datafiles>, to note any changes between years to the SNAP QC database structure, variable definitions and codes, and the quality of variable coding.

The contents of the SNAP QC database may change from year to year because of several factors, including the following:

- **Changes to the raw data file.** Changes to the raw data file may include updates to the QC file layout, changes to the number of months of data available for each State (see FAQ #7 below), changes to the maximum number of household members recorded, or changes to the values and coding of certain variables. Codes in the raw data file may change because of changes in SNAP policy or FNA needs. For example, in fiscal year (FY) 2024, the employment status-amount variable (EMPSTBi) was updated to include a new code (6) for “on medical or parental leave.”
- **Changes to file editing procedures.** Changes to file editing procedures may include updates to the definitions or construction of edited variables to reflect new household circumstances or improve consistency across cases. For example, the definition of the person-level disability indicator (DISi) has been updated and refined over time to account for new types of household circumstances.
- **Changes to Federal and State policies.** Changes to Federal and State policies may result in updates to existing variables or the creation of new variables to reflect policy changes. For example, in FY 2024, two constructed variables were updated in response to the higher age limit for adults potentially subject to time-limited benefits: NDICSCAi, an indicator for adults potentially subject to time limits, and FSNDISCA, the count of these individuals in the SNAP unit.
- **Variables added to or removed from the edited database.** Variables may be added to reflect new policies or analytic needs or removed when they are no longer applicable. For example, in FY 2024, several additional variables were added to reflect policy changes that expanded SNAP work requirements (see FAQ #15 for more information).

Chapter I and Appendix C of the SNAP QC Technical Documentation summarize new changes to the SNAP QC database each year. Information about variable quality and recommendations concerning their use is available in Appendix A.

4. How do SNAP units differ from households?

In the SNAP QC database, a SNAP unit, sometimes referred to as a SNAP household or filing unit, consists of individuals certified together to receive SNAP benefits. A household, also referred to as a home or dwelling unit, may contain multiple SNAP units. Because QC sampling occurs at the unit level, each record in the SNAP QC database contains data for a single SNAP unit. A SNAP unit may include participating and nonparticipating (ineligible) members.

5. How are SNAP participants and non-participants represented in the SNAP QC database?

Participating members are identified in the SNAP QC data by a SNAP affiliation code (FSAFILi) equal to 1 and are included in the unit size used to determine income eligibility and SNAP benefit amount. Nonparticipating members, identified by an FSAFILi value greater than 1, may be ineligible for SNAP for several reasons, such as exhausting their time limits or being ineligible noncitizens. Nonparticipating members may also have income deemed to participating members or characteristics that affect the eligibility and benefit amount of participating unit members.

For some records, the SNAP QC database also includes information on nonparticipating individuals in the household who are not part of the SNAP unit but whose information appears in the raw data file. These individuals are not consistently included in the database.

6. How do I replicate results in the Characteristics of SNAP Households report?

The Characteristics of SNAP Households reports, available for download at <https://www.fna.usda.gov/research/snap/household-characteristics>, include weighted estimates of SNAP units and SNAP participants and their characteristics. To replicate results, users of the SNAP QC data should ensure the following:

- Estimates are weighted using the full year weight (FYWGT).
- Estimates of SNAP participants restrict data to individuals with FSAFILi = 1 (participating members of the SNAP unit).
- Constructed variables are used instead of reported variables, when available (see FAQ #10 for more information on constructed versus reported variables).

For example, to calculate the weighted number of units that include a preschool-aged SNAP participant, users can identify households with FSNK0T4 > 0. Alternatively, users can use the reported person-level variables AGEi = 0-4 and FSAFILi = 1. Please refer to the sample code in SAS, Stata, and R to calculate weighted estimates of unit and person-level characteristics.

7. Did the COVID-19 public health emergency affect the contents of the edited FY 2020 and FY 2021 SNAP QC database?

The COVID-19 public health emergency resulted in an incomplete FY 2020 SNAP QC sample. To facilitate analyses of the limited and incongruent data, three separate SNAP QC databases were developed for that year. The first covers the pre-pandemic period of October 2019 to February 2020. The second covers the waiver period of June 2020 to September 2020 for the 47 States and territories that provided sufficient data for at least one of those months. The third combines the pre-pandemic period and the waiver period databases. Because the COVID-19 public health emergency continued to affect SNAP QC data collection throughout most of the following year, the FY 2021 database contains data only from July 2021 to September 2021. See the SNAP QC Technical Documentation for FY 2020 and FY 2021 from <https://snapqcdata.net/datafiles> for more details.

II. INFORMATION ABOUT VARIABLES AND VARIABLE QUALITY

8. Where can I find more details about the variables in the SNAP QC data and their value definitions?

Variable and value definitions, origins (reported or constructed), ranges, and recommendations concerning their use are available in Chapter V of the SNAP QC Technical Documentation, available for download at <https://snapqcdata.net/datafiles>. For coding guidance used by QC reviewers, users should refer to Form FNA-310 (SNAP QC Review Handbook, found at <https://www.fna.usda.gov/snap/qc>.

Users can also consult the SNAP QC data collection instrument, Form FNA-380-1, along with its instructions, also found at <https://www.fna.usda.gov/snap/qc>.

9. How are person-level variables structured?

The SNAP QC database includes one record for each SNAP unit. Information for individuals in a household is reported in person-specific variables that are indexed by a number (for example, AGE1, AGE2, AGE3). Individuals can be identified as SNAP participants with $FSAFIL_i = 1$, where i denotes the person number for a given household. The maximum number of people reported for a household varies by fiscal year. In most fiscal years, the SNAP QC data include information for up to 16 people in a household. The FY 2024 SNAP QC data, however, report person-specific variables for up to 18 individuals in a household and the FY 2023 data report person-specific variables for up to 17 individuals. Some person-level variables have corresponding unit-level variables that report unit-level income or expenses across participants in a household. For example, FSSLFEMP reports countable unit self-employment income while SLFEMP _{i} reports countable self-employment income for a given individual. For more information on the person-level variables available in the SNAP QC database, please refer to the codebook in Chapter V of the SNAP QC Technical Documentation, available to download from <https://snapqcdata.net/datafiles>. For more information on constructed variables available, see FAQ #10.

10. What is the difference between “reported” and “constructed” variables and which should I use?

Reported variables are collected on the FNA-380-1 Quality Control Review Schedule input form and read directly from the raw data file, although some editing may occur during processing. Constructed, or recoded, variables are derived from reported variables and Federal or State program policy parameters, such as the maximum SNAP benefit amount. Some constructed variables are edited versions of reported variables (for example, unit-level gross income and net income), whereas others are created to more easily identify units and individuals with certain characteristics (for example, non-elderly individuals with a disability) or meeting certain policy criteria (for example, SSI-CAP units).

When available, users should use constructed variables rather than reported variables. For example, to estimate the number of SNAP participants, use the constructed certified unit size variable (FSUSIZE), which provides the number of participating members in the SNAP unit after file editing. The SNAP QC database also includes raw household size (RAWHSIZE), which provides the total number of participants, nonparticipating members of the SNAP unit, and individuals who are not members of the SNAP unit. It also includes certified unit size (CERTHHSZ), which provides the number of participating members prior to editing.

Some constructed variables are designed to simplify tabulations. For example, the COMPOSITION variable consolidates information on the number of people in the SNAP unit and their relationships to one another, and the FSNK5T17 variable provides the number of children ages 5 to 17 in the SNAP unit.

Please refer to the codebook in Chapter V of the SNAP QC Technical Documentation, from <https://snapqcdata.net/datafiles>, for an indicator of which variables are reported (“R”) or constructed (“C”). Often, reported or raw variables include a “RAW” prefix, and constructed variables include an “FS” prefix.

Users can obtain results consistent with those in the Characteristics of SNAP Households report series, available from <https://www.fna.usda.gov/research/snap/household-characteristics>, by using the following constructed variables:

Variable	Description
FSBEN	Final calculated benefit
FSUSIZE	Constructed certified unit size
FSGRINC	Final gross countable unit income
FSNETINC	Final net countable unit income
FSERNDED	Calculated earned income deduction
TPOV	Gross income/poverty level ratio

11. What does “countable” mean when referring to income, assets, or expenses?

“Countable” income, assets, or expenses are those used for determining SNAP eligibility and benefits. For example:

- FSASSET includes cash, resources easily converted to cash (such as money in checking or savings accounts, savings certificates, stocks and bonds, and lump-sum payments), and some nonliquid resources. It excludes certain assets, such as retirement and educational savings accounts, family homes, tools of a trade, or business property used to earn income. It also excludes the value of vehicles in States that exclude all vehicles from the asset test.
- FSGRINC includes most cash income but excludes certain types of income, such as loans, and most noncash income or in-kind benefits (for example, energy assistance and educational loans in which payment is deferred).
- FSMEDEXP includes qualifying monthly medical expenses over \$35 for SNAP units with an elderly member or an individual with a disability. It excludes medical expenses of \$35 or less.

For more information on SNAP eligibility, see <https://www.fna.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility>.

12. Which variables in the SNAP QC database should I use with caution?

Some variables should be used with caution because of high rates of missing or unknown responses, which means the data may misrepresent the SNAP caseload. For example, the RACETHi variable, which reports person-level race and ethnicity, should be used with caution for national tabulations and some State-level tabulations.

In addition, some variables should be used in conjunction with related variables. For example, EMPSTAi and EMPSTBi, which describe employment status type and hours worked, are best used alongside other work-related variables, such as receipt of earnings, when determining employment status.

For additional information on variables that should be used with caution or with the understanding of specific limitations, users should refer to Appendix A of the SNAP QC Technical Documentation, available for download from <https://snapqcdata.net/datafiles>. The codebook in Chapter V also indicates these recommendations. In general, users should always take caution not to use results based on small sample sizes.

13. How should I interpret FSASTEST and FSGRTEST?

The SNAP QC database includes indicators of whether a unit passes the Federal asset (FSASTEST), gross income (FSGRTEST), and net income (FSNETEST) tests. These indicators are based on information included in the SNAP QC database and Federal eligibility rules. (As discussed in FAQ #11, only countable assets are reported on the raw SNAP QC data file.)

SNAP units exempt from these tests under Federal rules are coded as passing them. These include (1) units exempt from the asset test because all members receive public assistance (“Pure PA” units) and (2) units exempt from the gross income test because they include a member who is age 60 or older or has a disability.

However, non-Pure PA units that are categorically eligible through State narrow or broad-based categorical eligibility rules (CAT_ELIG = 1-3 and PURE_PA = 0) may be coded as failing a Federal asset or income test. Specifically, units may be coded as failing the Federal asset test if their resources are reported on the file because they are eligible through a BBCE policy with an asset test and those resources exceed the Federal asset limit. (Units eligible through a BBCE policy without an asset test are coded as passing the Federal asset test because their resources will not be reported on the file.) Similarly, units eligible through a BBCE policy with a gross income limit higher than the Federal limit or without a net income test will be coded as failing a Federal income test if their income exceeds the applicable Federal income limits. Units coded as failing a Federal test could lose SNAP eligibility if the State’s broad-based categorical eligibility policy were removed.

14. Which variables provide information related to poverty status?

The TPOV variable provides SNAP units’ income as a percentage of poverty. It is defined as countable gross income (FSGRINC) divided by the net income screen (NETSCRN) times 100 and rounded to the nearest integer. Dividing countable net income (FSNETINC) by the net screen (NETSCRN) yields net income as a percentage of poverty.

SNAP gross and net income screens, updated annually, are based on the poverty guidelines established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for the previous year. The poverty guidelines, which vary by SNAP unit size and geographic area, are available at <https://www.fna.usda.gov/snap/allotment/cola>, and the year-specific monthly gross and net income screens appear in Appendix F of the SNAP QC Technical Documentation, available for download from <https://snapqcdata.net/datafiles>. In addition, the SNAP QC database includes the applicable gross income screen (GROSSCRN) and net income screen (NETSCRN) for each SNAP unit. These are 130 percent of poverty and 100 percent of poverty, respectively.

15. Which variables provide information about disability status?

The SNAP QC database includes several variables related to the disability status of non-elderly individuals:

- DISi is a constructed person-level disability indicator for individuals age 59 or younger; to create this variable, the data editing algorithm uses information on receipt of SSI or Social Security benefits, SNAP unit receipt of a medical expense deduction, reason for exemption from work registration, employment status, age of other unit members, and other characteristics.
- FSDIS is a unit-level indicator of whether the SNAP unit includes an individual age 59 or younger with a disability (DISi = 1).
- FSNDIS is a count of the number of individuals in the SNAP unit age 59 or younger with a disability (DISi = 1).

The SNAP QC database also includes the reported able-bodied adult without dependents (ABAWD) status variable (ABWDSTi) and constructed variables related to adults potentially subject to time limits. NDISCAi identifies adults within the applicable age range who do not have a disability and do not live with children, and FSNDISCA reports the number of these individuals in the SNAP unit. Both variables use DISi to identify individuals with disabilities. Participants coded as NDISCAi = 1 are not, however, necessarily subject to work registration requirements or time limits.

In FY 2024, several additional disability-related variables were added to reflect policy changes that expanded SNAP work requirements. These included the following:

- DIS64_i, which identifies individuals age 64 or younger with a disability
- NDISCA64_i, which identifies adults ages 18 to 64 without a disability who live in a household without a child younger than age 14
- FSNDIS_64 and FSNDISCA_64, which report the number of these individuals in the SNAP unit
- FSDIS_64, which indicates whether the SNAP unit includes an individual age 64 or younger with a disability

Please refer to Chapter V of the SNAP QC Technical Documentation, available for download from <https://snapqcdata.net/datafiles>, for variable definitions and values, Appendix A for recommendations concerning variable use, and Appendix B for information on the construction of the disability indicators and related variables.

III. DETAILED ERROR FINDINGS VARIABLES

16. What information about errors in eligibility and benefit determinations is available on the SNAP QC database?

Users are unlikely to approximate State payment error rates using these data for several reasons, including that households determined to be ineligible for SNAP benefits are excluded from the SNAP QC database. However, the SNAP QC database includes the following information on variances (or errors) identified during the QC process:

- STATUS, which indicates whether the case was determined to be correct, an overissuance, or an underissuance
- AMTERR, which reports the total benefit error amount identified for the cases, including errors below the tolerance threshold
- Information for up to nine errors per household:
 - ELEMENT_i: the variance element (for example, wages and salaries)
 - NATURE_i: the nature of the variance element (for example, less income received from this source than budgeted)
 - AGENCY_i: whether the variance was attributed to agency or client responsibility
 - AMOUNT_i: the amount of the variance
 - DISCOV_i: how the variance was discovered (for example, recipient interview)
 - E_FINDG_i: the impact of the variance (for example, overissuance)
 - OCCDAT_i: the date the variance occurred
 - TIMEPER_i: the time period during which variance occurred
 - VERIFI_i: how the variance was verified (for example, case record)

For more information on these variables, refer to Form FNA-310 (SNAP QC Review Handbook) and Form FNA-380-1 and its instructions.

These variables are not edited as part of QC data processing.

17. The detailed error findings variables are indexed from 1 to 9 (for example, AGENCY1-AGENCY9). What does the index signify?

The SNAP QC database report information for up to nine errors identified per SNAP unit. The numeric suffix in each variable name indicates the error number. For example, ELEMENT3, NATURE3, and AMOUNT3 report the variance element, nature, and amount associated with the third error identified for the household.

IV. WEIGHTING

18. How should I use the sample weights (HWGT and FYWGT)?

The SNAP QC database contains two weight variables: (1) the monthly weight (HWGT) and (2) the full-year weight (FYWGT), where FYWGT is typically HWGT divided by 12.

Use HWGT for tabulations in a specific month. For tabulations covering more than one calendar month, calculate the average monthly estimate by dividing HWGT by the number of months included in the analysis and use the resulting value as the weight.

Use FYWGT for national tabulations of average monthly values across the full fiscal year, including estimates presented in the Characteristics of SNAP Households report series, available for download from <https://www.fna.usda.gov/research/snap/household-characteristics>.

19. How are the sample weights derived?

The SNAP QC database's sampling weights are derived through a multi-step process to reflect SNAP program operations data, excluding disaster benefits and benefits issued in error.

First, preliminary weights are calculated so that they sum to the monthly number of SNAP units reported in State SNAP program operations data, excluding those that only received disaster benefits or benefits issued in error. Next, final weights are produced using a nonlinear programming technique that generates estimates that match adjusted monthly program data for SNAP units, individuals, and benefits as closely as possible.

For more information on the derivation of the sample weights, please refer to Chapter III and Appendix D of the SNAP QC Technical Documentation, available for download from <https://snapqcdata.net/datafiles>.

20. How do I calculate standard errors?

Use the SNAP QC replicate weights to calculate standard errors for SNAP QC data estimates. Replicate weights are available alongside the SNAP QC data files and technical documentation for each fiscal year.

Refer to the sample SAS code for examples of how to calculate standard errors using replicate weights. For more information on replicate weights and the calculation of standard errors, see Appendix E in the Characteristics of SNAP Households report, available for download from <https://www.fna.usda.gov/research/snap/household-characteristics>.

V. OTHER

21. When will next fiscal year SNAP QC database and Technical Documentation be available?

For questions about the availability of future SNAP QC data and technical documentation, please contact FNA at FNAStudies@usda.gov.

22. Where can I direct any additional questions?

Please contact FNA at FNAStudies@usda.gov with any questions.