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Annual and Monthly SNAP Participation Rates

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What Is the Issue?

A key aspect of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service's (FNS) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is how well the program reaches its target population, measured by the participation rate among those eligible for SNAP benefits. Knowing who receives SNAP benefits, and who does not among those eligible, is important for assessing and improving program performance.

SNAP uses monthly circumstances to determine program eligibility and benefit amounts, and FNS publishes national and State-level estimates of participation among those eligible for an average month of the year (monthly SNAP participation rates). To complement the monthly participation rate, this report develops a new measure of SNAP's reach—an annual SNAP participation rate, defined as annual participants (who receive SNAP for 1 or more months of the year) as a proportion of annual eligibles (who are eligible for 1 or more months). The average monthly SNAP participation rate gives more weight to individuals who have more months of eligibility during the year, while an annual participation rate gives equal weight to all eligible individuals, regardless of how long they were eligible during the year.

What Did the Study Find?

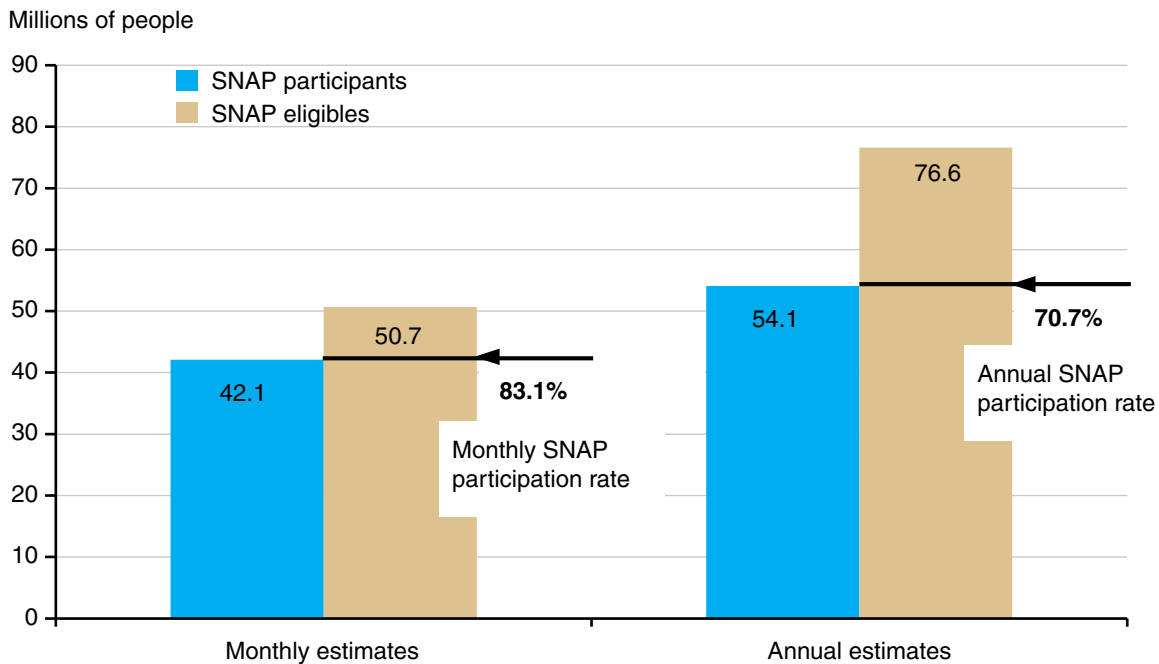
Estimates of program participants and eligibles differ markedly depending on the timeframe used and the group examined. For 2012:

- About 45 percent more individuals were estimated to be eligible for SNAP at some time during the year than were eligible in an average month of that year. There were only 20 percent more elderly eligible at some time during the year than in an average month, and only 6 percent more disabled people.
- About 57 percent of individuals who were ever eligible in the year were eligible for only part of the year (1 to 11 months), while the rest (43 percent) were eligible for the full year. Of those ever eligible in the year, about 66 percent of elderly individuals (age 66 years or older) were estimated to be eligible all 12 months, as were about 77 percent of disabled people.
- In contrast, about 84 percent more working poor were eligible for SNAP at some time during the year than in an average month, reflecting the transitory nature of eligibility for the working poor. Only about 25 percent of the working poor who were ever eligible during the year were eligible all 12 months.

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- An estimated 76.6 million people were eligible at some time during the year, while only about 54.1 million people ever participated. The resulting annual SNAP participation rate of 70.7 percent is 12.4 percentage points below the FNS estimate of the average monthly SNAP participation rate of 83.1 percent for fiscal 2012 (October-September).
- While estimates of annual participants exceed monthly participants (54.1 versus 42.1 million), annual eligibles exceed monthly eligibles by an even larger proportion (76.6 versus 50.7 million), making the annual SNAP participation rate lower than the monthly rate.
- New York State was examined as a case study for this report based on access to this State’s confidential micro-level SNAP records. With an estimated 5 million people eligible at some time during the year, the 2012 annual SNAP participation rate for New York State was 74.5 percent, which is below the State’s monthly participation rate of 79.7 percent.

U.S. monthly SNAP participation rate versus annual SNAP participation rate, 2012



Note: The monthly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participation rate is an estimate of monthly SNAP participants relative to monthly SNAP eligibles. The annual SNAP participation rate is an estimate of the annual SNAP participants relative to annual SNAP eligibles. The annual rate is calculated on a calendar-year basis; the monthly rate is calculated on a fiscal-year basis.

Sources: USDA, Economic Research Service calculations using data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Survey of Income and Program Participation for calendar 2012, and Eslami, 2014.

How Was the Study Conducted?

The data for estimating the annual U.S. SNAP participation rate for 2012 come from the 2008 panel of the U.S. Census Bureau’s Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), a nationally representative survey that provides longitudinal data by month. The data available in SIPP for estimating eligibility for SNAP are less complete than the data used by local SNAP offices to make official determinations of SNAP eligibility. Analysis for the New York State estimates was conducted at the U.S. Census Bureau using State-level SNAP administrative data and data from the American Community Survey.