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Where Households Get Food in a Typical Week: Findings From USDA's FoodAPS

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What Is the Issue?

Understanding where U.S. households acquire food, which foods they acquire, and how much they pay is essential to identifying which food and nutrition policies can best improve diet quality. While household and store scanner data from Nielsen and IRI cover grocery store purchases, national data on food from restaurants, schools, food banks/community resources, or family and friends are scarcer, especially those that would allow the comparison of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants to nonparticipants. The USDA's National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey (FoodAPS) provides the first complete picture of U.S. household food acquisitions.

What Did the Study Find?

Nearly all households (99 percent) acquired food during the 7-day reporting period, with an average of 11 separate food acquisition events per week.

- Minimal differences between rural and urban households and between households in the four U.S. Census Regions were observed.
- Non-SNAP households with income above 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Guideline (poverty line) reported the most events (11.8), while SNAP households reported less (10.8) and non-SNAP households with income below 185 percent of the poverty line reported the least (9.1).

Acquisition venues were classified into nine categories: (1) large grocery stores and supermarkets; (2) small and specialty food stores; (3) all other food stores (convenience stores, dollar stores, and pharmacies); (4) own production (gardening, hunting, and fishing); (5) food banks and Meals on Wheels; (6) restaurants and other eating places; (7) schools, daycare, and day camps; (8) family, friends, parties, and places of worship; and (9) work.

- Eighty-seven percent of households acquired food from large grocery stores or supermarkets in a typical week; 85 percent also acquired food from restaurants and other eating places.
 - Acquisitions from restaurants and other eating places (5.4/week) were twice as frequent as those from large grocery stores and supermarkets (2.8/week).
 - Higher income non-SNAP households were more likely to visit large grocery stores (88 percent) than SNAP and lower income non-SNAP households (83 percent), and were also more likely to visit small or specialty food stores (20 percent versus 14-15 percent).
 - SNAP households and lower income non-SNAP households reported fewer acquisitions from restaurants and other eating places (4.2) than higher income non-SNAP households (5.9).
- FoodAPS captured acquisitions from sources not measured in other U.S. purchase surveys:
 - Six percent of households acquired food from their own or others' production by hunting, fishing, or gardening.
 - One percent of households acquired food from food pantries and Meals on Wheels.

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- 37 percent of households acquired food from family, friends, parties, or a place of worship.
- Non-SNAP households were more likely to report food from own or others' production and less likely to report acquisitions from food pantries and Meals on Wheels than SNAP households.

Per capita expenditures averaged \$78 per week, with no differences between rural and urban areas.

- Per capita weekly spending is greater in the West (\$83) than in the Midwest (\$73).
- SNAP households spent less per week (\$52) than non-SNAP households (\$59-\$88).

Households devoted 55 percent of all expenditures reported during the week at large grocery stores, 3 percent at small or specialty food stores, and 7 percent at other food stores. A third of all expenditures were at restaurants and other eating places, with the rest of food-away-from-home (FAFH) spending occurring at work and schools.

- Rural households spend less per capita and a lower share of all spending at restaurants and other eating places (\$21.91, 29 percent) than do urban households (\$27.30, 35 percent).
- SNAP households allocate a greater share of spending at large grocery stores and supermarkets than do higher income non-SNAP households (60 percent versus 54 percent) and a greater share at stores grouped in the "all other" category (13 percent) than non-SNAP households (6-9 percent).
- SNAP households devoted a smaller share of expenditures to restaurants and other eating places (25 percent) than higher income non-SNAP households (35 percent). This likely reflects the fact that SNAP subsidizes spending at food retailers and not at eating places and that higher income households are likely able to pay more for the convenience of prepared food.

The FoodAPS data, uniquely, capture food acquisitions at no cost (free) to the household. On average, 22 percent of all food acquisitions reported were free.

- Most events from hunting/fishing/gardening; other food assistance; and family, friends, and community places were free (95-99 percent).
- Half of all food acquisitions at schools were free, while 70 percent at work were free.
- Of all acquisitions at restaurants and other eating places, 15 percent were free—most likely because someone else paid for the meal, or a restaurant worker reported a complimentary meal as from a restaurant rather than work.
- Rural households reported more free events from own production and fewer free events from family and friends than households in urban areas.
- SNAP households reported the highest share (30 percent) of all events as free. Most school acquisitions (91 percent) were reported to be free, whereas lower income non-SNAP households reported 64 percent of school acquisitions as free, and higher income non-SNAP households reported 36 percent of events from school as free. This difference may be due to SNAP households' pre-qualification for free meals from the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs.
- SNAP households reported a larger share of events from restaurants and eating places as free (19 percent) as compared to higher income non-SNAP households. These differences may reflect the fact that low-income households are more likely to have household members that work at restaurants and eating places and to receive free meals from the place of employment.

How Was the Study Conducted?

FoodAPS is a nationally representative survey of households in the continental United States. Data on food acquisitions over a 1-week period were collected from April 2012 to January 2013 from 4,826 households (comprising a total of 14,317 individuals).

This report provides national estimates for the share of households that acquire food from each of nine place categories, the mean number of acquisition events and visits to each of the place categories, the mean per capita weekly expenditures, and the expenditure shares at nine place categories. In addition, it also provides the share of food acquisitions that were free and the frequency of free acquisitions. Values are also provided for rural and urban areas and for each of the four Census regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West), and for three groups based on SNAP participation and household income.