

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Food Stamp Program Access Study examines the relationships between the food stamp participation decisions of eligible households and local food stamp office policies and practices that potentially affect access to the Program. This report presents a detailed descriptive analysis of the operational aspects of the FSP that may affect accessibility, from outreach practices to the structure of the application process and requirements to maintain continued Program eligibility.

The Food Stamp Program (FSP), administered by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), is a central component of our nation's safety net for low-income people to prevent hunger and poverty. Its primary objective is to help low-income households obtain a more nutritious diet by increasing their food purchasing power. The program provides eligible households with electronic benefit transfer cards that are redeemable at authorized food stores for a preset dollar amount. It is the largest domestic food assistance program in this country. Unlike other Federal income maintenance programs, the FSP has few categorical eligibility criteria, such as the presence of a child, a disabled person, pregnant women, or an elderly adult in the household. The majority of FSP recipients are children and approximately one-quarter are in households that receive cash assistance from the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Program (TANF) (FNS, 2001(b)).

Policy Setting

In 1996, Federal welfare reform legislation (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 or PRWORA) was enacted. This law replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children, a cash assistance entitlement program, with the block-granted, work-oriented Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. The FSP remained essentially a national entitlement program, though PRWORA made a number of important changes to the Food Stamp Program that reduced eligibility for some groups, established work requirements for a small group of adults without children, and limited future benefit increases for all participants.

National food stamp rolls decreased by 40 percent between 1994 and July 2000, from 27.5 million participants down to 16.9 million participants. Since July 2000, the low point of participation, food stamp rolls have increased fairly steadily, to an estimated 22.0 million participants in July 2003. It is important for policy makers to understand the factors that caused the dramatic decline in FSP participation during the 1990s. If the declines reflected increasing self-sufficiency among low-income households, then lower participation levels would be considered positive and would not require public intervention. However, if the declines meant that needy individuals and families did not receive the assistance for which they were eligible, the declines may be a cause for concern which might require public policy solutions at the local, State, and Federal levels.

Research Objectives

As part of an effort to more fully understand the factors that have caused the dramatic declines in FSP participation in the 1990s, the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture funded Abt Associates Inc. and Health Systems Research, Inc. to conduct a study to systematically

examine accessibility at the local office level using a nationally representative sample. The key issue concerned the extent to which policies implemented at the local level, as well as local office practices, affect households' decisions to apply for food stamps and their decisions to continue participating once they are approved for food stamp benefits.

The study's three main objectives were to:

- describe the policies and practices in local food stamp offices that may affect FSP accessibility;
- examine how local policies and practices affect households' decisions to apply for food stamps and their decisions to continue receiving food stamps; and
- examine the reasons why some eligible households do not participate in the FSP.

This report, one of three reports prepared for the study, focuses on the first objective: describing local office policies and practices that potentially affect program access. The report presents a detailed descriptive analysis of local office policies and practices covering a variety of operational aspects of the FSP, including, but not limited to, those driven by changes made under PRWORA. The analysis examines office policies that reflect State policy choices in TANF or the FSP and those policies and practices that are more likely based on local programs' operational decisions. The findings are based on in-depth surveys of local office staff and office observations regarding how eligible individuals might find out about the Food Stamp Program, the availability of general FSP information and also eligibility rules for specific populations, the front office environment, the application process, and requirements to maintain continued FSP eligibility.

Study Methods

Sample Selection

The sampling for this nationally representative study involved a number of different steps. Sampling was first conducted at the office level and then particular supervisors and caseworkers within those offices were selected for interviews.

Sample of Offices

The sampling plan for the national sample of offices had three objectives: to achieve national representation; to include substantial variation in administrative practices both between and within States; and to support office-level analysis of the effects of administrative practices on caseload entry and exit.

Each State and the District of Columbia provided a complete list of local offices, along with caseload information for each office. In places where different sites served distinct segments of the local caseload (e.g., the elderly or TANF clients), these sites were combined to make a single office that served all segments of the local program population. Offices with caseloads less than 150 were

excluded from the sampling frame because of the difficulties they would have presented in obtaining an adequate sample of applicants.¹

To ensure a maximum distribution of sample offices throughout the States, the sample frame was then stratified by the seven FNS regions, and by State within each region. States with small populations were grouped together to ensure the representation of smaller states in the office sample. In large States, the sample frame was further stratified based on the degree of urbanicity (defined as offices located within Metropolitan Statistical Areas, or MSAs, versus offices located outside MSAs).

Probability-proportional-to-size (PPS) sampling was used to draw a sample of 120 local food stamp offices. The sampled offices were located in 40 States and the District of Columbia. All selected States, with the exception of New York, agreed to participate in the research study. New York was unable to participate due to a pending lawsuit in New York City, concerning access to the Food Stamp Program, which was scheduled for trial during the data collection period. The final research sample included 109 local food stamp offices, located in 39 States and the District of Columbia.²

Table 1.1 shows the characteristics of the final sample of offices by region, metropolitan status, caseload size, and the number of separate sites that comprised the sampled offices. The table provides the unweighted distribution, the weighted distribution, and the distribution of the offices weighted by the national caseload.

The distribution of food stamp office size was moderately skewed. Large offices (with a caseload of 2,000 or more) served almost three-quarters of the participants, while comprising only 30 percent of the offices nationwide. Because of the PPS sampling, large offices comprised about three-quarters of the study sample. The sample was thus roughly self-weighting with regard to population served.

There was significant overlap between the geographic location of offices and office size. Seventy percent of smaller offices were located in nonmetropolitan counties and 81 percent of larger offices were located in metropolitan counties. Thus, the analysis in the report and the appendix data tables cross-tabulated by office size may also reflect on the differences between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan offices.

¹ Our sampling design required that in each office we obtain 10 applicant households and 10 households due for recertification in the sample month. Assuming 7 percent turnover in caseload per month, the minimum office size required was 150 (10/.07). Of the 3,789 food stamp offices located in the continental United States and the District of Columbia, 430 had monthly caseloads below 150. These small offices accounted for only 0.44 percent of the total food stamp caseload. Even among “small” food stamp offices (those serving fewer than 2,000 cases), these extremely small offices accounted for less than 2 percent of the caseload. Excluding these offices had a negligible effect on the analysis of the small offices and of all offices combined, since all tabulations focused on the percent of the national food stamp caseload with specific office policies and practices. See weighting discussion, below, for more detail.

² Adjustments to the sampling weights were made to account for the nonparticipation of New York State. See discussion on pages 6-7.

Table 1.1 Characteristics of the office sample				
Office Characteristic	Number of Offices in Sample (N=109)	Percent of Sample	Weighted Proportion of National Food Stamp Offices	Weighted Proportion of National Caseload
<i>FNS region</i>				
Northeast	5	5%	2%	8%
Mid-Atlantic	15	14%	15%	19%
Southeast	28	26%	25%	23%
Midwest	19	17%	16%	16%
Southwest	16	15%	16%	13%
Mountain Plains	8	7%	7%	7%
Western	18	17%	18%	15%
<i>Metro/Nonmetro location</i>				
Metropolitan county	80	73%	45%	77%
Nonmetropolitan county	29	27%	55%	23%
<i>Office size</i>				
FSP caseload less than 2,000	33	30%	70%	26%
FSP caseload 2,000 or greater	76	70%	30%	74%
<i>Number of sites</i>				
1	101	93%	94%	92%
2	7	6%	5%	8%
4	1	1%	1%	1%

Sample of Local Office Staff

In order to select supervisors and caseworkers to interview, a form was sent to the office manager or director at each sample site. The form requested information on a small number of office policies and asked for a list of all supervisors and caseworkers who handled food stamp cases in the office. The form also requested the following information:

- The date that each supervisor and caseworker became responsible for food stamp cases in the office;
- The types of food stamp cases supervisors and caseworkers handled (e.g., TANF, non-TANF, ABAWDs, elderly, and disabled food stamp cases.);
- The part of the food stamp process that supervisors and caseworkers handled (e.g., intake and ongoing);

- The individual supervisor who was most knowledgeable about food stamp policies and procedures for each type of food stamp case; and
- The supervisor and caseworker whose responsibilities covered the initial point of contact with TANF applicants regarding lump-sum payments or vouchers and up-front job search requirements.

The supervisor survey was designed to collect information on office policies. For *each type of food stamp case*, a knowledgeable supervisor was needed to answer questions about policies that affected those clients. When there were multiple supervisors handling a particular case type or aspect of the food stamp process, the supervisor who was designated by the office manager as most knowledgeable or the supervisor who had been working at the office the longest was selected. A total of 201 supervisors were selected for interviews, and there was a 100 percent response rate.

The caseworker survey was designed to collect information regarding caseworker practices. Caseworkers who were hired after April 1, 2000 were excluded from the sample because they lacked sufficient experience. All other caseworkers were included in the sampling frame. The goal was to obtain two caseworker responses for all the questions. The only exception was in offices that were so small that they did not have two caseworkers handling particular types of cases.

Every caseworker included in the sampling frame had some probability of being selected for the sample. The entire list of caseworkers for each office was divided by responsibility. The division was done in a way that ensured all caseworkers were placed in one of the groups. Caseworkers were then randomly selected within each group.

The total number of caseworkers sampled was 509. In a few instances, caseworkers selected for the sample were unavailable. Some caseworkers discontinued their employment before an interview could be arranged; others were on extended leave or were undergoing disciplinary procedures. In such cases, a new caseworker was randomly selected from the same group as the caseworker who was unavailable. Interviews were completed with 509 caseworkers.

Data Collection

Three different methods were used to collect data at food stamp offices: supervisor surveys, caseworker surveys, and office observations. Respondents were asked to report on policies and practices in effect in June 2000, the month in which workers and households were sampled. Data collection began in January 2001 and was completed in June 2001. The three data collection instruments are included in Appendix B.

A telephone survey was conducted with supervisors to collect information about official local office policies, supervisors' views on issues affecting FSP access, and the extent to which specific policies affected FSP participation. In each office, one supervisor survey instrument was completed. In most offices, more than one supervisor was interviewed, because supervisors were responsible for different types of food stamp cases or different parts of the FSP process and could therefore answer only those questions within their realm of responsibility. Demographic characteristics, attitudes, and opinions on

the reasons for the decline in FSP participation and on program changes since welfare reform, and recommendations for changes to increase program access were asked of all supervisors surveyed.³

A separate telephone survey designed to collect detailed information on caseworkers' practices and experiences was conducted with caseworkers. In each office, two caseworker survey instruments were completed to obtain more than one perspective on the range of local caseworkers' practices and experiences. In most offices, caseworkers were responsible for different types of food stamp cases and/or different parts of the food stamp application process. Therefore, multiple caseworkers were needed to complete one survey instrument. An average of five caseworkers were interviewed to complete two full surveys per office. Demographics, attitudes, opinions on the reasons for the decline in FSP participation and on program changes since welfare reform, and recommendations for changes to increase program access were collected from all caseworkers surveyed.

Field interviewers visited the 109 offices three times to unobtrusively observe various aspects of the office environment, including location and accessibility, reception area activities, and waiting times. These observations, which were scheduled in advance, occurred on different days of the week and at different times during the day. The interviewers' findings were documented in a close-ended data collection instrument.

Data Analysis

The ultimate concern of policymakers and program managers is to assess how local office operations may affect the clients or potential clients served by the FSP. Therefore, the data were analyzed to assess the prevalence of policies and practices in offices weighted to reflect the proportion of the national food stamp caseload served by the offices. Hence, when the results of the analysis are discussed in this report, they are not presented as a percentage of offices but as a percent of the national caseload in offices with particular policies or practices.⁴

Sampling weights were constructed for this type of analysis. As previously noted, the sample comprised 109 offices that were selected with probability proportional to caseload size. Base sample weights that were inversely proportional to the probability of selection were constructed. The sum of the base weights is thus conceptually equal to the total number of food stamp offices. It does not exactly equal the number of food stamp offices because of (a) nonresponse (11 selections in New York State) and (b) luck of the draw with regard to average caseload size.

In order to correct for nonresponse and sampling variability, the sample was grouped into cells defined by "super-region," MSA status, and caseload size, and the base weights were adjusted so that

³ Weighting procedures, described in the following section, discuss treatment of multiple supervisor and caseworker respondents in the analysis.

⁴ The estimates do not necessarily reflect the percent of households directly affected by a particular policy or practice as not all households are subject to all practices. For example, one analysis examines the incidence of job search requirements and reports that x percent of the food stamp caseload is served by offices that require participants to actively search for jobs. Not all households within an office will be subject to job search requirements, so the reported percentage does not represent the percentage of the caseload that is required to search for a job as a condition of continued eligibility.

they added up to the actual number of offices within each cell.⁵ The seven New York City offices were thus represented by other large urban offices in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions, while the four upstate New York offices were represented by other small and medium-sized offices in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions. The base weights of the sampled offices in these cells were appropriately increased.⁶

A caseload-adjusted office weight was then created by multiplying the office weights by the office caseloads. The caseload weights were adjusted within the same cells used to adjust the office weights (super-region, MSA status, caseload size), to guarantee that the new weights summed to the actual caseload. The sample frame total caseload was 7.29 million households, compared with an actual total of 7.4 million based on more accurate FNS data for each State. As a final step, the FNS total by super-region was aggregated and the caseload weights were scaled to get the correct totals.

The caseload-adjusted weights are used in all analyses presented in this report. In examining the prevalence of various policies and practices, the findings therefore reflect the percent of the national food stamp caseload served by offices with particular policies or practices. The results are discussed using one of two different phrases, which are equivalent. For example, in examining office practices in the event that clients miss their recertification interviews, the findings are sometimes reported as, “offices serving 54 percent of the national caseload automatically closed food stamp cases when clients missed their recertification interviews.” Alternatively, they may be reported as “54 percent of offices (weighted) automatically...” where the weight is the caseload-adjusted office weight.⁷ These two ways of presenting the findings are used interchangeably throughout the report. The choice of phrasing reflects an attempt to simplify the language used in discussing the findings.

Supervisors’ responses were generally assigned the caseload weights corresponding to their offices.⁸ Caseworkers’ responses to a particular item were assigned the office weight divided by the number of responses to that item in that office.⁹ Thus for each tabulation, the sum of the weights is the total national food stamp caseload.

⁵ The super-regions were defined as the seven FNS regions collapsed to five, by combining the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic, and the Mountain Plains and Western.

⁶ To the extent that offices in New York City are similar to other large urban offices in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic (e.g., offices in New Jersey and Pennsylvania) along the dimensions measured in the study, bias will be minimized. If food stamp policies and practices in New York City are very different from other large, urban offices, the study will not accurately represent the practices in New York.

⁷ A few analyses examine the prevalence of policies among a subset of offices, such as those serving immigrant households. In such cases, results are reported as “among offices serving immigrants, x percent of offices (weighted) had a policy...”

⁸ In many offices, supervisors only oversaw caseworkers who worked with certain types of clients or with one aspect of the FSP (e.g., intake versus ongoing). In order to obtain complete survey instruments, an average of two supervisors responded in each office. Most questions in the supervisor survey were only asked of one respondent in each office. The exceptions were the questions regarding supervisors’ opinions and their recommendations for program changes, which were asked of all supervisor respondents. For these questions, the weights were divided by the number of supervisor respondents in each office.

⁹ In very small offices, workers generally performed all tasks, so two of these individuals were randomly selected to answer all sections of the survey. In mid-size and larger offices, caseworkers usually specialized, for example, with respect to intake versus ongoing cases or TANF versus non-TANF households. In general, each section was answered by at least two individuals and two entire surveys were

The weights could not be refined to add up to subsets of the caseload that may be differentially affected by practices. For example, it is possible that offices serving a high percentage of TANF cases may handle these cases differently than offices serving a low percentage of TANF cases. In addition, all the findings presented in this report simply reveal what percent of the total national food stamp caseload is served by an office with a particular policy or practice, not what percent of households or of particular food stamp household types (e.g., TANF households, households with immigrants, households with earnings, or the elderly) are subject to the policy or practice.

Based on research hypotheses that smaller offices may be more "user friendly" and thus pose fewer barriers to FSP access (see, for example, McConnell and Ohls, 2000), the study assessed whether office size had an impact on FSP operations. A cross-tabular analysis was conducted to assess the percent of the caseload in smaller offices (with food stamp caseloads less than 2,000) and in larger offices (with food stamp caseloads of 2,000 or more) with each policy or practice. Tests of significance were then applied to determine whether there was a significant difference in each office practice by office size.

Organization of the Report

The following chapters report the findings from the office-level data collection efforts for the Study of Food Stamp Program Access. The report is organized chronologically, according to when a particular policy or practice may be most likely to influence an individual's decision to apply to or continue participating in the Food Stamp Program.

- ***Chapter 2: Local Office Policies and Practices That May Affect the Decision to Apply for Food Stamps.*** These policies and practices include those related to program outreach and information, the availability of food stamp application forms, the accessibility of food stamp offices, and practices that can assist population groups with special difficulties in navigating the process.
- ***Chapter 3: Local Office Policies and Practices That May Affect the Decision to Complete the Food Stamp Application Process.*** These policies and practices include the scheduling of interviews and the steps in the application process, the use of diversion practices for TANF clients and applicant job search for non-TANF clients, practices involving the excess medical expense deduction for the elderly and disabled, verification practices, and anti-fraud procedures.
- ***Chapter 4: Local Office Policies and Practices That May Affect Whether Participating Households Continue to Receive Food Stamps.*** The policies and practices cover recertification practices, reporting requirements, food stamp sanctions, employment and training requirements for non-TANF food stamp participants, and practices and procedures for continuing food stamps when households leave the TANF program.
- ***Chapter 5: Promoting and Hindering Food Stamp Participation: Best Practices and Continuing Barriers.*** Findings in previous chapters are examined in the context of what

completed. Within an office, the caseworker respondents provided multiple views on office practices that may vary among workers.

might be considered “best practices” for improving access to the FSP and what policies and practices might make the Program less accessible to eligible households.

- ***Technical Appendices.*** There are two technical appendices. Appendix A, titled “Data Tables,” contains the detailed data analysis of the study’s findings. The analysis is presented as the prevalence of practices in all food stamp offices and separately in smaller versus larger offices. The frequencies in the tables are expressed as a percent of the national food stamp caseload in offices with each practice or policy. Appendix B, titled “Data Collection Instruments,” contains the supervisor questionnaire, the caseworker questionnaire, and the field observation protocol.