

Chapter Four

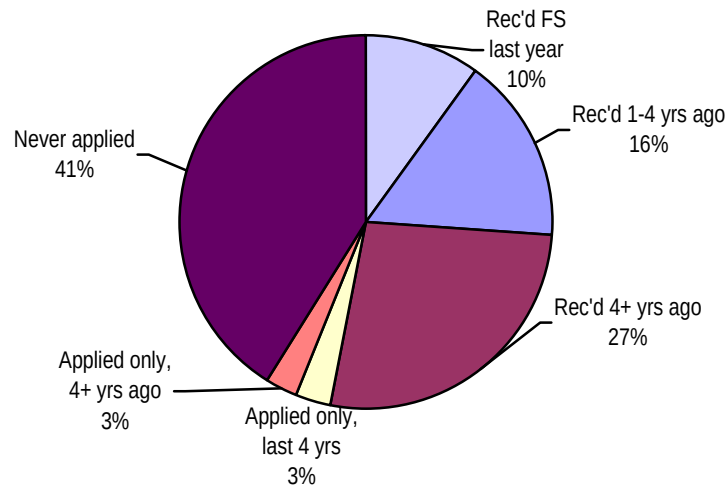
Food Stamp Program Experience and Satisfaction

A household's view of the Food Stamp Program and its interest in applying for and participating in the program is likely to be influenced by prior experience with the FSP as well as other government assistance programs. If households' previous experiences were positive, they felt the services they received were appropriate, and they were treated fairly and respectfully, they will probably be more likely to consider applying for benefits when their circumstances become strained. In the cost-benefit terminology, positive experiences reduce the psychological costs of participating in the Food Stamp Program.

This chapter examines the extent of eligible nonparticipant households' previous contacts with the Food Stamp Program and with cash assistance, medical assistance, and the WIC program. For those with fairly recent experiences—within the four years prior to the survey—their satisfaction with the services they received is also examined.

Among current eligible nonparticipant households, experience with the Food Stamp Program was widespread (figure 4.1).³⁴ Over half—52 percent—received food stamps some time in the past. Ten percent received benefits within the year prior to the survey and 16 percent in the prior one to four years. For many households—27 percent—it had been more than four years since they received FSP benefits. Furthermore, among those that never received food stamps, an additional 7 percent applied at some point, including 3 percent who did so within the prior four years.³⁵

Figure 4.1—Prior FSP experience of potential applicants

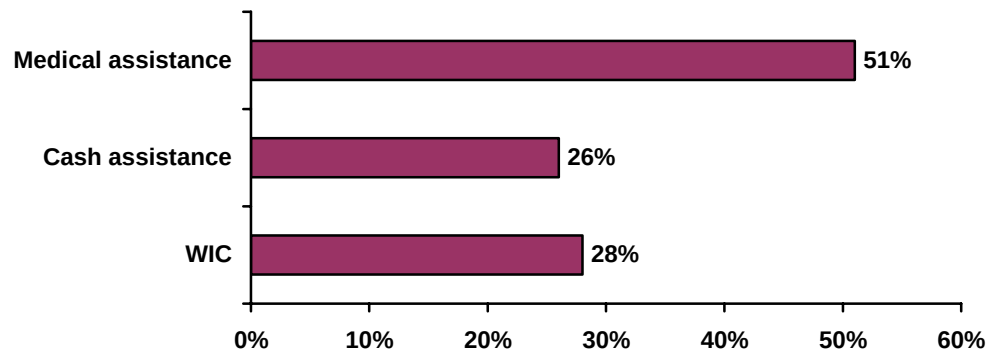


³⁴ Data in figures 4.1 and 4.2 are based on a sample of 1,206 respondents (unweighted).

³⁵ Individual categories do not sum to subtotals because of rounding—e.g., 3.45 percent applied in the last four years, 3.08 percent more than four years ago, for a subtotal of 7 percent.

Many households in this population had received other forms of government assistance (figure 4.2). A quarter (26 percent) of the households had received welfare or cash assistance, though for two-thirds of them four or more years had passed since they received any benefits. Medical assistance was received by half of all eligible nonparticipant households. Twenty-three percent reported that they were receiving it at the time of the survey and an additional 9 percent received some type of medical assistance within the year prior to the survey. A quarter of this population had received WIC benefits at some point. Six percent of all households reported that they were receiving benefits at the time of the survey and an additional 5 percent had participated in WIC during the prior year.

Figure 4.2—Prior receipt of other government assistance



Food Stamp Application Experience of Near Applicants

Eligible nonparticipant households include a small group of households that we have termed “near applicants.” They are households that contacted the local food stamp office within the six to twelve months prior to the survey to inquire about food stamp benefits, but never followed through by submitting an application. This group was of particular interest because while they had made an effort to find out about food stamp benefits, they decided not to apply. It seems likely that something happened to prevent their application, either a change in their circumstances or a change in their evaluation of the value of applying for benefits. A very small percentage of nonparticipants had made recent contact with the FSP office. The sample contained only 66 near applicant households, which represented 4.6 percent of all apparently eligible households. Due to the sample size, the frequencies shown for this group should be considered illustrative only.

Most (65 percent) near applicants knew, or “had some idea of,” the specific programs they were interested in when they contacted the food stamp or welfare office. Just over half were interested in the FSP when they came in. Half were interested in Medicaid and/or the related SCHIP, while smaller numbers came in explicitly for TANF, SSI, or General Assistance.

By definition, near applicants did not apply for food stamps when they visited or called the welfare office. With the exception of the Medicaid and SCHIP programs, they did not apply for other programs in large numbers. Half applied for Medicaid/SCHIP and about 40 percent of these were approved for benefits. Eight to 11 percent applied for TANF benefits, SSI, and General Assistance.

Half of all near applicants (49 percent) obtained a food stamp application form from the welfare office. Among those that did not, the usual reason given was that they did not ask for one, or that that no one suggested that they complete one, so they thought they would not be eligible.

Information about the Food Stamp Program was not readily available to most near applicants, according to their reports. Only 34 percent of near applicants reported that they were informed about the requirements for applying and participating in the FSP when they contacted the office.

Food Stamp Program Application Satisfaction: Near Applicants' Most Recent Visit

In order to understand the factors that may be inhibiting program participation, the survey asked a series of questions about near applicants' most recent contact with the welfare office.³⁶ The questions were directed to understanding how successful and satisfied these households were with their visit and what caused dissatisfaction.

While approximately two-thirds of near applicants (62 percent) reported that the hours the welfare office was open were "very" or "somewhat" convenient for them, 23 percent found the office hours "very" or "somewhat inconvenient" for their schedules (the rest did not have an opinion). Nearly all those who found the hours inconvenient reported that the office was only open during normal business hours, and for some this meant taking time off for work to get there.

Nearly half of near applicants (44 percent) were "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with the services provided by the receptionist or telephone operator, while 38 percent were "very" or "somewhat" dissatisfied (table B.20). About half of near-applicants (49 percent) spoke with a caseworker; their median wait to see the caseworker was 15 minutes. About half of near-applicants who saw a caseworker (53 percent) felt they really understood what they needed to do to get food stamps. While 41 percent of near applicants felt that the FSP application requirements were unreasonable, 38 percent felt that the requirements were reasonable. The remainder did not have an opinion.

About one-quarter (27 percent) of near applicants felt that they accomplished everything they set out to do in their most recent visit to the welfare office. The three-quarters of households that did not find their visits completely successful most often reported that they failed to find out if they were eligible or complete the application. Smaller numbers were unable to determine all the application requirements, or meet with a caseworker as they had hoped, while others were unclear about whether or not they had accomplished their goals.

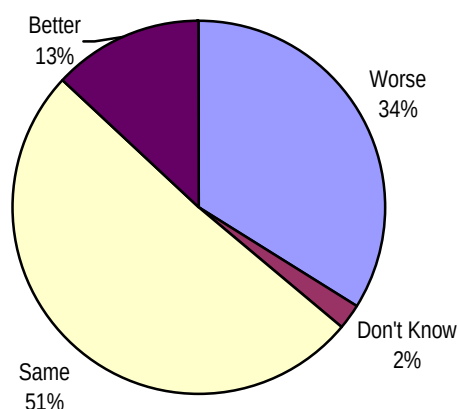
Near applicants appear to have faced some problems or barriers in their most recent visit to the welfare office. Getting to the office during the hours it was open was difficult for a sizeable minority of households. Others experienced difficulty in obtaining the necessary information. However, it must be kept in mind that near applicants represented only a very small percentage of all eligible nonparticipant households. Most eligible nonparticipant households did not even make an initial contact with the food stamp office.

³⁶ Analysis based on the sample of 66 "near applicant" respondents.

Overall Food Stamp Program Satisfaction

Households that had applied for food stamp benefits within the last four years, as well as near applicants, were asked a series of questions about their satisfaction with the services they received during their most recent visit to the welfare office.³⁷ As an overall measure of satisfaction, respondents were asked to compare their experiences at the food stamp office to their experiences in similar types of offices, such as the Division of Motor Vehicles, voter registration, WIC, the post office, or the unemployment office. About half of all households felt that they were treated about the same as at other government agencies (figure 4.3). A third, however, felt they were treated worse at the FSP office, while 13 percent felt they were treated better at the FSP office.

Figure 4.3—Treatment at food stamp office compared to other government offices among households with recent FSP experience*



*Includes the 5 percent of nonparticipant households that either applied for (but did not receive) FSP benefits within the prior four years or were near applicants.

Respondents were also asked to give their opinion about their satisfaction with specific aspects of their experience at the food stamp office. While a majority of households were reasonably satisfied with the services and treatment they received, a significant minority reported varying levels of dissatisfaction (see table B.21). Most agreed that their caseworker was knowledgeable about benefits and procedures (72 percent), and that their caseworker treated clients respectfully (66 percent). Only a third to a half, however, agreed with their caseworkers' decisions (38 percent), felt that their caseworker kept them well informed (53 percent), felt that the caseworker was helping to solve their problems (48 percent), and felt that the kinds of services they received from their caseworker were suitable (56 percent).

Eligible nonparticipants in 2000 who were either classified as near applicants or had applied for food stamp benefits within the last four years were less satisfied with the services they received at the welfare office than households that applied and were approved for benefits in 2000 (table B.21). Between 80 and 90 percent of approved applicants were satisfied with the services they received—

³⁷ Households that had applied for food stamps more than four years before the survey were not asked these questions. The intent was to examine satisfaction with the office after welfare reform was implemented.

they agreed strongly or somewhat with the statements that indicated satisfaction. Eligible nonparticipants in 2000 were much less inclined to “agree strongly” and much more likely to “disagree strongly” with the questions than approved applicants. This comparison suggests that one reason previous and near applicants did not follow through and apply for food stamp benefits may be that they were dissatisfied with their treatment at the food stamp office.

Summary

Over half of eligible nonparticipant households had some experience with the Food Stamp Program prior to their most recent contact—52 percent had received benefits in the past and an additional 7 percent had applied for benefits. Many nonparticipant households had also received other forms of government assistance, including medical assistance, cash assistance, and WIC benefits.

Near applicant households, defined as those who contacted the Food Stamp Program within the six to twelve months prior to the survey but did not submit an application, represent a small (66 households or 4.6 percent), though potentially interesting group of nonparticipant households. Many of these households appear to have faced some problems or barriers during their most recent visit to the welfare office. A sizeable minority had difficulty getting to the office when it was open. Others reported experiencing informational problems—weren’t informed about FSP benefits, weren’t given an application, or didn’t understand FSP application or participation requirements.

While a majority of households who were either near applicants or had applied for benefits in the past four years were reasonably satisfied with the services they received at the food stamp office, some were dissatisfied with one or more aspects of the treatment they received.