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Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Access at the State and County Levels

Evidence From Texas SNAP Administrative Records and the American Community Survey

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In fiscal year 2012 (October 1, 2011 through September 30, 2012), about 1 in 4 Americans participated in at least 1 of the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 15 domestic food assistance programs. Over 70 percent of USDA's total 2012 outlays went to these programs, and 73 percent of food assistance spending went to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Knowing the demographic characteristics of those who receive SNAP benefits and those who, among eligible individuals, do not is important for assessing and improving program performance.

What Is the Issue?

While State-level estimates of SNAP participation rates are published annually by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, the data required to produce more detailed estimates within a State (i.e., at a county level) have previously not been available. Such estimates would be useful as States decide where to focus outreach expenditures. These detailed participation rates would also be helpful in assessing administrative performance in local areas and in guiding administrative policies and procedures. This report measures access to SNAP using a new approach that links State-level SNAP administrative records and the American Community Survey (ACS), which surveys a sample of about 2 million U.S. households each year on various demographic factors. The report provides estimates of detailed SNAP access rates for geographic areas (counties and congressional districts) and demographic subgroups in Texas during 2008 and 2009.

What Did the Study Find?

By linking a State's administrative data on SNAP participation to the ACS, this report demonstrates how a wide range of "access" rates (analogous to participation rates) can be estimated across various demographic and geographic groupings. SNAP access is estimated for subgroups in Texas distinguished by age, citizenship status, disability status, education, employment status, work experience, health insurance coverage, household composition variables, household language, previous location of residence, race, receipt of various forms of income or govern-

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ment assistance, rural/urban residency, school enrollment status, and veteran status. Among the more policy-relevant findings:

- The statewide access rate was estimated to be 62.8 percent of eligible individuals.
- Among the 25 Texas counties sufficiently large enough to support estimation, the SNAP access rate ranged from a low of almost 5 out of every 10 eligible individuals (45.7 percent in Denton County) to a high of almost 8 out of 10 (78.2 percent in Hidalgo County).
- Among the 32 Texas congressional districts in 2008-09, the lowest rate of SNAP access was 36.8 percent in the 7th District near Houston while the highest rate was 76.9 percent in the 15th District (partially adjacent to Texas' southern border).
- Elderly individuals (age 60+) who lived alone, or only with other elderly individuals, had an especially low rate of access to SNAP. The access rate of elderly individuals who lived with at least one non-elderly individual in the household is still lower than the statewide average for all individuals—although significantly higher than that of elderly individuals living alone.
- Consistent with prior national estimates, households with children had substantially higher access rates in Texas than households without children. Among households with children, couples had significantly lower access rates than female heads or even multiple-adult (noncouple) households, and couples with children made up the largest eligible subgroup of all households, by household composition, in the State.
- A lack of facility with English may be an important barrier to SNAP participation. With its large Hispanic population, this is a particular policy concern in Texas. According to the Census Bureau's classification of linguistic isolation among Spanish speakers, "isolated" Spanish-speaking households exhibited access rates 13 percentage points lower than "non-isolated" Spanish-speaking households.

How Was the Study Conducted?

The study uses data from the American Community Survey (ACS) collected in 2009 by the U.S. Census Bureau, linked to 2008-09 administrative data from Texas SNAP files, which contain the universe of SNAP recipients in Texas. With a sample size of about 2 million U.S. households each year, the ACS is a nationally representative survey of the population of the United States designed to support statistical analysis of small spatial areas. We applied State and Federal program rules to simulate SNAP eligibility for individuals in the linked sample with information available in the ACS. We also employed a weighting method that takes into account sample loss from unmatchable records.

We use the term "access rates" to clearly distinguish our estimates from the official State SNAP participation rates published by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). We produce these estimates using a different methodology in terms of the underlying data sources used, the approach to estimating program eligibility, and the time period examined. The access rates estimated in this report measure access (or participation) among eligible individuals based on annual income measures, whereas the participation rate measures participation among eligible individuals in a representative month. Our measure is also distinct from a third, more timely but approximate measure of participation—the Program Access Index.