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# Improving the Assessment of SNAP Targeting Using Administrative Records

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## What Is the Issue?

Household survey data are a critical resource for studying USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The data are frequently used to assess the performance of "benefits targeting," or how well SNAP benefits reach the poorest households. However, household survey data have some shortcomings, which, if not taken into account, can lead to a distorted picture of who is receiving SNAP benefits. This study addresses some of these measurement issues by combining data from the American Community Survey (ACS)—the largest nationally representative household survey in the United States—with SNAP administrative records from New York State. The linked data expand the information on SNAP receipt available in the ACS alone, namely, whether households receive SNAP benefits at any time during the year, to include the *amount* of benefits received in a year and the *number of months* of receipt in a year. The administrative records also help address the well-documented problem of under-reporting of SNAP receipt in the ACS.

## What Did the Study Find?

In general, the study finds improved estimates of SNAP targeting over previous measures due to:

- Substituting American Community Survey (ACS) data on SNAP receipt with data from administrative records on SNAP receipt.
- Defining the household according to SNAP administrative guidelines (referred to as "constructed SNAP units").
- Restricting analysis to those households that responded to all income questions in the survey.

*Household participation in a given year.* Among all constructed SNAP units that received SNAP at any point during the average year between 2008 and 2012, 27 percent were in "deep poverty," with annual incomes at or below 50 percent of the Federal poverty threshold. Units with annual incomes at 51-100 percent of poverty accounted for another 33 percent of SNAP units—the largest share among all income categories. About 15 percent of all SNAP units had annual incomes above 200 percent of poverty. Despite their high annual incomes, these units, or certain members of these units, may have received benefits for 1 or more months of the year because SNAP eligibility is based on monthly, not annual, income.

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*Intensity of SNAP use.* Although they accounted for 27 percent of all units participating at any point in the year, SNAP units in deep poverty received about 32 percent of total annual SNAP benefits. As expected, SNAP units in the highest annual income category (15 percent of all participants) received disproportionately fewer annual benefits (13 percent of total). In general, households with higher annual incomes did not receive as high a level of benefits, or receive them for as long, as households with lower annual incomes. Distinguishing among different intensities of benefit receipt highlights the role of SNAP in providing temporary assistance to working households whose volatile incomes may make them program eligible for only part of the year.

An estimated 67 percent of constructed SNAP units that received SNAP benefits for the *entire* year reported annual incomes at or below 100 percent of poverty. SNAP units with annual incomes above 200 percent of poverty accounted for 26 percent of those receiving SNAP benefits for 6 months or less.

Omitting constructed SNAP units that did not respond to all income questions in the survey results in estimates that suggest SNAP is more highly targeted toward those with annual incomes at or below poverty. Findings also show that constructed SNAP units with annual incomes above 130 percent of poverty are significantly more likely to have an elderly member, a disabled member, receipt of earnings from work, or imputed income.

## **How Was the Study Conducted?**

The study linked the universe of SNAP administrative records from New York State to 5 years of data (2008-12) from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. The advantage of linking these data sources is that SNAP administrative records provide a more accurate measure of SNAP receipt than that reported in the ACS, while the ACS contains information on annual income and household demographics that the linked administrative records lack, including information on eligible nonparticipants. In addition, the format of the administrative records enables one to measure the number of months and the value of benefit receipt, two items not reported in the ACS.

The study uses ACS demographic information to better account for SNAP program subunits, or constructed SNAP units, within surveyed households—the household units that qualify as a SNAP unit under USDA rules. The analysis demonstrates how the inclusion of survey imputed income affects the results, and it examines the characteristics of SNAP participants with higher incomes, using both descriptive and multivariate analysis.