

Background

This report is the latest in a series of publications presenting estimates of the percentage of eligible persons, by State, who participate in the Food Stamp Program. The participation rate – a ratio of the number of participants to the number of people eligible for benefits – is an important measure of program performance.

This issue presents food stamp participation rates for States in an average month in fiscal year 2003 and for the previous fiscal year. Nationally, the participation rate among eligible persons increased from 54 percent in fiscal year 2002 to 56 percent in fiscal year 2003.

Findings

- **Food stamp participation rates continue to vary widely among States in fiscal year 2002.** Estimated rates in several States were below 45 percent and in several States exceeded 80 percent.
- **Some States have had consistently high participation rates relative to other States.** In both fiscal year 2002 and 2003, Oregon, Tennessee, Missouri, the District of Columbia, Maine, Louisiana, West Virginia, Hawaii, and Kentucky had significantly higher participation rates than *two-thirds* of the States. Michigan, Alaska, Indiana, and Illinois had significantly higher rates than *half* of the States.
- **Some States have had consistently low participation rates relative to other States.** North Carolina, New York, and California had significantly lower rates than *half* of the States in fiscal years 2002 and 2003. Maryland, Texas, Florida, Colorado, Utah, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Wyoming, Nevada, and Massachusetts had significantly lower rates than *two-thirds* of the States
- **Participation rates increased in the majority of States between fiscal year 2002 and 2003.** Overall rates increased the most in the Southeast Region, followed by the Mountain Plains and Midwest Regions. The Northeast Region's participation rate, at 49 percent, declined slightly and remained significantly lower than the rates for all of the other regions.

The estimates are derived using a statistical approach known as shrinkage estimation that draws on data from the Current Population Survey, decennial census, and administrative records. The shrinkage estimator averages direct sample estimates of participation rates with predictions from a regression model based on indicators of socioeconomic conditions. Shrinkage estimates are substantially more precise than direct sample estimates from the Current Population Survey even though larger sample sizes in recent years improved the precision of direct estimates for States with smaller populations. Nevertheless, the estimated participation rates are still based on fairly small samples of households in many States, and the uncertainty associated with these estimates is substantial. Users of these data should take the estimated confidence intervals into account when interpreting differences between States and within a State over time.

For More Information

Castner, L.A., and A.L. Schirm (2005). *Reaching Those in Need: State Food Stamp Participation Rates in 2003*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the Food and Nutrition Service. (Available on-line at www.fns.usda.gov/fns.)

Cunningham, Karen (2005). *Food Stamp Program Participation Rates: 2003*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the Food and Nutrition Service. Available on-line at www.fns.usda.gov/fns.

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