

Trends in USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Year 2016 to Fiscal Year 2019 (Summary)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides nutrition assistance to eligible low-income individuals and households in need. This report is the latest in a series on SNAP participation rates, which estimate the proportion of people eligible for benefits under Federal income and asset rules to those who actually participate in the program. This report presents rates for fiscal year (FY) 2019, comparing them to rates for FY 2016-2018 and showing participation rates by household characteristics.

Note that the U.S. Census Bureau implemented a redesigned processing system for data used in this report. Consequently, the FY 2016 and FY 2017 estimates in this report differ slightly from the ones published in a previous report in this series.

Key Findings

- The overall participation rate remained the same from FY 2018 to FY 2019, while total participants and eligible individuals declined.
- Individuals in households with incomes below poverty and children had higher than average participation rates in FY 2019.
- Elderly individuals continued to have lower than average participation rates in FY 2019.

Methods

Estimates of participants (numerator) in this report are based on SNAP administrative data for FY 2016 through 2019 for the 50 States and the District of Columbia, while estimates of eligible individuals (denominator) are based on Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement data for calendar years 2015 through 2019. Differences between these two sources cause some estimated participation rates to exceed 100 percent.

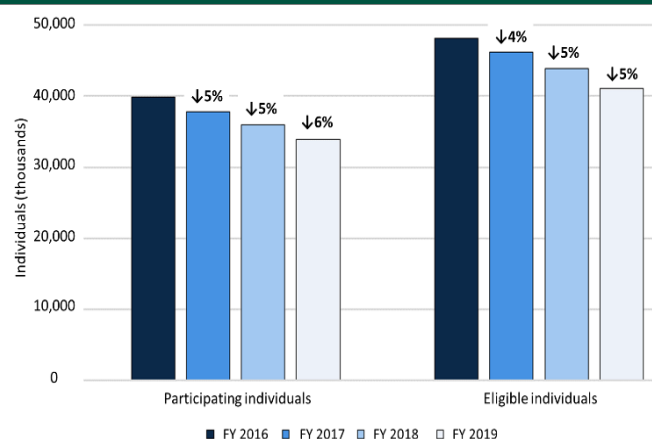
Individuals in households with income or assets above the Federal SNAP resource limits are removed from the participant count unless every member receives cash benefits from Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or State general assistance. These participation rate estimates do not include individuals who received temporary disaster benefits and individuals who received benefits in error.

Findings

Overall, the program served 82 percent of all eligible individuals in FY 2019, the same as in FY 2018 and FY 2017 but down 1 percentage point from 2016. On average, 41 million individuals were eligible for SNAP under Federal rules each month in FY 2019, and nearly 34 million participated in the program. Both the number of participants and the number of eligible individuals declined each year from FY 2016 to 2019 (Figure 1).

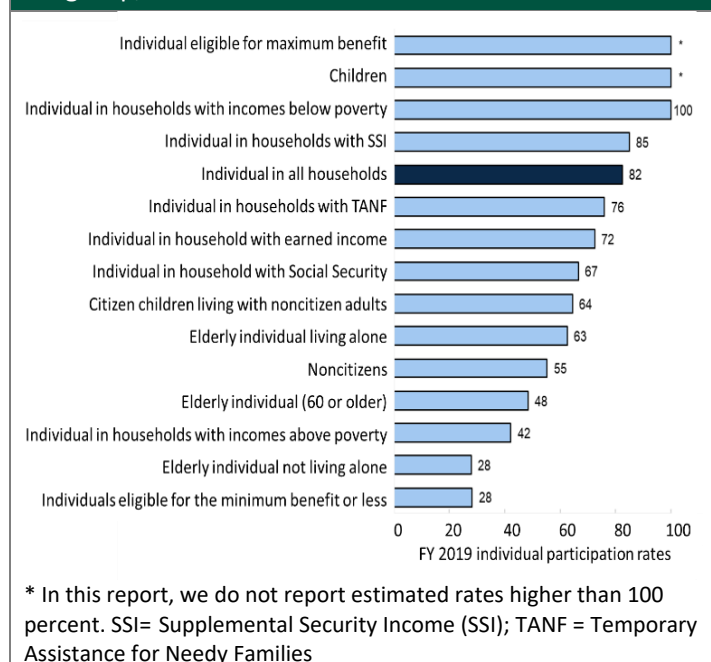
Historically, individuals with neediest households have participated at higher rates than other eligible individuals. This pattern continued in FY 2019. An estimated 100 percent of individuals in households with incomes at or below 100 percent of the poverty guidelines participated, compared to only 42 percent in households with incomes greater than the poverty guidelines (Figure 2). Similarly, while virtually all individuals eligible for the maximum allotment participated (\$192 for a 1-person household), only 28 percent of individuals eligible for the minimum benefit (\$15 for 1- and 2-person households) or

Figure 1: Changes from the previous year in participating individuals and eligible individuals, FY 2016 to FY 2019



less participated in FY 2019. Participation rates were also higher than average for children and individuals in households with Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

Figure 2: Individual participation rate estimates by subgroup, FY 2019



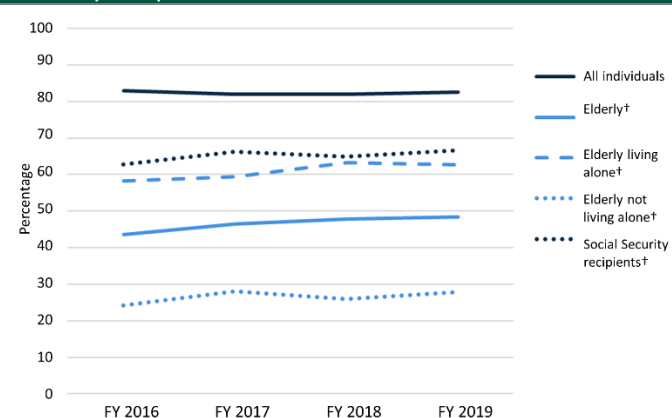
Elderly individuals (age 60 or older) typically participate in SNAP at lower-than-average rates, which remained true in FY 2019. However, elderly individuals living alone had a relatively higher participation rate at 63 percent, while those *not* living alone had a lower rate at 28 percent (Figure 2).

Participation rates for all individuals and for most subgroups showed little change between FY 2016 and FY 2019. However, there were some exceptions to this trend, noted below, which are detailed below.

For instance, the participation rate for elderly individuals increased by 4 percentage points from 44 percent in FY 2016 to 48 percent in FY 2018, where it remained in FY 2019 (Figure 3). Rates also increased between FY 2016 and 2019 for related subgroups – elderly living alone, elderly not living alone, and individuals who receive Social Security or SSI. The increase in the participation rate from 2016 to 2019 was statistically significant for all of these groups.

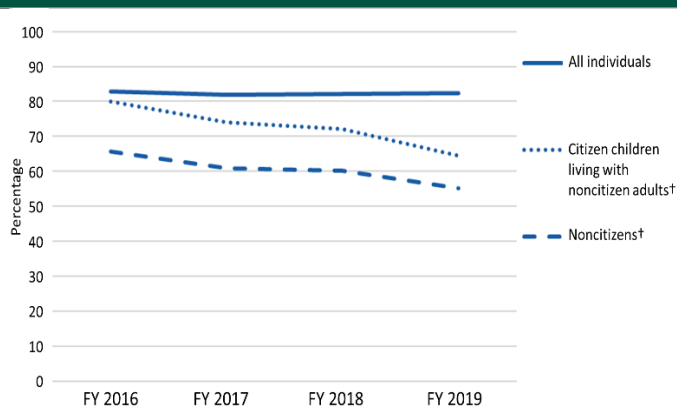
There were statistically significant decreases in participation rates for two related subgroups—noncitizens and citizen children living with noncitizen adults—between FY 2016 and FY 2019 (Figure 4). The participation rate for eligible noncitizens decreased from 66 percent to 55 percent during this time. The participation rate for citizen children living with noncitizen adults decreased by a larger amount, from 80 percent to 64 percent.

Figure 3: Changes in participation rates for all individuals, elderly individuals, elderly individuals living alone, elderly individuals not living alone, and Social Security recipients from FY 2016 to FY 2019



† Indicates statistically significant difference between FY 2016 and FY 2019 at the .10 level using a two-tailed t-test.

Figure 4: Change in the participation rate for noncitizens and citizen children living with noncitizen adults from FY 2016 to FY 2019



† Indicates statistically significant difference between FY 2016 and FY 2019 at the .10 level using a two-tailed t-test.

For More Information:

Vigil, Alma, (2021). Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Year 2016 to Fiscal Year 2019. Prepared by Mathematica, Contract No. 12-3198-20-F-0051, 12-3198-20-F-0056 Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Kameron Burt. Available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.