

Trends in USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Year 2016 to Fiscal Year 2020 (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. Because the coronavirus COVID-19 public health emergency affected data collection starting in March 2020, this summary covers only the pre-pandemic period of October 2019 through February 2020. Thus, this report presents rates for the early months of fiscal year (FY) 2020, comparing them to rates for FY 2016-2018 and showing participation rates by household characteristics.

Key Findings

- SNAP served 78 percent of all eligible individuals in pre-pandemic FY 2020, which is the lowest participation rate of recent years.
- Individuals in households with incomes below poverty and children had higher-than-average participation rates in pre-pandemic FY 2020.
- Elderly individuals continued to have lower-than-average participation rates.

Methods

Estimates of participants (numerator) in this report are based on SNAP administrative data for FY 2016 through the pre-pandemic months of FY 2020 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 the relevant calendar years. Differences between these two sources cause some estimated participation rates to exceed 100 percent.

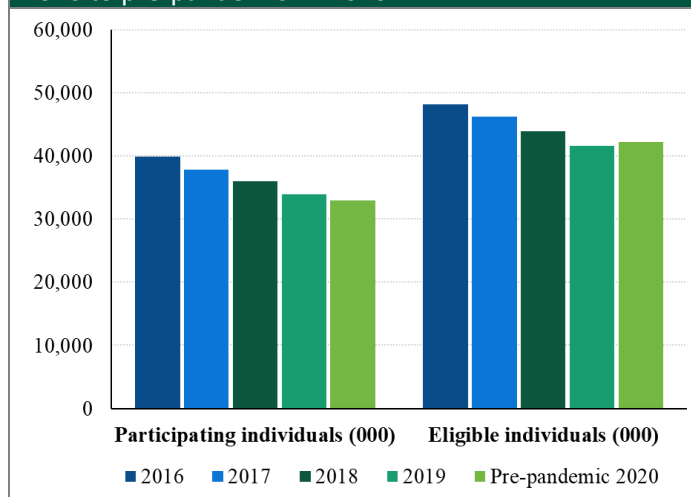
Individuals in households with income or assets above the Federal SNAP resource limits are removed from the participant count unless every member receives cash benefits from Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or State general assistance. These participation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

Findings

Overall, SNAP served 78 percent of all eligible individuals in pre-pandemic FY 2020, which is the lowest participation rate of recent years. On average, around 42 million individuals were eligible for SNAP under Federal rules each month in pre-pandemic FY 2020; of this, nearly 33 million participated in the program. The number of participants declined each year from FY 2016 to 2020, while the number of eligible individuals increased in pre-

pandemic FY 2020 (Figure 1) after declining for several years.

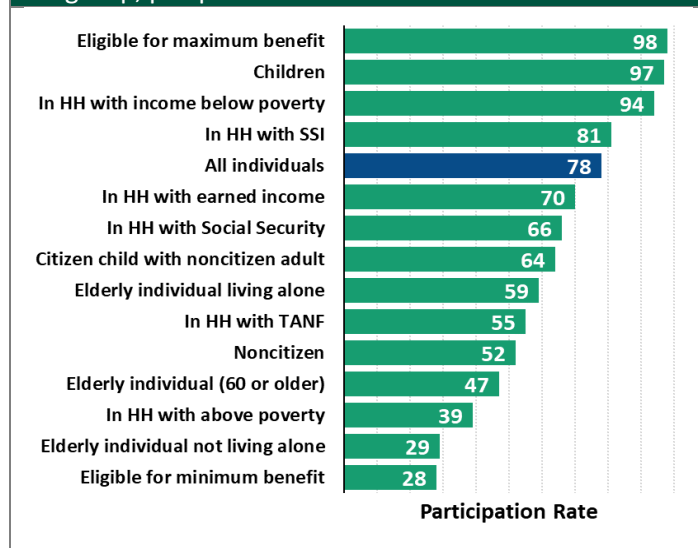
Figure 1: Changes from the previous year in participating individuals and eligible individuals, FY 2016 to pre-pandemic FY 2020



Historically, individuals in the poorest households have participated at higher rates than other eligible individuals. This pattern continued in FY 2020. An estimated 94 percent of individuals in households with incomes at or below 100 percent of the poverty guidelines participated, compared to only 39 percent in households with incomes greater than the poverty guidelines (Figure 2). Similarly, while 98 percent of individuals eligible for the maximum allotment participated (\$194 for 1-person

households), only 28 percent of individuals eligible for the minimum benefit (\$16 for 1-or-2-person households) or less participated in pre-pandemic FY 2020. 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, pre-pandemic FY 2020

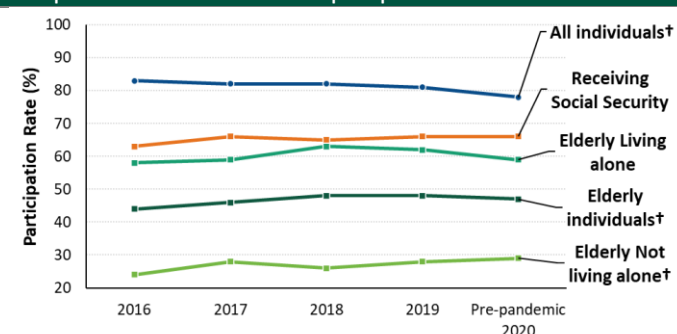


Elderly individuals (age 60 or older) typically participate in SNAP at lower-than-average rates, which remained true in FY 2020. However, elderly individuals living alone had a relatively higher participation rate at 59 percent, while those *not* living alone had a lower rate at 29 percent (Figure 2).

Participation rates for all individuals and for most subgroups declined slightly between FY 2016 and pre-pandemic FY 2020. However, there were some exceptions to this trend, detailed below.

The participation rate for elderly individuals increased by 3 percentage points from 44 percent in FY 2016 to 47 percent in pre-pandemic FY 2020 (Figure 3). Rates also increased between FY 2016 and 2020 for related subgroups: elderly living alone (58 to 59 percent), elderly not living alone (24 to 29 percent), and individuals who receive Social Security (63 to 66 percent). The participation-rate increases for elderly individuals overall and those not living alone were statistically significant.

Figure 3: Changes in participation rates for all individuals, elderly individuals, and Social Security recipients from FY 2016 to pre-pandemic FY 2020

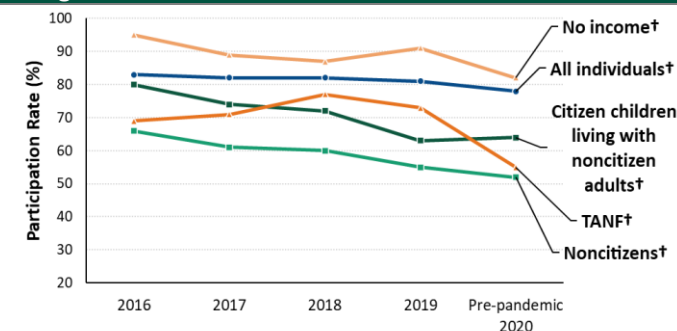


† Indicates statistically significant difference between FY 2016 and FY 2019 at the .10 level using a two-tailed t-test.

There were decreases in participation rates for two related subgroups—eligible noncitizens (typically, permanent residents with 10-years work, military service, a disability, five years residency, or children) and citizen children living with noncitizen adults—between FY 2016 and pre-pandemic FY 2020 (Figure 4). The participation rate for eligible noncitizens went from 66 percent to 52 percent during this time, and the rate for citizen children living with noncitizen adults went from 80 percent to 64 percent. Both changes are statistically significant.

Additionally, participation rates significantly fell among individuals with zero income and those who participate in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) from FY 2016 to pre-pandemic FY 2020 (Figure 4). The participation rate for zero-income households fell from 95 percent to 82 percent while individuals in households receiving TANF dropped from 69 percent to 55 percent.

Figure 4: Change in the participation rates for TANF participants, eligible noncitizens, and citizen children living with noncitizen adults from FY 2016 to FY 2020



† 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, (2022). Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Year 2016 to Fiscal Year 2020. Prepared by Mathematica, Contract No. 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.