Receipt of SNAP Benefits (Food Stamps)

Indicators of Child and Youth Well-Being
In fiscal year 2015, 19.8 million U.S. children received benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly, the food stamp program), the lowest number in the past five years. In the economic boom years of the late 1990s, these numbers dropped by nearly a third, before rising steadily and peaking in 2013.

Importance

Nearly all eligible poor households with children receive assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the food stamp program), a benefit designed to increase the food purchasing power of low-income households. SNAP is the largest of the federal Food and Nutrition Service programs. Receiving SNAP benefits increases what households spend on food, and the availability of calories and protein. Also, when controlling for other relevant factors, several studies suggest SNAP receipt increases food security, defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as having “access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members.”

Receipt of SNAP benefits is also associated with positive effects on children’s health. According to a nationally representative study, women with access to SNAP in the last three months of pregnancy had improved birth outcomes, as measured by birthweight. Research also finds that access to SNAP benefits in early childhood is associated, in adulthood, with improved health (particularly, the obesity- and diabetes-related cluster called “metabolic syndrome”), and economic self-sufficiency.

Additionally, there is evidence that SNAP benefits substantially reduce poverty among children. For example, a reduction of six percent in the rate of child poverty over the first decade of the 2000s can be attributed to SNAP benefits, and even greater reductions in the depth and severity of poverty among children. Recent research finds that SNAP participation is associated with improved reading and math skills for young children, especially girls, and with an increased likelihood of high school graduation.
Trends

The number of children receiving SNAP benefits rose from 9.9 million in 1980 to 14.4 million in 1994, before falling to 8.8 million in 2000. After slow to moderate increases through 2008, to 13.4 million, the number increased dramatically, coincident with the Great Recession and ensuing years, to peak at 20.5 million in 2013. The number of children receiving SNAP benefits has since declined modestly, reaching 19.9 million in 2015. (Figure 1)

Similarly, among all children, the proportion receiving SNAP fell from a peak of 21 percent in 1993 and 1994 to 12 percent in 2000 and 2001. Between 2000 and 2008, there was a modest increase to 18 percent, followed by a sharper increase through 2013. In 2015, 27 percent of all children received SNAP benefits. A similar trend holds among children living in poverty. The share of poor children receiving SNAP decreased from 95 percent in 1995 to a low of 75 percent in 2001. The proportion has increased since 2001, except for a small dip between 2006 and 2008, and was at 137 percent in 2015. Participation among all children
eligible for SNAP benefits has increased as well, from 71 percent in 2002 to over 100 percent in 2014 (the latest data available).a (Figure 2)

Probable contributors to this upward trend were rising unemployment between 2000 and 2009, as well as recent changes in state programs, such as those easing some eligibility restrictions, increasing awareness of eligibility for those exiting welfare, efforts to reduce stigma through use of electronic benefit cards, and decreasing paperwork requirements.11 Federal legislation (since expired) increased SNAP benefits in 2008 and 2009, which also likely boosted participation.12

State and Local Estimates

State estimates for the number of persons and households receiving SNAP benefits are available at www.fns.usda.gov/pd/snapmain.htm

---

a The use of different data sources to estimate rate numerators and denominators can result in estimates of eligible individuals with a particular characteristic that are lower than the corresponding estimates of participants. When this happens, estimated rates exceed 100 percent. The 2013 and 2014 summaries do not report estimated rates over 100 percent or the associated estimates of eligible individuals, households, or potential benefits.
International Estimates

None available.

National Goals

Although the government has not established national goals concerning SNAP benefits, two Healthy People 2020 objectives pertain to food insecurity. Consistent with the Department of Agriculture’s initiatives to end childhood hunger, the goals refer to reducing the percentage of children with very low food security from 1.3 percent in 2008, to 0.2 percent in 2020, and to reducing the percentage of households with food insecurity from 14.6 percent in 2008, to 6.0 percent by the year 2020.

More information on the objectives is available at:
(Goals NWS 12 and 13)

What Works to Make Progress on the Indicator

The Self-Sufficiency Research Clearinghouse, sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, of the U.S. Administration for Children and Families, offers research related to improving utilization of SNAP and other food assistance programs at www.opressrc.org/topics/food-assistance

Related Indicators

tanf
- Food insecurity: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=food-insecurity

Definition

SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), provides benefits for the purpose of increasing the food purchasing power of eligible low-income households so that they are able to purchase a nutritionally adequate diet. Eligible households have net monthly incomes at or below the poverty threshold, after
deductions for certain expenses. Benefits vary according to household size and income, and are based on the government’s “thrifty food plan.” In 2016, the maximum benefit for a family of four was $649 per month. All child participants in the 50 states and the District of Columbia are included in the estimates presented here.

**Data Sources**


**Raw Data Source**

Caseload data are administrative data compiled by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Poverty data are from the Current Population Survey.

## Appendix 1 - Child Recipients of Food Stamps/SNAP: Selected Years, 1980-2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child recipients</td>
<td>9,876</td>
<td>9,906</td>
<td>10,127</td>
<td>10,127</td>
<td>12,363</td>
<td>12,514</td>
<td>12,605</td>
<td>13,359</td>
<td>15,617</td>
<td>18,516</td>
<td>19,927</td>
<td>20,500</td>
<td>20,889</td>
<td>20,271</td>
<td>19,891</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child recipients as a percent of:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total child population</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in poverty</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>94.7</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>95.9</td>
<td>97.6</td>
<td>94.6</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>101.1</td>
<td>113.7</td>
<td>123.5</td>
<td>127.5</td>
<td>132.2</td>
<td>130.4</td>
<td>137.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children eligible for food stamps /SNAP(^2,3)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>86.3</td>
<td>88.6</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>88.3</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>89.0</td>
<td>95.6</td>
<td>100.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. The number of child participants includes only the participating States and D.C. (the territories are not included). Data from 1980 to 1983 includes participants of the Family Food Assistance Program (FFAP) which was largely replaced by the Food Stamp program in 1975. From 1980 to 1983 the number of FFAP participants averaged only 88,000.

2. Due to methodological changes to the calculations of eligible children in 2010 through 2012, the proportions for those years are not strictly comparable to previous years.

3. The use of different data sources to estimate rate numerators and denominators can result in estimates of eligible individuals with a particular characteristic that are lower than the corresponding estimates of participants. When this happens, estimated rates exceed 100 percent. The 2013 and 2014 summaries do not report estimated rates over 100 percent or the associated estimates of eligible individuals, households, or potential benefits.

Sources:
Endnotes


3 Ibid, p. 12.


10 SNAP benefits are not restricted to those households with below-poverty incomes. While the net monthly income cut-off for SNAP benefits is 100 percent of the poverty level, estimates of child poverty are calculated on an annual, not monthly basis. In addition, individuals with net income higher than the cut-off, but who are receiving other benefits (such as TANF, SSI disability, or disaster relief payments) may be categorically eligible.
