

ISSUE 11: LATINO PARTICIPATION IN THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM*

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is an important resource for low-income Latino[†] families struggling with food insecurity. SNAP provides resources for families to purchase food, with the goal of enhancing nutritional outcomes by improving the quantity and quality of food that families buy. While the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has increased its outreach to Latinos, barriers remain that prevent millions of eligible Latinos—particularly children in mixed-immigration-status households—from participating in the program.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

SNAP—formerly known as the Food Stamp Program—combats food insecurity by providing low-income individuals and families with a debit card to purchase eligible food items from participating stores, farmers’ markets, and other retailers. The program is administered by the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service and has served 46.5 million people, with an average benefit of \$125 per person per month in 2014. The federal criteria for a household to qualify for SNAP are:

- Gross monthly income must be at or below 130% of the federal poverty level (\$2,144 per month for a family of three in 2015). This limit does not apply to, and other guidelines are in place for, households with an elderly or disabled member.
- Net monthly income—income after deductions for items such as high housing costs and child care—must be less than or equal to the federal poverty level (\$19,800 per year for a family of three in 2015).
- Assets must fall below \$2,250 for most households and \$3,250 for those with an elderly or disabled member in 2015.
- Some categories of people are not eligible for SNAP regardless of income, such as employed persons on strike and most college students. Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for SNAP, although they may apply on behalf of their eligible family members and children.

Sources: USDA, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Costs (Data as of March 6, 2015),” www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/SNAPsummary.pdf (accessed March 2015); and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “Policy Basics: Introduction to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),” www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-introduction-to-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap (accessed May 2015).

SNAP serves millions of low-income Latino families and children each year; however, many eligible Latinos do not receive SNAP assistance.

- SNAP participation peaked in 2013 at over 47.6 million people. This level represented an 82% increase from 2007, just prior to the Great Recession. Enrollment has declined as the economy has begun to improve.¹
- SNAP participation rates continue to improve, reaching more eligible participants. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 75% of all eligible individuals received SNAP benefits in a typical month in 2010, compared to 54% in 2002.² However, Latinos are overrepresented among eligible nonparticipants.³

- In 2013, almost 7.6 million Hispanics took part in SNAP, making up nearly one in six (16.1%) of all participants. The proportion of Latino participants has remained roughly between 14% and 16% since 2007.⁴

Eligible Latino children living with immigrant family members have an increased risk of nonparticipation in SNAP.

- Immigrant and “mixed-status” families (where U.S. citizens and noncitizens live in the same household) may be deterred from applying on behalf of eligible children due to concerns or confusion about SNAP eligibility restrictions.⁵ This is particularly important for Latino families, as more than half (53%) of Latino children in the United States are U.S. citizens living with at least one noncitizen parent.⁶

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† The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. Furthermore, unless otherwise noted, estimates in this document do not include the 3.7 million residents of Puerto Rico. Comparison data for non-Hispanic Whites and non-Hispanic Blacks will be identified respectively as “Whites” and “Blacks.”

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- The percentage of citizen children living with noncitizen adults participating in SNAP has increased from 7.2% in 2007 to 8.8% in 2013.⁷ Despite continued progress, the SNAP participation of eligible children in mixed-status families (75%) falls short of the overall participation rate of eligible children (83%).⁸
- Confusion about complex restrictions or concerns about immigration consequences may be driving eligible individuals to not enroll. In one study, nearly one-quarter (24.2%) of Hispanic families receiving emergency food assistance through the national Feeding America program reported that they did not apply for SNAP benefits due to concerns about ineligibility due to citizenship status.⁹

SNAP is associated with children's increased food security, reduced hunger, and improved nutritional intake.

- The Urban Institute found that in low-income households, participation in SNAP reduced the likelihood of being food

insecure by about 31% and decreased the odds of being very food insecure (i.e., hungry) by 20%.¹⁰

- A Mathematica Policy Research study found that after households participated in SNAP for at least six months, their likelihood of food insecurity decreased by 10.6%.¹¹
- A national study found that among food-insecure youth (one-third were Mexican American), SNAP participation did not affect a child's likelihood of being overweight or obese.¹²
- SNAP enables families to purchase more nutritious foods. Fruits and vegetables, grain products, meats, and dairy products comprise almost 90% of the food purchased by SNAP participants.¹³

SNAP assistance provides millions of Latino children with a greater chance of living in food-secure homes and consuming nutrients that are important for healthy growth. Improved outreach efforts could result in more eligible Hispanic families participating.

Endnotes

- 1 USDA, "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Costs (Data as of March 6, 2015)," www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/SNAPsummary.pdf (accessed March 2015).
- 2 Dorothy Rosenbaum, "SNAP Is Effective and Efficient," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 11, 2013, www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=3239 (accessed May 2015).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Kelsey Farson Gray, *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2013*. USDA. Alexandria, VA, 2014.
- 5 While there are restrictions on immigrants' participation in SNAP, including an exclusion of all unauthorized immigrants, ineligible parents can apply on behalf of eligible children, including U.S.-citizen and noncitizen children who are not subject to the same waiting periods as many legal immigrant adults.
- 6 David A. Murphey, Lina Guzman, and Alicia Torres, "America's Hispanic Children: Gaining Ground, Looking Forward" (Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, 2014), www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/2014-38AmericaHispanicChildren.pdf (accessed May 2015).
- 7 Kelsey Farson Gray, *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2013*. USDA. Alexandria, VA, 2014, Table A.23.
- 8 Esa Eslami, *Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Year 2010 to Fiscal Year 2012*. USDA. Alexandria, VA, 2014, www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/ops/Trends2010-2012.pdf (accessed May 2015).
- 9 Sheila R. Zedlewski and Michael Martinez-Schiferl, *Low-Income Hispanic Children Need Both Private and Public Food Assistance*, Feeding Low-Income Children 2 (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2010).
- 10 Caroline Ratcliffe, Signe-Mary McKernan, and Sisi Zhang, "How Much Does the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Reduce Food Insecurity?" *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 93, no. 4 (2011): 1082–1098.
- 11 James Mabl et al., *Measuring the Effect of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Participation on Food Security*. USDA. Alexandria, VA, 2013.
- 12 M. J. Kohn et al., "Food Insecurity, Food Assistance and Weight Status in US Youth: New Evidence from NHANES 2007–08," *Pediatric Obesity* 9 (2013): 155–166.
- 13 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Policy Basics: Introduction to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)," www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-introduction-to-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap (accessed May 2015).