MATHEMATICA Policy Research

IssueBRIEF

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Characteristics of Elderly Individuals Participating in and Eligible for SNAP

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps low-income individuals purchase food so that they can obtain a nutritious diet. Historically, elderly adults (age 60 or older) have participated in SNAP at lower rates than the general population. Tracking the characteristics of elderly individuals participating in or eligible for SNAP and evaluating trends in elderly SNAP eligibility and participation rates across states helps better inform discussions about the design and effectiveness of SNAP policy related to elderly individuals. The research described in this brief highlights findings from a recent report on state trends in SNAP eligibility and participation among elderly individuals.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ELDERLY SNAP PARTICIPANTS

The number and characteristics of elderly SNAP participants in a state are determined by the number of eligible individuals in that state and whether those individuals decide to participate in the program. Several factors can affect participation decisions, such as the application process, household perceptions of need, participation in other programs that interact with SNAP, and calculated SNAP benefit amounts.

In an average month in fiscal year (FY) 2014, 10 percent of SNAP participants were elderly individuals, and 19 percent of participating SNAP households included at least one elderly member. The percentage of participating elderly individuals varied by state in FY 2014, from a high of 20 percent participating in New York to lows of 6 percent in Utah and 5 percent in California.

From FY 2008 to FY 2014, the average monthly number of elderly SNAP participants increased by 85 percent, from 2.5 million in FY 2008 to 4.6 million in FY 2014. At the same time, the average monthly number of all SNAP participants increased by 66 percent, from 27.6 million in FY 2008 to 45.8 million in FY 2014. Because the increase in total participation from FY 2008 to FY 2014 was similar to the increase in elderly participation during the same period, the percentages of participants over age 60 in FY 2014 and FY 2008 were about the same (10.1 and 9.1 percent, respectively).

The changes in the number of elderly SNAP participants in each state closely followed the national changes, with all states experiencing increases in elderly SNAP participants from FY 2008 to FY 2014. During this seven-year period, the number of elderly SNAP participants increased by over 50 percent in 40 states, and by 100 percent or more in 21 states (Figure 1).

Seven-year average percentage of elderly SNAP participants, FY 2008 to FY 2014

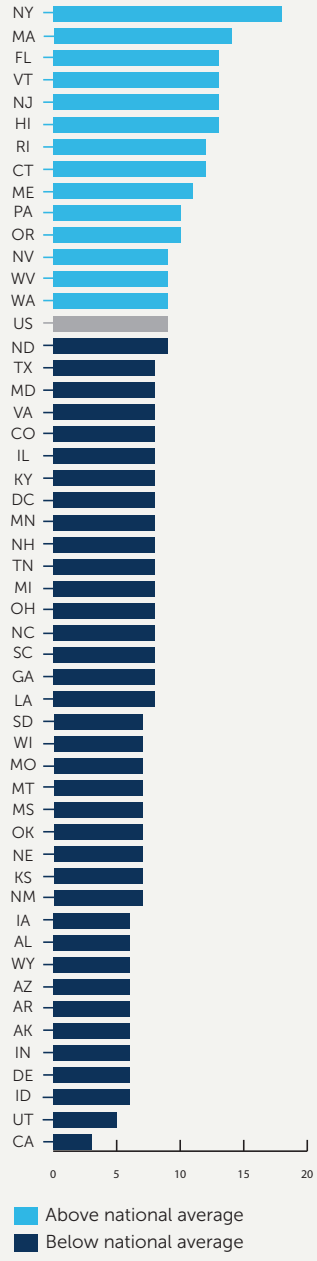

Figure 2

Total percentage increase in elderly SNAP participants by state from FY 2008 to FY 2014

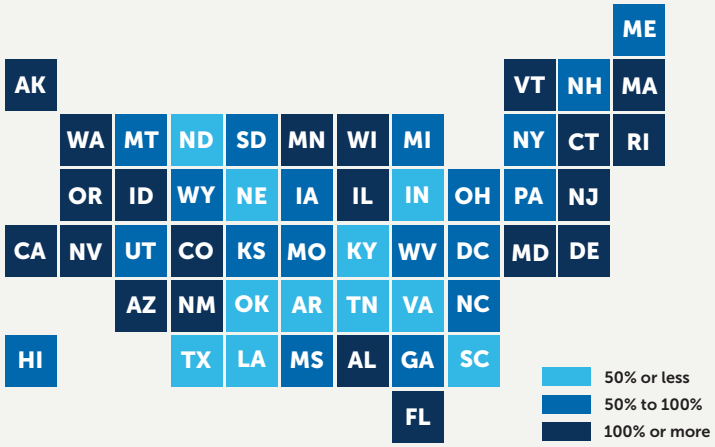

Figure 1

During the seven-year period from FY 2008 to FY 2014, 37 states had an average percentage of elderly SNAP participants that was below the national average, and in 3 of those states (Idaho, Utah, and California) the average percentage of elderly SNAP participants was less than 6 percent (Figure 2). California's average for the seven years (about 3 percent) was the lowest and likely was attributable to a state policy under which Supplemental Security Income recipients are not eligible for SNAP. Of the 14 states that had seven-year average percentages of elderly SNAP participants above the national seven-year average, 9 had average percentages between 10 and 15 percent, and New York's average of 18 percent was more than twice the national average.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SNAP-ELIGIBLE ELDERLY INDIVIDUALS

Like elderly SNAP participants, the number and characteristics of SNAP-eligible elderly individuals in a state can be influenced by several factors, such as state and federal eligibility policies, household economic circumstances, and state demographics. Differences in state policies and population demographics may lead to differences in SNAP eligibility rates and in the characteristics of the SNAP-eligible population across states. Similarly, changes in policies, economic circumstances, or demographics can lead to changes in the number and characteristics of the SNAP-eligible population within a state over time. Differences across states, such as in poverty rates or in shelter or medical costs, may lead to differences in the size and composition of the states' SNAP-eligible populations. Changes in poverty rates will affect the number of SNAP applicants who pass the gross income test. Likewise, shelter and medical costs can affect SNAP eligibility, since SNAP applicants are more likely to pass the net income test when these costs rise

Nationally, an estimated 72 million individuals were eligible for SNAP in FY 2011. About 14 million, or 19 percent, of all SNAP-eligible individuals were age 60 or older. Elderly individuals made up at least 20 percent of SNAP-eligible individuals in 25 states. Alabama, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina had the highest percentages of elderly SNAP-eligible individuals (27, 26, and 26 percent, respectively). In all states, at least 10 percent of the SNAP-eligible population were elderly individuals.

STATE ELDERLY SNAP PARTICIPATION RATES

Estimated SNAP participation rates are the ratio of estimated numbers of participants to estimated numbers of eligible individuals. In FY 2012, the overall SNAP participation rate—the percentage of eligible individuals participating in the program—was 83 percent. Although an average of 3.7 million elderly adults received SNAP benefits each month in FY 2012, the elderly population participated in SNAP at a lower rate than did all eligible people. In FY 2012, the SNAP participation rate among elderly individuals was only 42 percent, versus 92 percent for nonelderly individuals.

Change in estimated elderly SNAP participation rates by state from FY 2010 to FY 2012 (percentage points)

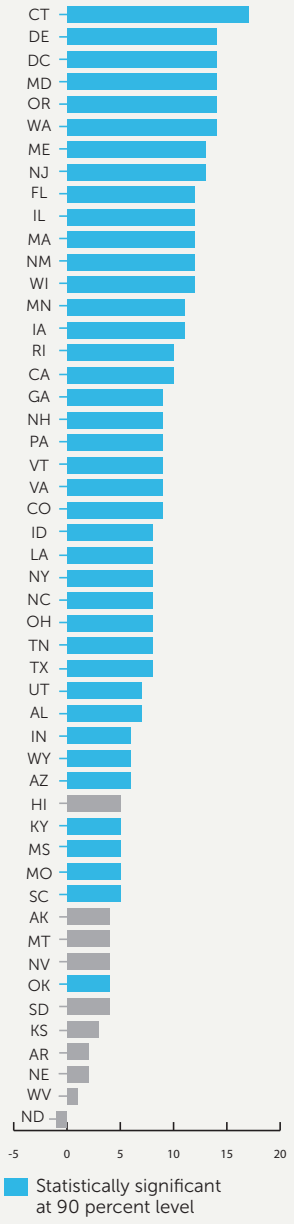

Figure 3

Nationally, the estimated SNAP participation rate among elderly individuals increased steadily, from 33 percent in FY 2010 to 42 percent in FY 2012. Like the national elderly participation rate, almost all state elderly participation rates increased between FY 2010 and FY 2012 (Figure 3). North Dakota was the only state in which the elderly participation rate decreased during this time—by one percentage point—although that change was not statistically significant. Elderly participation increased in all other states, and 41 of these increases were statistically significant. In 17 states, elderly participation increased by 10 percentage points or more, all of which were statistically significant. Connecticut had the largest increase (17 percentage points), and five other states (Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, Oregon, and Washington) had increases of about 14 percentage points.

METHODOLOGY

To produce national- and state-level tabulations of elderly SNAP participants, the study team used the SNAP Quality Control (SNAP QC) databases, which contain detailed demographic, economic, and SNAP eligibility information for an annual sample of 48,000 or more SNAP households. For more information about the SNAP QC databases, see Vigil et al. (2015). SNAP QC data files can also be found online at https://host76.mathematica-mpr.com/fns/.

To produce tabulations of elderly individuals eligible for SNAP, the study team used a SNAP microsimulation model—the 2011 MATH SIPP+ model. This model was also used to estimate SNAP eligibility rates. For a detailed description of the 2011 MATH SIPP+ model, see Leftin et al. (2014).

To estimate SNAP participation rates, the study team used (1) SNAP QC data files to estimate the number of elderly SNAP participants in an average month and (2) Current Population Survey-based SNAP eligibility files to estimate the number of elderly individuals eligible for SNAP in an average month. For more information on the participation rate methodology, see Eslami (2014).

To estimate state SNAP participation rates for elderly individuals, the study team employed the data and methodology used to estimate state participation rates for all eligible individuals and the eligible working poor, as described in "Reaching Those in Need: Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2012" (Cunnyngham 2015). For more information, see Cunnyngham et al. (2015).

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