

Chapter 2

Office Policies and Practices That May Affect the Decision to Apply for Food Stamps

This chapter examines the policies and practices of local food stamp offices that may discourage individuals from applying for food stamps and, thus, may have contributed to declines in the national food stamp participation rate during the 1990s. Three types of external factors may affect whether or not individuals apply for food stamps:

- Availability of Food Stamp Program (FSP) information for potential applicants, both in their communities and at local food stamp offices;
- Accessibility of food stamp offices; and
- Availability of practices that can help or accommodate individuals who have difficulty navigating the application process.

The findings in this chapter are organized according to these three topics. Staff recommendations for increasing the number of eligible FSP participants follow a descriptive analysis of office policies and practices. A summary at the end of the chapter highlights key policies and practices that may encourage individuals to apply for food stamps.

Availability of FSP Information

The local office survey collected detailed information about the availability and types of FSP outreach, and the availability of food stamp application forms. The survey was designed to answer four broad research questions:

- Do offices have food stamp outreach or public information campaigns in their communities, and what are the characteristics of those programs?
- Do front offices provide people with general and targeted materials, informing them about the FSP and its eligibility rules?
- What kind of information is provided to immigrants who are seeking food stamp services and to their caseworkers?
- How easy is it for potential applicants to obtain food stamp application forms—are forms readily available in the reception areas, and are they distributed at other community sites?

Food Stamp Outreach/Public Information

Providing FSP outreach and accurate information about the FSP and its eligibility rules should have a positive impact on program participation. Several national surveys, conducted during the 1980s and 1990s, found that a large number of FSP-eligible nonparticipants did not apply because they thought they were ineligible (Coe, 1983; Hollenbeck and Ohls, 1984; GAO, 1988; Ponza et al., 1999). For instance, the 1996 National Food Stamp Survey (NFSS) found that three-quarters of all eligible, but nonparticipating, families cited lack of awareness of FSP eligibility as the biggest reason for not

applying to the program (Ponza et al., 1999). The eligible nonparticipant survey, conducted as part of the current study, found that while confusion about eligibility prevented many people from applying for benefits, it has not increased in the four years since welfare reform (Bartlett and Burstein, 2003 forthcoming).

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture recognizes the importance of outreach efforts and makes funding available to States in three ways: by matching administrative funds, providing Federal Quality Control Reinvestment dollars, and offering special demonstration grants for food stamp outreach.

Outreach campaigns were fairly widespread (figure 2.1). Supervisors in food stamp offices serving 76 percent of the national food stamp caseload reported some type of ongoing outreach or public education campaign in their communities.¹ In most cases, local food stamp agencies were directly involved in outreach activities. However, community agencies also played an important role. They provided outreach for offices serving 57 percent of the national caseload, either in collaboration with food stamp agencies (38 percent of the national caseload) or as the sole providers (19 percent of the national caseload) (appendix table A2.1a). This finding is consistent with recent research indicating that the involvement of private non-profit community groups in food stamp outreach is key to increasing program participation (LTG, 1999).

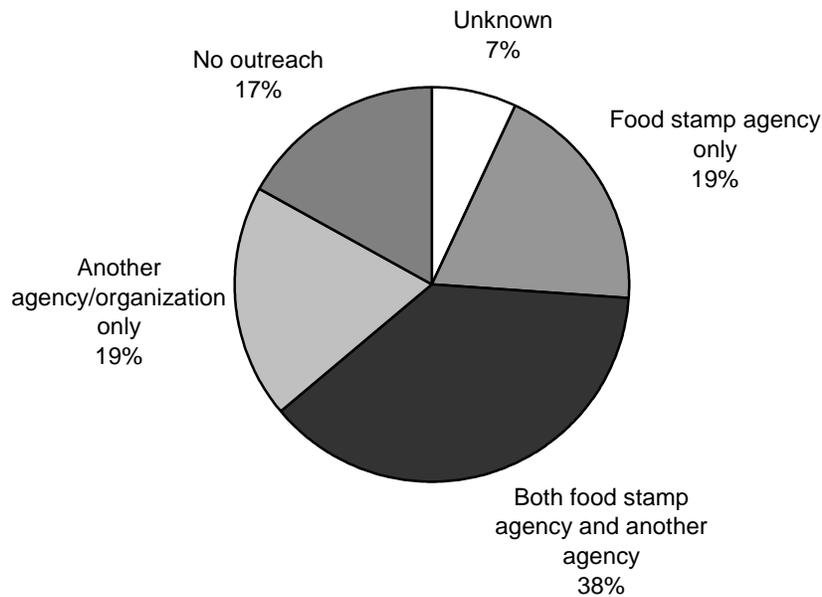
Substantial variation existed in the populations targeted by FSP outreach activities (appendix table A2.1c). In a weighted 37 percent of the offices, no specific groups were targeted. Of the target groups cited, those most frequently mentioned were either known to have low food stamp participation rates or were most affected by welfare reform. The three groups most often cited as targets of local food stamp outreach were the elderly (37 percent of offices, weighted), the disabled (24 percent of offices, weighted), and immigrants and refugees (27 percent of offices, weighted).

The homeless, working families, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) leavers were also targeted for specific outreach efforts (by offices serving between 13 and 18 percent of the national food stamp caseload). TANF leavers comprise a population group that may particularly benefit from food stamp outreach in the aftermath of welfare reform. The National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) panel data from 1995 to 1997 indicated that former welfare families were leaving the FSP at higher rates than their non-welfare counterparts, even when they remained eligible (Zedlewski and Brauner, 1999). Several State welfare studies also found that TANF leavers either had misinformation about their food stamp eligibility, or misunderstood the differences between TANF and food stamp eligibility (see Quint and Widom, 2001; Gordon et al., 2000; Rangarajan and Wood, 1999; South Carolina Department of Social Services, 1998).

Local offices used a variety of methods to inform the public about the FSP (figure 2.2). The two most common methods reported were presentations at community sites, and written materials, in the form of flyers, posters, and brochures. Other less common, but still frequently cited, methods were toll-

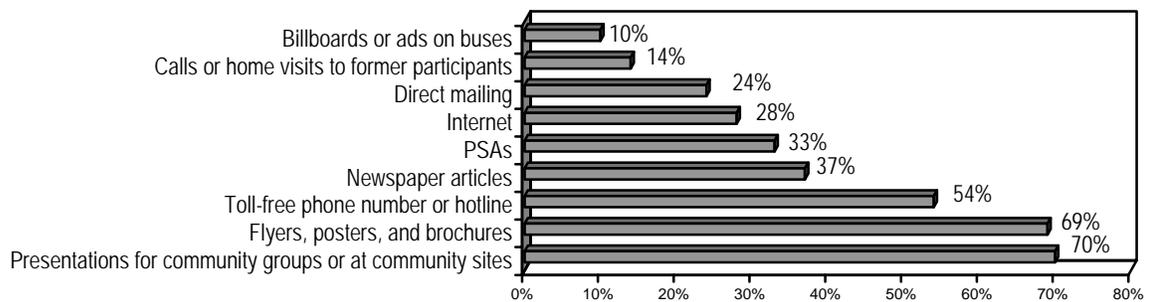
¹ See Chapter 1, page 6-8 for a discussion of weighting procedures used to develop the national estimates. In this report, the terms "percent of national caseload" and "percent of offices, weighted" are used interchangeably. These weighted numbers do not represent the percent of the caseload directly affected by a policy or practice, but rather, the percent of the caseload served by offices where a practice or policy is in effect.

Figure 2.1—Agencies conducting local food stamp outreach (percent of the national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix table A2.1a.

Figure 2.2—Methods used for local food stamp outreach (percent of the national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix table A2.1d.

free numbers or hotlines, articles in newspapers, public service announcements on radio or television, the Internet, direct mailing, home visits or calls, and advertisements on billboards or buses.

Individually targeted outreach was reported more often than one might expect, given the labor intensity of such methods. Direct mail was reported as a food stamp outreach method in offices

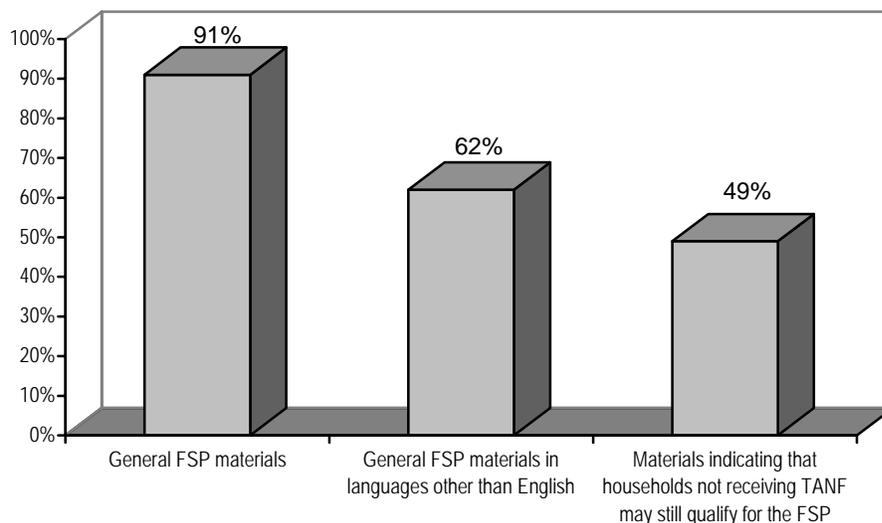
...serving 24 percent of the national caseload, whereas telephone calls or home visits to families who had left the FSP were used in offices serving 14 percent of the national caseload (appendix table A2.1d).

Recent Administration for Children and Families (ACF) reports on State and local efforts to improve food stamp, Medicaid, and State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) participation recommended that States and localities expand their food stamp outreach efforts by building upon the successful methods used for Medicaid and SCHIP outreach endeavors (Nolan, Hyzer, and Merrill, 2002; Mittler and Hyzer, 2002; Merrill and Darnell, 2002). In addition to the recent reports, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the FNS have for several years encouraged States to coordinate these efforts to reach out to potentially eligible families with young children. The local office survey findings showed that FSP outreach was coordinated with outreach for Medicaid and the SCHIP in offices serving the majority (59 percent) of the national caseload (appendix table A2.1b). This suggests that local agencies may be leveraging some of the Federal funding available to States for Medicaid and SCHIP outreach to bring families into the welfare office for multiple programs, including food stamps.

Availability of General Informational Materials at Local Offices

The survey and field observations examined the availability of FSP informational materials, either posted or available as handouts in the reception areas of local offices. The availability of these materials, including general program information and information targeted to participants who have left TANF, is summarized in figure 2.3.

Figure 2.3—Availability of food stamp informational materials (percent of the national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix table A2.2 (a, c, e).

Field observers found informational materials, such as posters, pamphlets, and educational videos, in the reception areas of local offices serving 91 percent of the national caseload. Observers also indicated that 62 percent of the offices (weighted) provided materials in other languages (appendix tables A2.2a and A2.2c).²

Studies on FSP participation after the enactment of welfare reform indicated a need to inform persons who left TANF about their potential eligibility for food stamps. While Federal welfare reform was designed to encourage individuals to find employment and leave the cash assistance rolls, many of these people maintained their food stamp eligibility, even after increasing their income from work. As noted above, numerous studies of TANF leavers reported that many did not participate in the FSP after TANF, even though they probably still qualified for food stamps. Hence, providing this population group with outreach and information materials on eligibility has grown increasingly important. However, field interviewers found that informational materials targeted to this group were only available in the reception areas of offices serving 49 percent of the national caseload (figure 2.3).

Information for Potential Applicants and Caseworkers about FSP Eligibility for Immigrants

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) made legal permanent residents ineligible for food stamps unless they were refugees, had a substantial work history, or had served in the U.S. armed services. Partial restorations, enacted in 1998, reinstated eligibility for people who were legally residing in the United States by August 1996 and were either children or disabled, or had turned 65 years old by August 1996.³ These changes may have caused confusion among immigrants and food stamp office staff regarding food stamp eligibility for legal immigrants. In addition, changes in Immigration and Naturalization Service rules led many immigrants to erroneously believe that food stamp receipt could negatively affect their permanent residency application. As a result of these factors, the number of noncitizens participating in the FSP dropped 67 percent between 1994 and 2000. This reflects both a decline in the number of noncitizens eligible for food stamps and a low participation rate among eligible noncitizens.⁴

All children born in the United States are eligible for government benefits because they are citizens, but a majority of native-born children of immigrants have parents who are not citizens. The Federally mandated FSP changes that occurred in the 1990s did not directly affect food stamp eligibility for citizen children living with noncitizen adults, but the children's participation in the program dropped 50 percent between 1994 and 2000 (Cunnyngham, 2002). This suggests that noncitizen parents may fail to apply for food stamp benefits for their children because they do not know their children are eligible.

² Among offices where non-English-speaking clients routinely go to the office, 80 percent of the caseload had access to translated information. Calculated from appendix table 2.12a, 77.5 percent of offices (weighted) routinely saw non-English speakers, and from appendix table 2.2c, 62.1 percent of offices (weighted) had translated materials. Therefore, 62.1 divided by 77.5 equals 80 percent of the offices (weighted).

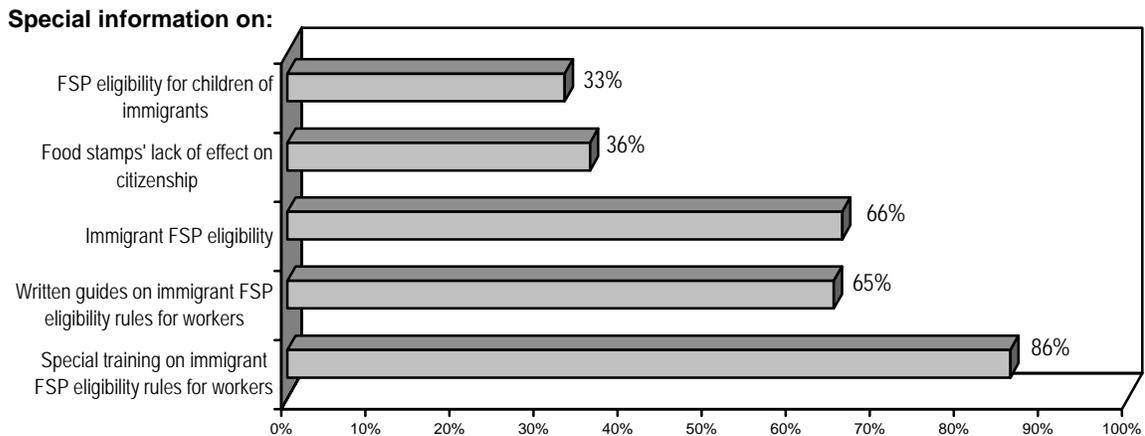
³ Further restorations were made in the 2002 Farm Bill, after the surveys were conducted. Eligibility was restored for all legal immigrants residing in the U.S. for at least five years, and for all legal immigrant children and disabled individuals.

⁴ In 2000, the participation rate among eligible noncitizens was 49 percent, compared with 66 percent in 1995 and 67 percent in 1994, before the changes in welfare reform occurred (Cunnyngham, 2002).

Several questions in the surveys of FSP supervisors and caseworkers, along with the field interviewer observations, assessed the availability of informational materials on food stamp eligibility rules for immigrants. Supervisors in 75 percent of offices (weighted) reported that they routinely saw immigrant families in their offices. The survey findings on office policies and practices that may affect FSP access for immigrants and their children, described below, are restricted to only those offices that routinely served immigrants.⁵

Among offices that routinely served immigrants, supervisors in 66 percent of the offices (weighted) reported that their staff distributed informational materials describing the special food stamp eligibility rules for immigrants (figure 2.4). Where materials were distributed, they were nearly always made available in both English and at least one other language. Field observations yielded similar results to the supervisors' reports on this office practice.

Figure 2.4—Information available to inform immigrants and workers about food stamp eligibility rules for immigrants (percent of the food stamp caseload in offices that report routinely seeing immigrants)



Calculated from data in appendix table A2.3 (a, b, d, f, g, j).

Written information clarifying that food stamp receipt cannot affect legal immigrants' ability to become U.S. citizens was not widely available in local offices. Only 36 percent of the offices (weighted) distributed such information to immigrants. Information on the eligibility rules for native-born children of immigrants was also not widely available. Field interviewers observed informational materials on the eligibility rules for these children in only 33 percent of the offices, weighted (figure 2.4).

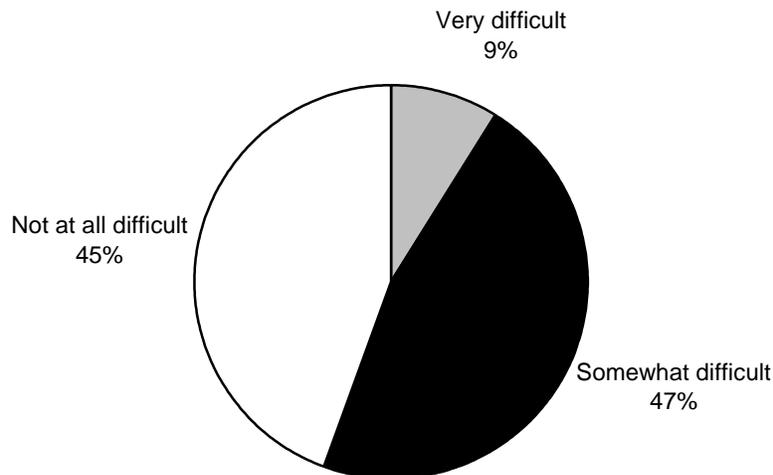
Due to the confusion and changes in the FSP eligibility rules for immigrants, FNS recommended training office staff on the food stamp eligibility rules for immigrants. The survey examined the local utilization of specific educational methods, including training and the use of simplified written guides to help workers determine which households, and which individuals in a household with legal

⁵ Appendix tables A2.3 and A2.4 analyze the data for the total national caseload served by all offices. Data for all the subset analysis presented in this section are calculated from data in these tables.

immigrants, were eligible for food stamps. Eighty-six percent of the offices that routinely saw immigrants (weighted) held special training sessions on immigrant and refugee eligibility. Sixty-five percent of these offices (weighted) provided simplified written eligibility guides (figure 2.4).

It has been widely assumed that caseworkers have difficulty implementing the complex food stamp eligibility rules for immigrants. The caseworkers surveyed were fairly evenly split in their opinions about the difficulty of implementing these rules (figure 2.5).⁶ Among the subset of offices that routinely served immigrants, less than 10 percent of the caseload was served by caseworkers who felt the rules were “very difficult” to apply, and 47 percent of the caseload was served by workers who indicated that the rules were “somewhat difficult” to implement. In contrast, 45 percent of the caseload was served by caseworkers who felt the rules were “not at all difficult” to apply.

Figure 2.5—Caseworkers’ perceptions of difficulty in implementing food stamp eligibility rules for immigrants (percent of the food stamp caseload in offices that report routinely seeing immigrants)



Calculated from data in appendix table A2.4 (a, b).

To assess whether immigrants were encouraged to apply for food stamps, even if their eligibility status was unknown, caseworkers who routinely saw immigrants were asked a series of questions about their usual practices in serving these clients. Among these offices, 83 percent of the caseload was served by caseworkers who encouraged all immigrants to complete the food stamp application form, even those who appeared ineligible because of when they entered the country. Similarly, 92

⁶ The analysis in the rest of this section is restricted to the sample of caseworkers who reported that they routinely served immigrants. Appendix table A2.4 presents the analysis relative to the total national food stamp caseload. Caseworkers who routinely saw immigrants were in offices serving 58 percent of the national food stamp caseload. This percentage is less than the percentage of supervisors who reported that their offices routinely served immigrants because not all caseworkers in any given office served immigrants.

percent of the caseload was served by caseworkers who routinely informed ineligible immigrants with children that they may be able to receive food stamps for their children. At the same time, it is noteworthy that caseworkers in offices serving 4 percent of this caseload reported that they usually told immigrants who appeared ineligible that they should not bother applying for food stamps.⁷

Availability of Food Stamp Application Forms

The first step in applying for food stamps is getting an application form, which can be obtained from the local office (in person or by telephone) or from another cooperating organization that distributes the forms. Cooperating organizations may act as a first line of outreach and program information, and may also speed up the application process by helping individuals fill out the form.

The survey asked supervisors about three local practices that may affect availability of application forms and, thus, the accessibility of the FSP:

- the availability of forms in the reception area, before applicants meet with caseworkers;
- the availability of forms by mail, upon request; and
- the distribution of forms to other community agencies.

The findings are summarized below.

Availability of Forms in the Reception Area, Before Meeting with Caseworkers

Federal regulations require that the food stamp application, or a joint application for individuals applying for other programs such as TANF or Medicaid, must be furnished immediately upon request. Supervisors were asked if food stamp application forms were provided to clients in the reception area or if an applicant had to meet with an eligibility worker before getting the form. A majority of the national caseload was served by offices where individuals could obtain an application form without first seeing a worker. However, 10 percent of offices (weighted) had a policy requiring applicants to meet with a caseworker before getting the form (appendix table A2.5a).⁸

The survey did not include a detailed interview to assess why some offices asked applicants to meet with a caseworker before filing a food stamp application form. However, the finding does suggest that accessibility of the application form may be a barrier for people who don't have time to meet with a caseworker on the day they visit the office, and would prefer to obtain and file the food stamp application in advance.

Qualitative research on local implementation of welfare reform indicates that the policy of up-front job search requirements for TANF applicants might be deterring or delaying the filing of food stamp application forms for non-expedited food stamp cases in some States (Gabor and Botsko, 2001; and Mittler and Hyzer, 2002). However, analysis of the national survey data found no positive correlation between the existence of a TANF up-front job search requirement and the practice of asking clients to wait to file their food stamp applications until they meet with a caseworker. Of the 10 percent of the

⁷ Statistics in this paragraph were calculated from appendix table 2.4 (a, d, and e).

⁸ Availability of application forms may be more of an issue in New York City. A New York City Council report found that applications were not always available on request (New York City Council, 2003).

national caseload in offices that required applicants to see a caseworker before receiving a food stamp application, only one-fifth was in offices that had a TANF applicant job search requirement.

Availability of Forms by Mail

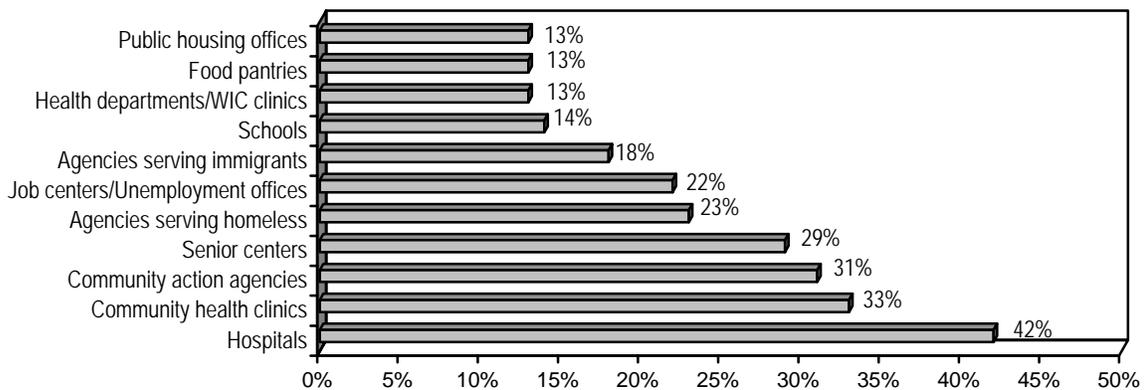
A majority (87 percent) of the national caseload used offices that made food stamp application forms available by mail to all who requested them. Just 4 percent of the national caseload used offices that never mailed out food stamp applications, while 8 percent of the national caseload was served by offices that had a policy of only mailing applications to people who staff determined were unable to go to the office (appendix table A2.5b).

Availability of Forms at Other Community Sites

The availability of food stamp application forms in the reception area of a local office may determine how quickly applicants file their applications. However, many potential applicants who have difficulty traveling to the food stamp office and/or need assistance in completing the form may prefer to obtain the form at alternative sites. Recent focus group research with food stamp-eligible seniors about their perceptions of the FSP and barriers to program participation found that seniors would rather obtain and fill out an application form at a community site, such as a senior center, food pantry, or senior housing, than at the welfare office (Gabor et al., 2002).

The survey found that local offices serving 68 percent of the national caseload made copies of the food stamp application form available at community sites (appendix table A2.5c). At least one-quarter of the offices made forms available at hospitals, community health clinics, community action agencies, and/or senior centers (figure 2.6). Other less common, but still frequently cited, distribution sites were agencies serving the homeless, job centers, unemployment offices and other employment service-related sites, agencies serving immigrants and refugees, schools, health departments and WIC clinics, food pantries, and public housing sites (appendix table A2.5d).

Figure 2.6—Types of community sites where applications are distributed (percent of the national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix table A2.5d.

Office Accessibility

The accessibility of the local food stamp office can affect an individual's decision to apply for benefits by filing a food stamp application. The local office survey examined office policies, and field interviewers observed the location and environment of the food stamp offices, to answer five broad research questions:

- Do local offices have extended or limited hours for filing food stamp applications and/or for scheduling certification interviews?
- How does distance to the office, public transportation, and the availability of transportation assistance vary among local offices?
- Are the local office buildings physically accessible?
- How crowded are the reception and front waiting areas at local offices?
- What kinds of information on applying for food stamps can a potential applicant receive over the telephone, without having to go into an office?

Extended Office Hours

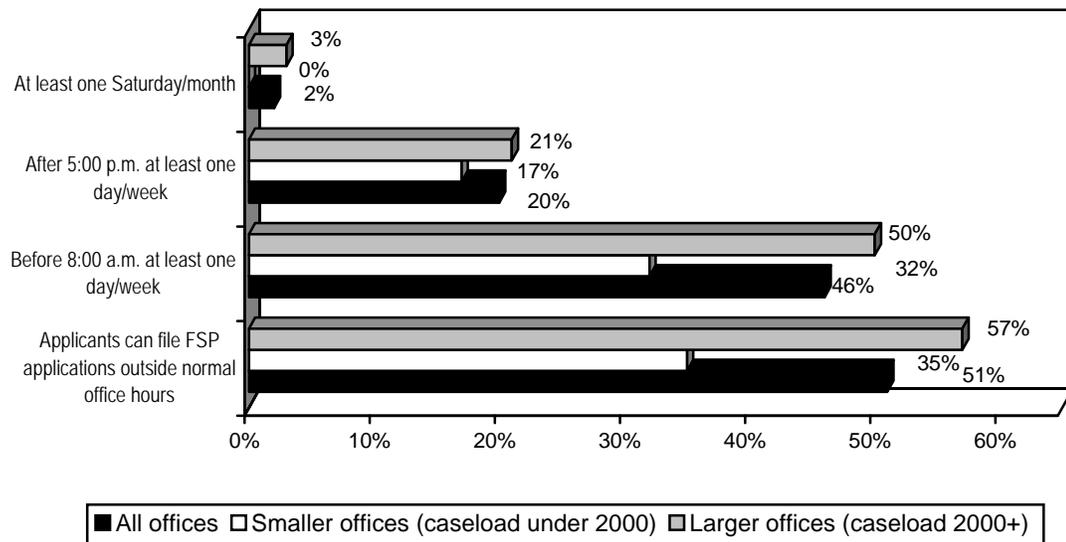
For working applicants, a potential barrier to participation in the FSP is the need to take time off from work to apply for benefits or attend an eligibility interview. With the increasing number of low-income families employed during the economic boom and the welfare reform era of the late 1990s, a larger proportion of those eligible and not participating in the FSP were working families. In fact, the food stamp participation rate of eligible households with earnings fell by 8 percentage points in the second half of the 1990s, from 51 percent in 1994 to 43 percent in 2000 (Cunnyngham, 2002).

Whether or not an office is open to accept food stamp applications or able to schedule eligibility interviews before or after regular working hours may greatly affect the ability of employed individuals to apply for benefits. The FNS guide for States on improving access to the FSP for working families recommends using extended hours as a way to improve access to the FSP (FNS, 2003(a)). Survey findings on the extent of extended and limited office hours are summarized below (appendix table A2.6).

Extended office hours for filing the application may allow an individual to begin the food stamp application process more quickly than mailing in the application form. Fifty-one percent of offices (weighted) accepted application forms outside normal working hours. Forty-six percent of offices accepted applications before 8 a.m., while 20 percent accepted applications after 5:00 p.m. Only 2 percent of offices accepted food stamp applications at least one Saturday per month (figure 2.7).⁹

⁹ These numbers—46 percent, 20 percent, and 2 percent—add up to more than 51 percent because some offices offered extended hours at several times—before 8 a.m., after 5 p.m., and/or at least one Saturday per month.

Figure 2.7—Extended office hours for accepting applications, by office size (percent of the national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix table A2.6b.

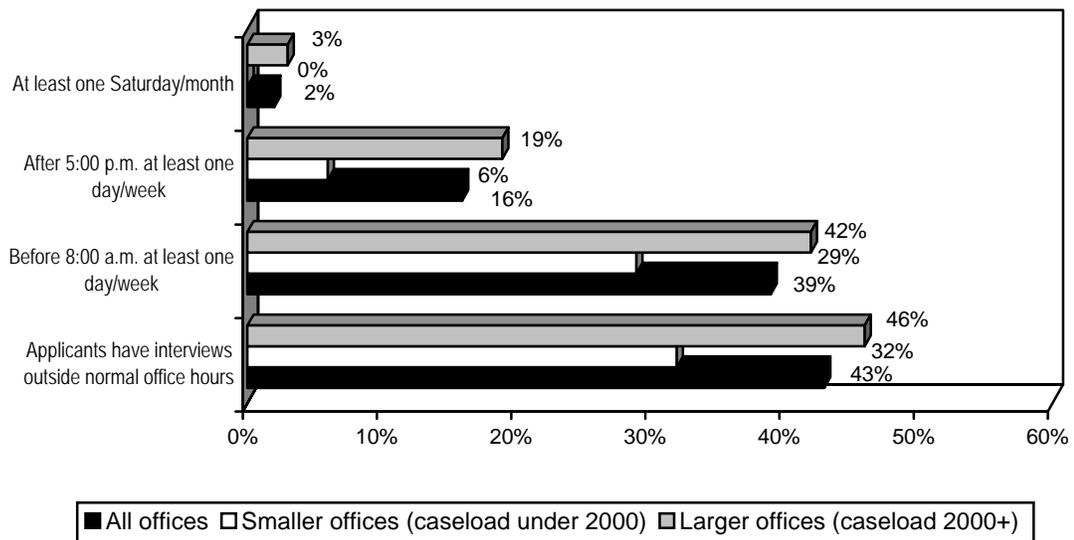
Anecdotal concerns have been expressed about offices routinely closing for lunch or before 5:00 p.m. According to survey results, few offices restricted office hours this way. Only 13 percent of the offices (weighted) stopped accepting new food stamp applications before 5:00 p.m. more than one day a week, and only 2 percent did not accept food stamp applications during a lunch period more than one day a week (appendix table A2.6b).

Somewhat fewer offices offered extended hours for conducting interviews than for accepting applications. Forty-three percent of the national caseload was served by offices with early, late, or Saturday hours for conducting food stamp certification interviews, compared with the 51 percent that accepted applications during these extended hours (figure 2.8). Caseworkers must be available before or after regular hours to conduct food stamp eligibility interviews, which may account for the lower prevalence.¹⁰

Restricting hours for conducting eligibility interviews was more common than for accepting applications. Specifically, 20 percent of the offices (weighted) stopped conducting eligibility interviews before 5:00 p.m. more than one day each week, and 5 percent of the offices (weighted) discontinued interviews during the lunch period more than one day a week (appendix table A2.6c).

¹⁰ Broken down by the type of extended hours, 39 percent of the offices (weighted) were open before 8:00 a.m. at least one day a week to conduct eligibility interviews, 16 percent conducted eligibility interviews after 5:00 p.m. at least one day a week, and 2 percent conducted interviews at least one Saturday each month.

Figure 2.8—Extended office hours for conducting eligibility interviews, by office size (percent of the national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix table A2.6c.

Having secure, after-hours drop boxes for dropping off food stamp application forms and other required documentation is another way to promote access for those who work. Offices serving 28 percent of the national caseload provided these drop boxes (appendix table A2.6e).

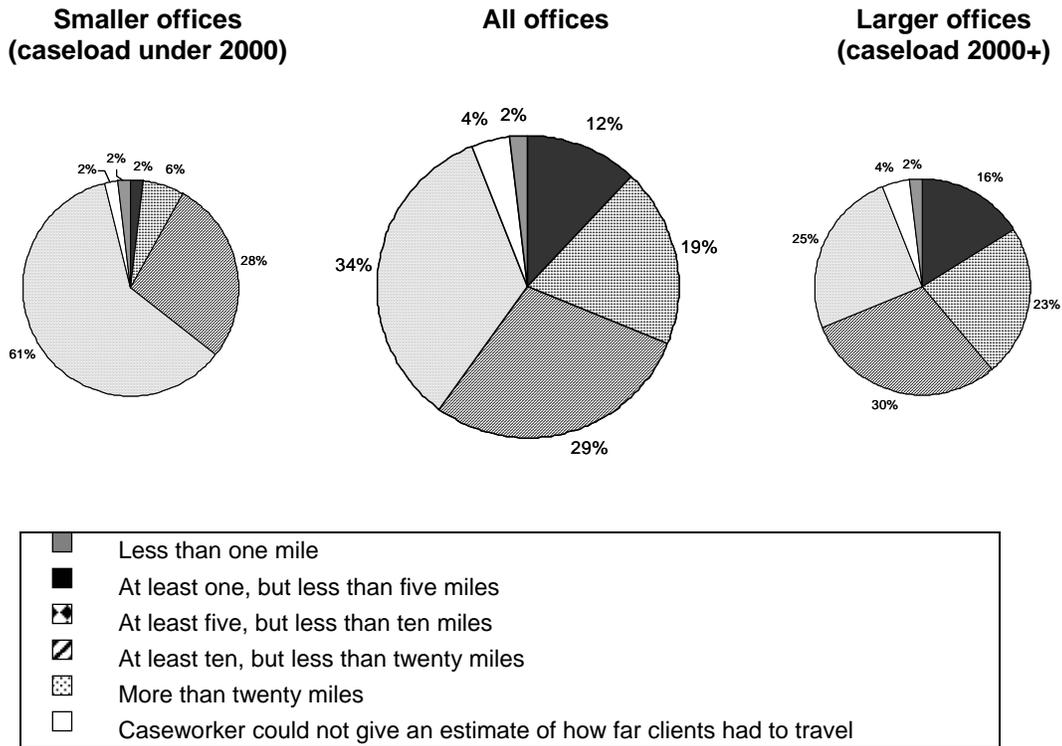
Transportation Issues

Though past national surveys indicated that eligible nonparticipants rarely cited transportation as a major barrier to FSP participation, transportation problems and the cost of getting to the food stamp office may pose serious challenges for some individuals (Bartlett et al., 1992; Ponza et al., 1999). Two recent focus group studies on barriers to FSP participation for seniors found that obtaining transportation to and from the food stamp office was a problem for seniors in both rural and urban areas. Seniors reported that when public transportation was available, it either did not come near their homes or did not stop near the food stamp office (Gabor et al., 2002; McConnell and Ponza, 1999).

The distance clients must travel from their homes to the office affects the costs of applying for food stamps, both in terms of transportation time and money. Thirty-four percent of the offices (weighted) had some clients who traveled more than 20 miles to reach the food stamp office (figure 2.9).

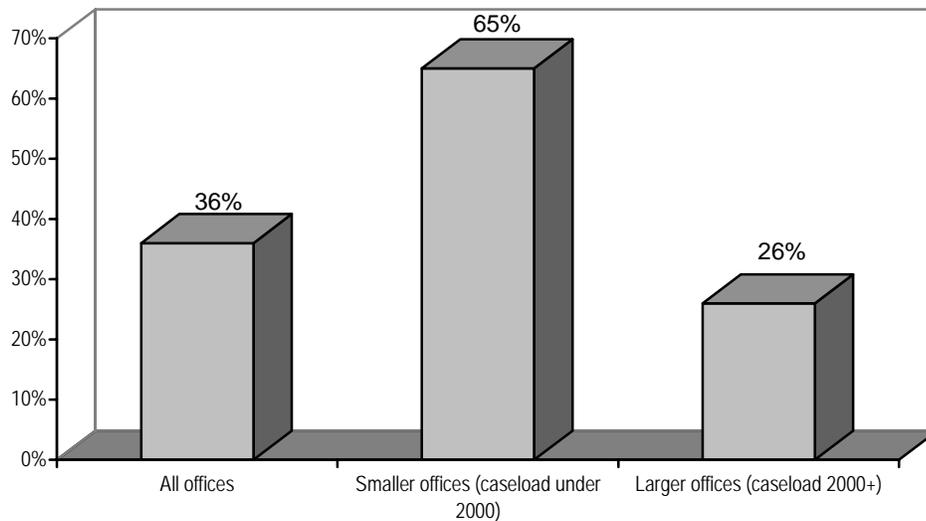
Caseworkers in offices serving 36 percent of the national caseload reported that access to public transportation was limited (figure 2.10). For purposes of this analysis, an office was defined as having “limited access to public transportation” if the caseworker reported one of the following two characteristics of the local office: the public transit route did not come within one-half mile of the office, or less than one-half of the office clientele lived in areas served by transit routes that provided access to the food stamp office.

Figure 2.9—Caseworker report of furthest distance clients must travel from home to food stamp office, by office size (percent of the national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix table A2.7a.

Figure 2.10—Limited access to public transportation as reported by caseworkers,* by office size (percent of the national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix table A2.7 (b, c).

* Public transit route does not come within one-half mile of the office or less than one-half of the office clientele lives in areas served by public transit routes that reach the office.

Twenty-seven percent of the offices (weighted) offered transportation assistance to people who needed to apply or recertify for benefits. Some variation existed in the populations that offices targeted for transportation assistance. Where specific groups were cited, the most common were the disabled, elderly, and TANF households (a group for whom States have had more funding available for support services, including transportation), (appendix tables A2.7d and A2.7e).

Physical Accessibility

Field interviewers observed many different aspects of the physical accessibility of the local food stamp office sites. The four key aspects were: the availability of free parking; signage outside the building with the office name; the availability of handicapped parking; and whether or not the building was wheelchair accessible. Approximately 90 percent of the offices (weighted) were accessible based on each of these aspects (appendix table A2.8). A special analysis was conducted to assess the frequency of these characteristics in combination. The results showed that 80 percent of offices (weighted) had all of these positive characteristics.

Office Crowding

Office crowding and/or the length of time clients have to stand and wait to be served may play an important role in discouraging people to file an application. A study conducted in the late 1980s surveyed individuals in five local offices who inquired about food stamps, but did not subsequently file an application. Twenty-one percent of this group said that one of the reasons they did not file the application was that the wait to speak to someone at the office was too long (Bartlett et al., 1992).

Field observers examined the incidence of lines at food stamp office reception areas at different times of day, on three separate occasions. There were no lines in the reception area of 37 percent of the offices (weighted), and always lines in 10 percent of the offices (weighted). Sufficient seating was available in 87 percent of the offices, weighted (appendix table A2.9).

Information Available to Potential Applicants by Telephone

Many clients first contact a food stamp office by telephone, to either request an application or inquire about applying. Consistent with the intent of Federal program regulations, nearly all food stamp offices nationwide provided applicants with general information about the application process, as well as information on what they need to bring when they go to apply (appendix table A2.10).

Barriers or Facilitators to FSP Access for Special Populations

This section focuses on the extent to which local office practices affected access to the food stamp application process for four special groups: people who had difficulty traveling to the food stamp office; non-English-speaking clients; applicants with young children; and people with visual impairments.

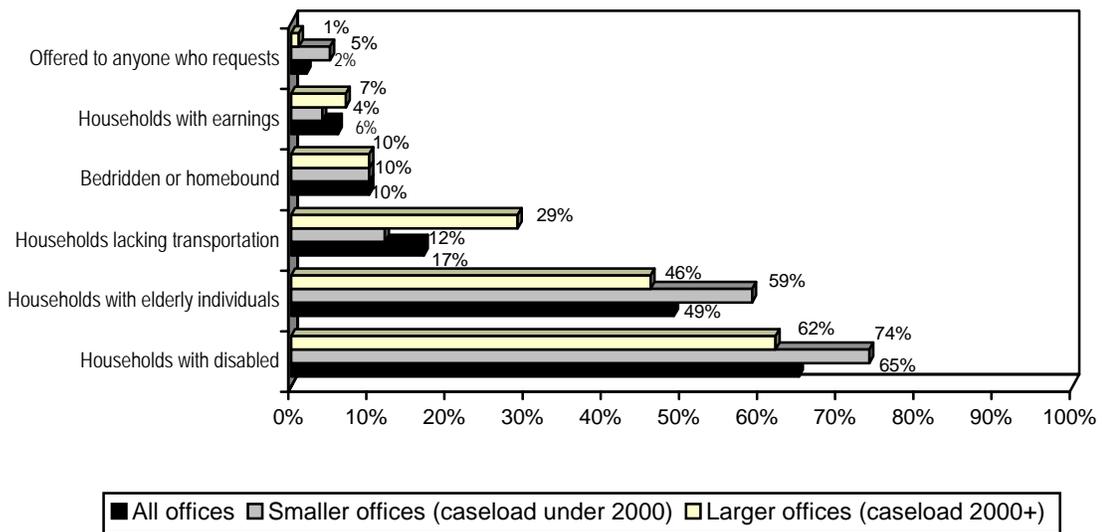
Waiving the Requirement for an In-Office Interview for People with Hardships

At the time of the survey, FSP regulations required local food stamp offices to provide a telephone or at-home interview to requesting individuals who were unable to go to the office for an interview. The

survey questioned whether or not caseworkers took proactive steps to offer certain applicants a telephone or at-home interview. Offering such options to people who have difficulty getting to the food stamp office, particularly the elderly and disabled, could help increase FSP participation.

Caseworkers in 75 percent of the offices (weighted) reported that they offered telephone or home interviews to people with hardships, even if they didn't request one. Some variation existed within the groups that were routinely offered telephone or at-home interviews. The disabled and elderly were most commonly offered these interviews by offices serving 65 percent and 49 percent of the national caseload, respectively (figure 2.11). An interesting finding is that caseworkers in 6 percent of the offices (weighted) routinely offered telephone or at-home food stamp eligibility interviews to employed individuals or those who had other work-related commitments, indicating an interest in accommodating those with limited availability to visit the food stamp office.

Figure 2.11—Population groups routinely offered telephone or in-home eligibility interviews, by office size (percent of the national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix table A2.11b.

Availability of Interpretation Services for Non-English-Speaking Clients

The number of non-English speakers in the United States has grown significantly in the past few decades. According to respondent self-reports in the 2000 census, 19.5 million adults and children (ages five and older) do not speak English at all or very well (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Without interpretation services in appropriate languages, these individuals would have difficulty participating in programs for which they are eligible.

The Food Stamp Act contains anti-discrimination provisions and requires States to use appropriate bilingual personnel in the administration of the program in localities where a substantial number of low-income families speak a language other than English (7 U.S.C. @2020c, (e)(1)(B)). The Federal FSP regulations further specify that each local food stamp office in an area with approximately 100

non-English-speaking low-income families or in areas with a seasonal influx of workers must provide access to bilingual services (7 CFR 272.4(b) (2001)).

Supervisors in 78 percent of the offices (weighted) said that non-English-speaking clients routinely visited their office seeking services (appendix table A2.12a). According to both supervisors and caseworkers, bilingual staff or interpreters were available during most office hours for a majority of the national caseload. A special analysis was conducted to determine whether or not bilingual caseworkers and interpreters were available in the subset of offices that routinely saw non-English speakers. Results of this analysis show that non-English-speaking clients seeking food stamp services had excellent access to bilingual staff or interpreters. Ninety-six percent of the caseload in offices that routinely saw non-English-speaking clients had either bilingual caseworkers on staff or interpreters available during more than one-half of the office hours.¹¹

Accommodations for Applicants with Young Children

Parents may have difficulty going to the food stamp office if they have to bring their children with them and wait for extended periods. Several questions in the supervisor survey were designed to assess the child-friendliness of offices for food stamp applicants, and field interviewers inspected reception areas and restrooms to see if they had facilities to accommodate parents with young children.

Figure 2.12 shows interviewers' findings on four practices: availability of childcare on-site; availability of play space in the reception area (either a dedicated area or floor space); availability of toys or books; and availability of a diaper changing area in restrooms. In 60 percent of the offices (weighted), play space for children was available. However, as measured by the other variables, fewer than half of the offices (weighted) had "child-friendly" practices.

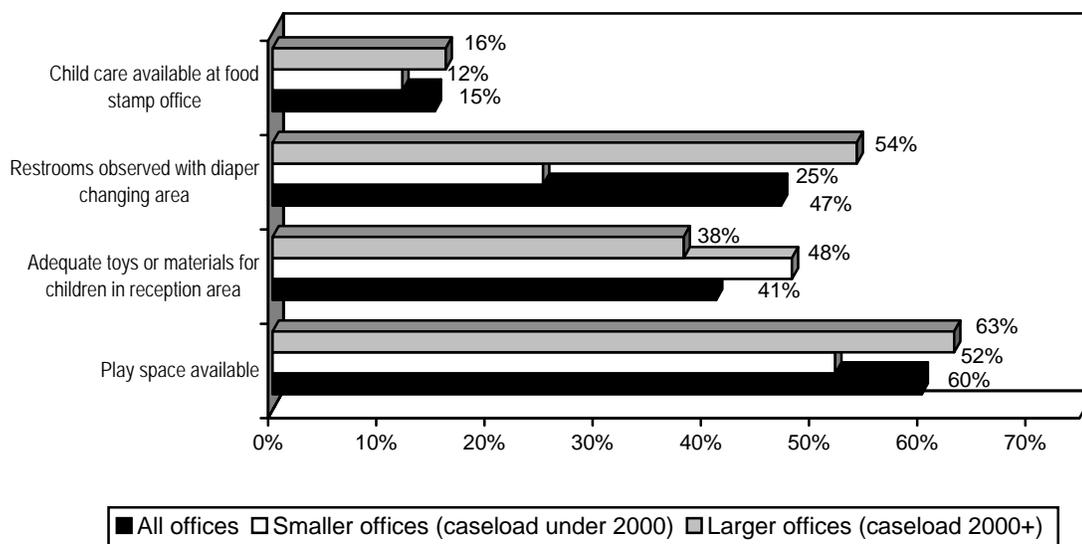
Supervisors were also asked whether or not they restricted applicants from bringing children into the office. The survey found that in 6 percent of the offices (weighted), the policy was to ask clients not to bring their children into the office (appendix table A2.13).

Availability of Large-Print Application Forms for Persons with Vision Impairments

For the elderly and others with sight impairments, the small type on a typical food stamp application form may hinder people from completing the form. Concerns about the type size of the application form and the difficulty reading the form were raised in focus groups held with seniors eligible for but not participating in the FSP (Gabor et al., 2002). When asked whether their office offered a large-print form to people with limited vision, supervisors in only 8 percent of the offices (weighted) reported having such forms available (appendix table A2.11c).

¹¹ Appendix table A2.12 presents the data on availability of interpretations services as a percent of the national food stamp caseload. The survey did not distinguish whether interpreters were available in person or by telephone.

Figure 2.12—Prevalence of child-friendly office practices, by office size (percent of the national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix table A2.13 (b, c, d, e).

Staff Recommendations for Program Changes

Office staff were asked if they had suggestions for changes in local office practices to help increase the number of eligible clients applying for the FSP. Respondents' suggestions substantially varied, but two specific recommendations were frequently made by supervisors: to expand or improve FSP outreach efforts (33 percent of offices, weighted) and to hire more staff (20 percent of the offices, weighted). Supervisors in 13 percent of the offices (weighted) recommended extending the office hours. Office staff in 3 to 5 percent of the offices (weighted) recommended improving the reception area environment, increasing the number of office sites or making the office locations more convenient for potential clients, stationing staff at other locations, and improving coordination with other agencies.¹²

Differences in Policies and Practices Based on Office Size

The survey showed a number of expected differences between larger and smaller offices—that smaller offices lacked waiting lines but took more time to reach, and that larger offices saw more immigrants and non-English-speaking clientele—but it also revealed notable variations in such areas as outreach, the availability of application forms, the process of obtaining forms, and office hours.¹³

¹² Local agencies have the authority to make most of the changes recommended by workers.

¹³ Smaller offices have caseloads between 150 and 2,000; larger offices have caseloads of 2,000 or more.

Outreach

The extent of outreach depended on the size of the food stamp office, with larger offices providing less outreach. Twenty-one percent of larger offices (weighted) did not offer food stamp outreach activities. By contrast, only 5 percent of smaller offices (weighted) lacked food stamp outreach activities (appendix table A2.1a).

Office size had little impact on the types of groups targeted for outreach activities, with two exceptions: populations served by larger offices were more likely than those served by smaller ones to have outreach activities for immigrants and refugees; and larger offices were more likely than smaller offices to target families with children (appendix table A2.1c). When it came to outreach methods, and specifically to individually targeted outreach, there was no difference between larger and smaller offices.

Availability of Application Forms

A majority of the offices made food stamp application forms available by mail, upon request, but no significant difference was found in the mail-out policy between larger and smaller food stamp offices. Larger offices, however, were more likely to make forms available at community sites than smaller offices. For example, 73 percent of the larger offices (weighted) and 53 percent of the smaller offices (weighted) distributed forms at sites other than the food stamp office (appendix table A2.5c). Additionally, the caseload served by larger offices was more likely than the caseload served by smaller ones to be able to apply for food stamps at the local hospital. Finally, no significant differences existed between larger and smaller offices in the availability of application forms in office reception areas.

Extended Hours for Receiving Applications

Office size appears to have a statistically significant effect on the existence of extended hours for filing food stamp applications. Among larger offices, 57 percent of the caseload was in offices that accepted food stamp applications during extended hours (early, late, and/or on Saturdays). Among smaller offices, 35 percent of the caseload was in offices with extended hours for accepting applications, with the difference largely driven by the fact that larger offices were more likely than smaller offices to accept food stamp applications before 8:00 a.m. (figure 2.7 and appendix table A2.6b).

Larger offices were also more likely to offer extended evening hours for interviews. Nineteen percent of larger offices (weighted) stayed open after 5:00 p.m. for interviews more than one day each week, compared with the 6 percent of the smaller offices (weighted). There were no significant differences by office size with regard to restricted hours for conducting eligibility interviews (figure 2.8 and appendix table A2.6c).

Transportation Issues

Not surprisingly, long distances to the office and limited public transportation were significantly more common phenomena and potential access barriers for populations served by smaller food stamp offices—which tended to be located in rural or less densely populated areas—than those served by larger offices. Among smaller offices, 61 percent of the caseload was in offices where some clients

had to travel more than 20 miles to reach the food stamp office, compared with 25 percent of the caseload in larger offices (appendix table A2.7a).

Analysis by office size shows that 65 percent of the caseload at smaller offices and 26 percent of the caseload served by larger offices lived in areas where access to public transportation was limited (figure 2.10). It is not surprising that limited access is more common in smaller offices, but the finding that one-quarter of larger offices (weighted) had limited access to public transportation was unexpected. At the same time, the provision of transportation assistance was very limited in both larger and smaller offices (appendix table A2.7d).

Lines in the Reception Area

As might be anticipated, the existence of lines in the reception area was significantly more common in larger offices than smaller ones. None of the smaller offices always had lines during all three observation periods, whereas 14 percent of the larger offices always had lines (appendix table A2.9a).

Immigrants

Supervisors in 75 percent of the offices (weighted) reported that they routinely saw immigrant families in their offices, but those in larger offices (81 percent, weighted) were more likely to serve immigrants than those in smaller offices (56 percent, weighted). However, 30 percent of larger offices (weighted) *did not* distribute written informational materials on immigrant-related FSP eligibility rules, which could affect program access for this group (appendix table A2.3b).

Similarly, 65 percent of all offices (weighted) provided staff training on the complex eligibility rules for immigrants, yet 13 percent of larger offices (weighted) *did not* provide such training. This practice is significantly more likely to be routine in smaller offices than in larger offices, consistent with the hypothesis that caseworkers in smaller offices know their client base and have more time to work with each applicant (appendix table A2.3f).

Non-English-speaking Clientele

Although 78 percent of all offices (weighted) routinely served non-English-speaking clientele, a significantly greater share of larger offices (86 percent, weighted) saw non-English speakers than smaller offices (53 percent, weighted), (appendix table A2.12a).

While it was expected that larger offices would provide more access to interpretation services, the analysis indicates no significant differences on this access measure by office size.¹⁴ It is important to note, however, that the survey was not designed to provide information about the availability of interpretation services for all, or only some, of the major non-English-speaking languages spoken in the local offices' service areas, or about the availability of interpreters in person versus only by telephone.

¹⁴ When the analysis is restricted to offices that routinely served non-English speakers, 95 percent of small offices (weighted) and 97 percent of large offices (weighted) either had bilingual caseworkers on staff or interpreters available during more than one-half of office hours.

Summary

This chapter examined a range of local food stamp office policies and practices that, potentially, may encourage or discourage households from applying for food stamp benefits. This section summarizes the findings by presenting selected key variables or combinations of variables that appear likely to increase access to the FSP by encouraging individuals to file applications, thereby beginning the process of applying for benefits. Policies and practices that would likely have a positive effect on accessibility include providing adequate information to potential applicants, making the food stamp office accessible to all groups, and providing additional assistance to certain groups, such as the elderly and disabled. Which policies and practices are widespread among local offices and which are relatively rare are examined.

Availability of Food Stamp Program Information

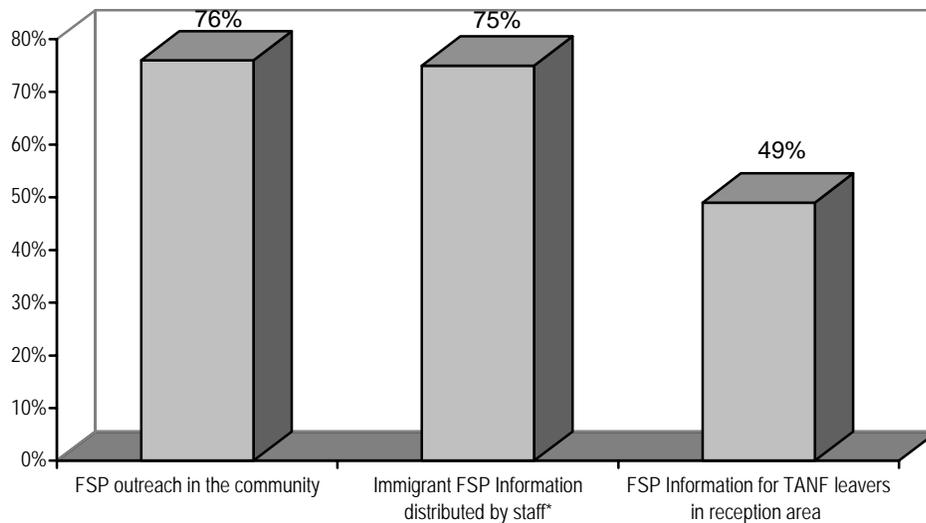
Outreach campaigns and the provision of information about the FSP may encourage households to apply for benefits by making them aware of the program and its eligibility criteria. The provision of outreach and information, particularly to segments of the population with low FSP participation rates and those affected by welfare reform occurred in some, though far from all, local food stamp offices. Outreach efforts to educate the public about the FSP occurred in three-quarters of the offices, weighted (figure 2.13). Most often, outreach provided general information and was not targeted to specific groups. Between one-quarter and one-third of offices (weighted) directed specific outreach campaigns to the elderly and disabled, groups with historically low participation rates. Less than one-quarter of offices (weighted) targeted outreach efforts to groups directly affected by welfare reform—immigrants, TANF recipients, and ABAWDs.

While general information about the Food Stamp Program was available in virtually all offices, information to help immigrants and TANF recipients understand program eligibility rules was less widely available. In three-quarters (weighted) of food stamp offices, information concerning the special eligibility rules for immigrants and their children was either available or not needed as the office did not serve an immigrant population. Less than half of all offices (weighted) provided households that left TANF with information to help them understand that they might still be eligible for food stamp benefits. Providing special information to groups who may be confused about their FSP eligibility could help improve program access.

Food stamp application forms were nearly always easily accessible to those who were interested in obtaining them. In almost 90 percent of the offices (weighted), applications forms were available by mail (figure 2.14). In addition, in 90 percent of the offices (weighted) application forms were readily available in the reception area of the food stamp office. Only 10 percent of the caseload was served by offices that required applicants to see a caseworker before obtaining an application form. While affecting a relatively small portion of the overall caseload, this practice could present a serious barrier to individuals, such as the employed, who have limited time.

In two-thirds of the offices, food stamp application forms were available at other community sites or offices. Accessibility might be improved if more food stamp offices offered households the option of obtaining application forms in a variety of locations throughout the community.

Figure 2.13—Availability outreach/program information (percent of national food stamp caseload)



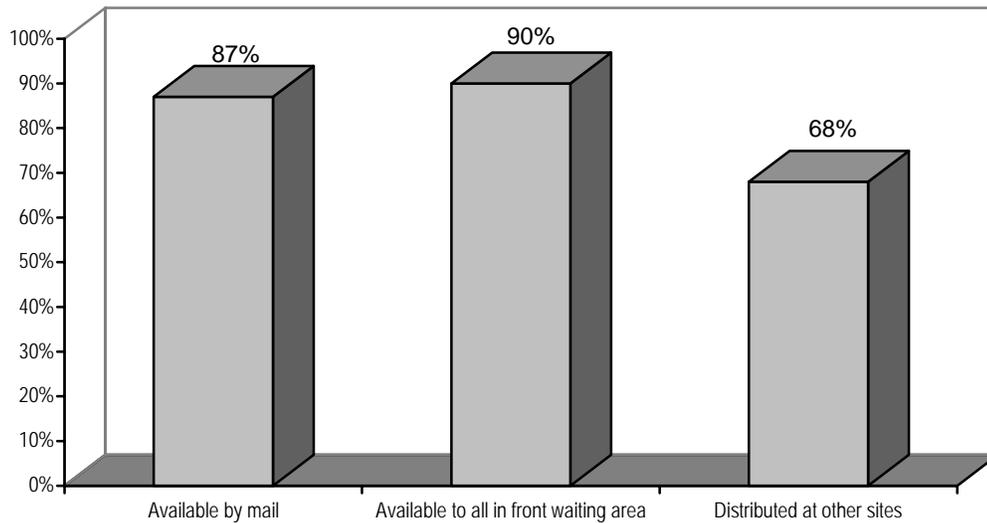
Data from appendix tables A2.1a, A2.3(a, b), A2.2e.

* Includes offices that do not routinely see immigrants.

Accessibility of Local Food Stamp Office

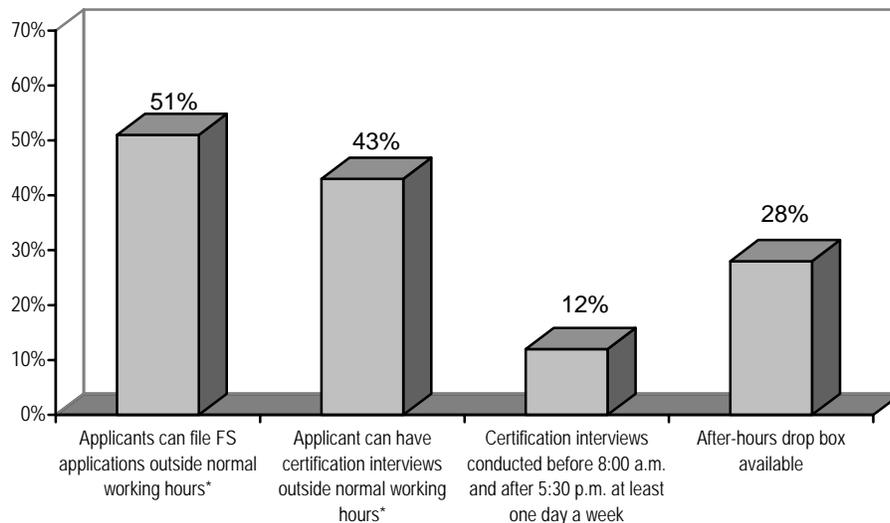
One way a local office can enhance program access, particularly for working families, is by extending the hours the office is open. In about half of all offices (weighted), applicants had some ability to file their applications and have certification interviews outside normal business hours (figure 2.15). Offices were counted as offering extended hours if they were open either before 8am, after 5pm, or on Saturday, at least one day per week. Most offices, however, offered very limited extended hours—only 12 percent of offices (weighted) conducted certification interviews before 8am *and* after 5:30pm at least one day a week. A minority of offices (28 percent, weighted) provided drop boxes for applicants to leave applications and other documents when the office was closed.

Figure 2.14—Availability of FSP application forms (percent of national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix table A2.5(a, b, c).

Figure 2.15—Extended office hours (percent of national food stamp caseload)

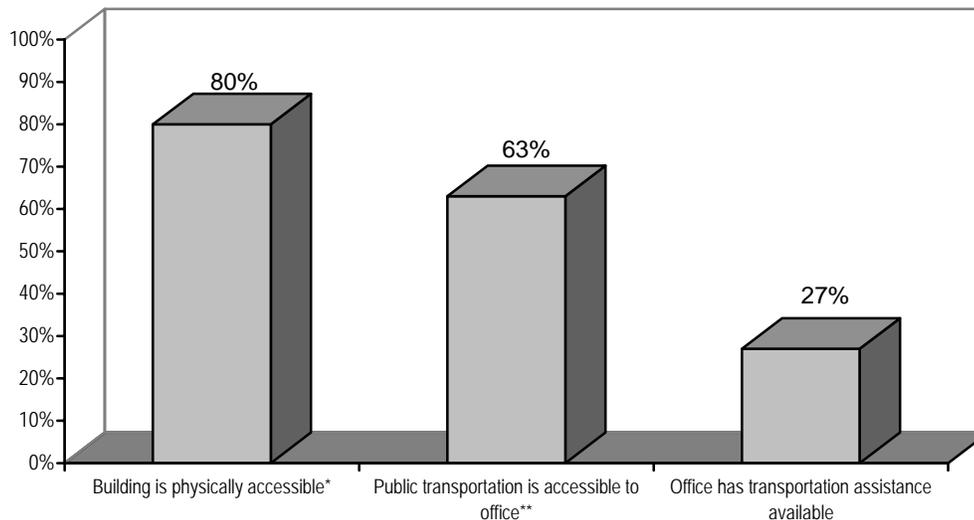


Data from appendix table A2.6(d, e), special tabulations based on variables in appendix table A2.6(b, c).

* Open either before 8 a.m., after 5 p.m., or on Saturday, at least one day per week.

Most food stamp office buildings (80 percent, weighted) were physically accessible, where accessibility included the availability of handicapped parking, wheelchair accessibility, and a clear display of the office name on the outside of the building (figure 2.16). While not all local offices met all three accessibility criteria, 90 percent of offices (weighted) were physically accessible on any given measure.

Figure 2.16—Accessibility of FSP office (percent of national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix table A2.7(b, c, d), figure 2.10.

* Office name clearly displayed outside the building, handicapped parking available, and wheelchair accessible.

** Public transit routes both come within one-half mile of the office and reach areas where the majority of the office clientele reside.

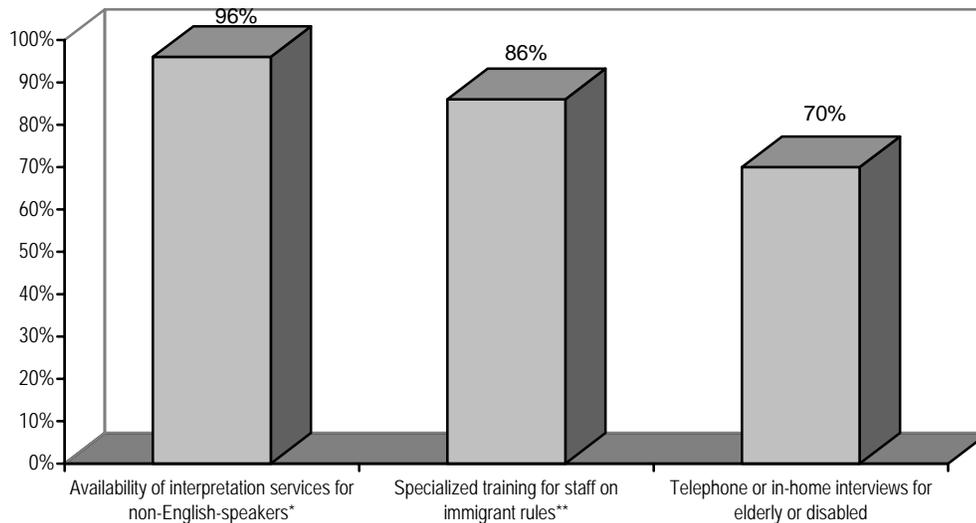
The availability of public transportation can increase the accessibility of the food stamp office. Approximately 60 percent of the caseload was served by offices that were accessible by public transportation. As expected, smaller offices, which are more likely to be located in rural areas, were less likely to be accessible by public transportation than larger offices. One way offices can help overcome the transportation barrier is to provide transportation assistance, either in the form of vouchers or rides directly to the office. Only about a quarter of offices (27 percent, weighted) provided such assistance, however.

Another way to reduce the burden of traveling to the food stamp office is to allow households to complete the certification interview by telephone or at-home. Seventy percent of offices (weighted) provided these alternatives to the elderly and disabled. Offering telephone interviews to other households that have difficulty traveling to the office could be one way to increase program accessibility.

Accommodations for Special Populations

Among food stamp offices that routinely provided services to non-English speakers, 96 percent of offices (weighted) had bilingual caseworkers on staff or had interpreters available during at least half the hours the office was open (figure 2.17). This suggests that non-English speakers could be accommodated, though they might be restricted to the hours that interpreters were available. Information was unavailable about the quality or effectiveness of the interpretation services.

Figure 2.17—Accommodations for special populations (percent of national food stamp caseload)



Data from appendix tables A2.3(a, f), A2.11(b), A2.12(a, b, c).

* Bilingual caseworkers on staff or interpreters available for most office hours. Includes only offices that reported routinely seeing non-English speakers.

** Includes only offices that routinely see immigrants.

Finally, most local offices had made efforts to ensure that caseworkers understood the complicated rules for immigrant eligibility. Among offices that routinely saw immigrants, 86 percent of the caseload was served in offices that had developed specialized training for staff, as FNS recommends.

Conclusions

In each of the three broad areas that may impact a household's decisions to apply for food stamp benefits—availability of program information, accessibility of the office, and accommodations for special populations—some practices that are likely to improve accessibility were very common among local food stamp offices. The one exception to this statement is the availability of extended office hours. While approximately half of all offices (weighted) were sometimes open outside normal business hours, most food stamp offices (weighted) offered applicants very limited opportunities to apply for benefits, complete the certification interview, or return needed documents after hours. This could make it particularly difficult for working families to apply and complete the food stamp application process.

Local offices had developed policies and practices that enabled interested households to apply for FSP benefits. However, accommodations for specific subpopulations that might be in need of special assistance were less common. For example, a minority of offices (weighted) routinely provided special information on eligibility rules for households that left TANF. As mentioned above, accommodations for working families were also less prevalent. Finally, while 70 percent of offices (weighted) offered telephone interviews to the elderly and disabled, few offices provided this option

to other types of households who experienced difficulties getting to the office. A minority of offices (weighted) provided actual transportation assistance to households.

PRWORA directly impacted the FSP eligibility of immigrant households. A majority of local food stamp offices (weighted) had instituted practices to help deal with the changes in eligibility rules. They provided information to immigrant households to help them understand the new rules and provided specialized training to their workers to help them implement the new rules.

While PRWORA did not directly affect the FSP eligibility of TANF households, anecdotal evidence suggests it might have created confusion among this population of food stamp recipients. However, only about half the local offices (weighted) made changes that might assist this group, either by providing specific information about FSP eligibility to households that left TANF or by providing extended office hours to accommodate the increasing number of food stamp eligible households that are working.

The next chapter examines local offices' policies and practices that might potentially affect whether households complete the application process once they have filed an application form.