



The Food-Spending Patterns of Households Participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Findings From USDA's FoodAPS

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What Is the Issue?

USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the cornerstone of Federal food assistance for low-income households and is one of the largest safety net programs in the United States, with program benefits of almost \$67 billion in 2016. SNAP is designed to increase the food purchasing power of program participants. This, in turn, should increase their ability to achieve a nutritious diet and attain food security—having enough food for an active, healthy life. Given the significant Federal investment in SNAP, policymakers and program administrators can benefit from having a comprehensive understanding of food expenditures of households that participate in the program. A recent USDA survey—the National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey (FoodAPS)—provides a unique opportunity to conduct a detailed analysis of the food-spending patterns of SNAP households.

This study compares food expenditures of SNAP households with those of eligible nonparticipant households and households overall. Findings provide background information on a number of issues related to the adequacy of SNAP benefits and the importance of SNAP in the food budgets of participating households, the relationship between food spending and food insecurity, and the timing of SNAP benefits.

What Did the Study Find?

The food-spending patterns of SNAP households differ from those of other households, even nonparticipant households whose income and assets are low enough to make them eligible for the program. Key differences in food spending include the following:

- SNAP households spend less on average on food, adjusting for household size and composition, than other households, even compared with eligible nonparticipant households. The average weekly food expenditures per adult-male equivalent (AME) in 2012 were \$47 for SNAP households, \$61 for eligible nonparticipant households, and \$67 for all U.S. households.
- Food-at-home (grocery store) spending accounts for a greater share of the total food expenditures of SNAP households (74 percent) than of eligible nonparticipant households (65 percent) and of all U.S. households (62 percent).

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The average weekly total food spending of SNAP households was slightly more than the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), which represents combinations of food items that a household could prepare and consume at home to meet current dietary standards at a low cost. However, the average weekly food-at-home spending was 82 percent of the TFP cost. Across SNAP households, food-spending patterns varied considerably per AME, relative to the TFP, and in the contribution (share) of SNAP to the food budget:

- Food spending was lower in SNAP households with children than in those without children; it was higher in SNAP households without a married head than in those with a married head; and it was higher in SNAP households residing in rural areas than in those living in urban or suburban areas.
- Overall spending in SNAP households did not vary by presence of employed adults. However, SNAP households with employed adults spent more on food away from home and less on food at home than those with no employed adults.
- The contribution of SNAP benefits to food-at-home spending is substantial—at least two-thirds—among households with children and households with income below the poverty line. SNAP benefits account for 80 percent of the food-at-home spending of SNAP households with income below 50 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines.

Among both SNAP households and eligible nonparticipant households, those that are food secure spend more on food than those that are food insecure:

- Most of the difference in total food spending by food-security status can be attributed to differences in average food-at-home spending, whereas the differences in food-away-from-home spending were small and not statistically significant.
- For food-insecure households, average food spending does not vary among those that experience the more severe condition of very low food security and those that do not.

Findings reveal a clear temporal pattern in the food spending of SNAP households across the benefit month:

- On the days just after SNAP benefit receipt, average daily food expenditures are substantially higher than on days during the rest of the month. The same cyclical pattern is seen in food-at-home spending and in the contribution of SNAP benefits to food spending.
- Food-away-from-home spending does not vary over the SNAP benefit month.
- While average food spending declines sharply over the SNAP benefit month, there is no increase in the average number of times SNAP households acquire free food and beverages as the month progresses.

How Was the Study Conducted?

This study uses data from FoodAPS, a nationally representative USDA survey that collected detailed information about food acquisitions by all household members over a 7-day period. Data were collected between April 2012 and January 2013. A total of 4,826 households completed the survey. The main food shopper or meal planner for each household (the primary respondent) provided information on household characteristics, including household size and composition, income, SNAP participation, and food-security status. Primary respondents also supplied information on expenditures for all at-home and away-from-home foods and beverages purchased and acquired from all sources by all household members.

FoodAPS purposely sampled a disproportionately high number of SNAP households and other low-income households. The study uses two approaches to adjust for differences in household size and composition that would be expected to influence food needs: (1) calculating food spending per adult-male equivalent in the household, which is essentially a per-person measure that is adjusted for the average daily energy needs of particular age and gender groups, and (2) comparing household spending to the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan.