



DECISION DEMOGRAPHICS

**MATHEMATICA**  
Policy Research

**Stephen Tordella**  
*President*  
Decision Demographics

**James Mabli**  
*Associate Director*  
Mathematica Policy Research

# **Dynamics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation from 2008 to 2012**

Testimony for Hearing on  
The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Nutrition Subcommittee  
Committee on Agriculture  
U.S. House of Representatives

February 26, 2015

This page is intentionally blank for printing purposes.

Thank you, Chairwoman Jackie Walorski, Ranking Member Jim McGovern, and members of the Nutrition Subcommittee for this opportunity to testify on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). I was asked to testify before this committee as part of an evidence-based approach to understanding the SNAP population. Critical to developing effective SNAP policy, this review of SNAP dynamics will help Congress to understand changes in SNAP participation patterns and the national caseload under different economic conditions and policy environments.

My testimony is based on a recent study of SNAP participation dynamics conducted by my organization, Decision Demographics, and our partners at Mathematica Policy Research, for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support. I will present findings from one of our study reports, "*Dynamics of SNAP Participation from 2008 to 2012*," a link to which can be found on our website.<sup>1</sup> My colleagues, Principal Investigator James Mabli, who coauthored this testimony, as well as authors Joshua Leftin, Thomas Godfrey, and Nancy Wemmerus contributed to this report. The study used data from the 2008 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), a nationally representative longitudinal sample survey that collected detailed information for five years, beginning in 2008, on monthly labor force activity, income, family circumstances, and program participation.

This afternoon I will describe patterns of SNAP caseload dynamics over the past decade. By "dynamics," we mean the flow of participants into and out of the program. I will specifically address:

---

<sup>1</sup> Leftin, Joshua, Nancy Wemmerus, James Mabli, Thomas Godfrey, and Stephen Tordella, (2014). Dynamics of SNAP Participation from 2008 to 2012. Prepared by Decision Demographics for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service: Alexandria, VA. Available online at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/ops/Dynamics2008-2012.pdf>

- Who goes onto SNAP and at what rates do they enter the program?
- Once participants are on the program, how long do they stay?
- When they leave the program, how long is it before they come back?
- What events are associated with people entering or exiting SNAP?
- How do different groups of people participate in the program?
- How do SNAP dynamics drive changes in participation patterns and the national caseload over time?

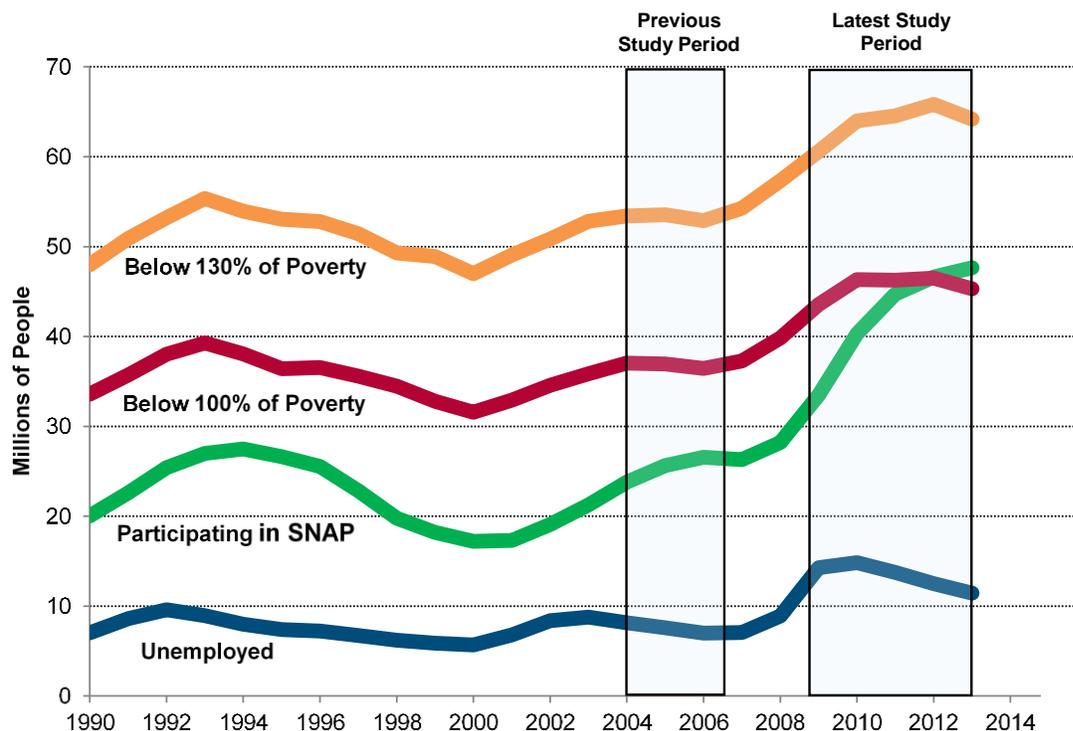
First, for context, I will highlight SNAP participation trends over the last decade. Next, I will review our findings on SNAP caseload dynamics. I will discuss observed differences in these dynamics over the past ten years; describe distinctions by demographic, economic and family characteristics; and present factors associated with SNAP entry and exit. I will close by discussing how changing patterns in dynamics have shaped overall caseload changes, comparing findings from our two most recent studies, which looked at the periods 2004-2006 and 2008-2012.

### **SNAP Today**

SNAP is the largest of the 15 domestic nutrition assistance programs administered by FNS. The number of SNAP participants has increased dramatically over the past decade, from an average monthly caseload of 24 million in fiscal year 2004 to its peak of 47.6 million in fiscal year 2013. It declined modestly to 46.5 million in fiscal year 2014. Understanding SNAP participation dynamics over time is critical to understanding these participation changes. Figure 1 provides a snapshot of changes in SNAP participation and concurrent rates of unemployment and poverty, since 1990.

**Figure 1**

**Trends in Poverty, the SNAP Caseload, and the Number of Unemployed Individuals, 1990–2013**



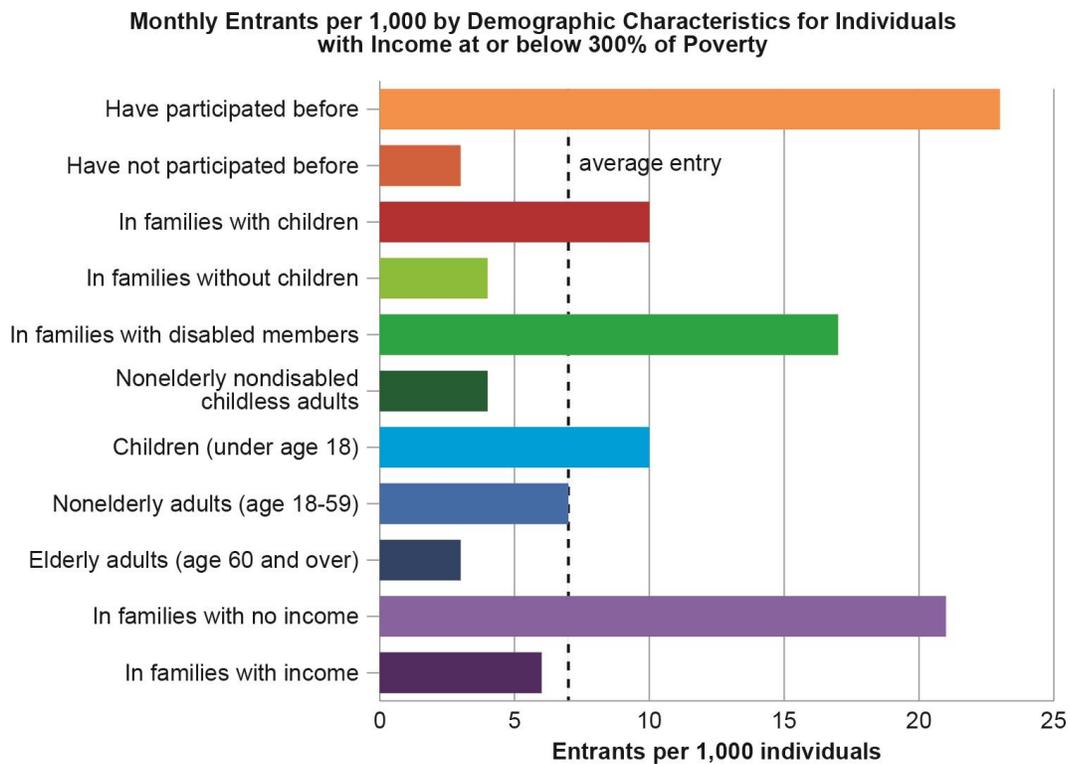
### Examining SNAP Entry Rates

Between mid-2008 and the end of 2012—the period for which SIPP followed the respondents on which we based this study—an average of 7 out of every 1,000 people in low-income families who were not receiving SNAP entered SNAP in the next month.<sup>2</sup> This is a 40 percent increase over the 2004 to 2006 study period (referred to as the mid-2000s), when 5 out of every 1,000 people in low-income families joined the program each month, and substantially higher than the period from 2001 to 2003, when 4 out of every 1,000 people in low-income families joined SNAP each month on average.

<sup>2</sup> We considered individuals to be in a low-income family if they had family income less than 300 percent of poverty.

SNAP entry patterns differ by family situation and income. For example, individuals who received benefits in the past were much more likely to enter than those who had not received benefits. Three of every 1,000 low-income nonparticipants who had never received SNAP benefits during their adult lives entered the program in a given month, compared with 23 out of 1,000 people who had participated previously (see Figure 2). Entry rates were also higher than average for individuals in families with children or disabled members, and those in families without income. Nondisabled adults age 18-49 in households without dependents (commonly referred to as “ABAWDs”), and elderly adults, had lower than average SNAP entry rates.

**Figure 2**



## **Factors Associated with Entering SNAP**

The detailed SIPP monthly data allow us to observe life events or changes that may be associated with entering (or exiting) SNAP. Although we cannot definitively ascertain that these events caused SNAP entry, we can show to what degree certain events or changes in circumstances, which we call “triggers,” immediately precede SNAP entry.

The most common events associated with entry into SNAP were related to decreases in family earnings, loss of employment, and changes to the family situation. Among those who entered SNAP in the study period, 30 percent experienced a substantial decrease in family earnings in the previous four months, while 23 percent experienced a substantial loss in other family income—income aside from earnings and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Nearly 16 percent of those who entered SNAP were in families where a member became unemployed within the previous four months, and 12 percent experienced a change in their family situation within the previous four months, such as a pregnancy, a new dependent in the family, or a separation or divorce.

## **Once Participants Are On SNAP, How Long Do They Stay?**

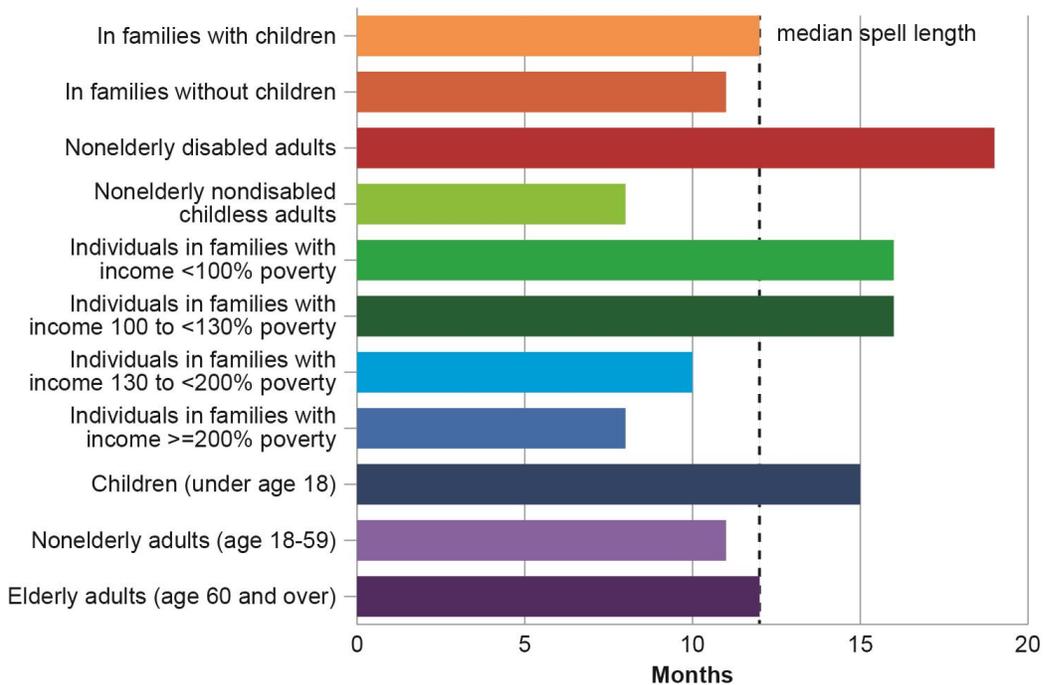
Because time on the program contributes to overall caseload and program costs, there is great interest in understanding how long SNAP participants typically receive assistance. Dynamics research refers to each participation period as a “spell” and the number of months a participant receives SNAP benefits in one session as a “spell length.”

SNAP spells have gotten longer over the past decade: half of those who entered the program between 2008 to 2012 (“new entrants”) exited within 12 months, compared to 10 months during the mid-2000s and 8 months in the early 2000s. SNAP spell lengths were shorter for individuals in families without children and for ABAWDs (see Figure 3). Spell lengths were longer for new

entrants living in poverty, those in single-parent families, nonelderly disabled adults, and children. Overall, however, most entrants left the program within two years.

**Figure 3**

**Median SNAP Spell Lengths for New Entrants by Demographic Characteristics and Income**



In the findings presented above, we observed individuals who entered SNAP any time during the 2008 to 2012 survey period, and followed them to determine how long they remained on the program. However, looking only at these new entrants does not allow us to understand the behavior of longer-term SNAP participants; many long-term participants were already receiving SNAP when this round of the SIPP survey began, so by following only new entrants during the survey period, we necessarily miss many of those whose stay began before the survey period. To more completely understand caseload dynamics, we also took a slice of the population at an early point in the survey (called a cross-section) and looked at who was receiving SNAP and how long they had already been on the program. We then followed these cases forward, determining

whether they exited the program during the survey period. As expected, this cross-section of SNAP participants has longer spells than the new entrants: a median length of 8 years, up from 7 years in the mid-2000s (in other words, half of those who were participating early in the 2008 panel period exited within 8 years, but half remained on the program longer than 8 years). Elderly individuals had higher than average median spell length while ABAWDS had a median spell length of 3 years.

### **What Factors are Associated with Exiting SNAP?**

The SNAP exit rate is the percentage of participants that exit the program over a fixed period of time. As with entry rates, changes in average exit rates over time can help explain changes in overall caseload size. Examining individuals' circumstances around the time of exit can provide clues as to why individuals may leave the program. We found that factors contributing to exit from SNAP differ for people in different demographic or economic circumstances.

In about 30 percent of households that exit SNAP, the data do not show an event related to improved financial circumstances or reduced need in the previous four months that we would readily associate with exit from the program. About 70 percent experienced a substantial increase in income or a decrease in the number of family members. Thirty-seven percent experienced more than one of these events in the four months before exiting. Increases in earnings were the most common of the events we examined that preceded exits. These events, however, are common and do not always lead to exiting SNAP.

### **At What Rates do Individuals Re-Enter the Program?**

SNAP re-entry patterns measure the extent to which individuals transition on and off the program. Forty-seven percent of SNAP participants who exited the program in the panel period re-entered within 12 months. Another 12 percent re-entered within two years, for a total of 59

percent re-entering within 24 months. Participants returned to the program more quickly during 2008 to 2012 than prior study periods. In the mid-2000s, 53 percent of participants re-entered within two years.

Some subgroups re-entered SNAP more quickly than others. In particular, individuals in families whose income was below the poverty level when they exited returned to SNAP more quickly than those who had higher incomes. Similarly, individuals in families with children returned to SNAP more quickly than those in families without children.

### **How Entry Rates and Duration Explain Increases in SNAP Participation**

As noted at the beginning of this testimony, the SNAP caseload grew substantially from the 2004 to 2006 period to the 2008 to 2012 period, and in each year over the course of the 2008 to 2012 period. For a caseload to grow, people must be entering the program at higher rates, staying in the program longer, or both—which is what occurred during 2008 to 2012. This continues a trend in SNAP dynamics observed from the early 2000s to the mid-2000s; yet while the economy was improving during the mid-2000s, this was not the case during much of the 2008 to 2012 period. As a result, the increases in entry and duration from the mid-2000s to the 2008 to 2012 time period were greater than those from the early to mid-2000s. Finally, although the caseload grew each year from 2008 to 2012, there was a slowdown in growth over this period due to a year-to-year decline in the number of SNAP entrants relative to the total caseload.

### **Policy Implications from Examining SNAP Dynamics**

We hope that this objective analysis will contribute to the research base on SNAP program dynamics, especially as Congress conducts an evidence-based investigation of the program. Through this research, we investigated SNAP caseload dynamics to better understand what drives changes in SNAP participation over time.

This study of SNAP dynamics provides two key insights into the rise in the SNAP caseload over the past ten years. First, SNAP participation in 2008 to 2012 increased, relative to the mid-2000s, due to both an increase in entry rates and the length of time spent on SNAP. The proportion of low-income individuals not already on the program who entered in an average month increased by 40 percent and the median spell of SNAP participation among new entrants lasted 20 percent longer than during the mid-2000s.

Second, SNAP dynamics closely reflect individual circumstances. SNAP entry rates were highest among the poorest individuals, and decreased with income. Similarly, the length of time spent on SNAP was longest for poorest individuals, and decreased with income. Changes in employment and earnings were the most common factor associated with entering and exiting the program. Job losses and decreases in earnings were strongly associated with entering SNAP, and job gains and increases in earnings were strongly associated with leaving the program. These findings suggest that the program is responding to changing economic conditions and individuals' increased needs in the way in which it was originally designed.

Thank you again for giving us the opportunity to testify before the House Committee on Agriculture about this important topic.

This page is intentionally blank for printing purposes.