

Characteristics and Circumstances of Zero-Income SNAP Households

Client: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service

Project Overview

The purpose of this 3-year project was to examine the characteristics, circumstances, and spending patterns of zero-income Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) units. This is critically important as the percentage of zero-income units has been increasing steadily and the pattern of increase started long before the economic downturn of 2008 and 2009. Generally, the SNAP caseload closely follows the national unemployment rate, but the relationship is less clear for zero-income units.



The study provided:

- A descriptive analysis of the characteristics of zero-income SNAP units, including demographic information; SNAP recipient history; and measures of participation dynamics, including entry rates, spell lengths, exit rates, and reentry rates
- An analysis of spending patterns based on electronic benefit transaction (EBT) transaction records
- An examination of units' circumstances, including variability in their zero-income status, family composition, sources of income if/when they have income, and survival strategies

The study consisted of 5 primary components:

1. A cross-sectional analysis of Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data to provide information about the demographic, family, and employment characteristics of zero-income SNAP units as compared to other SNAP units and non-SNAP households with similar income
2. A longitudinal component to address the circumstances of zero-income units using SIPP data and the redemption patterns of zero-income units over several years using EBT data
3. A qualitative component involving 50 in-depth interviews with zero-income respondents, both English speaking and non-English speaking, to provide greater detail on the characteristics, circumstances, and buying patterns of zero-income units
4. An event-history analysis to measure techniques used to document and examine the “dynamics” of individuals being zero-gross-income SNAP participants
5. A policy analysis to assess the relationship between zero-income SNAP caseload growth and decline and economic conditions and policy changes



Core Activities

Literature Reviews and Environmental Scans; Semi-Structured Interviews; Qualitative Research; Secondary Data Analysis; Policy Analysis; Report Development and Presentation

Products

The final report is entitled “Characteristics and Circumstances of Zero-Income SNAP Households” (May 2014) and is available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/characteristics-and-circumstances-zero-income-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-households>.