

IOM (Institute of Medicine) and NRC (National Research Council). 2013. *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Examining the Evidence to Define Benefit Adequacy*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2013



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Background

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, previously the Food Stamp Program), administered by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, is our nation's primary food security safety net. Currently serving >46 million Americans (~1 in 7) living in 21.1 million households each month, the overarching goal of the program is to improve access to healthy foods for low-income individuals and households. With an annual price tag exceeding \$75 billion, SNAP is re-evaluated, revamped, and reauthorized by Congress every 5 y as part of the Farm Bill, the current version of which expired in September 2012. Because of lack of closure and consensus, however, the Farm Bill was ultimately extended until September 2013 as part of the American Taxpayer Relief Act. As such, debate continues as to what the future holds for SNAP and those it serves.

One factor that remains an area of active debate relates to how the adequacy of the SNAP allotment of foods and beverages should be evaluated. For instance, some argue that the time needed to purchase and prepare foods from basic ingredients as described in the "Thrifty Food Plan" (TFP) on which SNAP allotments are based should be considered when assessing the adequacy of SNAP. In response to this ongoing debate and as part of the government's continuing assessment of its food assistance programs, the USDA asked the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to conduct a study "to examine the feasibility of defining the adequacy of SNAP allotments." In other words, the USDA asked the IOM to determine whether SNAP adequacy could be objectively defined, and if so, what factors (including new data) would need to be considered. The outcome of this study was published in 2013 in the IOM and NRC's joint report entitled *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Examining the Evidence to Define Benefit Adequacy*, and a summary is provided here.

Process

To meet its objectives, the IOM assembled a committee of experts chaired by Dr. Julie Caswell, professor of resource economics and chair of the Department of Resource Economics at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. This committee was assembled twice for all-hands meetings held in 2012 and worked with experienced librarians at the George E. Brown Jr. Library of the National Academies to conduct a comprehensive review of the current evidence of peer-reviewed and selected nonpeer-reviewed publications. Specifically, they identified and summarized publications related to how SNAP adequacy is influenced and might be codified. From this systematic review of the literature, committee members developed a framework illustrating the process by which households make food choices and how SNAP characteristics affect this process. In turn, they were able to identify factors that theoretically might affect whether SNAP goals are met to ultimately determine the feasibility of defining allotment adequacy. Importantly, the committee did not focus its efforts on outlining how SNAP participation might be encouraged, but instead on issues related to how SNAP participants' attributes and actions may affect the adequacy of the benefits that they receive.

The committee identified myriad factors that might modulate whether the goals of SNAP are likely actualized; as such, these factors would likely need to be considered when attempting to define SNAP adequacy. These characteristics include total resources (financial and time), individual and household characteristics (e.g., dietary knowledge and culinary skills), environmental factors (e.g., location and transportation), and various characteristics of SNAP (e.g., eligibility criteria) that influence the process through which participants may or may not meet programmatic goals.

Conclusions and recommendations

On review of the literature and construction of their conceptual framework, the committee formulated 3 conclusions and several coordinate recommendations.

- *Conclusion 1:* Importantly, the expert committee concluded that the adequacy of SNAP allotments can indeed be defined in an objective manner, but doing so will require identification of factors that affect participants' ability to ultimately attain food security and access a healthy diet.
- *Conclusion 2:* They also concluded that, because the adequacy of SNAP allotments is influenced by individual, household, and environmental factors, these variables must be included in the definition of SNAP adequacy. For instance, because the time requirements implicitly assumed by the TFP are inconsistent with the time available for meal preparation in most households, most SNAP participants must often purchase

expensive prepared “value-added” foods. As such, the current value of the SNAP allotment substantially limits the flexibility and purchasing power of SNAP benefits.

- *Conclusion 3:* Their final major conclusion was that the adequacy of SNAP allotments is influenced by various program characteristics. For instance, the maximum SNAP benefit may not be adequate to allow participants to purchase sufficient foods. Furthermore, it is possible that assumptions used to estimate the percentage of household income typically spent on food may be outdated. These facts can substantially affect SNAP adequacy.

In response to these conclusions, the committee recommended that the influence of relevant individual, household, and environmental factors on SNAP participants’ purchasing power be given the monetary value of their SNAP benefits. Furthermore, programmatic factors such as maximum benefit guarantee and benefit reduction rate should be re-

evaluated using contemporary national statistics. In addition, ongoing research should be established to monitor and evaluate important SNAP-related parameters such as nationwide food insecurity, dietary intake adequacy among SNAP participants, and nutrition education effectiveness in at-risk populations.

For more information

Free copies of this report are available at <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2013/Supplemental-Nutrition-Assistance-Program-Examining-the-Evidence-to-Define-Benefit-Adequacy.aspx>. The Food Stamp Acts of 1964 and 1977 are available at http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/rules/Legislation/pdfs/PL_88-525.pdf and http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/rules/Legislation/pdfs/PL_88-525a.pdf, respectively. The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 is available at http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/rules/Legislation/pdfs/PL_110-246.pdf.