

# ISSUE BRIEF

## SNAP PARTICIPANTS' EMPLOYMENT PATTERNS FINDINGS FROM THE NHIS



Putting Healthy Food  
Within Reach

### IN THIS BRIEF

FNS' SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) programs aim to equip SNAP participants with skills that can help them succeed on the job market and achieve financial independence. This Issue Brief seeks to inform policy makers, practitioners, and advocates about the characteristics of SNAP participants, their employment rates and patterns, and the key determinants of employment. Findings can be used to inform the design and redesign of SNAP E&T Programs.

#### AUTHORS

Mithuna Srinivasan  
Jennifer Pooler

### OVERVIEW

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, is the nation's largest food safety net program. SNAP is a means-tested program that provides vital nutrition to millions of low-income individuals and families. In fiscal year 2015, the program provided benefits to more than 45 million individuals, with the average recipient receiving about \$127 a month.

Since 1971, SNAP has instituted work requirements for working-age adults (aged 18-59), including registering for work, not voluntarily quitting a job or reducing hours, and taking a job if offered. For adults who cannot find work on their own, the SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) program (started in 1985), provides grants to states to administer workforce readiness programs to help participants gain skills, training, or experience and thereby increase their likelihood of finding gainful employment. Able bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs)<sup>i</sup> must meet additional work requirements, including working or participating in a work program for at least 20 hours per week, in order to receive SNAP benefits for more than 3 months in a 3-year period.

While much research has been undertaken on SNAP E&T programs, less is known about the employment characteristics of SNAP participants. Given the limited resources of SNAP E&T programs, administrators need to take into account factors such as work history, or barriers to work, while designing programs, to ensure that they reach those most in need, and help them in the most effective way.

IMPAQ used nationally representative survey data from the 2011–2015 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS)<sup>ii</sup> to examine employment patterns of working-age SNAP participants who are not disabled or working in the armed forces. All estimates are weighted to be representative of the U.S. population. In 2011–2015, the NHIS collected data from more than 250,000 adults between the ages of 18 and 59, of whom 17% reported participating in SNAP in the prior year.

## A “SNAP” SHOT OF WORKING-AGE PARTICIPANTS

The average age of a working-age SNAP participant is 35 years. Similar to published data on SNAP participation, the typical SNAP participant in the sample is female, non-Hispanic White, a U.S. citizen, and lives in a household with at least one child under 18.<sup>iii</sup> Other key demographic and socioeconomic characteristics include:

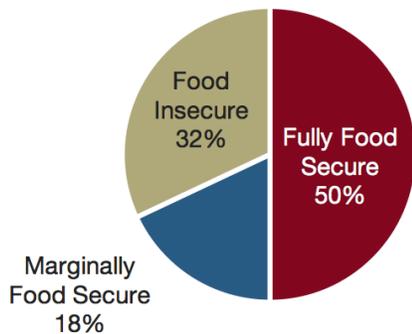
**Education** - Over half of all SNAP participants have a high school diploma or less education; 21% do not even have a high school diploma.

**Family Composition** - About 50% of SNAP participants are single (not married or living with a partner). Nearly 62% of single participants live in households with a child present.

**Income** - SNAP participants are severely income constrained, with the majority (70%) having annual household incomes under \$35,000.

**Food Security** - Despite receiving SNAP benefits, only 50% of participants report being fully food secure (Exhibit 1), that is having access to enough foods to lead a healthy life style.<sup>iv</sup>

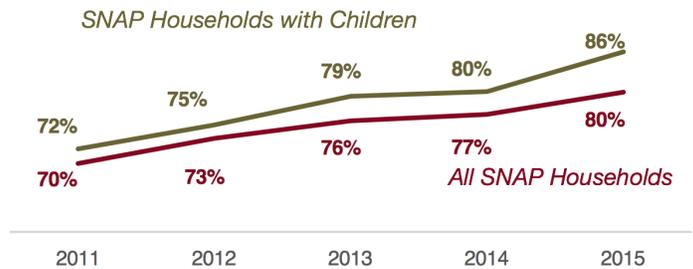
### Exhibit 1. Food Security Status of Working-Age SNAP Participants



## SNAP PARTICIPANTS’ EMPLOYMENT PATTERNS

NHIS respondents were asked about their employment status in the two weeks prior to the survey. In 2011-2015, the average employment rate was 75% among working-age adults participating in SNAP, with a higher average rate seen for those in households with children (78%). Employment rates for both groups increased during this timeframe (Exhibit 2), possibly reflecting the rebound from the great recession.

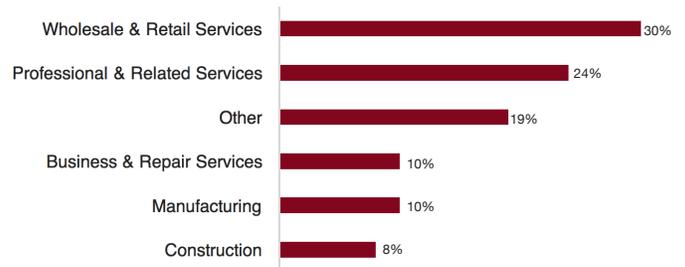
### Exhibit 2. Employment Rates of Working-Age SNAP Participants, 2011 to 2015



**Among SNAP participants who could reasonably be expected to work, a large majority of them *do* work.**

SNAP participants reported being employed in a variety of industries (Exhibit 3). The most common industries were: (a) Wholesale and Retail Trade, (b) Professional and Related Services, (c) Business and Repair Services, and (d) Manufacturing.

### Exhibit 3. Industries Employing Working-Age SNAP Participants



The types of work that SNAP participants have may contribute to the need for public assistance to provide nutritious meals for their families. Those who worked in the two weeks prior to the survey were:

- Working **full-time** (62%; at least 35 hours a week)
- Working in the **private sector** (85%)
- Working **one job** (93%)
- At their current or longest job **1-5 years** (44%); 22% had spent more than 5 years.
- Employed at a **small workplace** (50%; 1-24 employees)
- Not paid **sick leave** (69%)

## DETERMINANTS OF EMPLOYMENT

The likelihood of a SNAP participant being employed is associated with certain key demographic and socioeconomic characteristics:

**Citizenship** - Employment among SNAP participants who are U.S. citizens is lower than that for non-citizens (74% versus 83%).

**Family Structure** - Married individuals have higher rates of employment than those who are single (83% versus 75%).

**Food Security** - Fully food secure SNAP participants are 8 percentage points more likely to be employed than those who are not fully food secure.

**Health** - In general, those in poorer health had lower rates of employment than their healthier counterparts (Exhibit 4).

### Exhibit 4. Percentage of Working-Age Employed SNAP Participants, by Health Characteristics

Health-Related Characteristics	% Employed
<b>Health Status</b>	
Fair/Poor	67%
Good/Very Good/Excellent	76%
<b>Chronic Conditions</b>	
Yes	72%
No	76%

As noted previously, only 25% of SNAP participants were unemployed in the two weeks prior to the survey. The vast majority (88%) of unemployed SNAP participants have worked at some point in their lives. Furthermore, nearly half of all unemployed SNAP participants reported being employed in the prior year, of which the majority (63%) had a job that lasted for at least half the year.

**Despite high rates of employment, most SNAP participants (70%) still have very low levels of household income (under \$35,000).**

**Nearly half (49%) of all unemployed SNAP participants reported being employed in the prior year.**

## IMPLICATIONS

These findings, from a large, nationally representative survey, provide valuable insights on SNAP participants' employment patterns, which can help inform the broader policy discussions related to work incentives and E&T programs:

- High rates of employment, and consistently increasing rates of employment during the study period are encouraging, and indicate that **SNAP likely does not discourage work**. Furthermore, most SNAP participants unemployed at the time of the survey had worked at some point, and a large share even had recent work experience.
- **Policymakers should continue to address barriers to work faced by SNAP participants**. Certain subgroups of participants tend to have significantly lower rates of employment than others (e.g., those who are food insecure or in poor health). Research should be conducted to explore the types of work previously done by especially vulnerable subgroups, and that information used to tailor E&T programs to their workforce preparation and education needs.
- State SNAP agencies should adopt a holistic approach to address individuals' needs and barriers, that is not solely focused on finding jobs. **It is equally important to help with job retention**. In many instances, individuals struggle with keeping their job because of obstacles such as health issues, childcare or transportation needs.
- **E&T strategies should continue to focus on being "job-driven,"** so that SNAP recipients acquire the skills to meet evolving labor market demand. The demand for skilled workers in the economy will only continue to grow, and available jobs will require at least some education beyond high school. Yet, a non-trivial share of SNAP participants do not even have a high school diploma. Many SNAP E&T participants are already using the program to boost their educational attainment by pursuing a GED or postsecondary credentials.

- State SNAP agencies should continue to explore ways on how to create clear career pathways through which workers can gain both experience and training, or integrate their current SNAP E&T programs into existing career pathways systems. For this, it is prudent to **involve (potential) employers in the design of job-driven E&T strategies**, to further ensure a match between skills gained and skills demanded.

At the end of the day, policymakers should recognize that placing SNAP participants successfully on the road to self-sufficiency requires that **job creation and skill development be complementary strategies**. Additional research should seek to gain feedback and perspectives directly from SNAP participants on issues such as job satisfaction, and whether they perceive their earnings to be sufficient for them to eventually transition out of poverty and become self-sufficient. The government can also consider setting up an online clearinghouse which can serve as a one-stop shop for state SNAP agencies to share information about their most successful SNAP E&T strategies, information about promising workforce development programs in general, and data that can be used to further research activities pertaining to this population.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**DR. MITHUNA SRINIVASAN**

(Ph.D., Economics, The Ohio State University) is an applied economist who has conducted research and evaluation on a variety of topics related to parental investments in children, food and nutrition, workforce development, and Medicare.



**MS. JENNIFER POOLER**

(MPP, Public Policy, University of Southern Maine) has conducted research and evaluation in the area of food insecurity and nutrition assistance program participation for over 10 years.



IMPAQ helps governments, businesses, foundations, nonprofits, and universities evaluate and enhance their programs and policies. Our staff of world class researchers, survey professionals, technical innovators, and subject matter experts combine innovative thinking and rigorous approaches to make a real world impact. We are known for our flexibility, responsiveness, and willingness to adapt to our clients' challenges in order to solve real-world problems.

**IMPAQ International evaluates and enhances public programs and policy.**

**Questions and comments can be directed to IMPAQ International.** For more information visit [www.impaqint.com](http://www.impaqint.com) or call (443) 259-5500

<sup>1</sup>An ABAWD is a person between the ages of 18 and 49 who has no dependents and is not disabled.

<sup>2</sup>Lynn Blewett, Julia A. Rivera Drew, Risa Griffin, Miriam L. King, and Kari C. W. Williams. IPUMS Health Survey: National Health Interview Survey, Version 6.2. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2016. <http://doi.org/10.18128/D070.V6.2>.

<sup>3</sup>Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2015. United States Department of Agriculture, Report No. SNAP-16-CHAR.

<sup>4</sup>Coleman-Jensen A, Rabbitt MP, Gregory CA. Household Food Security in the United States in 2015. Washington, DC; 2016. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/err215/err-215.pdf?v=42636>.