WOMEN AND FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

Federal programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture provide essential help to low-income women and their families in obtaining food. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the Federal Food Stamp Program, provides benefits for purchasing foods to individuals and families with incomes generally below 130 percent of the federal poverty level. In 2011, following an economic recession, the number of people served by SNAP hit a record high of 44.1 million per month, on average, or about 1 in 7 Americans. Of the 24.2 million adults served, over 15 million (62.5 percent) were women (data not shown). Between 1990 and 2011, the number of people served by SNAP tracked strongly over time with the number of people in poverty, demonstrating the critical role of SNAP in responding to need. In 2011, 1.7 million children and 2.2 million adults, 62 percent of whom were women, were lifted above the poverty line after adding the value of SNAP benefits to household income.

Among the households that relied on SNAP in 2011, 5.1 million (24.5 percent) were female-headed households with children, accounting for 52.1 percent of all SNAP households with children (data not shown). The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) also plays an important role in serving low-income women and families by providing supplementary nutritious foods, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and referrals to health and other social services. WIC serves pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, as well as infants and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk and have household incomes generally at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level. In 2012, more than three-quarters of the 8.9 million individuals receiving WIC benefits were infants and children (76.5 percent); however, the program also served nearly 2.1 million pregnant women and mothers, representing 23.5 percent of WIC participants. About 63 percent of those eligible for WIC participate in the program, though rates vary from about 85 percent among eligible infants to 70.8 percent for pregnant women and only 52.4 percent for eligible children. SNAP participation rates are about 72 percent overall, ranging from 92 percent among eligible children to only 34 percent among the elderly.

SNAP Participants and Individuals in Poverty, 1990–2011


Participants in WIC, 2012*

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, WIC Program Participation Data

*Based on Federal Fiscal Year (October to September)