Americans aged 60 and over account for nearly 1 in 10 participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly the Food Stamp Program), though less than half of eligible, low-income elderly adults participate in the program. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, which administers SNAP, has taken steps in recent years to improve enrollment processes and timeliness and increase access to healthy foods for this population.

This IMPAQ issue brief summarizes barriers seniors continue to face in participating in SNAP and provides recommendations for improving participation rates.

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SNAP is designed to reduce food insecurity (the inability to meet daily food needs). Food insecurity among seniors more than doubled from 2001 to 2013, with 9.6 million seniors experiencing food insecurity in 2013.

ISSUE

In the United States, over 45 million people participated in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) each month through the first half of 2015. Approximately 1 in 10 participants are seniors, defined as age 60 or older. Less than half (41%) of eligible seniors are enrolled in SNAP, compared to 89% of eligible non-elderly adults (ages 18–59). While SNAP participation rates among seniors have increased in recent years (by 11% from 2000 to 2013), this has not kept pace with SNAP eligible non-elderly adults for whom participation rates increased by 36 percent.

![SNAP Participation Rates by Age Group, 2000–2013](chart.png)

This is important as food insecurity has been associated with poor nutrition and poor health status among the elderly, as well as higher prevalence of chronic conditions, medication non-adherence, and hospital readmissions.\textsuperscript{5,6,7,8

**BARRIERS TO SNAP PARTICIPATION**

Since seniors are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, it is important to ensure eligible seniors can participate in SNAP to help meet their nutritional needs. There are multiple reasons seniors may be less likely to participate in SNAP than younger adults, including:

- **Lack of awareness.** Households with seniors are less likely to know where to apply for SNAP benefits compared to households without seniors.\textsuperscript{9} Households with seniors are also less likely to have previously received SNAP benefits or know anyone who has done so.

- **Lack of information about eligibility criteria.** Seniors are less likely to be aware of their potential eligibility to receive SNAP benefits compared to other eligible nonparticipants.\textsuperscript{10} In one nationally representative study, 64\% of households with seniors reported that they would apply if they knew they were eligible.\textsuperscript{9}

- **Eligibility rules change after age 60.** Households with seniors have different eligibility requirements for income, which can add to eligibility confusion. Non-elderly applicants must meet gross income standards of less than 130\% of poverty, while households with seniors may have gross incomes up to 165\% of poverty. Younger seniors (individuals aged 60–65) may not have been eligible for SNAP benefits previously and may not be aware of the different eligibility threshold.

- **Perception of negative stigma and embarrassment prevents participation.** Approximately 40\% of SNAP participants report having experienced at least one form of perceived stigma, such as being treated disrespectfully after telling people they receive SNAP benefits or when using benefits in a store.\textsuperscript{11} Some seniors have not applied for SNAP because of perceptions that they would be looked down upon by others and perceived as lazy and unwilling to work should they receive benefits.

- **Misperceptions regarding benefit amounts.** Eligible seniors have expressed that SNAP benefits are too small to make the effort of applying worthwhile. While the Federal minimum SNAP benefit amount is $16, few elderly individuals receive this amount. Rather, for seniors living alone, the average monthly benefit was $134.\textsuperscript{12} Adding this average monthly benefit to an average monthly income of $428 among SNAP-participating seniors yields a 31\% increase in spendable resources.

- **Challenges with the application process.** Lastly, many seniors have described the application process as daunting and confusing, finding challenges with both the
paperwork involved and technology used. This is especially the case for seniors with limited English proficiency.

**EFFORTS TO INCREASE ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION**

In recent years, FNS has made and continues to make efforts to decrease participation barriers and increase access to SNAP and nutritious foods for older Americans. A few examples include:

- **Simplifying the SNAP application and recertification processes:**
  - Elderly Simplified Application Projects include waiving the interview requirement, using a shorter SNAP application form, verification through data matches with no additional verification required unless information is questionable, and 36-month certification periods.
  - Standard Medical Deduction Demonstrations ease verification requirements and provide a standard medical deduction to households with seniors and people with disabilities.
  - Combined Application Projects streamline SNAP application procedures by allowing seniors to use information from the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) application to generate a SNAP application.

- **Purchasing & Delivery Pilot Program:** The USDA plans to launch a pilot program in 2016 to increase access to groceries for homebound seniors and people with disabilities by allowing government and nonprofit agencies to accept SNAP benefits as payments for purchasing and delivering groceries. For more information, please see IMPAQ’s Issue Brief: “Efforts to Increase Access to SNAP for Homebound Seniors through Purchasing and Delivery Services.”

- **Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program:** The USDA awards grants to states to allow low-income seniors to use coupons to purchase eligible foods from farmers’ markets, roadside stands, and community supported agriculture programs. This allows seniors to access fresh, nutritious, unprepared, locally grown fruits, vegetables, honey and fresh-cut herbs. In FY 2013, benefits were available to 835,795 seniors, and the program continues to grow.

More generally, FNS has increased its attention to application processing timeliness (APT) as a barrier to participation for eligible households. Some states have successfully implemented policy and procedural changes to improve APT rates through business process reengineering (BPR) and other program improvement strategies. FNS supports these and other program improvement efforts through SNAP Processing and Technology Improvement Grants, as well as “high-performance bonuses” awarded to the best performing and most improved SNAP agencies.
FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES
SNAP participation among seniors will increase and be sustained only through the continued and concerted efforts of FNS, state SNAP programs, and advocacy and community groups. While FNS has taken a number of steps in recent years to address barriers to SNAP participation for seniors, many demonstration projects are still being implemented at the state level. For instance, IMPAQ has been engaged in providing technical support to state and local SNAP offices in three states by facilitating business process reengineering (BPR). BPR provides a holistic framework for states to modernize and streamline the administration of SNAP benefits. IMPAQ’s work in Tennessee and Nebraska has helped improve their timeliness and accuracy in processing SNAP applications, making it easier for all participants to enroll in the SNAP program.

The USDA has acknowledged that lower SNAP participation rates among seniors may be related to administrative complexities in applying and recertifying for SNAP benefits. The USDA FY 2016 Budget Summary and Annual Performance Plan proposes building on the success of several state demonstrations in increasing elderly participation by creating a state option to improve SNAP access for low-income seniors. This initiative would provide $9 million in FY 2016 to help states improve access to SNAP for seniors and allow states the option to adopt policies to streamline and simplify SNAP application, reporting requirements, and recertification for low-income elderly individuals. Additional opportunities to increase participation include community-based outreach targeted directly to seniors, especially in rural areas; and working with health care and other social service providers who serve seniors. Advocacy and community-based organizations should also consider focusing efforts on increasing enrollment and addressing barriers through outreach, communicating information about eligibility, and providing assistance with completing the application process.

Finally, further research to examine barriers to SNAP participation among seniors would contribute to evidence-based practice, as the most current comprehensive assessment of their participation was conducted in 2002. As the senior population grows, the demographics of seniors change, and more seniors are “aging in place” there are likely new barriers to SNAP participation that need to be addressed to ultimately curb food insecurity and improve overall health and well-being.

ABOUT IMPAQ
IMPAQ International evaluates and enhances public programs and policy. Our work ranges from rigorous evaluations to testing and redesigning complex government data management processes, to providing technical assistance to community organizations, to helping schools implement nutrition policy.

For more information about this brief or how IMPAQ can help evaluate or enhance your programs and policies, visit www.IMPAQint.com or call (443) 259-5500.
REFERENCES


