

Do State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Policies affect Older Adults and People with Disabilities

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Key Findings and Policy Implications

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federal program, but states have considerable discretion in choosing which SNAP policies to adopt, including many eligibility criteria and thresholds, and many administrative practices. This study examines the effect of state-specific variations in SNAP policy choices on access to SNAP benefits for older people and people with disabilities. It uses data on state policy variation from the SNAP Policy Database and SNAP State Option Reports, and data on individual SNAP participation and disability from the Survey of Income and Program Participation. The paper finds that:

- SNAP policies are commonly divided into three categories: eligibility policies, transaction cost policies, and stigma policies. Eligibility policies raise or lower the means-testing thresholds for benefits, the work requirements, noncitizen eligibility, or other household eligibility criteria (dependent children, people with disabilities, age thresholds, etc.). Transaction cost policies and stigma policies ease or tighten the burden of applying for or participating in SNAP.
- As one would expect, policies that increase generosity or simplify the application process increase participation and policies that disqualify or restrict access decrease participation. Older people and people with disabilities are more sensitive to these policies, with larger effects of policy on participation, relative to the general population.
- The Elderly Simplified Application Process (ESAP) – which simplifies the entire process for those 60 years and older by streamlining the verification process, waiving the recertification interview, and extending benefits to 36 months – works as intended and facilitates access to SNAP benefits for those aged 60 or over.
- The Standard Medical Deduction (SMD), however – which simplifies the reporting of medical expenses for SNAP – has a negative impact on SNAP receipt for the general population and for those with work-limiting disabilities.

SNAP policy and its impact on SNAP participation are centrally important to understanding the wellbeing of lower-income OASDI beneficiaries. Approximately one quarter of all SNAP participants (eleven million people in 2015) have a functional or work-limiting condition. About 14 percent of SNAP participants are seniors.

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