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A Comparison of the Characteristics and Spending Patterns of Food Stamp Recipients and Nonrecipients

Abstract

[Excerpt]

The Food Stamp Program is intended to assist eligible low income households to purchase food so that they can maintain a nutritious diet. Food Stamp benefits are distributed in the form of paper coupons or Electronic Benefit Cards. Food Stamp benefits can be used only to buy authorized food items at stores designated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This report summarizes the characteristics and expenditures of consumer units (CUs) classified according to whether Food Stamps are received, and whether the CU includes minors (members under 18 years of age).

Keywords

low income, spending, food stamp, comparison

Comments

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A comparison of the characteristics and spending patterns of Food Stamp recipients and nonrecipients

The Food Stamp Program is intended to assist eligible low income households to purchase food so that they can maintain a nutritious diet. Food Stamp benefits are distributed in the form of paper coupons or Electronic Benefit Cards. Food Stamp benefits can be used only to buy authorized food items at stores designated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This report summarizes the characteristics and expenditures of consumer units¹ (CUs) classified according to whether Food Stamps are received, and whether the CU includes minors (members under 18 years of age).

In 1998, CUs receiving Food Stamps made up 5 percent of all consumer units, and 67 percent of those included minors.² In contrast, 34 percent of CUs that did not receive Food Stamps included minors. The average value of Food Stamps received by CUs with minors, \$2,255, is 15 percent of their income before taxes, 13 percent of average total expenditures, and 55 percent of food expenditures. (See table on reverse side.) In comparison, the average value of Food Stamps received by CUs without minors, \$639, is 7 percent of their income before taxes, 6 percent of average total expen-

ditures, and 30 percent of food expenditure. Food Stamp CUs with minors received an average of \$4,806 in public assistance and Supplemental Security Income, with the value of Food Stamps comprising 47 percent of that amount. Food Stamp CUs without minors received an average of \$2,290 in public assistance and Supplemental Security Income, with the value of Food Stamps comprising 28 percent. Non-Food Stamp CUs received an average of \$137 in public assistance and Supplemental Security Income.

Characteristics

Demographics. Food Stamp CUs with minors averaged 4.1 persons in the household, with 2.4 persons under age 18. Non-Food Stamp CUs with minors averaged 4.0 persons in the household, with 1.8 persons under age 18. Among CUs with minors, 82 percent of Food Stamp CUs have a female reference person, compared with 38 percent for non-Food Stamp CUs. About 41 percent of the reference persons of Food Stamp CUs are black and about 19 percent are Hispanic; for non-Food Stamp CUs, 14 percent are black and 12 percent are Hispanic. Among the four groups, non-Food Stamp CUs with minors have the highest aver-

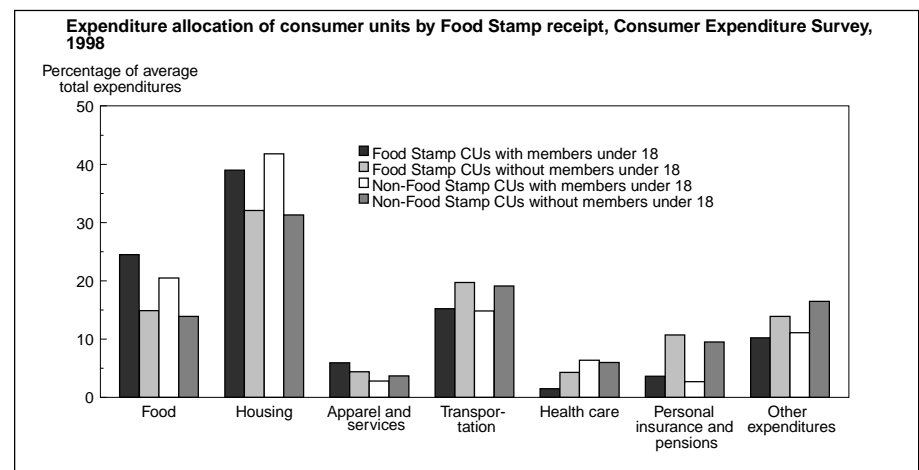
age number of earners per household (two persons), twice the number of earners as in Food Stamp CUs with minors.

Composition. The relationships between the reference person and other members of a CU differ depending on whether minors are present in the CU, or if the CU receives Food Stamps. "Husband and wife with own or adopted children" households comprise 23 percent of Food Stamp CUs with minors, compared with 68 percent of non-Food Stamp CUs with minors. Single-parent households constitute about 45 percent of Food Stamp CUs with minors, compared with 14 percent of non-Food Stamp CUs with minors. Of CUs in which minors are present, 15 percent of those receiving Food Stamps have a grandparent, sibling, or other relative as the reference person, compared with 5 percent for non-Food Stamp CUs. Food Stamp CUs have a higher proportion of singles, 74 percent, than do non-Food Stamp CUs, 44 percent.

Participation in free food programs. The Consumer Expenditure Survey also asks respondents if they receive free food from private and public welfare agencies. Participation rates in such programs are as follows: 14 percent of

¹ A *consumer unit* includes (1) members of a household related by blood, marriage, adoption or other legal arrangement; (2) a person living alone or sharing a household with others but who is responsible for at least two of the following three major types of expenses—food, housing, and other expenses; or (3) two or more persons living together who pool their income to make joint expenditure decisions. In this report, the terms *CU* and *household* are used interchangeably. A *reference person* is the first member mentioned by the respondent when asked "to start with the name of the person or one of the persons who owns or rents the home." It is with respect to this person that the relationship of the other CU members is determined.

² Due to the 3-month reference period of the quarterly Interview component of the Consumer Expenditure Survey, the data for this report include data for October 1997 through November 1998; this effectively constitutes 12 months of data due to the rotating sample design of the survey.



food stamp CUs without minors, 10 percent of Food Stamp CUs with minors, and about 1 percent of non-Food Stamp CUs.

Expenditures

Average total expenditures of \$42,617 by non-Food Stamp CUs with minors are about 2.5 times greater than those of Food Stamp CUs with minors; average total expenditures of \$30,953 by non-Food Stamp CUs without minors are about 2.9 times greater than those of Food Stamp CUs without minors. Housing, food, and transportation comprised 79 percent of average total expenditures for Food Stamp

CUs with minors, 67 percent for non-Food Stamp CUs with minors, 77 percent for Food Stamp CUs without minors, and 64 percent for non-Food Stamp CUs without minors. (See chart on reverse side.) Both Food Stamp CUs and non-Food Stamp CUs allocated the largest share of total expenditures to housing—an average of 36 percent for Food Stamp CUs. The second largest expenditure category for Food Stamp CUs is food—an average of 20 percent. The second largest expenditure category for non-Food Stamp CUs is transportation — an average of 17 percent, about the same as for Food Stamp CUs.

For further information on the data presented here, contact Lucilla Tan at (202)691-6900. For general information about the data source, the Consumer Expenditure Survey, send email to cexinfo@bls.gov. To find Consumer Expenditure Survey data on the Internet, access <http://stats.bls.gov/csxhome.htm>, the BLS homepage. Material in this publication is in the public domain, and with appropriate credit, may be reproduced without permission. This information is available to sensory impaired individuals upon request. Voice phone: (202) 691-5200; Federal Relay Service: 1-800-877-8339.

Expenditures and characteristics of consumer units (CUs), by Food Stamp status and by presence of members under age 18, Consumer Expenditure Survey, 1998

Item	All CUs	Food Stamp CUs		Non-Food Stamp CUs		Item	All CUs	Food Stamp CUs		Non-Food Stamp CUs	
		With members under 18	Without members under 18	With members under 18	Without members under 18			With members under 18	Without members under 18	With members under 18	Without members under 18
Number of consumer units (in 000s)	106,959	3,861	1,946	34,679	66,473	Consumer unit characteristics					
Income before taxes	\$41,244	\$15,172	\$9,177	\$52,767	\$37,731	Average number in consumer unit:					
Public assistance, Supplemental Security Income	\$332	\$4,807	\$2,290	\$150	\$123	Persons					
Food Stamps	\$89	\$2,255	\$639	\$0	\$0	Children under 18					
Income after taxes	\$37,970	\$15,135	\$9,100	\$48,860	\$34,507	Percent distribution:					
Average total expenditures	\$33,856	\$16,910	\$10,552	\$42,617	\$30,953	Husband and wife with own/adopted children					
Percent distribution:						Husband and wife with sibling, grandchildren					
Food	14.5	24.5	14.9	20.5	13.9	Husband and wife only					
Housing	31.8	39.0	32.1	41.8	31.3	Single parent					
Transportation	19.3	15.2	19.7	14.8	19.1	Single					
Other expenditures	34.4	21.3	33.3	23.0	35.7	Reference person is a relative					
						Other					

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