

Only 12% of California's Poorest Adults Receive Food Stamps, One Million Lack Adequate Food

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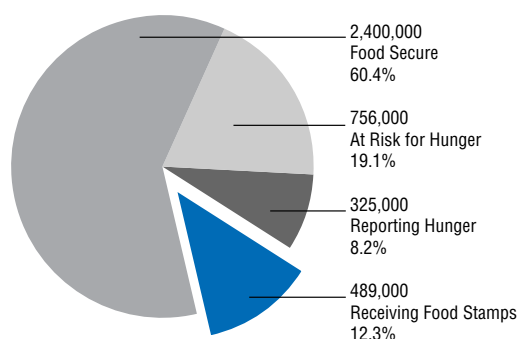
July 2003

The Food Stamp Program is established by Congress as a defense against hunger.¹ Eligibility for the program is based on several factors that include income, assets, and immigration and citizenship status. In this fact sheet we estimate population sizes and describe differences between food stamp recipients and non-recipients among California adults, ages 18-64. These estimates are based on data collected in the 2001 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS 2001).²

To simplify the task of estimating the food stamp eligibility of California's non-elderly adults, those below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) may be broadly defined as "income eligible."³ Income is of central importance since food stamps are intended to help prevent hunger and allow low-income families to buy nutritious food. We further limit the analysis to adults less than 65 years of age due to data constraints among the elderly respondents.

Based on the above criteria, we estimate the number of poor adults under age 65 who are potentially eligible for the Food Stamp Program to be almost four million (3,978,000). This estimate includes those who may be ineligible for reasons other than income, such as immigration and SSI statuses. Of the nearly four million income-eligible adults, only 12.3 percent (489,000) report receiving food stamps while 87.7 percent (3.5 million) are not receiving food stamps. In addition to those who believe they are ineligible for reasons other than income and therefore did not apply, an unknown number may be unaware of the program or may have an application pending. This information was not collected by the survey.

About one in four (one million) of the four million income-eligible adults report not receiving food stamps and at the same time report having inadequate or unreliable access to nutritious food (i.e., being "food insecure").⁴ Among these non-recipient



Gray areas represent people not receiving food stamps

food-insecure adults, 325,000 report hunger, and the remaining 756,000 are at risk for hunger (Exhibit 1).

Adults who are not receiving food stamps have slightly higher incomes than do food stamp recipients, although both groups are below 130% FPL. While two out of three (68.7%) of the 3.5 million non-recipients have household incomes below the poverty level, nearly all of the 489,000 food stamp recipients (98.1%) are below poverty (Exhibit 2). Non-recipients are more likely to be working at a job than are those receiving food stamps (59.9% vs. 34.8%). About half (51.4%) of those receiving food stamps are not in the labor force.⁵

Approximately half (48%) of the non-recipients report living in households with children, compared to four out of five (83.5%) food stamp recipients (see Exhibit 2). Non-recipients are slightly more likely to be urban residents than are recipients (87% vs. 83%).

Non-recipients are considerably less likely to report participation in other public assistance programs. Specifically, only 2% of the non-recipients report receiving TANF/CalWORKs, and about 19.5% have Medi-Cal coverage. By comparison, 58% of the food stamp recipients receive TANF/CalWORKs and 81% have Medi-Cal (see Exhibit 2). These differences

EXHIBIT 1:
*Adults Below 130%
Federal Poverty Level,
Ages 18-64*
Source: 2001 California
Health Interview Survey

1 USDA Food and Nutrition Service. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/>

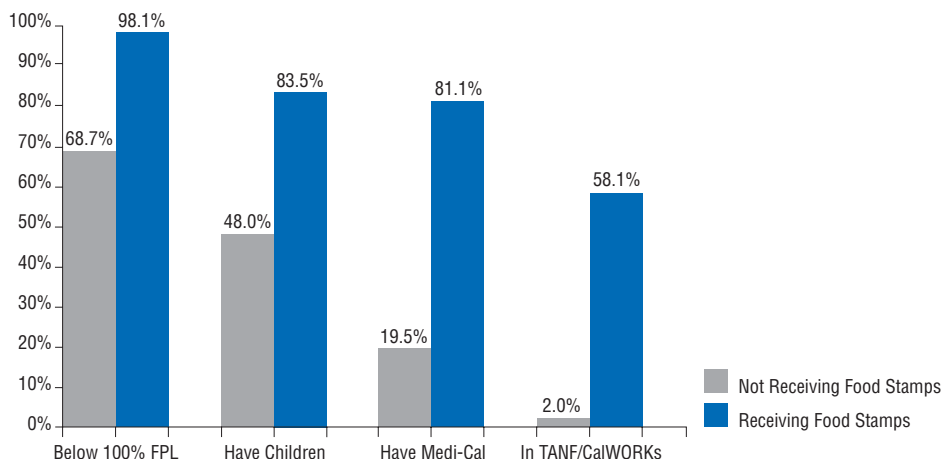
2 The California Department of Social Services estimated 652,389 households received food stamps in 2001. [Food Stamp Household Characteristics Survey. California Department of Social Services, Research and Development Division. 2001.] CHIS 2001 estimates that the total adult population of all ages receiving food stamps is 648,000. The CHIS estimate is not of households but of adults.

3 The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) varies by household income and household size. In 2001, the poverty threshold (100% FPL) was \$9,044 for one person, \$11,559 for a family of two, and \$14,129 for a family of three.

4 Food secure and food insecure with and without hunger are designations determined by a series of standardized questions developed by the Food Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). [Bickel G, Nord M, Price C, Hamilton W, Cook J. Guide to Measuring Household Food Security, Revised 2000. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. March 2000.]

5 These are persons who are both not working and not actively looking for work.

EXHIBIT 2:
*Comparison of Non-Recipients and Recipients of Food Stamps: Poverty, Children, and Public Program Participation, Ages 18-64**
Source: 2001 California Health Interview Survey



All differences are statistically significant at $p < .001$

*Adults below 130% FPL

may suggest a networking effect among participants in public assistance programs. In seeking help, low-income adults may more likely be connected to the Food Stamp Program through contact with social workers and other program staff.

Among all four million income-eligible adults, 55 percent (2.2 million) are U.S. citizens and not receiving food stamps. Another 33 percent (1.3 million) are non-citizens and not receiving food stamps (Exhibit 3). Some of the non-citizen adults may be ineligible for

that for every low-income adult under age 65 receiving food stamps, there are many more who may be eligible and may need food assistance. Clearly, the Food Stamp Program in California needs to increase its efforts to reach the population it is intended to protect.

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Acknowledgements

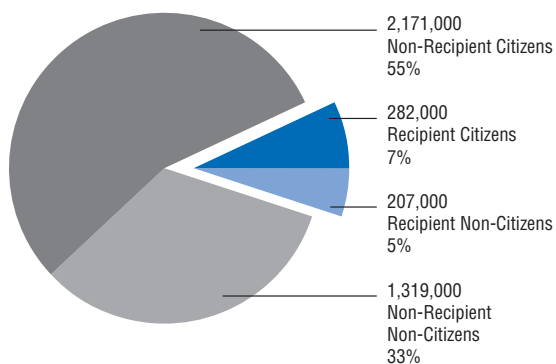
The authors appreciate the contributions of reviewers Gail Harrison, PhD, Lester Breslow, PhD, Laura Lund, and E. Richard Brown, PhD.

Data Source

All findings reported in this fact sheet are based on data from the 2001 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS 2001). CHIS is a large, population-based random-digit-dial (RDD) survey on health, access to care, and public program participation. The analysis for this fact sheet is conducted with the CHIS sample of 7,773 non-elderly adults (ages 18-64) whose household incomes are below 130% of the Federal poverty level, of whom 1,164 self-reported to be recipients of food stamps. Component estimates may not add up to the resulting total estimate due to missing responses. All statements on estimate differences are statistically significant at an alpha level of 0.05.

The California Health Interview Survey is a collaboration of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, the California Department of Health Services, and the Public Health Institute. Funding for CHIS 2001 was provided by the California Department of Health Services, The California Endowment, the National Cancer Institute, the California Children and Families Commission, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Indian Health Service. For more information on CHIS, visit www.chis.ucla.edu.

EXHIBIT 3:
Non-Recipients and Recipients of Food Stamps by Citizenship Status Among Adults Below 130% Federal Poverty Level, Ages 18-64
Source: 2001 California Health Interview Survey



food stamps due to their undocumented immigrant status. Many of these adults, though, may have children who are eligible. It is worth noting that the majority of both non-recipients and recipients are U.S. citizens, although the non-recipients include a slightly larger proportion of citizens than do food stamp recipients (62.2% vs. 57.7%).

The Food Stamp Program is part of this country's safety net for low-income households and a defense against hunger. However, the CHIS 2001 data suggest



The California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) funded this research and fact sheet.

The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, the California Health Interview Survey collaborators, the Regents of the University of California, California Food Policy Advocates, or other CHIS 2001 funding organizations.

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Editor-in-Chief: E. Richard Brown, PhD; Communications Assistant: Celeste Maglan;

Editing/Production Services: Sheri Penney, Penney Layne Productions; Graphic Production: Donna Bellock, Ikkanda Design Group

The UCLA Center for Health Policy Research is based in the UCLA School of Public Health and is also affiliated with the UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research

FS2003-5