

Recent Trends in Food Stamp Usage and Implications for Increased Work Requirements

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The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called the Food Stamp Program) provides food assistance to low-income individuals and families. With the program up for renewal, it is the subject of debates focused on the work effort of recipients, with an eye toward expanding work requirements to a larger group of recipients.

Existing SNAP work requirements have focused on “Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents” (often referred to as ABAWDs), where an “able-bodied” adult is currently defined as an 18- to 49-year old without a disability (with disability generally indicated by receiving some state or federal disability benefit). Critics of the program want to impose SNAP work requirements on a broader population that they consider “work capable”—including older adults and parents of dependent children—arguing that “work-capable” adults are increasingly taking up SNAP benefits while working less. For example, the Foundation for Government Accountability (FGA), an advocate for SNAP work requirements, alleges that 2 out of 3 SNAP recipients whom they deem “work capable” do not participate in the workforce.¹ Similar claims surface in a recent report by the President’s Council of Economic Advisers.² Driven in part by these criticisms, the U.S. House of Representatives’ version of the farm bill (which reauthorizes the SNAP program) institutes work requirements for all SNAP recipients that are considered “work capable.” This definition includes “able-bodied” adults through age 59 (as opposed to 49 under current law) as well as those with dependents ages 6 and older. In light of the far-reaching impacts that these changes to work requirements would have, this research brief provides new empirical evidence regarding benefit take up and work effort of “work-capable” adults. We find that:

(1) “Work-capable” adults comprise about 31 percent of the population that receives SNAP at some point during the year; they do not represent a growing segment of the SNAP caseload.

(2) While individuals may receive SNAP during periods of unemployment or low work hours, approximately 2 out of 3 “work-capable” adults who receive SNAP at some point during the year also work at some point during that year, and 84 percent of “work-capable” adults live in households in which someone worked during the year. Many SNAP recipients turn to the safety net at times of unemployment and then return to work.

1. See the recent FGA article that catalogues their claims about workforce participation by SNAP recipients: <https://thefga.org/commentary/6-in-10-able-bodied-food-stamp-recipients-do-not-work-at-all-that-has-to-change/>.

2. See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/cea-report-expanding-work-requirements-non-cash-welfare-programs/>.



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(3) Among “work-capable” SNAP recipients who are not working, 1 out of 3 either have health limitations or live with a family member who does. Of all adults who are “work capable” and not working, some of whom also live with health limitations, many are in school (20 percent), caring for family members (29 percent), or simply cannot find work due to local employment conditions (27 percent).

Data and Methods

In order to provide a broad analysis of SNAP participation and work effort throughout the year, we use nationally-representative survey data from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS-ASEC), 2011-2015. We augment our CPS-ASEC data with imputed SNAP variables from the Transfer Income Model (TRIM), produced by the Urban Institute, which uses simulations based on administrative rules to account for under-reported SNAP participation as well as to impute indicators for SNAP eligibility, disability status, and classifications such as ABAWD status. We use the most recent five years of data available from TRIM, which happens to coincide with recovery years after the Great Recession when many states were allowed to waive work restrictions on ABAWDs given the poor economy.

Given that these data represent participation at any point in a given year, the statistics reported here will necessarily differ from official SNAP statistics created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture using monthly quality control data. Others have used data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to study SNAP participation, which offers a complement to our results and exhibits generally higher work participation rates. Both CPS-ASEC and SIPP have an advantage over typically available administrative data in that they provide a broader view of work effort over a longer period of time.

We define “work-capable” adults as individuals aged 18 to 59 who are considered non-disabled by SNAP guidelines and have no dependents under age 6. The main indication that an individual is disabled according to SNAP guidelines is the presence of some state or federal disability assistance income. For our definition of “work capable”, we consider someone disabled if the individual receives such disability income in the CPS-ASEC data, or if the individual is coded as disabled according to the TRIM data for Supplemental Security Income disability status.

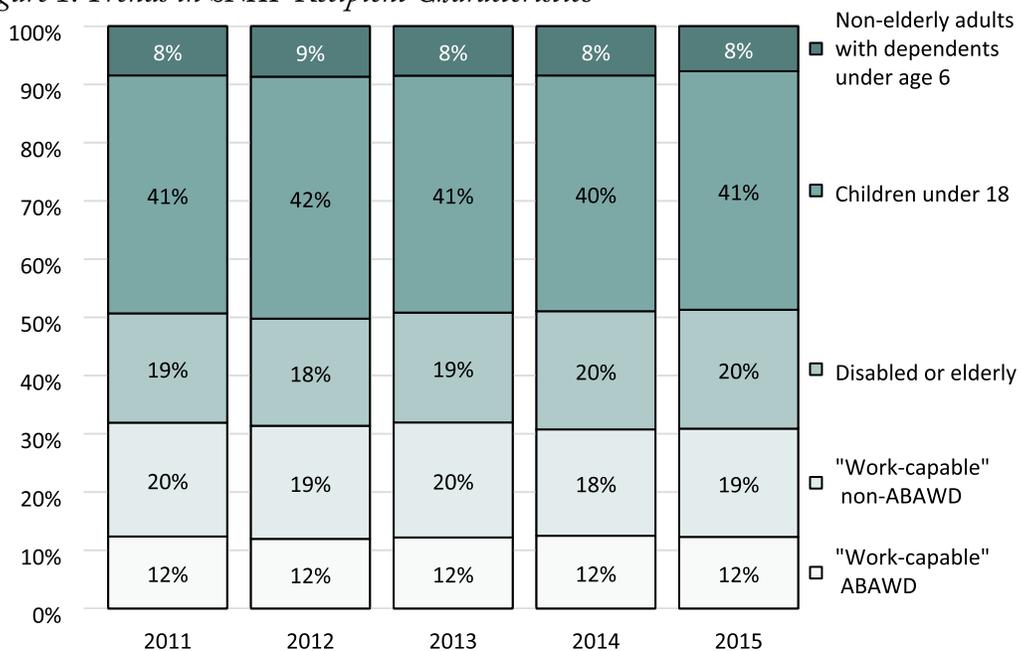
“Work-Capable” Adults do not Represent a Growing Share of the SNAP Caseload

We first examine the prevalence of “work-capable” adults as a percentage of the total population receiving SNAP benefits at some point during the year. (See Data and Methods box for details.) Figure 1 shows SNAP participation for the years 2011 to 2015. The total proportion deemed “work capable” is about 31 percent, which remains stable over time. In fact, SNAP caseloads have decreased between 2011 and 2015 (see Appendix Table A1), thus the number of “work-capable” adults receiving SNAP benefits has declined while their share of the population has remained constant. Further, the majority of “work-capable” adults do work at some point during the year and often live in families with someone who works (as discussed below).

Our results also show that the “work-capable” subgroup of ABAWDs (i.e., those that are currently subject to work requirements) make up a relatively small proportion of all SNAP recipients. Nationally, only about 12 percent of all SNAP recipients (or about 7 million recipients nationwide) are classified as ABAWDs, and this population does not appear to be growing over time. The additional population of “work-capable” adults who would be newly subject to work requirements under the House farm bill (those ages 50 to 59 and those with dependents ages 6 and over) make up about 19 percent of all SNAP recipients, and this population is also not a growing segment of the SNAP caseload.

Importantly, about half of all SNAP recipients are comprised of children and their caretakers, and another fifth of all recipients are either elderly or disabled. Moreover, our analysis of the SNAP caseload in recent years demonstrates that SNAP benefits are not increasingly going to “work-capable” adults.³

Figure 1: Trends in SNAP Recipient Characteristics



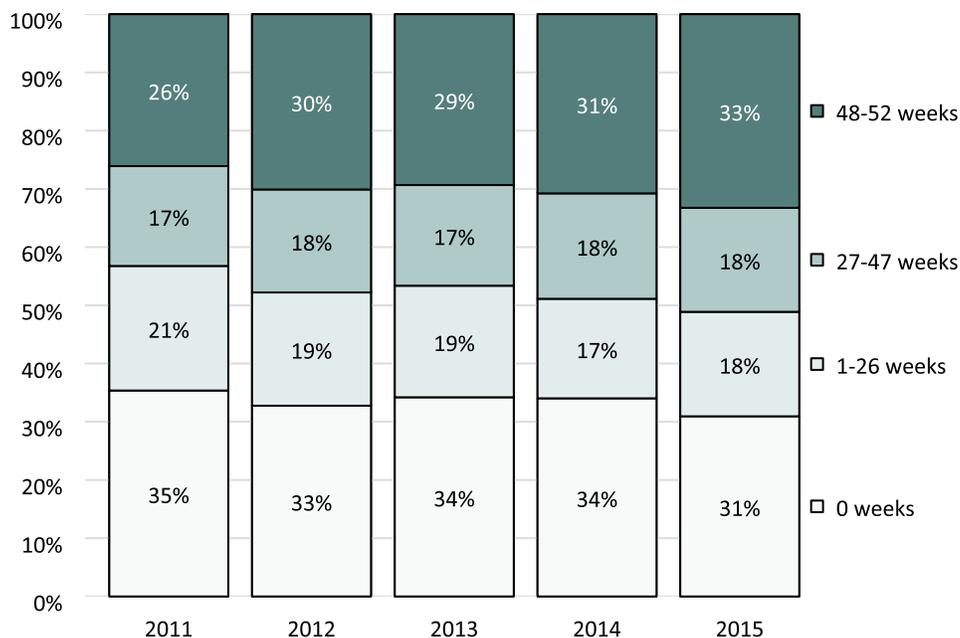
3. The Council of Economic Advisers' recent July 2018 report does show an increase in SNAP participation among “work-capable” adults beginning around 2007. This change, however, is consistent with increasing SNAP participation across the population during the Great Recession. Further, based on the CEA's own evidence, the increase in SNAP participation among “work-capable” adults was smaller than the same increase for the total population during that time.

Workforce Participation by SNAP Recipients is not Waning

About 3 in 10 SNAP recipients in recent years can be classified as “work-capable” adults, and this population is the subject of the recent claims about lagging workforce participation among SNAP recipients. We thus next examine the work effort exhibited by this population.

Many individuals and families rely on SNAP during periods of unemployment, but nevertheless exhibit significant work effort over the course of a year. Figure 2 shows the number of weeks worked for the “work-capable” adult population who received some SNAP during the year. About 67 percent of these SNAP recipients have worked at some point during the year. Among those who did not work during the year, on average, 20 percent were going to school, 29 percent were taking care of home or family, 27 percent could not find work, 8 percent were ill or disabled (under a broader definition than is used for SNAP classification), and the remaining 16 percent were not working for other reasons (see Figure A1 in the appendix). This analysis relies on one year of data, but when looking over a longer time period the workforce participation among “work-capable” adults is even greater. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities’ analysis of SIPP data from 2011 to 2013 reveals that 74 percent of non-disabled, non-elderly adult SNAP recipients work at some point in the 12 months preceding or following the months that they received SNAP.⁴ Taken together, these data show that only a small portion of the SNAP caseload is made up of “work-capable” adults with no employment (about 11 percent of all recipients).

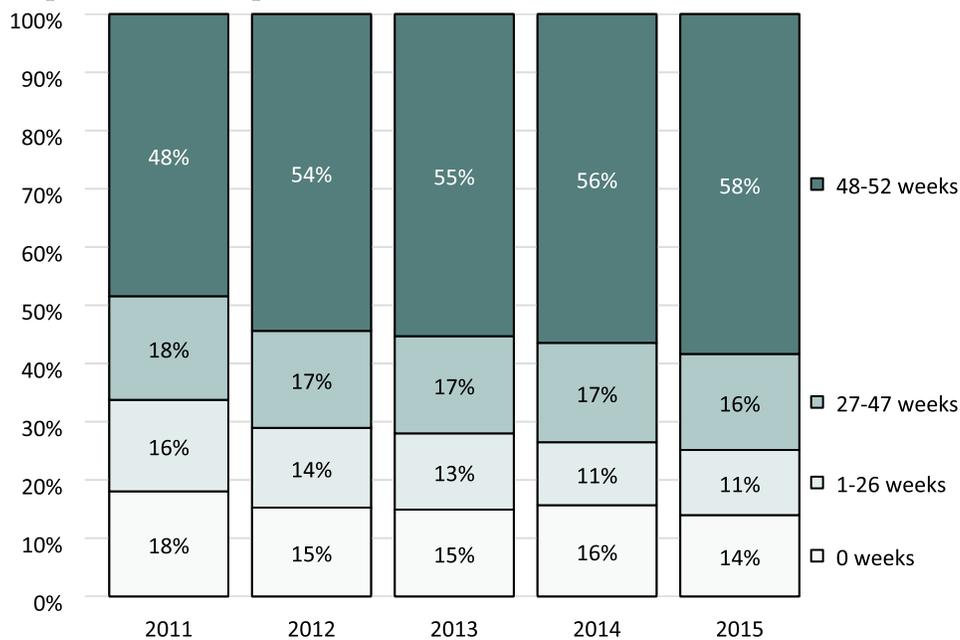
Figure 2: Total Weeks Worked among “Work-Capable” Adult SNAP Recipients



4. See <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/3-15-18fa.pdf>. Note that this usage of “non-disabled” corresponds to receipt of disability benefits as defined in this brief, which includes some people who may in fact be unable to work because of a disability.

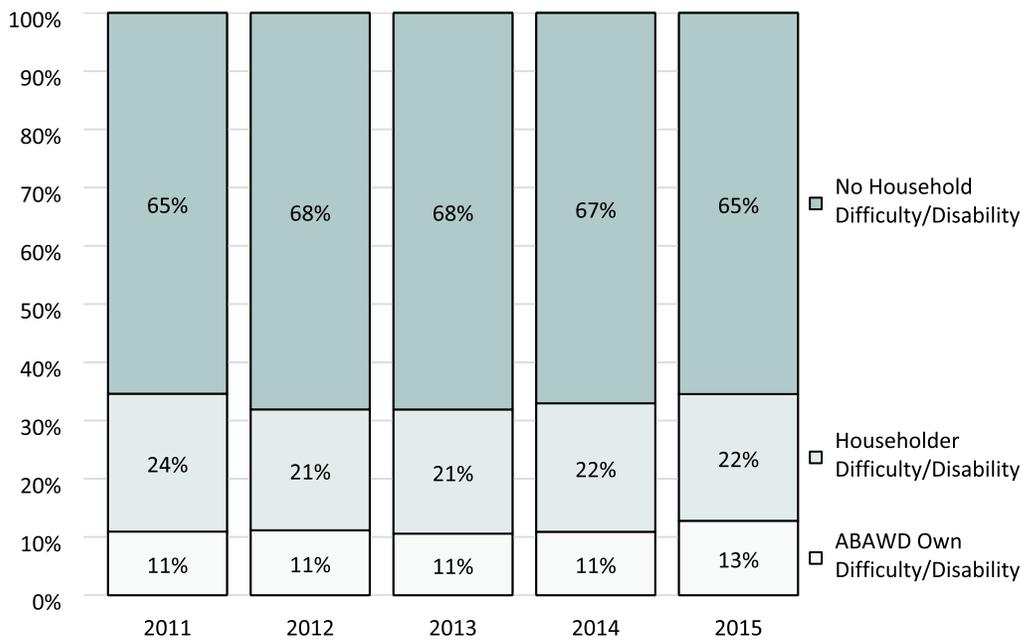
SNAP recipients often live in family units with other family members who work. About 67 percent of “work-capable” adults live with others in the household. The majority of “work-capable” adults live in households in which someone works at least 48 weeks of the year (58 percent in total for 2015), and this group has grown since 2011 as the economy continues recovering after the Great Recession (see Figure 3). On average during this time period, about 84 percent of “work-capable” adults lived in families in which someone worked during the year.

Figure 3: Most Weeks Worked among Any Household Member for SNAP Units With a “Work-Capable” Adult Recipient



Another issue with the classification of work capable is the definition of able-bodied. Not all “work-capable” SNAP recipients can truly be classified as “able-bodied.” For instance, “work-capable” adults may report some difficulty or limitation related to hearing, vision, memory, mobility, personal care, or other physical difficulties, yet they may either not qualify for or otherwise choose not to take up federal or state disability benefits. Further, these “work-capable” adults may live in households where another member has some health limitation or disability. Figure 4 shows that, on average, about 11 percent of “work-capable” adults report some limitations, and 22 percent live with a householder with a difficulty or disability. Note that the total percentage of “work-capable” adults with some health limitation is greater than the 8 percent of “work-capable” adults who are not working due to an illness or disability because individuals may have multiple reasons for not working, while the survey only records one reason.

Figure 4: Household Difficulty/Disability for SNAP Units with a Non-Working, “Work-Capable” Adult Recipient



Conclusion

According to our analysis, the concerns raised by the proponents of strict work requirements for SNAP participants are unfounded. Recent trends among “work-capable” SNAP recipients do not indicate increases in SNAP participation or decreases in work effort. In fact, a majority of “work-capable” SNAP recipients participated in work at some point during the year, and those who did not work often lived with a family member who did, or they were productively enrolled in school or caring for family members who might be very young, elderly, ill or disabled. Both the President’s Council of Economic Advisers and partisan groups like the FGA imply that longer-term trends in the work effort of SNAP recipients are problematic. But our results reinforce a body of research indicating that families receive SNAP in times of distress and unemployment, or times for which the safety net was designed. When one takes a longer view, most SNAP recipients exhibit significant work effort, this doesn’t appear to be changing much in recent years, and even those not working may have good reasons for why they are out of the labor force during hard times. SNAP benefits are meant to supplement family budgets for individuals and families when times are tough, and a fair accounting of the evidence suggests that this is exactly how the program is working.

Appendix

Table A1. SNAP Participation (in millions), 2011-2015				
Year	"Work-Capable" Adults		Total	
	Number of Recipients	Number Eligible	Number of Recipients	Number Eligible
2011	18.1	25.9	56.8	80.5
2012	18.2	27.5	58.0	83.3
2013	18.6	26.9	58.3	82.5
2014	17.2	26.6	56.1	83.3
2015	17.2	25.3	55.8	80.6
Average	17.9	26.4	57.0	82.0

Note: Participation here corresponds to CPS-ASEC/TRIM data representative of any time during the year, which differs from official USDA statistics based on monthly quality control data.

Figure A1: Reason for Not Working among Non-Working, "Work-Capable" Adult SNAP Recipients

