

Highlights of GAO-04-346, a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Eligible working families are believed to participate in the Food Stamp Program at a lower rate than the eligible population as a whole. As a result, many federal, state, and local officials believe the program is not living up to its potential as a component of the nation's work support system. This report examines: (1) what proportion of eligible working families participate in the program and what family characteristics are associated with a family's participation; (2) what factors may be acting as impediments to a working family's decision to participate in the program; and (3) what steps are being taken, or have been suggested, to help eligible low-income working families participate in the program while ensuring program integrity.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture direct the Food and Nutrition Service to: (1) encourage states to collect and report on the results of their outreach and other efforts to increase participation among eligible working families and (2) disseminate the lessons learned from those efforts to other states and localities.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-346](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-346).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Kay Brown at (202) 512-3674 or brownke@gao.gov.

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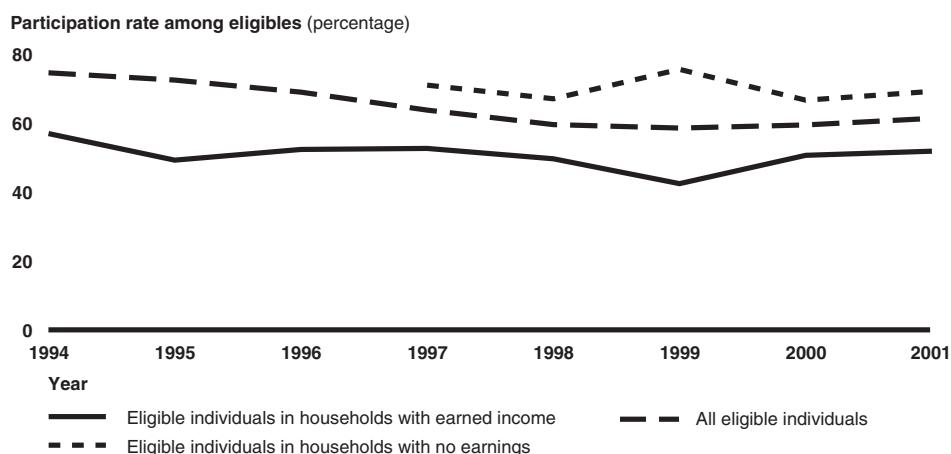
# FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

## Steps Have Been Taken to Increase Participation of Working Families, but Better Tracking of Efforts Is Needed

### What GAO Found

In 2001, an estimated 52 percent of eligible individuals in working families participated in the Food Stamp Program compared with about 70 percent of eligible members of nonworking families.

#### Participation Rates Are Lower for Working Families than for Nonworking Families



Source: The Food and Nutrition Service and GAO.

Participating working families are more likely to receive greater food stamp benefit amounts than those eligible working families that do not participate. Also, participating working families were more likely to participate in other government assistance programs and to rent rather than own their home.

Factors that can impede an eligible working family's participation in the program include whether the family is aware of the program's existence and eligibility criteria and whether a family considers the program's administrative process—including having to make frequent trips to a food stamp office during working hours and providing documentation of income—overly burdensome. However, there are some potentially significant benefits, including error and fraud prevention, to some of the administrative requirements. Evidence also suggests that some families weigh the perceived burdens of participation against the benefits of doing so and perceive a stigma attached to receiving food stamps.

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and several states and localities have taken or suggested steps to address the impediments to participation in the program for working families, while also considering ways to balance easier participation with program integrity. These efforts include increasing food stamp outreach, adopting new administrative processes to ease participation and reduce program error, developing tools to help families estimate food stamp benefit amount, and re-naming the program to reduce the stigma associated with food stamps. Compiling a complete picture of these steps was not possible, however, because FNS does not systematically track these efforts, and the outcomes of their use are still largely unknown.