

Participants in Assistance Programs

How many Americans take part in a major means-tested government assistance program?

To answer this question, this Brief uses three different types of participation rates: *average* monthly participation in both 1990 and 1991, the percentage receiving assistance for a *minimum* of 1 month in each year, and the proportion receiving benefits during the *entire* 2-year span. Also explored are which groups were the most likely participants, the typical length of participation, and the amount of benefits received. The data were collected by the Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP).

Major means-tested assistance programs include Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), General Assistance, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), food stamps, Medicaid, Federal or State rent assistance, and public housing.

In a typical month, about 1 in 8 of us are program participants.

Twenty-nine million Americans (12 percent) participated in one or more major means-tested government assistance programs in an *average* month during 1990 and

31 million participated in 1991. More persons participated for a *minimum* of 1 month (36 million, or 15 percent, in 1990 and 38 million, or 16 percent, in 1991). (The latter two proportions are not significantly different.) And some (18 million, or 8 percent) received benefits during *every* month of 1990 and 1991. Those who began to take part during the 2-year period participated for a median of 8 months during this time.

Participation in Medicaid and food stamps programs rises.

As the graph below shows, Medicaid and food stamps were the most heavily utilized major means-tested programs. Between 1990 and 1991, average monthly participation rates rose for food stamps and Medicaid, but remained statistically unchanged for the other programs.

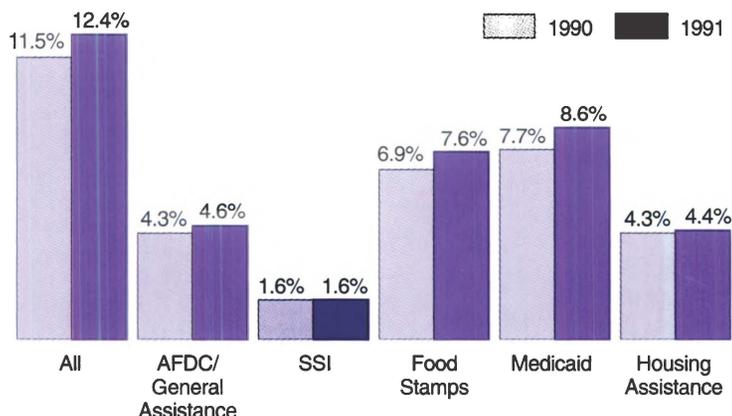
Looking at the median length of time people participated, we find that housing assistance was tops. Those beginning spells during the 1990-1992 period were participants for a median of 16 months over this span. The corresponding medians for Medicaid, AFDC/General Assistance, and food stamps, although not significantly different from one another, were 11, 10, and 9 months, respectively.

Poverty and participation are closely related.

Poor persons were about 10 times as likely as the nonpoor to have been major means-tested program participants in an average month in 1990 (53 percent compared with 5 percent). Nearly 3 in 4 poor persons (71 percent) participated in at least 1 month in 1990; and about half (52 percent) took part during all of 1990 and 1991. The corresponding proportions for the

Medicaid and Food Stamps Are the Most Heavily Used Major Programs

Average monthly participation rates for different major means-tested government assistance programs: 1990 and 1991



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nonpoor were 8 percent and 3 percent, respectively.

In general, persons took part in programs longer if they were poor. Those who began to receive housing assistance sometime after the start of 1990, for example, received it for a median of 23 months if they were poor at the time, 9 months if they were not.

The graph at right shows average monthly participation rates for various demographic and socio-economic groups. The groups with higher-than-average participation rates had relatively high poverty rates as well.

A large share of many participants' income comes from benefits.

Median monthly family benefits from AFDC, General Assistance, SSI, and food stamps for participating persons totaled \$420 in 1990 and 1991. When income is defined to include money income plus the value of food stamps and WIC (Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children) benefits, one-half of participants received more than 50 percent of monthly income from means-tested programs in 1990. Nearly one-third received all their income from these programs. The corresponding 1991 percentages were not significantly different.

More information:

Dynamics of Economic Well-Being: Program Participation, 1990 to 1992. Current Population Reports, Series P70-41. Contact Customer Services (301-763-4100 or 301-457-4100 after December 16) for ordering information.

Contacts:

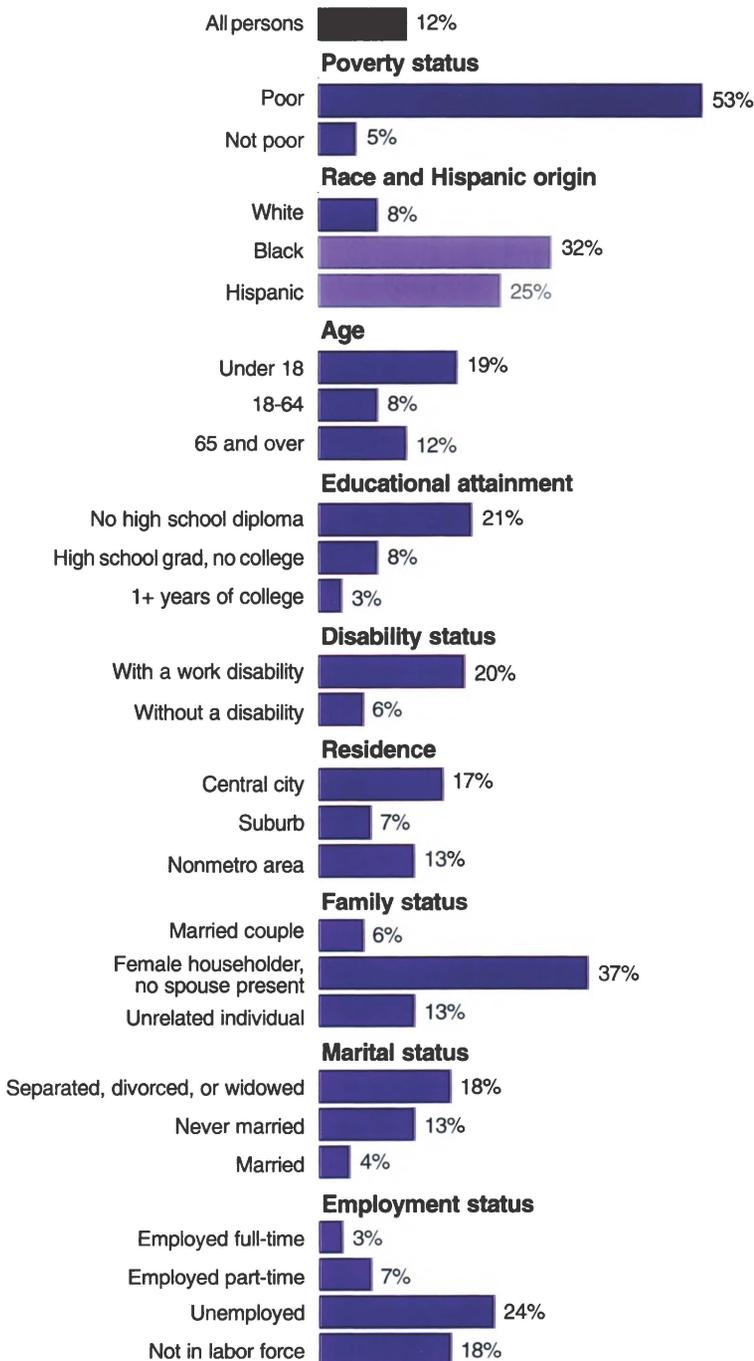
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This Brief is one of a series that presents information of current policy interest. It

What Are the Odds of Being a Program Participant?

Percent of persons who participated in a major means-tested government assistance program in an average month during 1990, by characteristic



Note: Disability status category pertains to individuals 15-69 years old. Educational attainment, marital status, and employment status categories pertain to persons 18 years old and over. Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

may include data from businesses, households, or other sources. All statistics are subject to sampling variability, as well as survey design flaws, respondent classification errors, and data processing mistakes. The Census Bureau has taken steps

to minimize errors, and analytical statements have been tested and meet statistical standards. However, because of methodological differences, use caution when comparing these data with data from other sources.