

**Nutrition Assistance for Older Adults**

About 3 in 10 adults age 60 and older live below two-times the federal poverty line, often defined as “low income.”<sup>i</sup> While most adults qualify for Social Security benefits at age 62, this program does not guarantee an income above the poverty line (Favreault 2010). Many low-income older adults seek help through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps), the cornerstone of the nation’s food assistance system. Some frail older adults get help through a local elderly nutrition program, such as home-delivered meals, or “Meals on Wheels” (MOW). As shown below, SNAP and MOW tend to complement each other.

**Use of Food Assistance Is Relatively Limited among Low-Income Seniors**

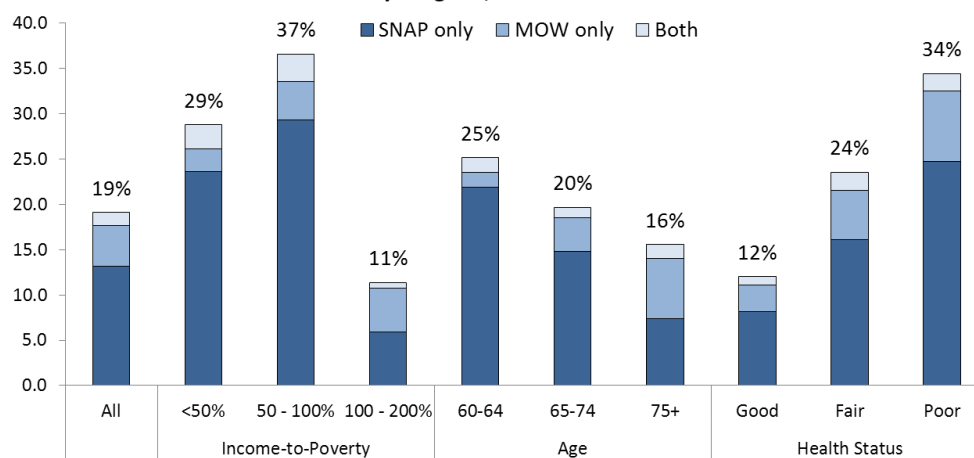
SNAP ensures that low-income households can pay for a minimally nutritious diet and MOW provides meals to homebound older adults. Older adults have relatively low SNAP participation rates, about 35 percent, compared with 67 percent for the program average (Leftin 2010). Prior studies point to the relatively low benefits for many older adults and the stigma attached to receiving benefits as two reasons why older adults do not apply for this help.

- About 2.7 million adults age 60 and older received, on average, \$128 per month in SNAP assistance in 2009 for a total cost of around \$4 billion (USDA 2010).
- Over 880,000 older adults received MOW in 2009 for a federal cost of \$214.5 million (AOA 2010).

About 2 in 10 low-income older adults received assistance from one of these programs during 2007 and 2008 (figure 1). This increases to nearly one in three older adults with incomes below one-half the poverty level. Only about 1 percent of low-income older adults report receipt of both benefits.

- Receipt of SNAP declines with age and receipt of MOW rises with age, presumably as a greater share of older adults become homebound.
- Low-income adults in poor health more often receive help from SNAP (25 percent) and MOW (8 percent) than those in better health, but only a small share (2 percent) of those in poor health receive help from both programs.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Low-Income Adults, Age 60+, Receiving Food Assistance, by Program, 2007 and 2008**



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2008 Health and Retirement Study.  
 Note: Low-income is defined as cash income below two-times the federal poverty level (FPL).

While a surprisingly small share of low-income older adults receive nutrition assistance, SNAP and MOW still fill an important need for food assistance among many low-income older adults. Another indicator of the significant need for food assistance among older adults is that 2.5 million older adults received help from food pantries and other emergency food outlets in 2008 (Mathematica 2010). State and federal efforts to increase SNAP usage among seniors by, for example, establishing automatic enrollment for those who receive Supplemental Security Income (cash assistance for adults age 65 and older with incomes substantially below poverty) should increase food assistance for seniors. Unfortunately, we know little about unmet nutrition needs among older adults and relatively little about how these sources of nutrition assistance intersect.

**SNAP.** (1) Eligibility: Households with gross incomes below 130 percent of poverty (\$13,500 per year for a single person living alone in 2009) and net incomes below 100 percent of poverty.<sup>ii</sup> (2) Benefit: The program assumes that households can contribute 30 percent of net income (gross income less deductions for expenses such as shelter and health care) toward the cost of a thrifty food plan and the SNAP benefit makes up the difference. For example, an older adult living alone with \$8,000 in cash income and \$4,000 in deductions would receive approximately \$1,200 in SNAP per year (the 2009 SNAP maximum benefit of \$2,400 less 30 percent of net income).

**MOW.** (1) Eligibility: Services are targeted to those with the greatest need, particularly low-income individuals and those at risk for institutionalization. Individuals must be age 60 and older and homebound or disabled and residing with a homebound older adult. (2) Home-delivered meals provide recipients with at least a third of their recommended dietary allowances and are free. (3) In 2009 AOA provided \$214.5 million, but costs are supplemented by state and local government and private donations.

## References

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<sup>i</sup> Authors' tabulations of the March 2010 Current Population Survey.

<sup>ii</sup> Recent or undocumented immigrants cannot receive these benefits except in a few states that pay for the benefits with state dollars.