UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY
CENTER FOR POVERTY RESEARCH

Discussion Paper Series
2025-09

ISSN: 1936-9379

The Evolution of Households with SNAP, 1979-2024

James P. Ziliak
University of Kentucky

December 2025

Preferred citation:
Ziliak, J. P. (2025, Dec.). The Evolution of Households with SNAP. *University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research Discussion Paper Series, DP2025-09*, Retrieved [Date] from https://ukcpr.uky.edu/cpr/research.

Author Correspondence
James P. Ziliak: <jziliak@uky.edu>

University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research
550 South Limestone Street, Lexington, KY 40506-0034
Phone: 859-257-6902; Email: ukcpr@uky.edu

https://ukcpr.uky.edu

EO/AA

The Evolution of Households with SNAP, 1979-2024

James P. Ziliak
Department of Economics and Center for Poverty Research
University of Kentucky

December 9, 2025

Abstract: I provide a descriptive portrait of the trends in participation and composition of households receiving assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey for the calendar years 1979-2024. I first present estimates of participation overall and by socioeconomic characteristics of the householder. The share of households receiving SNAP increased from 8% to 10% over the sample period, with the most notable increases in participation rates among householders with some college education or less, those with a disability, those without children or living alone, and those households with gross family incomes placing them in near poverty. I then focus on the composition of households receiving SNAP in comparison to the overall population of households, including the share of householders by age, race/ethnicity, education attainment, nativity, disability, employment, and income. The heads of households receiving SNAP have become more educated over time with those with at least some college education tripling to 40%, and they have become older as the share of heads age 60 and older has doubled since the Great Recession to become the largest share by age. Households with SNAP are smaller today than in the past, with growth in 1-person households coming at the expense of those with 4 or more people. There has been a secular decline in the share of households with SNAP with family incomes in poverty, meaning a growing share are those with incomes two to three times the federal poverty level. This is consistent with rising participation rates of those with disabilities and those age 60 and older, each of whom is exempt from the gross-income test for eligibility. Despite the aging of householders with SNAP, the share of households with labor-market earnings has held steady at about 60%, and earnings comprises the largest and growing share of household disposable incomes.

Acknowledgement: I am grateful for the helpful comments on an earlier draft from Craig Gundersen, Bradley Hardy, Colleen Heflin, Hilary Hoynes, Elizabeth Krause, Robert Moffitt, Diane Schanzenbach, Tim Smeeding, and Shelly Ver Ploeg. All errors are my own.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest food assistance program in the US social safety net serving nearly 42 million participants at a cost of $100 billion in federal fiscal year 2024.[1] Established in 1964 as the Food Stamp Program, and later renamed SNAP in 2008, the program offers monthly benefits to low-income and low-asset households to prepare and consume food in the home. Benefits are paid by the federal government, but the program is administered by the states and those costs are shared between federal and state governments. Perhaps the biggest change in program administration in recent decades came about after the 1996 welfare reform when the takeup rate in SNAP—participation among those eligible for assistance—plummeted from over 70 percent to just over 1 in 2. In a bid to increase participation among eligibles, states were given incentives to expand program outreach, which included such measures as the rollout of call centers and online applications, extending benefit recertification intervals, and extending or waiving asset tests for certain groups, among many others.[2] Two decades later the takeup rate has reached nearly 90%.[3]

In light of changes to SNAP program administration and eligibility, along with wider societal changes in population aging, education attainment, marriage, fertility, and gender composition of the labor force, in this paper I provide a descriptive portrait of the trends in participation and composition of households in the United States receiving assistance from SNAP. I take a long sweeping view of the program from the genesis of the modern Food Stamp Program to the present using data from the Current Population Survey Annual Social and

[1] See program data at URL: https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap
[2] Ziliak, James P. 2015. "Why Are So Many Americans on Food Stamps? The Role of the Economy, Policy, and Demographics." In SNAP Matters: How Food Stamps Affect Health and Well Being. J. Bartfeld, C. Gundersen, T. Smeeding, and J. Ziliak, (eds.), Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 18-48.
[3] Vigil, Alma, and Nima Rahimi. 2024. "Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Year 2020 and Fiscal Year 2022." Submitted by Mathematica to the Office of Policy Support, USDA Food and Nutrition Service, Alexandria, VA. URL: https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/ops-snap-trendsfy20-fy22-report.pdf

Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC) for survey years 1980-2025. I first present estimates of participation overall and by socioeconomic characteristics of the householder including geography, sex, race/ethnicity, education, age, nativity, disability, and poverty status. I do not restrict attention to those income and asset eligible, and thus I present population-level participation rates and not takeup rates among eligibles. I then focus on the same set of socioeconomic characteristics to examine in detail the composition of households receiving SNAP and compare these characteristics to the overall population of households.

The USDA has published an exhaustive annual report on the characteristics of SNAP households since 1975, and the material here differs in three key ways.[4] First, I provide population-level estimates of participation rates using nationally-representative household survey data. The USDA report is based on random audits of SNAP households as part of the SNAP Quality Control (SNAP-QC) System, and while it is nationally representative of SNAP households, it is not representative of all households like the CPS ASEC and thus cannot be used in isolation to produce participation rates. Second, and related, the CPS ASEC permits the direct comparison of the socioeconomic composition of all households to the subset of those receiving SNAP in the same data source. SNAP-QC data permits the latter, but not the former as it is necessary to go to another source like the ASEC to make such comparisons. Third, the unit of analysis in the SNAP-QC data is the SNAP household, which for program purposes is defined as a group of individuals procuring, preparing, and consuming food together, and the reference period is the month prior to the audit. The unit of analysis in the CPS ASEC is the household, defined as individuals sharing a common dwelling unit, and the reference period for resources is the prior calendar year. This means that a CPS household may have some members on the

[4] The annual USDA reports from 1997 onward are available at https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/snap/household-characteristics.

program, and others not on, or it may contain multiple SNAP households. That is, the CPS ASEC offers a broader look at the demographic and resource composition of the household in which SNAP benefits are received. The disadvantage of the CPS data, however, is that it is not possible to identify if a household contains multiple SNAP units, and it is prone to underreporting of program participation, though evidence suggests underreporting affects participation levels but not trends over time.[5] An appendix provides further discussion of SNAP-QC data.

The next section provides a brief background and history of the SNAP program. Section III describes the CPS ASEC data used in the analysis. I then provide in Section IV estimates of trends in participation overall, and by geography, race/ethnicity, education attainment, sex, presence of children, income, and other characteristics. The subsequent section provides a deeper look into the socioeconomic composition of all U.S. households in comparison to those households receiving SNAP. Section VI offers some concluding remarks.

II. Background on SNAP

The Food Stamp Act of 1964 established the Food Stamp Program (FSP) with the dual goals to bolster the agricultural economy and to improve the nutrition of low-income households. Participation by state and local governments was voluntary, and it took a decade for the program to roll out nationwide.[6] Monthly benefits were provided to qualifying households in the form of paper coupons, but it was necessary to purchase the coupons with cash in advance in the amount

[5] See Ziliak, James P. 2025. "Using survey-based regression imputation to address transfer underreporting in the CPS ASEC: Implications for Inequality and Poverty 2001-2024," for evidence that SNAP participation in the CPS ASEC closely tracks the trends in SNAP participation from administrative records, and hits population-weighted levels of participation in many years over the last two decades.

[6] For history of SNAP and benefit determination see Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. 2013. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Examining the Evidence to Define Benefit Adequacy. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; Hoynes, Hilary, and Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach. 2016. "US Food and Nutrition Programs." In Economics of Means-Tested Transfer Programs in the United States, R. Moffitt (ed.), Chicago: NBER and University of Chicago Press; and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. A Short History of SNAP. URL: https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/history .

commensurate with their usual and customary expenditures on food (capped at 30% of food spending with the Food Stamp Act of 1971). The benefit was to be used to prepare and consume food in the home, with most food items in USDA-certified stores eligible for benefit redemption, with the notable exceptions of hot prepared foods, alcohol, cigarettes, paper products, and personal care items. The Food Stamp Act of 1977 eliminated the so-called purchase requirement over concerns that it limited participation among cash-strapped households. However, households were still expected to contribute to food spending, and thus the purchase requirement was implicitly retained by reducing the benefit amount by 30% of "net income", defined as gross income less certain allowable deductions. That is, the program was still designed to serve as a supplement to household food spending. In the early 2000s the paper coupons were replaced by an electronic benefit transfer card (EBT) that functions akin to a debit card. The federal program was renamed SNAP in 2008, though states retained the option to choose their own name and nearly half of states elected to keep the FSP moniker or selected a different one. Today the EBT card can be redeemed at over a quarter million USDA-certified grocery vendors across the country, from small convenience markets to large superstores.

The basic program structure has remained relatively stable since passage of the 1977 Act. To be eligible, applicants must be citizens, legal permanent residents (with a 5-year residency requirement implemented in 1996), refugees, or select other groups granted political asylum. The program is means-tested consisting of two income tests and two assets tests. The gross income test requires gross monthly income to be less than 130% of the federal poverty line (FPL), and the net income test requires net income to be less than 100% FPL. Gross income is defined broadly to include labor-market earnings as well as cash transfers from other assistance programs (including disability, retirement, and welfare) and other forms of nonlabor income such as

interest and dividends. The asset tests consist of a liquid asset test of $3,000 and a vehicle value test of $4,650. Households with a person age 60 and older or with a qualifying disability are exempt from the gross-income test, and they face a higher liquid-asset test of $4,650. At least one vehicle is exempt from the vehicle test if it is used for work purposes, to transport a qualifying disabled dependent, or for a limited number of other cases. There is also a work registration requirement for non-disabled, non-retired adults, and a work test for non-disabled 18-54 year olds without dependents ("ABAWDS"). The ABAWD test requires 20 hours of work per week, and failure to meet the test results in benefits being limited to 3 months in any 36-month period.[7]

The other administrative innovation in recent decades beyond the introduction of EBT cards is the devolution of many program operation decisions to the state level during the George W. Bush Administration. This occurred after the 1996 welfare reform when takeup rates of SNAP plummeted as families left cash welfare and states were incentivized to expand program access and outreach. These state-level changes included expanding categorical eligibility for SNAP from only cash recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) to non-cash TANF recipients or those meeting otherwise more generous income and/or asset tests under TANF, or eligibility for energy assistance programs (known as broad-based categorical eligibility); expanding the option for simplified reporting, which allowed states to relax the frequency and form (i.e., phone or online) of benefit recertification; liberalizing (or eliminating) vehicle asset limits; relaxing benefit recertification intervals; introducing call centers for benefit application and redetermination; restoring eligibility for legal aliens previously excluded by the 1996 welfare reforms; among many others. States

[7] Additional details on eligibility criteria are available at https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility

also could apply for waivers from the ABAWD work requirement, both during periods of widespread economic recession, as well as for more localized areas facing sustained high unemployment or other economic hardships. Combined with changes in the macroeconomy, these policy innovations helped drive the growth in SNAP in the decade leading up to and through the Great Recession of 2008-09.[8]

Several additional policy changes were made to SNAP during the Covid-19 health pandemic, some temporary and some permanent. The most significant temporary change to benefits commenced in March 2020 when benefits were raised to the maximum allotment for a given household size. That is, the requirement that households contribute 30% of net income to food purchases was suspended, and this increased benefits for over 60% of the caseload. This change persisted until the federal public health emergency was canceled in March 2023, though several states rolled back this policy change earlier as they canceled the emergency prior to the federal declaration.[9] The notable permanent policy change was the recalibration of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), the minimally nutritive diet that underpins the maximum SNAP benefit. Enacted in October 2021, the revision provided the first increase in real purchasing power of the TFP in five decades and resulted in a 21% increase in the average SNAP benefit.

Most of the policy changes were designed to increase program participation among those historically eligible for benefits, and to reduce cycling on and off the program during periods of recertification ("churn"). However, some changes such as the increases in the maximum benefit and expansion of broad-based categorical eligibility reach higher up the income distribution and

[8] Ziliak (2015). Ibid.
[9] Jones, Jordan (2024). "SNAP Spending Rose and Fell with Pandemic-era Changes to Benefit Amounts," Amber Waves, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, URL: https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2024/june/snap-spending-rose-and-fell-with-pandemic-era-changes-to-benefit-amounts; Rosenbaum, Dottie, Katie Bergh, and Lauren Hall (2023). "Temporary Pandemic SNAP Benefits Will End in Remaining 35 States in March 2023," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Washington, DC, URL: https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/temporary-pandemic-snap-benefits-will-end-in-remaining-35-states-in-march.

could result in a shifting composition of households on SNAP. In the ensuing sections I explore changing participation and composition of households with SNAP.

III. Data

The analysis sample comes from the CPS ASEC for survey years 1980-2025, corresponding to calendar years 1979-2024. The starting year is the first year that the CPS collected information on SNAP participation, and coincides with full implementation of program changes after passage of the Food Stamp Act of 1977. The ASEC is primarily collected in March of each year, consisting of about 60,000 households prior to the 2001 survey, and roughly 90,000 households thereafter. Information on basic demographics and household structure refers to the interview week, while data on program participation, earnings, and income refers to the prior calendar year.

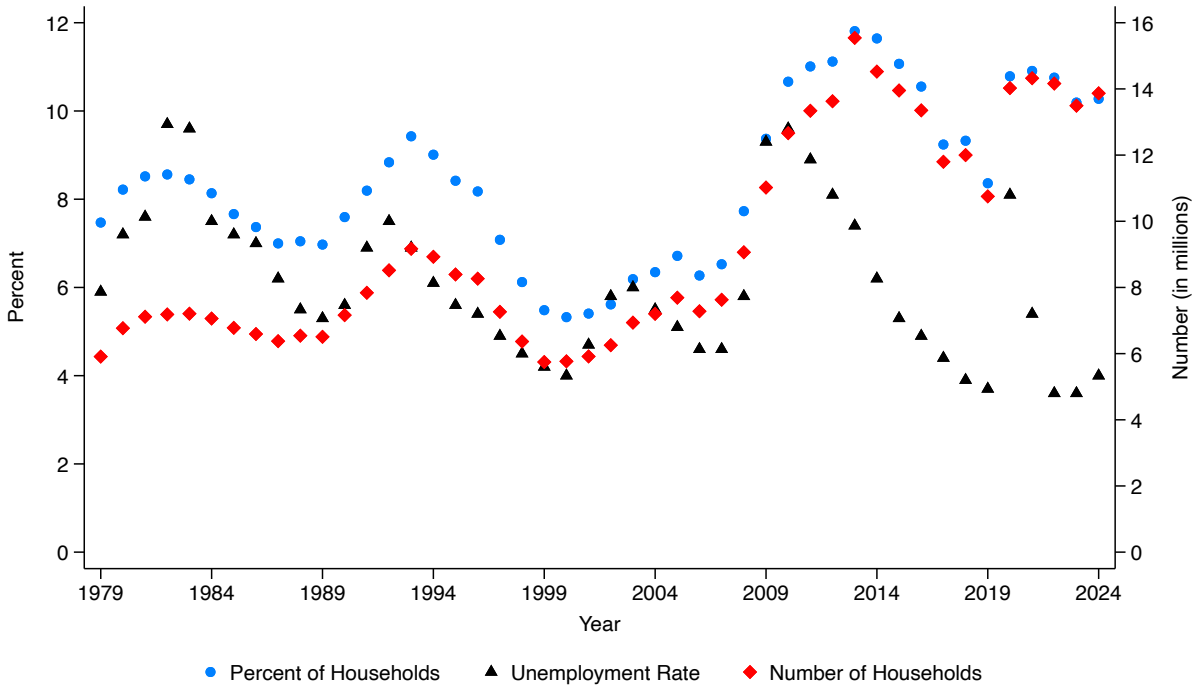
The survey asks whether anyone in the household received SNAP, the number of persons in the household that are part of the SNAP unit, and the number of months of receipt. These responses are recorded as the same values for all members of the CPS household. As noted previously, it is not possible to identify which members of the household are on the SNAP case, and thus I make the assumption throughout the analysis that the household pools all financial resources, including SNAP benefits, across all members. As a consequence, the unit of analysis is the householder, defined by the Census Bureau as the adult individual who owns or rents the residence, or is otherwise designated as the reference person for the dwelling unit. The implication is that characteristics of the household are assigned by the householder characteristics. For example, if the householder reports their race/ethnic identity as White, Non-Hispanic, then that race/ethnicity is assigned to the whole household regardless of whether other members of the household share that same identity.

There are no further sample exclusions or adjustments, and all estimates are weighted using the household weight produced by the Census Bureau.[10] Thus, I retain all observations, including those with Census-imputed values or who have the entire ASEC supplement imputed. Dropping those observations has no effect on the underlying trends presented. I do not make any correction for possible underreporting of SNAP participation in the ASEC.

IV. Trends in Household Participation in SNAP

Figure 1 depicts trends in the percent of households receiving SNAP, and the right axis reflects the corresponding number of households. The figure shows that participation has trended

Figure 1. Participation Rate and Number of Households on SNAP



Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

[10] The lone exception is that I drop a household head in the 1994 survey year with a recorded age of 2.

upward over time from about 8 percent of CPS households in 1979 to about 10 percent of households in 2024. Because of population growth, the corresponding number of households on the program more than doubled from just over 6 million to 14 million.[11] The other notable feature in the figure is the extent to which participation tracks the unemployment rate, also depicted. Participation rises during the economic downturns of the early 1980s and 1990s, the Great Recession of 2008-2009, and the Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020. In each case, however, participation abated with the subsequent economic recovery, albeit at seemingly different speeds across business cycles.

Table 1 presents ordinary least squares times-series estimates of the relationship between participation and the aggregate unemployment rate and a linear trend. Because the dependent variable and unemployment rate are in natural logs the coefficient is an elasticity. A 10% increase in the unemployment rate results in a 5% increase in both the rate and number of households on SNAP. The high R^2, especially in the model of the number of households, underscores the close link between the state of the macroeconomy and the SNAP program.[12]

Table 1. The Effect of the Unemployment Rate on the Fraction and Number of Households on SNAP

	Ln(unemployment rate)	Trend	Constant	Adjusted R^2
Ln(participation rate)	0.484 (0.096)	0.012 (0.002)	0.972 (0.196)	0.477
Ln(number)	0.491 (0.090)	0.024 (0.002)	0.758 (0.183)	0.779

Notes: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025. Standard errors are in parentheses. The number of observations is 46.

[11] Note that the number of households is fewer than reported by the USDA both because of possible underreporting of participation and because the definition of household differs, i.e. a CPS household may contain multiple SNAP households. The accompanying appendix discusses in greater detail differences between the ASEC and QC data.

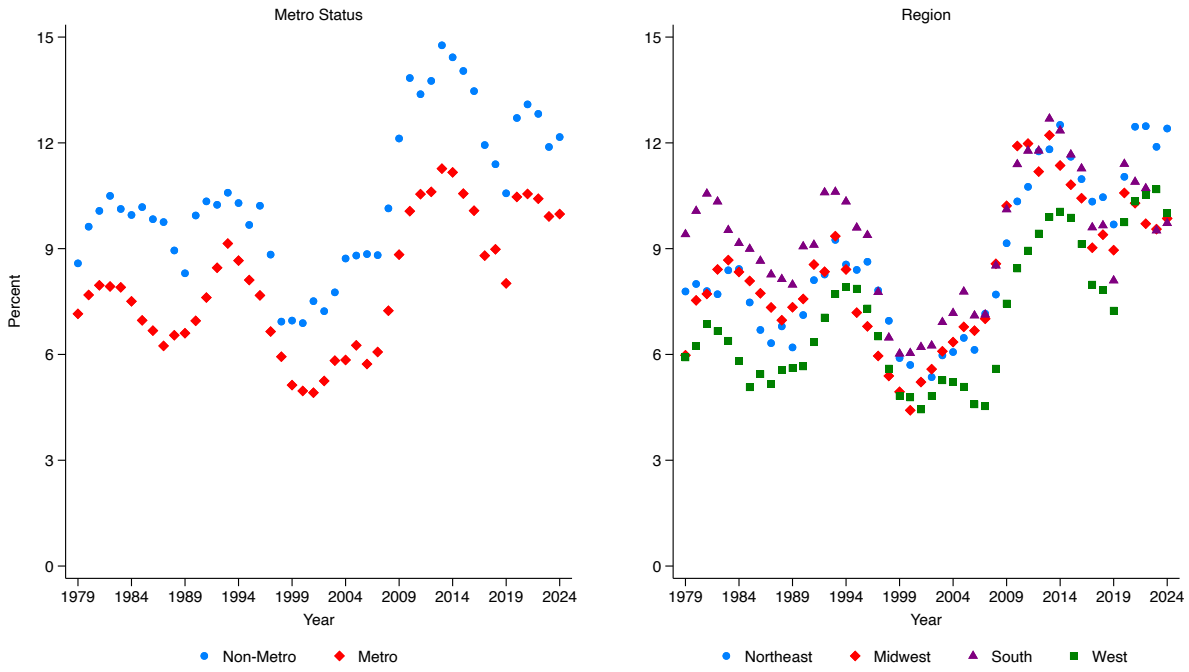
[12] For a recent treatment of SNAP as an automatic stabilizer see Bauer, Lauren, and Diane Schanzenbach. 2025. "Proposed SNAP cuts would permanently undermine recession readiness and responsiveness." Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, URL: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/proposed-snap-cuts-would-permanently-undermine-recession-readiness-and-responsiveness/ . For a more general discussion of automatic stabilizers see United State Government Accountability Office. 2025. Economic Downturns: Considerations for an Effective Automatic Fiscal Response. Washington, DC, URL: https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-25-106455.pdf

A. Geography

One of the goals of the SNAP program is to support the agricultural economy. This can come in the form of support for farmers by boosting the demand for food purchased in grocery stores, as well as support for low-income residents of rural areas working for lower wages, some of whom are employed directly in the agricultural economy. The left panel of Figure 2 depicts trends in SNAP participation for residents of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas, which is a proxy for urban and rural areas in the CPS ASEC. In a typical year participation rates in nonmetro areas are 2-3 percentage points higher than in metro areas, but both metro and nonmetro areas have experienced a trend increase in participation over the last 46 years.

The right panel of Figure 2 examines the four broad geographic regions of the U.S. In the

Figure 2. Participation Rate of Households on SNAP by Geography



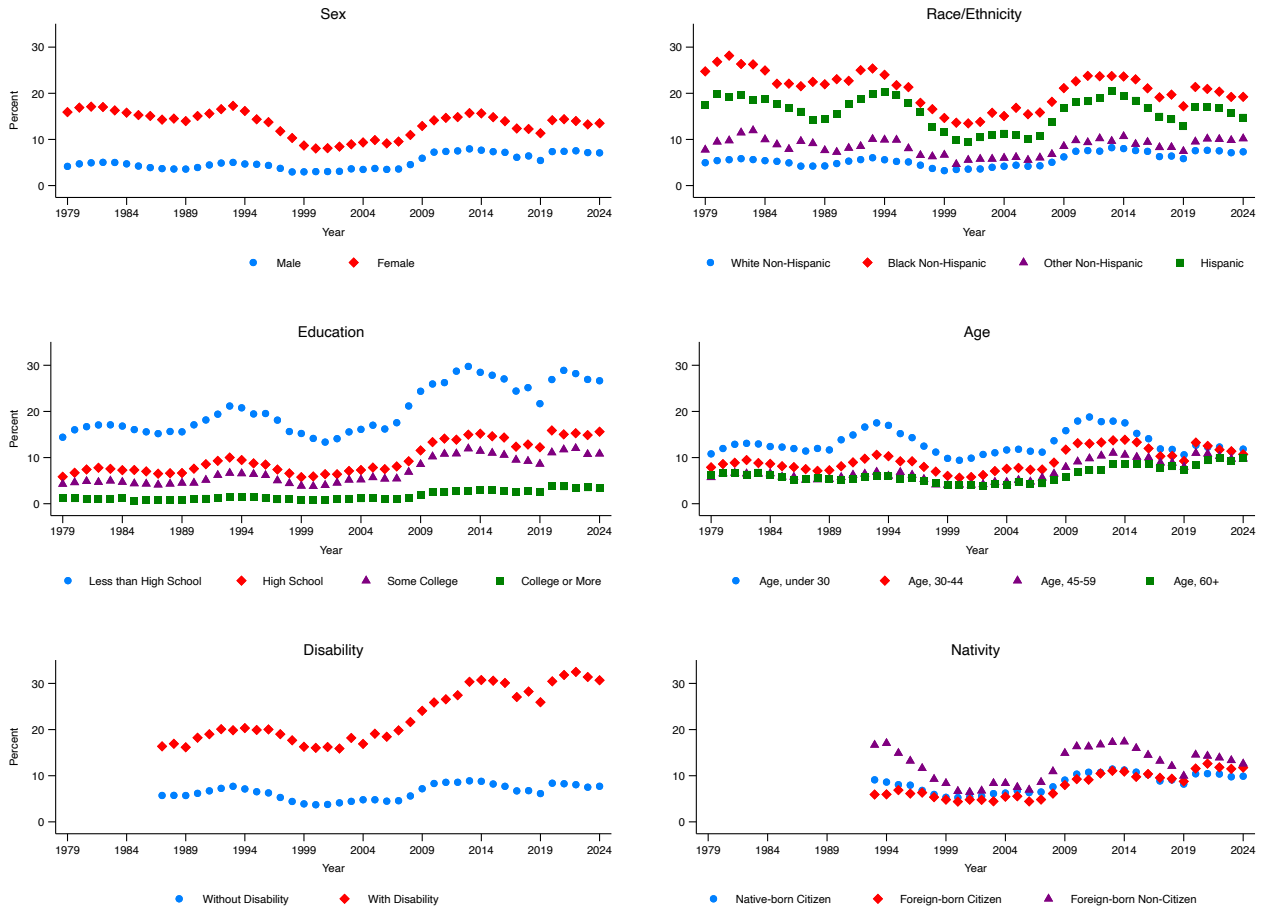
Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

1980s and 1990s participation in SNAP in the South exceeded the other regions, but in the two decades leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic there was little difference in rates between the Northeast, Midwest, and South, with the West several percentage points lower. In the years after the health crisis, SNAP participation is highest among households residing in the Northeast.

B. Demography

I next examine household participation in SNAP across a variety of demographic characteristics of the householder. The upper left panel of Figure 3 presents trends by sex, where

Figure 3. Participation Rate of Households on SNAP by Householder Demographics



Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

participation rates among female householders were typically 3 times higher than male householders until the late 1990s when they began to converge. Full convergence was never attained with rates among women roughly 5 percentage points higher over the past two decades.

The upper right panel of Figure 3 shows participation rates by the race/ethnicity of the householder. The categories are mutually exclusive groups of White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Other Race Non-Hispanic, and Hispanic. Other Race includes householders of Asian, Pacific Island, or Native American descent. In each year, a higher percentage of households headed by a Black person participates in SNAP compared to other groups, but that rate has declined over time. Participation rates among Hispanics have also trended downward over time, while rates of White and Other Race households have slightly trended upward.

The middle left panel presents trends in SNAP participation by education attainment of the householder, where attainment is defined by less than high school (under 12 years completed), high school (12 years or GED), some college (13-15 years completed), and college or more (16 or more years completed). The increasing overall participation in SNAP after the Great Recession observed in Figure 1 was led by growth in participation among household heads with less than a college degree, most especially those with high school or less. This can reflect both a stalling out of the economic status of lower-education households, as well as greater outreach to these families and thus leading to higher takeup rates among eligibles.

The middle right panel presents participation rates by age groups of households of those under age 30, those age 30-44 years old, those age 45-59 years old, and those 60 and older. Historically participation rates declined across age groups, with those under age 30 exceeding the other age groups. This is consistent with child-rearing responsibilities. After the Great Recession, however, participation rates converged across these four age groups, led by falling rates among

those under age 30—consistent with declining marriage and fertility among the young—and increases among the other age groups, notably those age 60 and older.

The bottom row of Figure 3 depicts participation rates by disability (left panel) and nativity (right panel) status of the householder. Disability refers to a self-reported disability that limits the amount and kind of work that the householder can engage in, or if the disability is so severe that it leads to labor-force withdrawal, and it includes both those on and off formal disability insurance programs. For nativity, I separate out native-born citizens, foreign-born citizens, and foreign-born noncitizens. The latter group consists of refugees, legal permanent residents, and the undocumented. Note that the former two groups are eligible for SNAP, while the undocumented are not. The CPS only began recording disability and nativity starting with the 1994 survey, and it does not separately identify subgroups of noncitizens. The left panel shows that participation rates among the disabled increased more than 50% over the last three decades, thus driving some of the trend growth overall participation in the program. The right panel shows that while participation rates of foreign-born noncitizens exceeds that of citizens in most years, and is highly cyclical, it is trending downward over time while participation rates of citizens, especially foreign-born citizens, has been trending upward.[13]

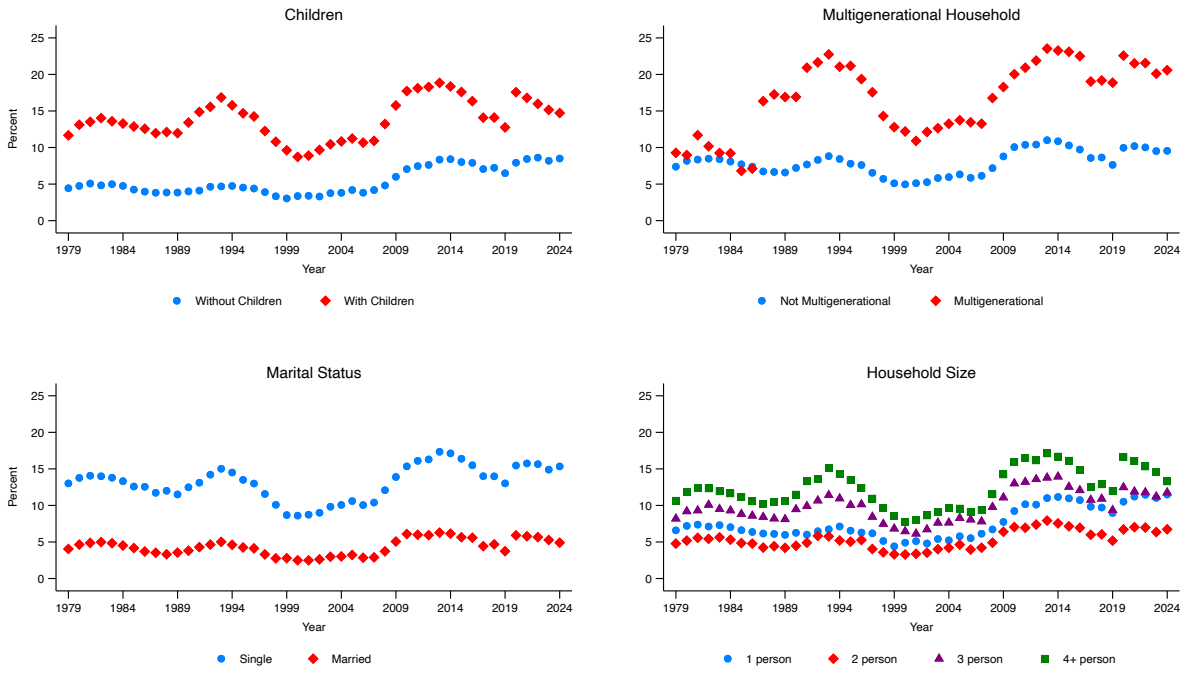
C. Household Structure

In Figure 4 I look inside the household to examine how SNAP participation varies across household structure. The upper left panel separates households based on the presence or absence of a child under age 19 (though adult children may be present). In most years the participation rate among households with children is 2-3 times higher than those without children, and

[13] For research on the cyclicality of SNAP participation of refugees and immigrants see Bollinger, Christopher R., and Paul Hagstrom. 2008. Food Stamp Program Participation of Refugees and Immigrants, Southern Economic Journal 74(3): 665-692; and for related work on the labor supply effects of SNAP among immigrants see East, Chloe N. 2018. Immigrants' Labor Supply Response to Food Stamp Access, Labour Economics 51(April): 202-226.

participation is highly cyclical. At the same time, since 2000 the secular growth in participation among households without children under age 19 has been stronger than among households with children, though there has been secular growth in that group too. The upper-right panel examines households with multiple generations, defined as those containing a parent, grandparent, or grandchild of the householder. Because of a change in variable definition, the rates before 1987 are not directly comparable to those after. Since the late 1980s rates of SNAP participation among multigenerational households have been at least double those of single generation households, reflecting the more precarious economic circumstances facing those households.[14]

Figure 4. Participation Rate of Households on SNAP by Household Structure



Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

[14] Harvey, Hope. 2025. Doubled Up: Shared Households and the Precarious Lives of Families. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

The lower left panel of Figure 4 separates out households based on the marital status of the householder as single or married. Similar to those splits based on presence of children or presence of another generation in the household, singles have participation rates in SNAP roughly 3 times those of married householders, with the exception of the decade in between the 1996 welfare reform and the Great Recession. Finally, in the lower right panel I separate households by the number of residents, pooling together households with 4 or more people. In any given year participation in SNAP is greatest among large households, but the trend growth post 2000 has been among single-person households with rates doubling from 5 to 10%.

D. Employment and Income

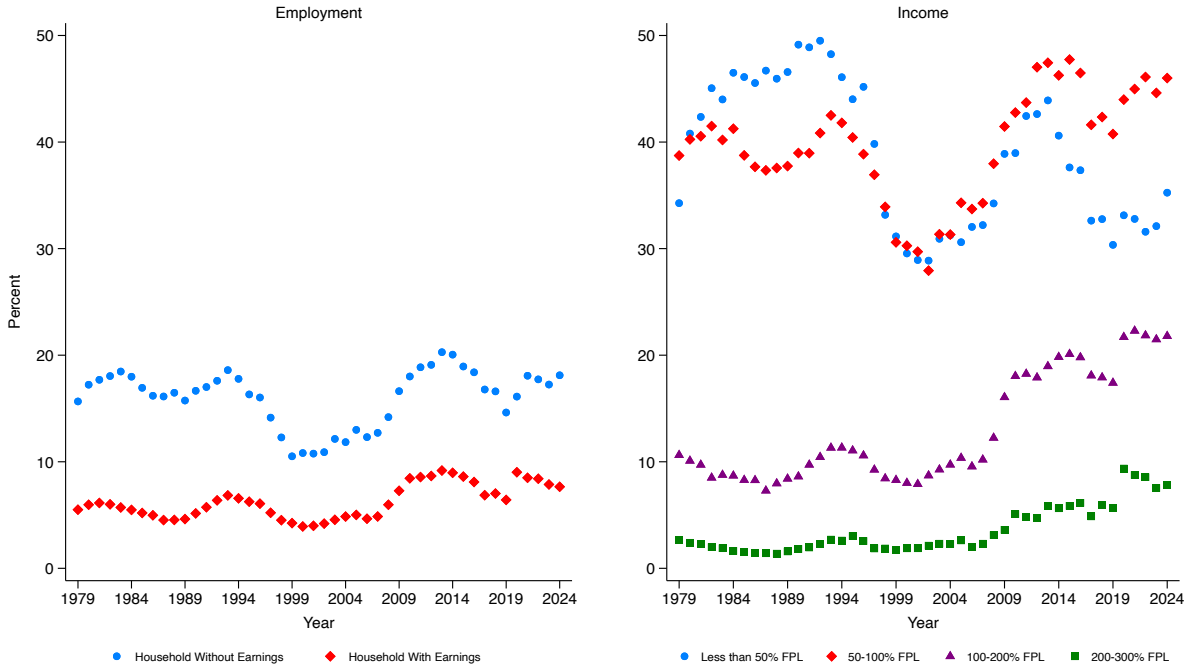
Figure 5 examines how household participation in SNAP varies by whether anyone in the household has earnings from the labor market (left panel) and by poverty status (right panel). In a typical year households without earnings participate at a rate 2-3 times higher than those with earnings. Perhaps surprising, however, is that participation among households without earnings is still highly cyclical. There was a precipitous 50% decline in the late 1990s during the early years of welfare reform, likely driven by a group that was referred to as "disconnected mothers" who were neither in work nor on welfare, even though these households remained eligible for assistance.[15] It was this subgroup of economically vulnerable households that spurred action by the USDA to expand access to the program.

The right panel of Figure 5 depicts poverty status based on the householder's family income. This measure of pre-tax income is the one used to produce the Census Bureau's official

[15] Blank, Rebecca, and Brian Kovak. 2009. "The Growing Problem of Disconnected Single Mothers." In Making the Work-Based Safety Net Work Better: Forward-Looking Policies to Help Low-Income Families, C. Heinrich and K. Scholz (eds.), New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

poverty estimates, and as such it excludes in-kind benefits from SNAP and Medicaid/Medicare, as well as refundable tax credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC). It also excludes contributions of non-family members of the household such as cohabiting partners. The figure shows that in the 1980s to mid 1990s participation rates among those in deep poverty, defined as income to needs below 50% FPL, were higher than other groups, but then participation plummeted during the late 1990s, coinciding with welfare reform and rise of disconnected women, and never reached the levels of earlier decades. Indeed, over the past decade participation among the most disadvantaged has fallen below the group with incomes 50-100% FPL. This perhaps reflects administrative hurdles associated with applying for

Figure 5. Participation Rate of Households on SNAP by Employment and Poverty Status



Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

assistance that falls particularly hard on the deep poor.[16] At the same time, participation rates among those in near poverty, especially households at 100-200% FPL, have increased since the Great Recession and with a notable bump during Covid-19. This is consistent with higher participation rates among the disabled and elderly, each of whom have the gross-income test waived for eligibility. The Covid-19 bump in participation likely reflects both the economic precarity of the pandemic, as well as introduction of the Pandemic-EBT program discussed in the next section.

V. Trends in the Composition of Households with and without SNAP

In this section I look within the population of households with SNAP to examine how the socioeconomic characteristics of households receiving SNAP benefits has evolved over time. In each case I provide a comparison to the overall population to better situate those receiving assistance. Recall that the demographic characteristics reflect those of the householder.

A. Geography

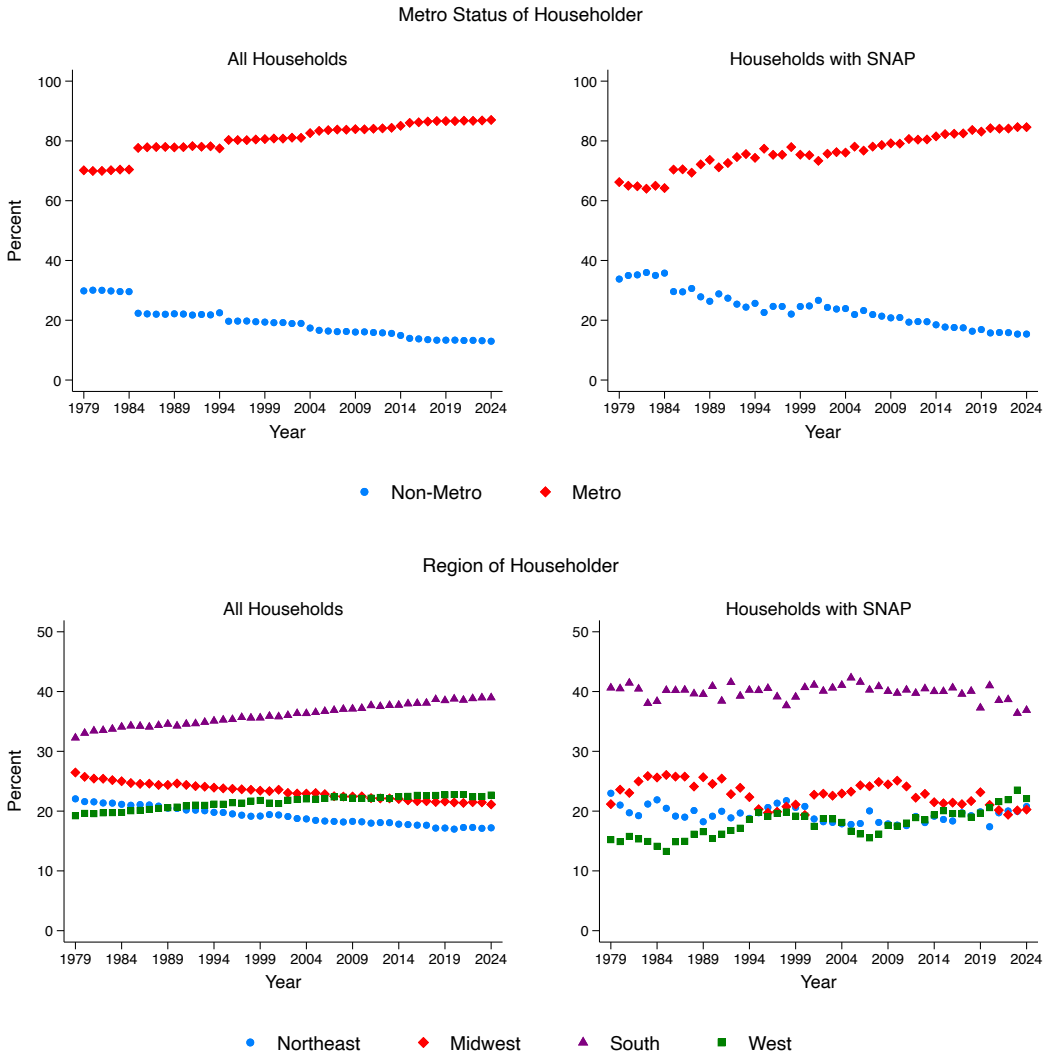
In Figure 6 I present trends in the share of households residing in metro and nonmetro areas, and share by Census region. The upper panel shows that households overall, and those receiving SNAP, are increasingly likely to reside in metro areas over time, and these shares are broadly similar.[17] In 1979 about 70% of all households were in metro areas, and 30% in nonmetro areas, and among households with SNAP this split was two-thirds/one-third. By 2024 it was roughly 84% metro/16% nonmetro overall and 82%/18% among households with SNAP.

The bottom left panel of Figure 6 shows steady population growth in the South, and to a

[16] Herd, Pamela, Donald Moynihan. 2018. Administrative Burden: Policymaking by other means. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; Hominoff, Tatiana, and Jason Somerville. 2021. "Program Recertification Costs: Evidence from SNAP." American Economic Journal: Economic Policy 13(4): 277-298; Heflin, Colleen, Leslie Hodges, Irma Arteaga, and Chinnedum Ojinnaka. 2023. "Churn in the Older Adult SNAP Population." Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy 45(1): 350-371.

[17] The steps in the upper left panel of Figure 6 reflect population benchmarking in the CPS ASEC to the Decennial Census. This adjustment was most pronounced after the 1980 Census.

Figure 6. Composition of Householders by Metro Status and Region



Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

lesser extent the West, at the expense of household residency in the Northeast and Midwest. The lower right panel, on the other hand, shows that the share of households with SNAP residing in the South has been quite stable at about 40%. Likewise, the share of households with SNAP residing in the Northeast has also been stable, but at half the level. What is quite interesting is

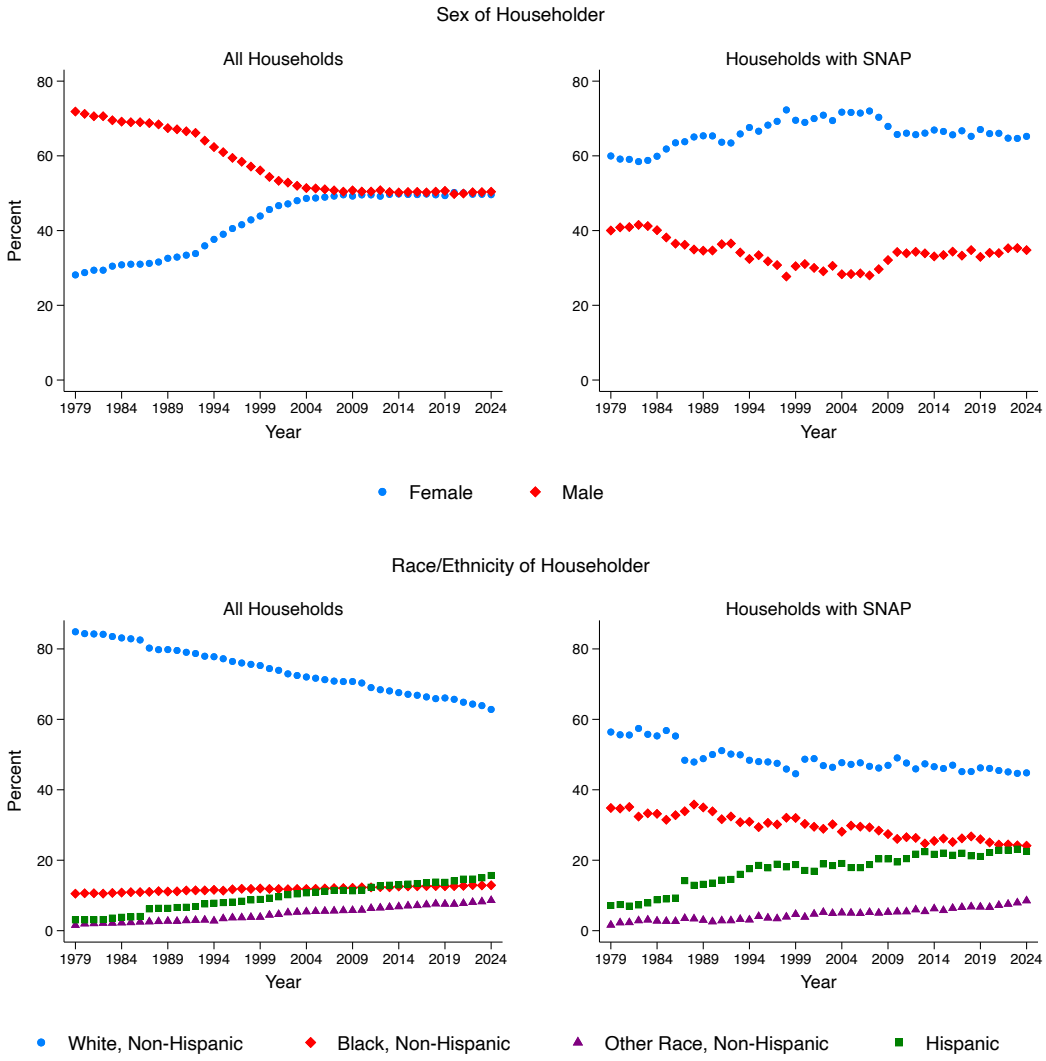
that the shares residing in the Midwest and West are mirror images, most pronounced during the economic recession and restructuring of the early 1980s and during the Great Recession. In both of those periods the share of households with SNAP rose in the Midwest and fell in the West. The opposite occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, suggesting differing policy choices across those regions.

B. Demographics

In Figure 7 I present trends in the share of households overall and with SNAP by sex and race/ethnicity of the householder. The upper left panel depicts a dramatic shift in the composition of households headed by a woman. In 1979 75% of households were headed by men and 25% by women. Over the ensuing quarter century these shares converged to a 50-50 split. Some of this evolution occurred because of a rise in single-mother households, and some due to changing social norms of how respondents self-report who is the householder in heterosexual relationships. In comparison, the right panel of Figure 7 shows that the sex composition of households with SNAP has been relatively stable, with the share headed by women increasing about 5 percentage points to 65%, and the share headed by men falling by 5 points. There was a temporary decline in the share headed by men in the middle of the sample period, but after the Great Recession there has been little change.

The bottom panel of Figure 7 presents the composition of all households and households with SNAP by race/ethnicity of the householder. The U.S. population has become more racially/ethnically diverse over the past 46 years, especially with the growth of Hispanic and Asian households. While the SNAP population has always been more diverse than the population overall, it has followed a similar trajectory toward even greater diversity over time. However, whereas the share of Black households overall has been steady, the share of Black households

Figure 7. Composition of Householders by Sex and Race/Ethnicity

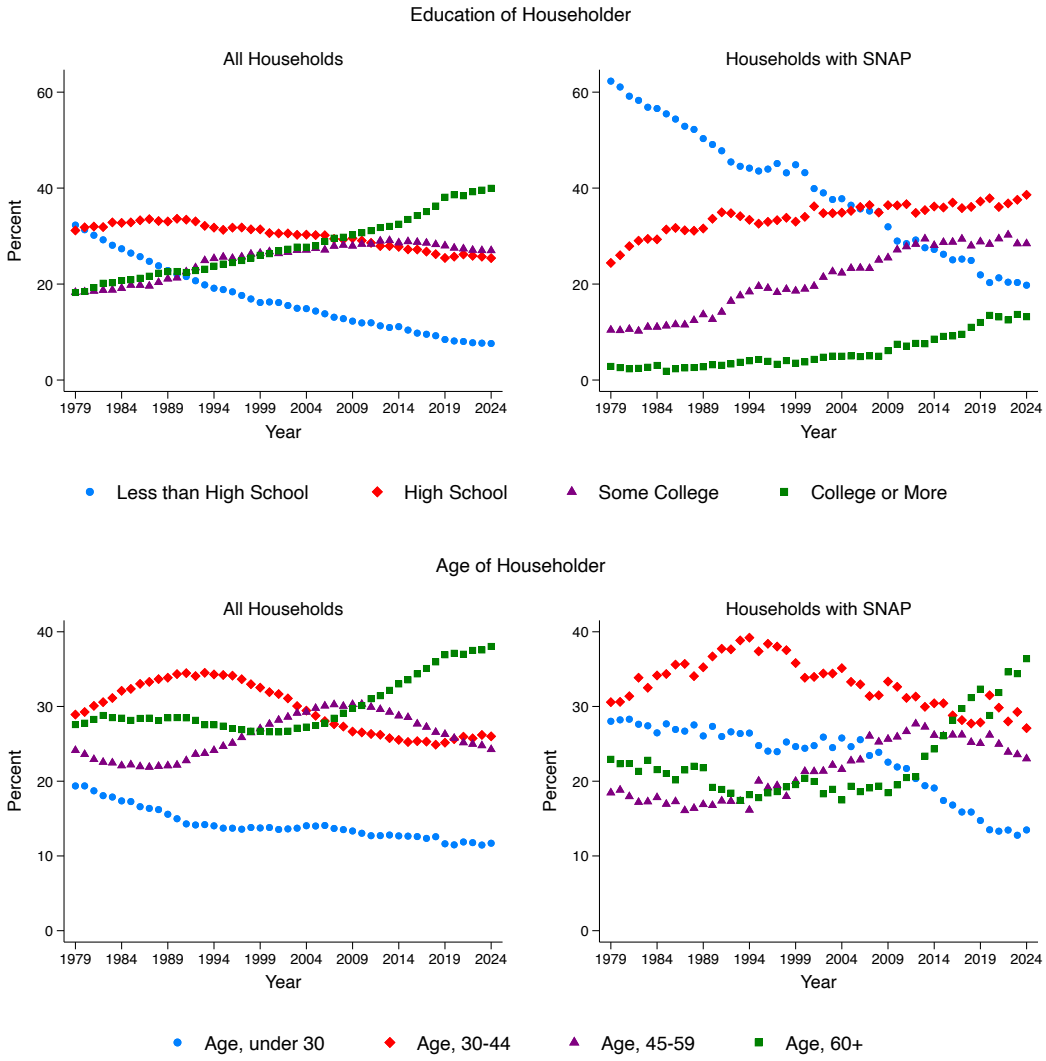


Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

with SNAP has declined at a rate faster than White households.

In Figure 8 I present the composition of households by education attainment and age of the householder. The share of households with SNAP headed by a high school dropout plummeted by 40 percentage points over the last 46 years from 60 percent to 20 percent, a rate faster than the decline overall, which fell in half over the same period. This decline was met by a

Figure 8. Composition of Householders by Education and Age



Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

of households with SNAP headed by someone with some college or more. Unlike the overall population where households headed by someone with a high school diploma declined, similarly educated households with SNAP increased by about 15 percentage points to nearly 40 percent.

The bottom panel of Figure 8 shows the age composition of householders. There has been

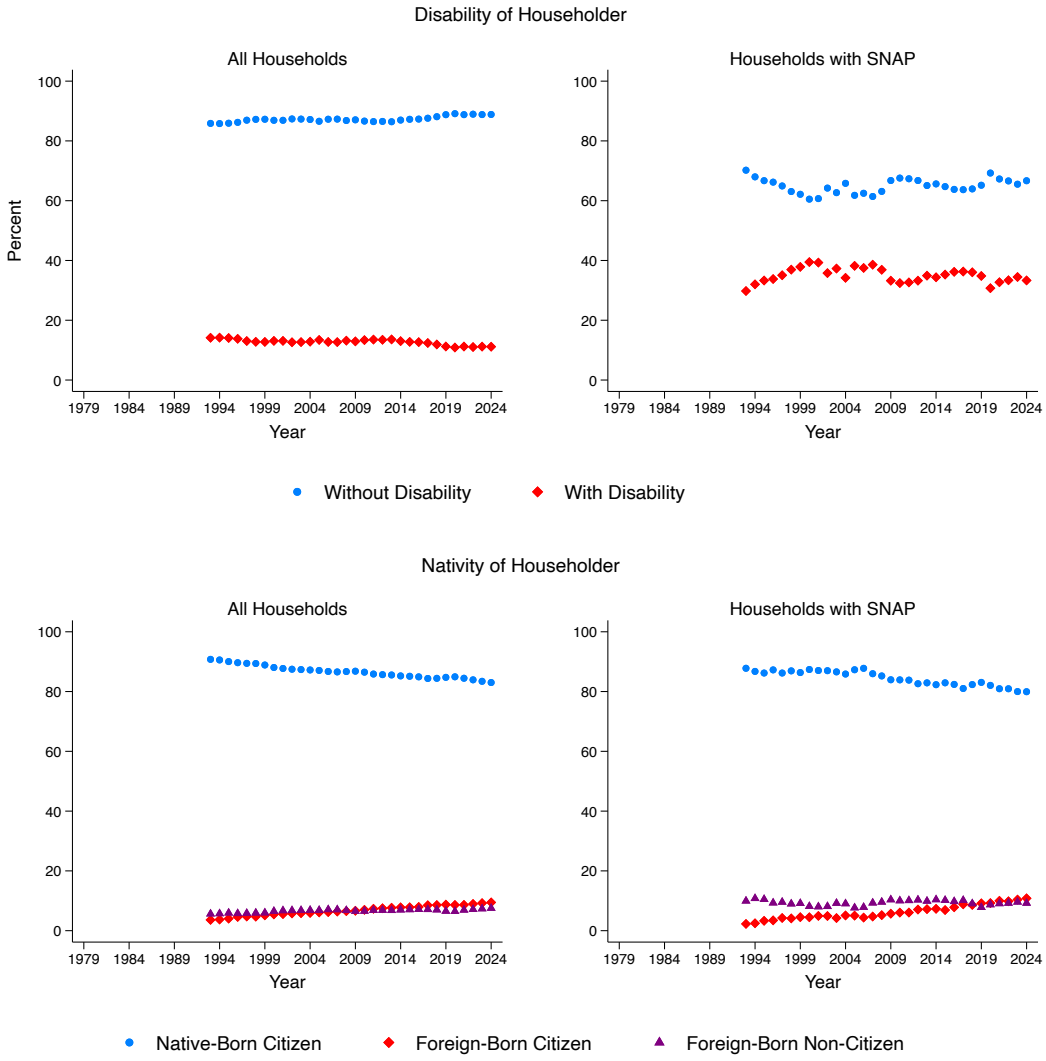
a steady decline in households overall headed by someone under age 30, but this was particularly acute among households with SNAP, especially in the years after the Great Recession. At the same time there has been a sharp increase in the share of households with SNAP headed by a person age 60 or older from 20% to 40% in the 15 years after the Great Recession, and this age group now comprises the largest share of SNAP households. This growth in older households with SNAP outpaced overall demographic aging by a person 60 or older in the left panel.

Figure 9 presents trends in the composition of households by disability and nativity status of the householder. The top panel of the figure shows that in a typical year there are twice as many householders with a disability residing in a SNAP household compared to the population overall. There was a runup from 1994-2001 in the percentage of householders with SNAP reporting a disability from about 30% to 40%, but with little change thereafter outside of some temporary changes around the Great Recession and Covid-19. The bottom panel shows that there has been a decline in the share of native-born householders with SNAP from just under 90% of households in 1979 to just under 80% of households in 2024. This decline has been fully captured by the growth in the share of SNAP households headed by a foreign-born citizen as the share headed by a noncitizen has been stable at about 10 percent the last three decades. These shares and trends in nativity status broadly reflect the population of households overall.

C. Household Structure

Figure 10 presents the first of two on household structure, starting with the presence of children and of multiple generations. The upper left panel shows the share of households overall without and with children has steadily diverged over time, where in 1979 about 60% of households were without children and 40% were with children, and this grew to a 70%/30% split by 2024. The ratios were the opposite in households with SNAP, with roughly 35% without

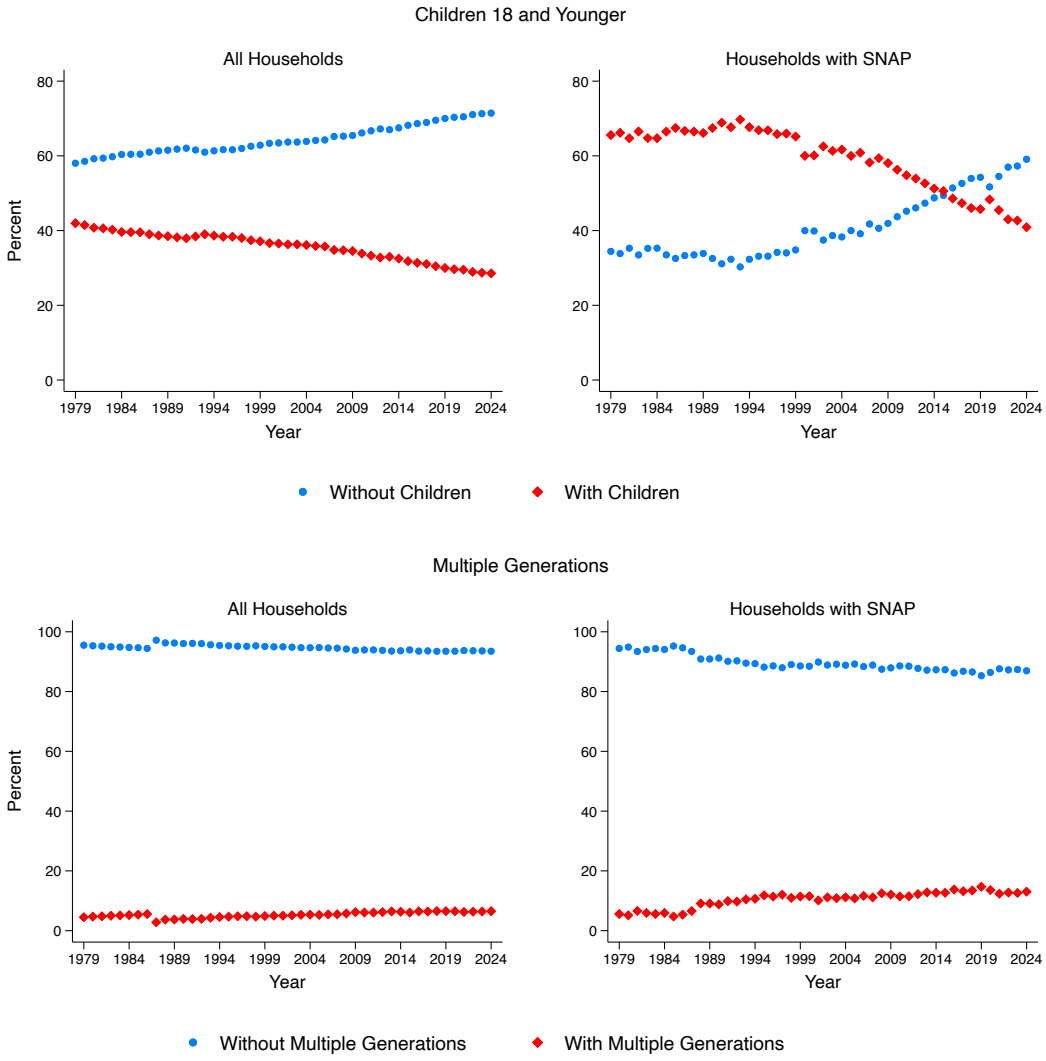
Figure 9. Composition of Householders by Nativity and Disability



Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

children and 65% with children. This ratio remained steady until the mid 1990s when there began a trend reversal such that by 2024 60% of households with SNAP were childless and 40% had children. Despite the decline in young children in the household, it is still possible for there to be growth in two- or three-generation households. The bottom panel of Figure 10 suggests

Figure 10. Composition of Householders by Presence of Children and Multiple Generations

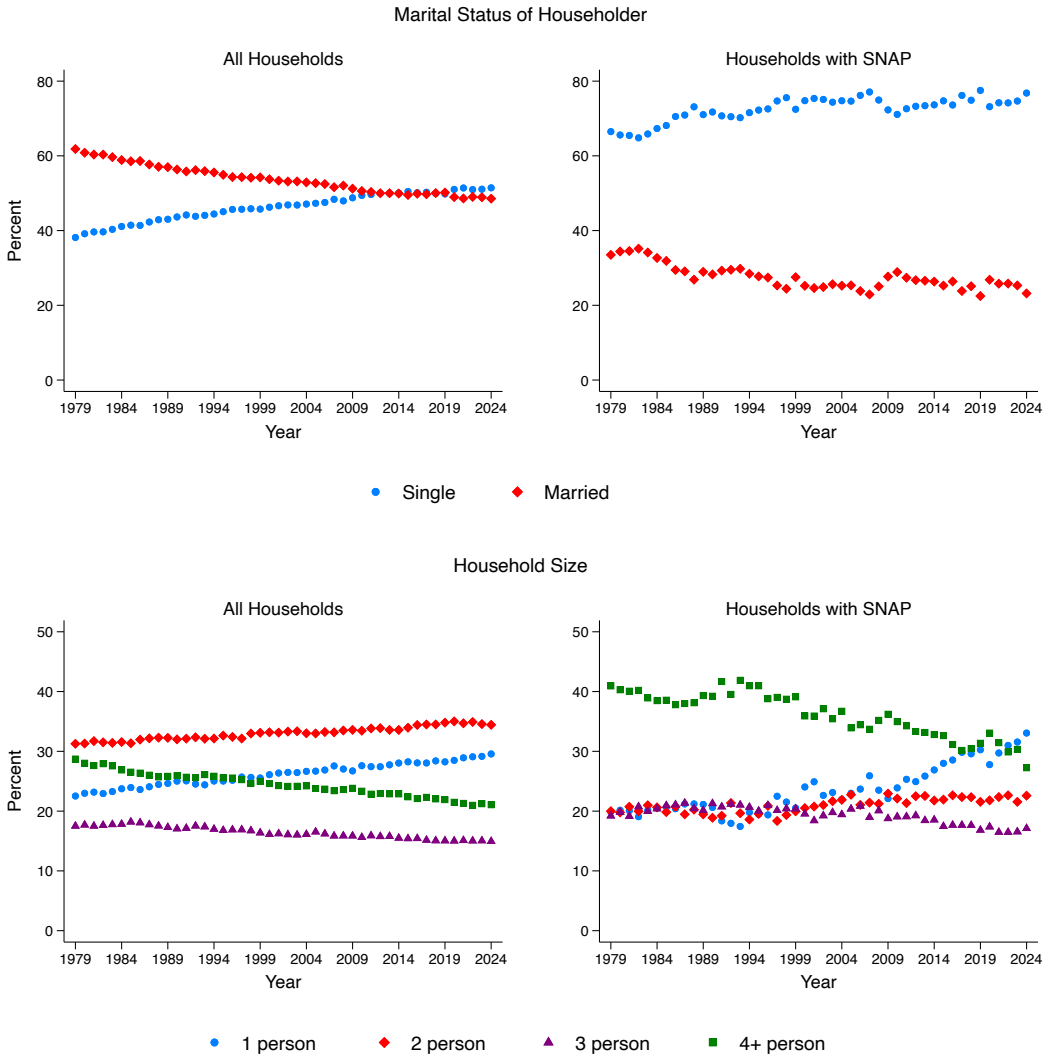


Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

otherwise, as the share of households with SNAP that had more than one generation present has remained constant at roughly 10-12% for the last 40 years.

I next explore in Figure 11 changes in the marital status of the householder, and changes in the number of people in the household. The upper left panel shows a significant trend decline

Figure 11. Composition of Households by Marital Status and Size



Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

in marriage, with the householder 20 percentage points more likely to be married in 1979, but by the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, there were more households headed by a single person. The upper right panel suggests a similar movement toward single-headed households, but there have always been more single households with SNAP than married, and this gap expanded by about

10 percentage points to result in a 20% married/80% single by 2024.

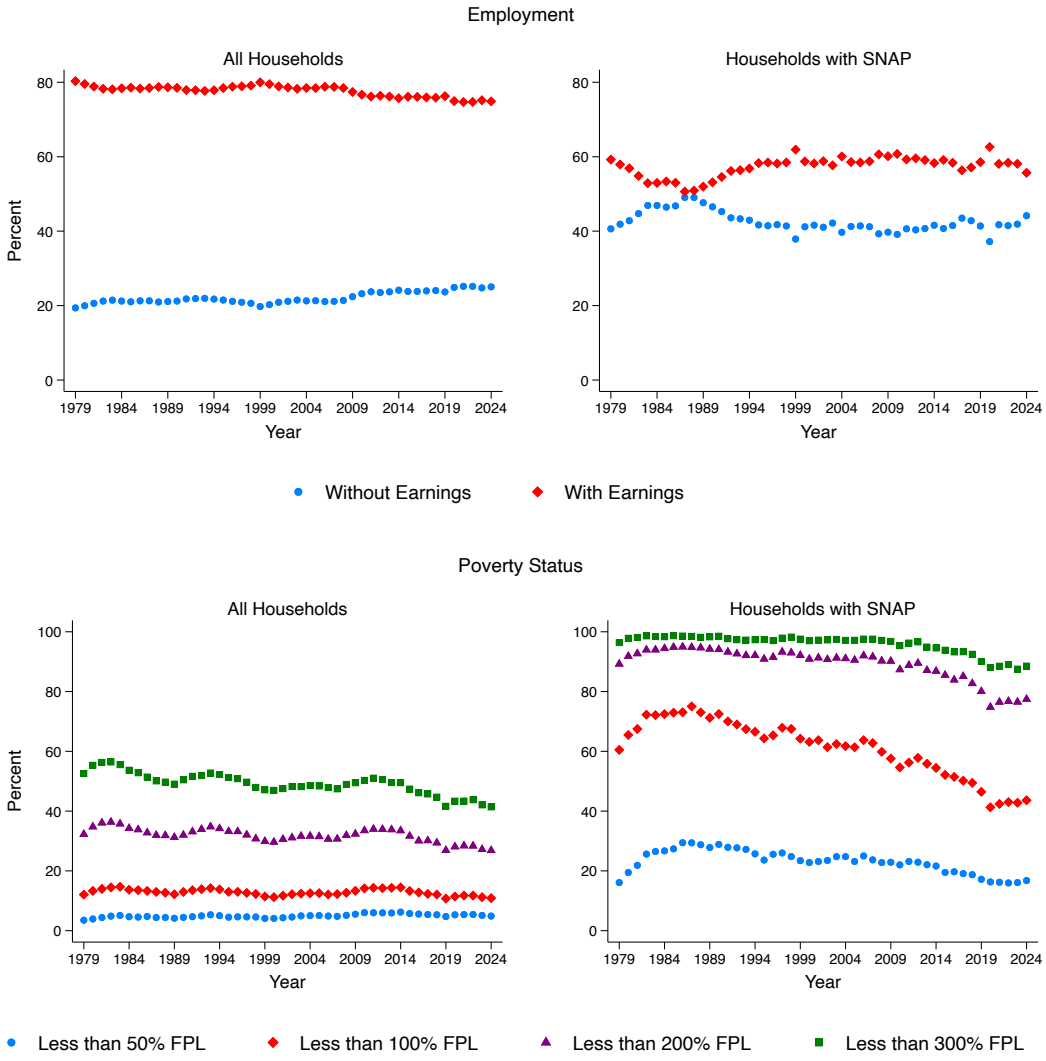
The bottom panel of Figure 11 depicts the evolution of household size consisting of 1, 2, 3, and 4 or more persons. Among the population of households there has been growth in both 1- and 2-person households, which has come largely from a decline in large households with 4 or more persons. Restricting to those households with SNAP we see a similar pattern, but in this case all the growth has occurred among single-person households, with the share increasing by 15 percentage points over the last three decades to become the largest share of households with SNAP.

D. Household Employment and Income

In this subsection I present trends in the composition of households with respect to employment and poverty status, as well as the sources and distribution of income. The upper panel of Figure 12 depicts the composition of households without and with earnings. Overall, about 80% of households have some labor-market earnings, though there has been a slight trend decline in the years after the Great Recession. Among households with SNAP, the ratio has been remarkably steady at about 60% with earnings, 40% without earnings (outside of a 10-year window from the mid-80s to mid-90s).

The bottom panel of Figure 12 presents trends in the composition of households based on the family income to federal poverty level. Among the population of households, there has been remarkable stability in the share with family incomes placing them in deep poverty or poverty, though there has been a trend decline in the share of households with incomes placing them in near poverty. Focusing on those households with SNAP, until the Great Recession nearly all have gross incomes below 300% FPL, and indeed below 200% FPL, but in the past 15 years the composition of households with SNAP pulls from higher in the income distribution. Recall that

Figure 12. Composition of Households by Employment and Poverty Status



Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

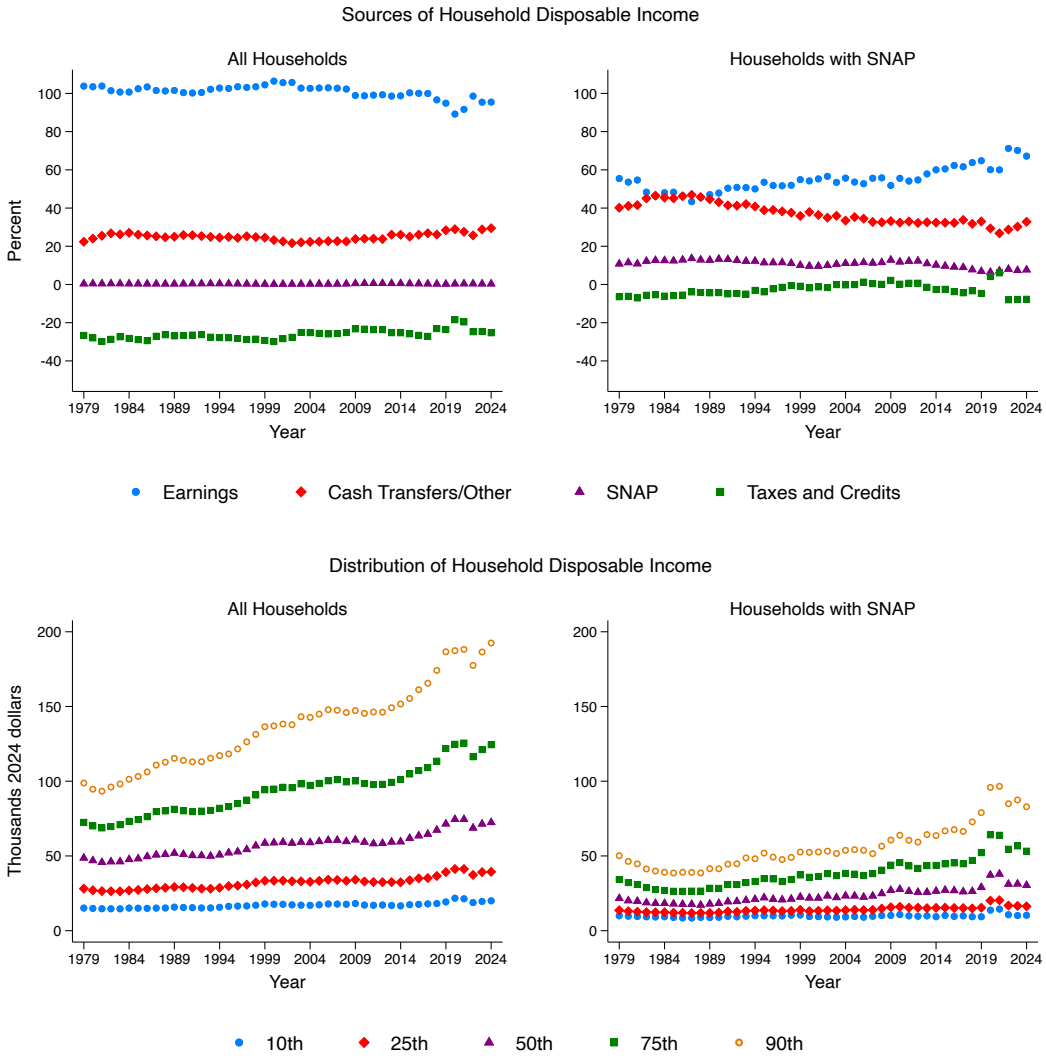
while the gross income test for SNAP is 130% FPL, SNAP units with a person age 60 or older, or caring for a person with the disability, are exempt from the gross income test, and both groups participation rates have been rising over time. Moreover, the income reported in the CPS for the FPL is based on the family, which may contain members not on the SNAP benefit, e.g. a

grandparent or adult child who prepares food separately. There has been a notable drop in the share of SNAP households with gross incomes below the poverty line, suggesting that the program is serving a larger share of households in near poverty and above.

Figure 13 further explores the changing distribution of incomes among households with SNAP by expanding the concept of income to disposable income of the household. Specifically, disposable income is defined as the sum of gross income plus in-kind benefits provided by SNAP, and less federal, state, and payroll income taxes inclusive of refundable tax credits such as the EITC and CTC. I also expand the definition of whose income is counted beyond family members to all persons in the household such as cohabiting partners and other non-family members. Tax liability is estimated by NBER's TAXSIM program whereby I first construct tax units in the household (because some households have multiple filers), compute tax liability for each tax unit, and then add up total household tax liability. Incomes are inflation adjusted using the 2024 personal consumption expenditure deflator.

In the upper panel of Figure 13 I decompose disposable income at the mean of the distribution among households into its component parts of earnings, cash transfers plus other nonlabor income, SNAP benefits, and net taxes (tax payments less refundable credits). The upper-right panel shows that with the lone exception of the early 1980s, the majority of income received among the average household with SNAP comes from labor-market earnings, and that share has trended upward over time. The share from cash transfers has declined, while that obtained from SNAP has been quite stable at about 10% of disposable income. The expansion of the refundable EITC in the mid 1990s is notable as it moves taxes from a net extractor for the average household with SNAP to a net neutral, and then in 2020 and 2021 the large Economic Impact Payments and increase in refundable CTC actually moved net tax liability negative

Figure 13. Composition of Households by Disposable Household Income



Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

(meaning a subsidy) for the average SNAP household. The average household in the overall population in the upper-left panel receives no support from SNAP, and faces a net tax liability of about 30% (except for a brief reprieve in 2020/21).

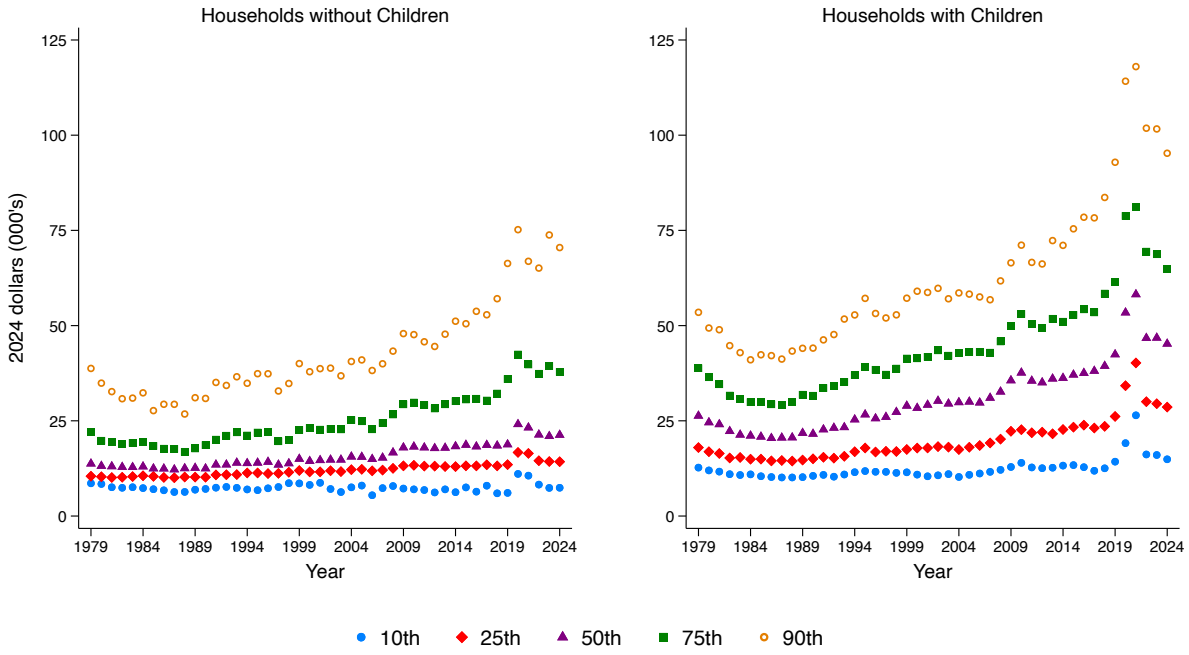
The bottom panel of Figure 13 presents percentiles of the disposable income distribution

among households overall and with SNAP at the 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th percentiles. As expected, households with SNAP (right panel) have much lower income levels and growth than households overall (left panel), but there are some important changes in the income distribution among households with SNAP. Disposable income at the median was stable at about $20,000 per year (in constant 2024 dollars) in the three decades leading up to the Great Recession, and then trending up to about $25,000 until the Covid-19 Pandemic when there was a sharp increase in household median income in 2020 and 2021 before returning to a level just above the pre-pandemic trend. Also notable is the increase in incomes in the right tail of the income distribution among households with SNAP over the last decade. It is important to emphasize again that the household as defined here is broader than that used in determining eligibility for assistance from the SNAP program, and that eligibility is determined by income over the prior month before application, not the calendar year. For example, the spike in incomes among SNAP households during Covid-19 could result from adult children on SNAP moving home temporarily during the crisis, or from higher-income households losing employment when unemployment rates skyrocketed to over 14% at the onset of the pandemic.

The most obvious potential sources of growth of incomes during 2020-2022 were the disbursement of Economic Impact Payments (EIP) and the introduction of Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT). Starting in March 2020 a series of three payments were sent out to most households, with amounts depending on the number of children and adults in the tax filing unit and installment (March 2020, December 2020, March 2021). These funds were excluded from calculation of SNAP eligibility and thus contribute to the increase in incomes among households with SNAP in this period. At the same time, when schools closed in March 2020 students lost access to the free- and reduced-price school breakfast and lunch programs. In response the USDA monetized

(at a higher value) those lost meals via the P-EBT program both over the school and summer months by issuing assistance to anyone eligible for school meal programs.[18] This includes those eligible via the Community Eligibility Provision, which provides access to school meals to all children enrolled regardless of income and assets. Depending on state of residence, and in some cases year, the P-EBT was loaded onto the SNAP EBT card if already enrolled in SNAP, and new EBT cards were issued to those not enrolled. In most cases states issued guidance for use of the EBT card the same as those for SNAP, i.e. redemption at USDA-certified markets on all food

Figure 14. Distribution of Disposable Household Income Among Households with SNAP by Presence of Children



Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025

[18] U.S. Department of Agriculture. Food and Nutrition Service. State Guidance on Pandemic EBT, Washington, DC, https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-guidance-coronavirus-pandemic-ebt-pebt; Food Research & Action Center. Pandemic EBT, Washington, DC, https://frac.org/pebt .

groups except those not allowable under SNAP (e.g. hot foods, paper products). The Census Bureau did not add explicit wording about P-EBT benefits to the CPS ASEC until the 2022 survey year, so it is entirely plausible that households reported receiving SNAP on the survey when they in fact were receiving P-EBT for their children.[19]

In Figure 14 I attempt to gauge the contributions of EIP and P-EBT on the distribution of income among households with SNAP by separating by presence or absence of children. Households without children were eligible for EIP but not P-EBT, while households with children were eligible for both. The figure depicts a spike in disposable incomes across the distribution in both 2020 and 2021 for both groups of households, but the increase is more pronounced in the right tail among households with children, consistent with P-EBT.

V. Conclusion

I examined trends in participation of households receiving SNAP in the CPS ASEC over the past 46 years, along with the evolution of the demographic and economic composition of households with SNAP in comparison to the overall population of households. The results suggest that the share of households receiving SNAP increased modestly from 8% to 10% over the sample period, with much larger changes over the business cycles, especially during the Great Recession and Covid-19 Pandemic. The most notable increases in participation rates have been among householders with some college education or less, those age 60 and older, those living without children or living alone, those with a work-limiting disability, and those households with gross family incomes placing them in near poverty.

[19] Shrider, Em. 2019. "School Lunch and Pandemic-EBT Valuation in the 2021 Supplemental Poverty Measure." U.S. Census Bureau, SEHSD WP #2022-15. https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2022/demo/sehsd-wp2022-15.pdf

Like the population overall, the heads of households receiving SNAP have become more educated over time with those with at least some college tripling to 40%. They have also become older at a pace faster than overall population aging of householders, with the share of heads at least age 60 doubling since the Great Recession to become the largest share by age. Households with SNAP have become smaller over time, with growth in 1-person households coming at the expense of those with 4 or more people. There has also been a secular decline in the share of households with SNAP with family incomes in poverty, meaning a growing share are those with incomes two to three times the federal poverty level. After accounting for SNAP benefits, tax payments, and refundable credits, the distribution of disposable income among households with SNAP shifted outward over the past decade. This became particularly pronounced during the Covid-19 health crisis, likely from a combination of temporary job loss among higher-income workers, Economic Impact Payments that did not count against SNAP eligibility, and also the Pandemic EBT program that provided food assistance to households with school-age children that de facto operated like SNAP. Despite the aging of householders, the share of households with SNAP reporting labor-market earnings has held steady at about 60%, and earnings comprises the largest and growing share of household disposable incomes for the average household receiving SNAP.

The importance of earnings to the typical household with SNAP is likely to grow in coming years after Congressional passage of H.R.1 Public Law 119-21 in July 2025. This legislation expands mandatory work requirements for ABAWDS ages 18-54 to ages 18-64, an age group that includes the fastest-growing component of the program. The 20-hour per week work requirement is also extended to nondisabled parents whose youngest dependent is 14 years or older, as well as to the homeless. However, earnings among SNAP recipients is unlikely to

increase as much as the authors of the legislation might expect given evidence that ABAWD work requirements cause disenrollment from the program to be greater than employment gains.[20] The legislation also limits how the maximum SNAP benefit can be updated over time and how much utility costs can be deducted in computing net income, as well as rolling back some state flexibility in using broad-based categorical eligibility for benefits. In addition, states' share of administrative costs are increased from 50% to 75%, and for the first time in its 60-year history, states will be responsible for a share of SNAP benefit costs depending on their administrative error rate. Combined, these policies are estimated to reduce participation by 2.4 million persons in a typical month, and federal spending on SNAP by more than $180 billion over the next decade.[21] The new policies are also likely to significantly change the socioeconomic composition of the SNAP program, underscoring the need for ongoing monitoring of the program's reach across U.S. households.

[20] Harris, Timothy F. 2021. Do SNAP Work Requirements Work? Economic Inquiry 59(1): 72-94; Han Jeehoon. 2022. The Impact of SNAP Work Requirements on Labor Supply 74(2022): 102089; Gray, Colin, et al. 2023. Employed in a SNAP? The Impact of Work Requirements on Program Participation and Labor Supply. American Economic Journal: Economic Policy 15(1): 306-341; Cook, Jason B., and Chloe N. East. 2024. The Disenrollment and Labor Supply Effects of SNAP Work Requirements. NBER Working Paper 32441.

[21] https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2025-08/61367-SNAP.pdf; https://www.cbo.gov/publication/61570;

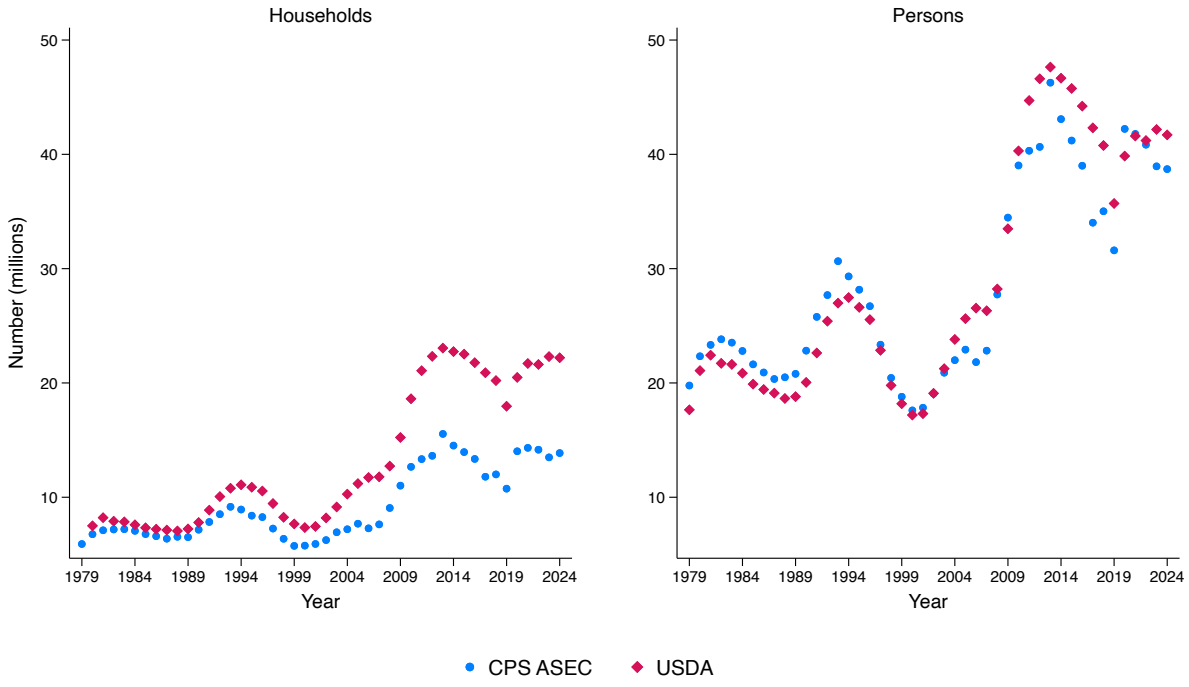
Appendix: Differences Between CPS ASEC and SNAP Administrative Data

The data used in the analysis is from the CPS ASEC for survey years 1980-2025. The CPS is a stratified random sample of household addresses drawn from the Census Bureau's Master Address File. Approximately 60,000 households were sampled for the ASEC supplement prior to the 2001 survey, with an additional 30,000 households added in 2001 and in each year thereafter. A separate weight is provided for each individual and household to make the sample nationally representative of both people and households, where the supplement household weight is the same as the supplement individual weight of the householder.

The CPS ASEC reports whether anyone in the household received SNAP in the prior calendar year, and how many members, but it does not record who in the household receives assistance. Moreover, the survey does not record whether the household contains multiple SNAP assistance units. Both scenarios are possible if not all household members procure, produce, and consume meals together, which could result in some household members in the SNAP unit and others not, or result in more than one SNAP unit. The Census Bureau assumes that members of the household pool and share resources from SNAP, and thus all are assigned as participating if any member participates. Using the CPS ASEC person and household supplement weights it is possible to weight up to population totals and compare to administrative counts provided by the USDA. This is depicted in Appendix Figure 1, which in the left panel shows the weighted population of households on SNAP from the ASEC compared to the administrative USDA data, and the right panel shows the corresponding weighted survey and administrative totals of persons on SNAP. Administrative household counts are not made available until 1980.

The left panel of the figure shows that level differences of households between the CPS ASEC and administrative records from 1979 to the mid 1990s were quite small, but a gap opened

Appendix Figure 1. The Number of Households and Persons with SNAP from CPS ASEC and USDA



Source: Author's calculations using the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement survey years 1980-2025; USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap

up in the late 1990s and swelled after the Great Recession and persisted. The right panel shows that the weighted number of persons on SNAP in the CPS ASEC actually exceeded administrative counts until the mid 1990s, which follows from the CPS assumption that all household members receive the benefit when they may not in all households. The weighted person count overlapped with administrative counts in most year after the mid 1990s until the Great Recession, after which a gap emerged with CPS counts falling below administrative counts until the Covid-19 period starting in 2020. While there are differences in levels, the figure makes clear that for both households and persons, the CPS ASEC very closely tracks the time series trends of the administrative data.

There are several possible reasons for discrepancy between the CPS ASEC estimated SNAP enrollment and the administrative data. First, the sample frame of the CPS excludes certain groups from enumeration who might be participating in SNAP. For example, the homeless with no fixed address like a PO Box, those persons residing in assisted living facilities, and members of the Armed Forces living alone or with only other Armed Forces members are excluded from the CPS sample universe, but each group could qualify for SNAP. In addition, the CPS is a sample from the 50 states and the District of Columbia, excluding Guam, the Virgin Islands, the Northern Mariana Islands, and other territories, which each are in the USDA administrative totals, albeit these will amount to small differences. (Puerto Rico manages a separate stand-alone program). Second, and importantly, the CPS household weight is the householder's individual weight, who may not actually be on the SNAP program and thus their weight is not calibrated to sum up to SNAP administrative aggregates. Third, there is likely underreporting of SNAP participation in the survey, which has grown worse over time.[22] This suggests that the underreporting of SNAP in the CPS ASEC stems not only from misreporting, but also from survey-design reasons.

As discussed in the Introduction, an alternative to the CPS ASEC is data from the SNAP Quality Control (SNAP-QC) System. SNAP-QC is a nationally representative sample of random audits of SNAP cases at the state-month level that is conducted to monitor program operations, and used to produce state-level error rates in benefit issuance.[23] The weights are produced to add up to administrative totals, after some adjustments. The advantage of SNAP-QC is that it is possible to examine the socioeconomic composition of units actually receiving SNAP. The

[22] Meyer, Bruce D., Wallace K. C. Mok, and James X. Sullivan. 2015. Household Surveys in Crisis. Journal of Economic Perspectives 29(4): 199-226.
[23] The SNAP-QC data and technical documentation is available for download at URL: https://snapqcdata.net/datafiles

downside of SNAP-QC is that it is not possible to situate the SNAP unit within the wider household in which it resides (for those households where not all members participate, or there are multiple SNAP units), and information is only collected on the prior month.

It is reassuring, then, that where comparisons are possible the trends in the composition of households with SNAP identified in the main text based on the CPS ASEC generally align with those from the SNAP-QC. For example, Figure 8 shows that the trend increase in householders age 60 and older exploded after the Great Recession, to comprise the largest household share by age today, consistent with SNAP-QC.[24] Figure 10 shows a trend decline in the share of SNAP households with children, and where households without children now comprise the majority share, while Figure 11 shows the emergence of 1-person households as the largest component of the caseload, again both consistent with SNAP-QC.[25] Not all the composition shares overlap though, but this can be explained by differences in survey design. For example, in Figure 12 I show that 60% of households with SNAP report labor-market earnings in the past year. This is roughly double the rate found in a typical month among SNAP units in the QC data.[26] The difference here is that the reference period for the CPS ASEC is the prior year, while the reference period for the SNAP-QC is the prior month. The latter would naturally result in lower employment than the former. This difference in reference period highlights the important complementarity of examining SNAP within the context of the wider household and calendar year as is possible in the CPS ASEC.

[24] Heflin, Colleen M., and Madonna Harrington Meyer. 2025. Food for Thought: Understanding older adult food insecurity. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation (Figure 4.4)
[25] Rachidi, Angela. 2025. The Shifting Composition of SNAP Households. American Enterprise Institute. URL: https://cosm.aei.org/the-shifting-composition-of-snap-households/
[26] U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Characteristics of SNAP Households, Various issues, URL: https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/snap/household-characteristics