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**The Reaching the Working
Poor and Poor Elderly
Study:**

**What We Learned and
Recommendations for
Future Research**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is the cornerstone of America's overall strategy for ensuring that all Americans have enough to eat. It plays an important role as a safety net for low-income elderly persons and working persons with low earnings, including those who have successfully made the transition from cash welfare to work. But it is estimated that in 1994 less than one-half of working households and less than two-fifths of elderly households that were thought to be eligible for food stamp benefits actually received them. Low participation rates are a concern because, depending on their cause, they may be an indication that the FSP is not fulfilling its mission of providing food assistance to everyone who needs it.

To increase its understanding of the reasons for nonparticipation, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) contracted with Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) to conduct a study of nonparticipation by low-income working and elderly households, entitled *Reaching the Working Poor and Poor Elderly*. This report summarizes what was learned and offers recommendations for how a national survey of the reasons for nonparticipation in the FSP should be designed and fielded.

The *Working and Elderly Poor Study* had three phases. First, we assessed what was known about FSP nonparticipation from existing surveys and focus groups and analyzed data on the characteristics and food security of FSP-eligible households. Second, we conducted 12 focus groups with FSP participants and nonparticipants from working and elderly households that were probably FSP eligible. Third, we developed questionnaires about the reasons for nonparticipation and tested them using cognitive techniques on 16 low-income elderly and working persons. We then conducted a large pretest of the survey in the winter of 1998, administering the questionnaires to 451 respondents, mostly by telephone.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT FSP NONPARTICIPATION BY WORKING AND ELDERLY HOUSEHOLDS

In January 1994, only about 46 percent of working FSP-eligible households and 35 percent of elderly FSP-eligible households participated in the program, compared with 69 percent of all FSP-eligible households. And the *numbers* of working and elderly households that did not participate were large--about 2.7 million working households and 3.5 million elderly households.

Existing research has identified five broad categories of reasons for FSP nonparticipation:

1. ***Lack of Information.*** Many low-income survey respondents and focus group members do not think they are FSP eligible. Some elderly and working nonparticipants have never heard of the FSP, and others do not know how to apply for food stamp benefits.

2. ***Perceived Lack of Need.*** A perception that the household “can get by” without food stamp benefits or that “others need them more” are frequently given as reasons for nonparticipation. Data on food security suggest that the degree of a household’s need for food stamp benefits is an important determinant of FSP participation. However, evidence suggests that at least some households that say they do not need food stamp benefits are *not* food secure.
3. ***Expected Benefits Are Too Low.*** Analyses of household survey data have found that the likelihood of households’ FSP participation increases with the size of the benefit they would receive. Elderly households, though not working households, are typically eligible for only a small amount of benefits.
4. ***Reasons Related to Program Administration.*** Low-income households may be deterred from applying for food stamp benefits because of the time, money, or hassle involved in participating in the program. Concerns include: difficulty getting to the FSP office, applying and recertifying is time-consuming and complicated, questions at application and recertification are too personal, FSP office staff seem disrespectful, and the FSP office is unpleasant or unsafe.
5. ***Stigma or Other Psychological Reasons.*** Undoubtedly there is a stigma associated with applying for and using food stamp benefits. However, the extent to which stigma affects FSP nonparticipation is uncertain.

All existing research suggests that each of these reasons is applicable for at least some nonparticipants, that more than one is applicable for nearly all nonparticipants, and that these five reasons account for nearly all nonparticipation in the FSP.

GAPS IN OUR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FSP NONPARTICIPATION

We do not have a thorough understanding of the relative importance of each specific reason for FSP nonparticipation. Available evidence suggests that two reasons for nonparticipation are particularly important: a perception that a household does not need food stamp benefits and a perception that the household is FSP-ineligible. However, an important limitation of previous surveys and focus groups is that they used only simple income screens to determine FSP eligibility. Hence some survey respondents and focus group members may not be FSP eligible. Including FSP-ineligible households in the sample will bias upward the number of people reporting that they do not participate because they think (correctly) that they are ineligible or because they do not need food stamp benefits.

Previous surveys had three other limitations: (1) they asked general open-ended questions that elicited general answers, (2) most did not ask about food security, even though the question of whether low participation rates are a concern depends on the food security of nonparticipants, and (3) the sample sizes of working and elderly households were small.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONDUCTING A NATIONAL SURVEY

Currently, we can only speculate on the appropriate policy response to the low FSP participation rates among working and elderly households. To determine whether the low participation rates are cause for concern and, if they are, to decide upon appropriate policy response requires a national survey of working and elderly nonparticipating households.

In the *Working and Elderly Poor Study* we designed a survey to collect information about FSP nonparticipation among working and elderly low-income households. The survey uses random-digit-dialing to identify FSP nonparticipants in working and elderly households. A short screening interview is used to check whether the respondents were likely to be eligible for food stamp benefits. FSP nonparticipants who pass the screening interview are administered a questionnaire by telephone that includes questions that: (1) ask directly about the reasons for nonparticipation and are structured and closed-ended; (2) collect information necessary to make a good determination of FSP eligibility; (3) ask about food security; (4) ask about sources of food assistance other than food stamp benefits; (5) ask nonparticipants about their previous experiences with the FSP; and (6) ask about the household's demographic characteristics. The *Working and Elderly Poor* survey was designed to include FSP participants so that comparisons could be made of their characteristics and experiences with the FSP with those of the nonparticipants. The participants are identified using lists of program participants obtained from the FSP as well as through random-digit-dialing.

The pretest of the *Working and Elderly Poor Study* survey showed that it is feasible to conduct this survey. However, the survey would require considerable survey resources. In the pretest, we called nearly 17,000 telephone numbers to identify 484 eligible nonparticipants. We estimate that it would take over 18,000 hours of interview labor to identify a sample of about 1,000 eligible nonparticipants from working households and 1,000 eligible nonparticipants from elderly households.

To meet the challenges inherent in a survey about nonparticipation, we also recommend that:

1. ***Efforts should be made to increase the survey's response rate.*** The response rate is the number of people who complete an interview as a proportion of the number of people with whom an interview is attempted. Response rates to random-digit-dialing surveys are typically low. With some changes to the *Working and Elderly Poor Study* survey (which are discussed in this report), we think the response rate to the survey could be between 63 and 67 percent.
2. ***Consideration should be given to excluding FSP participants from the survey.*** Conducting a survey of nonparticipants only would provide sufficient information to provide guidance on the appropriate policy response to the nonparticipation. While including participants in the survey adds richness to the data collected, the information collected from the participants may not justify the additional survey resources required to include them in the survey.

3. ***If FSP participants are to be included in the survey, lists of program participants are needed.*** Participants can be identified by random-digit-dialing or by using program-provided lists. However, because participants are rarer than nonparticipants among working and elderly FSP-eligible households, and because identifying each participant using random-digit-dialing takes many calls, it is more efficient to use both random-digit-dialing and lists of program participants.
4. ***Consideration should be given to including a small number of households without telephones.*** Because non-telephone households may have different reasons for nonparticipation than telephone households do, they should be included in a national survey of nonparticipants, even though it would take considerable survey resources to locate even small numbers of them. We also recommend that the questionnaires ask households with and without working telephones about previous interruptions in telephone services. These data can be used to statistically adjust for the under-representation of non-telephone households.
5. ***Consideration should be given to adding a module about FSP nonparticipation to another household survey.*** This could significantly reduce the costs of collecting the data, the response rate may be higher, and if the survey collects detailed income information it could allow for a more accurate screening for FSP-eligible households.
6. ***The questionnaires developed in this study should be revised to address FSP nonparticipation issues arising from recent welfare reform.*** Although a one-time survey cannot fully explore the reasons for *changes* in the FSP participation rate as a result of welfare reform, it can explore the link between FSP participation and welfare reform. In particular, the questionnaires can explore whether the decision to stop receiving food stamp benefits was linked to no longer receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), whether respondents who had recently applied for TANF had been told about the FSP and encouraged to apply, and whether respondents feel that the desire to be self-sufficient was important in their decision not to participate in the FSP.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is the cornerstone of America's overall strategy for ensuring that all Americans have enough to eat. It plays an important role as a safety net for low-income elderly persons and working persons with low earnings, including those who have successfully made the transition from cash welfare to work. But it is estimated that in 1994 less than one-half of working households and less than two-fifths of elderly households that were thought to be eligible for food stamp benefits actually received them.¹ To increase its understanding of the reasons for nonparticipation, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) contracted with Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) to conduct a study of nonparticipation by low-income working and elderly households, entitled *Reaching the Working Poor and Poor Elderly*.

The *Working and Elderly Poor* study had three main objectives. The first was to review what is known about nonparticipation in the FSP from existing data sources. The second was to increase our knowledge about nonparticipation by conducting focus groups of both participants and low-income nonparticipants from working and elderly households. The third was to design and test a survey examining the reasons for nonparticipation among working and elderly low-income households. This report summarizes what was learned as a result of the *Working and Elderly Poor* study and offers recommendations for how a national survey of the reasons for nonparticipation in the FSP should be designed and fielded.

Despite recent welfare reform legislation designed to reduce the number of people dependent on welfare, low rates of participation in the FSP should still be considered a potential cause for concern. This

¹Stavrianos (1997).

is because low participation rates may be an indication that the FSP is not fulfilling its mission: to provide food assistance to all those who need it. If low-income people do not know about the FSP or do not know how to apply for benefits, or if features of the program discourage people from participating, changes in the program need to be made for it to fulfill its mission. On the other hand, if people do not participate because they do not need food assistance, then program changes are not necessary.

The next section provides an overview of the study. We then end the chapter by briefly describing the organization of the rest of the report.

A. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The *Working and Elderly Poor* study had three interrelated phases, each addressing one of the objectives of the study. This section briefly describes each of these phases.

1. Literature Review and Data Analysis

The objective of the first phase of the study was to assess what is currently known about FSP nonparticipation by low-income working and elderly households by examining the relevant literature and analyzing existing data sources.²

The literature on the reasons for low FSP participation by the subgroups of interest is extremely sparse. Only a few studies have examined the reasons for nonparticipation by the elderly, and we know of no study that focuses on the reasons for nonparticipation by working households. Hence we reviewed a broader literature, examining the reasons for nonparticipation in other programs, the literature on the characteristics of nonparticipants, the literature on the patterns of FSP participation over time, studies of the operations of the FSP and outreach programs, and the sociology and economics literature on stigma.

²The findings from this phase of the study are presented in McConnell and Nixon (1996).

One common approach to studying the reasons for nonparticipation is to examine the characteristics of FSP-eligible nonparticipants and compare them with those of FSP participants. The reasons for nonparticipation are then *inferred* from these comparisons. Using data from the January 1992 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), we extended these analyses by examining in detail, using multivariate analysis, the economic and demographic characteristics of working and elderly households that were associated with FSP participation.

If a household cannot obtain nutritionally adequate and safe food in socially acceptable ways it is said to be *food insecure*. Food insecurity is a broad concept that includes not only hunger but also other conditions such as anxiety about having enough food, having to eat only a few low-cost foods, having to borrow money for food, or having to visit a soup kitchen for food. Knowing whether a nonparticipant household is food insecure is key to determining whether those who do not participate in the FSP are in need of food assistance. We examined the food security of working and elderly participants and FSP-eligible nonparticipants using data from the SIPP Extended Well-Being Module³ and the April 1995 Food Security Supplement of the Current Population Survey.

Finally, using a panel of SIPP data covering October 1989 to August 1993, we examined the patterns of FSP participation of working and elderly people over time. This involved analyzing the length of FSP participation spells and the events that preceded entry into and exit from the FSP.

³This was administered between October 1992 and January 1993.

2. Focus Groups

To further our understanding of the reasons for nonparticipation and to help in the design of the *Working and Elderly Poor* questionnaires, we conducted 12 focus group discussions with FSP participants and nonparticipants from working and elderly households who we thought were probably eligible for food stamp benefits. The advantage of conducting focus groups is that they provide an opportunity to discuss with probing and follow-up questions the underlying reasons for nonparticipation.

Each focus group consisted only of people who fell into one of four categories:

1. Working FSP nonparticipants who were likely to be FSP-eligible (four groups)
2. Working FSP participants (two groups)
3. Elderly nonparticipants who were likely to be FSP-eligible (four groups)
4. Elderly FSP participants (two groups)

We conducted the focus groups in six sites: Baltimore City and Baltimore County in Maryland, Harris County and Polk County in Texas, and Lane County and Lincoln County in Oregon. Baltimore City and Harris County (Houston) are urban, Baltimore County and Lane County are suburban, and Polk County and Lincoln County are rural.

In addition to addressing the reasons for nonparticipation, the focus group discussions examined how the decision to participate (or not) was made and the factors that influenced that decision, current and past experiences with the program, how much the focus group members knew about the program, and whether there were changes in the program that would facilitate participation.⁴

⁴Ponza and McConnell (1996) discusses the focus groups and their findings in detail.

3. Designing and Testing a Survey About Nonparticipation

A national survey of households who are eligible for the program but decided not to participate is needed if we are to fully understand the reasons for nonparticipation. The objective of the third phase of the study was to design and test such a survey.

We faced three major challenges in designing the survey. First, it is necessary to identify people who are eligible for the FSP but do not participate. As no complete or unbiased lists of these people exist, we identified FSP nonparticipants who were likely to be eligible for food stamps using random-digit-dialing. This involves calling randomly selected telephone numbers from commercially-produced lists of telephone numbers in a specified area. FSP participants were identified from lists of participants obtained from the state FSP agencies as well as from random-digit-dialing.

The second challenge is to determine whether the persons who are contacted through random-digit-dialing are people who meet our criteria for inclusion in the sample. To be included in the sample, the respondent needed to be from a working or elderly household. We also required that *nonparticipants* had income and assets low-enough that they were likely to be eligible for food stamp benefits and that *participants* had applied for food stamp benefits within the past three years so that they could easily recall their experiences applying for benefits. To determine whether the respondent satisfied these criteria, we asked them a short set of screening questions. The challenge in designing these questions was to strike a balance between asking detailed and often sensitive questions to make an accurate determination of eligibility, and keeping the set of questions short so that the proportion of persons who complete the interview is high.

The third challenge was to develop questionnaires that collected sufficient information to identify the reasons for nonparticipation. In previous surveys about nonparticipation, the questions had elicited responses that were too vague to inform policy decisions (McConnell and Nixon 1996).

We developed eight different versions of a questionnaire designed to collect information about FSP nonparticipation and participation.⁵ Each type of respondent--working nonparticipant, working participant, elderly nonparticipant, elderly participant--was administered a different questionnaire, and for each type of respondent we used two different interviews--a short and a long version.

The questionnaires covered a wide range of topics. All nonparticipants were asked a series of closed-ended questions about whether a specific factor was a reason for their nonparticipation, whether it was an “important” reason for their nonparticipation, and what was “the most important” reason for their nonparticipation. For some reasons, we included follow-up questions that asked about the reason in more detail. We also asked whether there were “other” reasons for the respondent’s nonparticipation. All the questionnaires, whether they were to be administered to a respondent who was a working participant, elderly participant, working nonparticipant, or elderly nonparticipant, included questions about the following topics:

- ***Prior Experiences Applying for Food Stamps.*** We asked about the reasons respondents applied for food stamps in the previous three years, whether they applied for other benefits at the time that they applied for food stamp benefits, how the respondents applied for food stamp benefits (for example, in person or via authorized representative), and specific problems that they may have encountered with applying. We also identified respondents who started the application process but did not complete it and probed for the reasons they did not finish the process. Participants were asked about factors that helped them overcome barriers to applying for or using food stamp benefits.

⁵The questionnaires are presented in Volume II of McConnell, Ponza, and Cohen (1999).

- ***Prior Experiences Receiving Food Stamps.*** Both participants and nonparticipants who previously received food stamps in the previous three years were asked about their experiences receiving food stamp benefits. We asked the nonparticipants who previously received food stamp benefits why they stopped receiving them.
- ***Food Security.*** All questionnaires contained questions to determine the food security of the respondents' households. The long questionnaires asked more questions, allowing a more accurate measurement of food security.
- ***Household Composition and Demographic Information.*** We asked about the size and composition of the household.

The long versions of the questionnaires also included questions about the receipt of food assistance other than food stamp benefits, earnings, characteristics of the job of the prime earner in the household (working questionnaires only), health (elderly only), social supports, income, expenses, vehicles owned by the household and the respondent's knowledge of the FSP.

The questionnaires were *cognitively tested* in-person on 16 low-income elderly and working persons (Ponza et al. 1997). Cognitive testing is a method used to identify problems with the questionnaires such as vague or imprecise questions, too abstract or difficult questions, vocabulary problems, and bias caused by the wording or order of the questions. It involves techniques such as asking the respondents to think aloud when they answer the questions, probing them on their responses, asking them to breakdown the components of their answer, asking them to rate the accuracy of their answer to a question, and asking them to paraphrase the question. As a result of the cognitive tests, we revised the wording of some questions, added some questions, and added response categories to some questions.

Because a national survey on nonparticipation would have to overcome these conceptual and operational challenges, we conducted a large pretest of the survey that began in January 1998 and lasted

for about three months.⁶ The pretest took place in six urban sites (Boston, Massachusetts; Galveston, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Durham, North Carolina) and two rural sites (Bedford County, Pennsylvania; and Murray, Lincoln, and Lyon Counties, Minnesota).

Using random-digit-dialing, we called nearly 17,000 telephone numbers to identify 484 nonparticipants from working or elderly households who were likely to be eligible for food stamp benefits. We identified 92 FSP participants using random-digit-dialing and another 86 FSP participants from lists of program participants provided by state FSP agencies. A questionnaire was administered to 451 respondents who met our criteria for inclusion in the sample.

All the initial screening interviews and 85 percent of the questionnaires (both long and short) were conducted by telephone. In a national survey the questionnaires may also be administered to some households without telephones. To test whether the questionnaires could also be administered in person, we administered about 15 percent of the questionnaires (both long and short) in-person.

B. ORGANIZATION OF THE REST OF THE REPORT

The rest of the report consists of two chapters. The next chapter summarizes what we currently know about nonparticipation in the FSP by low-income working and elderly households based on the findings from this study. The final chapter presents our recommendations for collecting more information about FSP nonparticipation.

⁶McConnell, Ponza, and Cohen (1999) discusses the pretest and its findings in detail.

II. OUR CURRENT KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FSP NONPARTICIPATION OF WORKING AND ELDERLY HOUSEHOLDS

Are the low rates of participation in the FSP among working and elderly FSP-eligible households a reflection of a lack of need for food stamp benefits by these households, or are they an indication that the program is not fulfilling its mission of providing food assistance to all households that need it? The answer to this question is important in determining whether changes to the operation of the FSP are required. However, we do not currently have sufficient evidence about the reasons for nonparticipation by these groups to answer this question. This chapter describes what we know and what we *don't* know about FSP nonparticipation by working and elderly households.

The existing evidence on the reasons for nonparticipation comes from three main sources:

1. ***Comparisons of the Characteristics and Behavior of FSP Participants with Those of FSP-Eligible Nonparticipants.*** Most of this analysis has been conducted using either cross sections or panel data from the SIPP (see, for example, McConnell and Nixon 1996). The advantage of the SIPP is that it provides sufficient information to obtain a good prediction of FSP eligibility.
2. ***Focus Groups of Participants and Nonparticipants.*** Focus groups can provide a rich source of data on the reasons for nonparticipation. Ponza and Wray (1990) discuss findings from 12 focus groups of low-income elderly in three cities. We also conducted 12 focus groups in six sites as part of the *Working and Elderly Poor* study (see McConnell and Ponza, 1996).
3. ***Surveys of Nonparticipants.*** A few household surveys have asked low-income nonparticipants directly why they do not participate. These include the 1980 and 1987 Panel Study of Income Dynamics,⁷ the 1979-1980 Survey of Food Consumption in Low-Income Households,⁸ the Supplemental Security Income (SSI)/Elderly Cashout

⁷See Coe (1983) and General Accounting Office (1988 and 1990).

⁸See Blaylock and Smallwood (1984).

Demonstration,⁹ and the survey conducted for the Simplified Application Demonstration.¹⁰ The findings of the pretest of the survey designed as part of this *Working and Elderly Poor* study are only suggestive because the samples are small and not nationally representative.¹¹

The discussion in this chapter is based on all three sources.

The rest of this chapter is organized as follows. We begin, in Section A, by describing some characteristics of FSP-eligible working and elderly households, the differences between FSP-eligible working and elderly households who participate and do not participate in the FSP, and the rates at which working and elderly households participate in the FSP. Section B discusses what we know about the process of deciding whether to participate in the FSP. We then describe in Section C what we know about the reasons for not participating in the FSP. Finally, Section D identifies the gaps in our knowledge about nonparticipation.

A. CHARACTERISTICS AND FSP PARTICIPATION OF WORKING AND ELDERLY HOUSEHOLDS

This study focuses on nonparticipation by two groups of households: the working and the elderly. We define working households as households that have some income from earnings and elderly households as households that have at least one member who is 60 or older.

1. Characteristics of FSP-Eligible Working and Elderly Households

An analysis of data from the SIPP conducted for this study suggests that FSP-eligible working and elderly households have some similarities. Both working and elderly FSP-eligible households have more

⁹See Blanchard et al. (1982) and Hollenbeck and Ohls (1984).

¹⁰See Ohls et al. (1985).

¹¹See McConnell, Ponza, and Cohen (1999).

income and assets than other FSP-eligible households. Based on 1992 SIPP data, 46 percent of working and 54 percent of elderly FSP-eligible households have income above the poverty line, compared with only 35 percent of all FSP-eligible households. Working FSP-eligible households obtain most of their income from earnings; elderly FSP-eligible households obtain most of their income from Social Security, pensions, and SSI. Both working and elderly FSP-eligible households are more likely than other FSP-eligible households to have assets and to own their home.

In other ways, however, the two groups are quite different. Working households are larger and more likely to have children than other FSP-eligible households while elderly households are smaller and less likely to have children than other FSP-eligible households. Half of working households consist of more than one adult and one or more children, whereas approximately two-thirds of elderly households consist of just one elderly person. While elderly households are typically eligible for low food stamp benefits, working households are typically eligible for a larger than average benefit. Analyses of a panel of SIPP data have found that working households tend to experience many changes in household and economic circumstances and so move on and off the FSP frequently. Elderly households do not move on and off the FSP frequently, reflecting less frequent changes in household or economic circumstances. And while households with earnings are more likely than other households to have experienced a change in household income or composition preceding their entry into the FSP, households with elderly persons are much less likely to have experienced these changes preceding their entry into the FSP.

2. Comparisons of the Characteristics of Working and Elderly FSP Participants and FSP-Eligible Nonparticipants

As is true for all FSP-eligible households, working and elderly FSP-eligible households that do not participate in the FSP differ from those that do. The differences include:

- ***Households that do not participate in the FSP tend to be smaller on average than participating ones.*** Nineteen percent of working FSP-eligible nonparticipant households consist of only one person compared with 4 percent of working participant households. Similarly, 68 percent of elderly FSP-eligible nonparticipant households consist of only one person compared with 55 percent of elderly participant households.
- ***Children are less prevalent in nonparticipant households.*** While children are present in 60 percent of working FSP-eligible nonparticipant households, children are present in 83 percent of working participant households. Children are present in only 6 percent of elderly FSP-eligible nonparticipant households compared with 19 percent of elderly participant households.
- ***Households that do not participate in the FSP have a higher total income on average than those that do participate.*** Fifty-seven percent of working FSP-eligible nonparticipant households have income above the poverty line, compared with 50 percent of working participant households. Fifty-one percent of elderly FSP-eligible nonparticipant households have income above the poverty line, compared with 37 percent of elderly participant households.
- ***Nonparticipants are more likely than participants to have assets and own their homes.***
- ***The value of the food stamp benefits that would be given to nonparticipants is lower on average than the benefits actually received by FSP participants.*** This is true even after controlling for differences in household size.
- ***Nonparticipant households are less likely to participate in other assistance programs*** such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), SSI, or General Assistance (GA).

3. Participation Rates

The rates at which working and elderly FSP-eligible households participated in the FSP in January 1994 are presented in Table II.1. For comparison, we also present the overall FSP participation rate.

TABLE II.1
FSP PARTICIPATION RATES: JANUARY 1994

Type of Household	Number of Households in Thousands			Participation Rate
	Participants	Nonparticipants	All FSP-Eligible	
Working	2,301	2,725	5,026	45.8%
Elderly	1,908	3,506	5,414	35.2%
All	10,840	4,909	15,749	68.8%

SOURCE: Stavrianos (1997)

These participation rates were derived from estimates of the number of FSP-eligible households from the SIPP and estimates of the number of participants from FSP administrative data.

Both working and elderly households have particularly low rates of participation in the FSP. Only about 46 percent of working FSP-eligible households and 35 percent of elderly FSP-eligible households participated in the program. This compares with a participation rate for all FSP-eligible households of about 69 percent. And the *numbers* of working and elderly households who do not participate are large. About 2.7 million working households and 3.5 million elderly households who are probably eligible for food stamp benefits do not participate in the program.

An important finding from our study is that the lower participation rates by working and elderly households cannot be explained solely by their income, assets, and home ownership. Working and elderly households both have relatively high income, more valuable assets, and high frequency of home ownership—all characteristics associated with nonparticipation. However, we found that working and elderly

households still had significantly lower participation rates even after we controlled for these and other economic and demographic household characteristics.

B. THE PARTICIPATION DECISION

How do low-income households decide whether or not to participate in the FSP? The factors that influence the decision are discussed in length in the next section, which focuses on the reasons for nonparticipation. This section discusses the *process* of deciding whether or not to participate, based mainly on focus group discussions. We begin by discussing the sequence of decisions that typically leads to participation in the FSP and the influence of others on the decision of whether or not to participate.

1. The Sequence of Decisions

For many households in the *Working and Elderly Poor* focus groups, the process of determining whether to participate in the FSP involved making two decisions: (1) deciding whether the household needs food assistance, and then (2) considering the best source of assistance among those available.

When making the decision about whether it needs food assistance, a household usually considers the resources it has left for food after paying rent and utilities, medicines, and making mortgage and car payments. Research using the SIPP as well as the *Working and Elderly Poor* focus groups point to two main types of events that trigger the decision that the household needs food assistance: (1) changes in income, such as a change in employment status, earnings, or unearned nontransfer income (such as child support), and (2) family composition changes, such as a change in marital status, the death of a spouse, or the birth of a child. When focus group members were asked about what led them to apply for food stamp benefits, some of their typical comments included:

“I [am usually] working full-time, but my doctor [said I could only work] part-time for a while.” (Working focus group member).

“For five years I didn’t work. I stayed at home with my children and then all of a sudden I found myself divorced and raising kids on my own, and you know, I had no work experience to be able to get out and make a decent living.” (Working focus group member).

“Divorce. I had money coming in off a judgement until I was 65 and it ended when I was 65.” (Elderly focus group member).

The first sources of assistance considered by many of the members of the focus groups were family, relatives, and friends. However, sometimes this type of help is not available because the person has no family, has no family nearby, or the family is unable or does not want to provide assistance (because, for example, the person has been “disowned” by the family).

If informal sources are not available, households then typically examine the more formal sources of assistance such as food baskets, food pantries, soup kitchens, commodity distribution programs, and the FSP. In deciding between these sources, most households weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each. The advantage of obtaining food assistance from sources other than the FSP, according to focus group members, is that it is easier. Obtaining food from other sources usually does not require a long application process; frequently the household just needs to say that it is low-income and lives in a specific area. Despite this advantage, these types of assistance are not always available, and some focus group members said that when they are available they do not provide sufficient food or that the food is sometimes spoiled, or unhealthy “junk” food.

2. Others’ Influence on the Decision

Most focus group members said that the decision of whether to participate in the FSP was their own. This is consistent with the *Working and Elderly Poor* pretest findings; few respondents said that an

important reason they did not participate was that relatives or friends did not want them to do so. But the discussions in the focus groups revealed that other family members, friends, clergy, and social workers do influence the decision of whether to participate. In many cases these other people encouraged the focus group member to apply for food stamp benefits. In other cases, however, other people, most frequently other family members, discouraged the focus group member from applying, giving reasons related to the stigma associated with receiving food stamp benefits. Some elderly focus group members felt that they had never made the “decision” to participate. These members had been unaware of the FSP until case managers from hospitals or social services had urged them to participate and had completed most of the application process for them.

C. REASONS FOR NONPARTICIPATION IN THE FSP

The reasons working and elderly households decide not to participate in the FSP fall into five broad categories:

1. ***Lack of Information.*** This includes an unawareness of the existence of the FSP, lack of knowledge of where or how to apply for food stamp benefits, and misperceptions about eligibility.
2. ***A Perceived Lack of Need.*** This is a perception that the respondent does not need food stamp benefits, the belief that other households need food stamp benefits more, or a belief that the respondent’s need is only temporary.
3. ***Low Expected FSP Benefits.*** Some households may think it is not worthwhile to apply for food stamp benefits if they are eligible for only a small amount of benefits.
4. ***Program Administration.*** The flip side of a low benefit from applying is the cost of participating in the program. The time, money, and hassle involved in the application and recertification process may discourage participation.
5. ***Stigma and Other Psychological Reasons.*** Another “cost” that may discourage participation is the stigma and other negative feelings that are sometimes associated with participating in assistance programs.

We know of no evidence that suggests other reasons for nonparticipation by working or elderly households. In the *Working and Elderly Poor* pretest, after asking the nonparticipating respondents about each of these reasons, we asked whether there were “other” reasons that the respondents did not participate. No respondents described a reason that did not fit into one of our five categories.¹²

All existing evidence suggests that each of these reasons is applicable for at least some households that do not participate. It is also apparent that more than one of these reasons is applicable for nearly all nonparticipating households. For example, being eligible for only a small amount of food stamp benefits would probably not be a concern if the household thought it would be costless to apply for and receive the benefits. Households that say they do not participate because they do not know how to go about applying would presumably find out how to apply if the expected FSP benefits were high enough.

The rest of this section discusses each reason for nonparticipation and the existing evidence about its importance in explaining the low participation rates among working and elderly households.

1. Lack of Information

Much of the available evidence suggests that a lack of information is an important deterrent to FSP participation by low-income working and elderly households. The main information problem seems to be that many low-income households do not think they are eligible for food stamp benefits. When asked directly in surveys about why they do not participate, between one-third and one-half of nonparticipants say they think they are ineligible.¹³ Similar proportions of respondents to the pretest of the *Working and*

¹²Although some responses were nonsensical.

¹³In the 1980 Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 54 percent of nonparticipants said they thought they
(continued...)

Elderly Poor survey thought they were ineligible. Many members of the *Working and Elderly Poor* nonparticipant focus groups also reported that they did not participate because they thought they were ineligible.

When asked in the *Working and Elderly Poor* pretest and focus groups why they thought they were ineligible most people said that their income was too high or their assets too valuable. Some thought incorrectly that they were categorically ineligible for food stamp benefits, because, for example, they were working, did not have children, or were elderly. However, none of the focus group members that thought they were ineligible had gone to the FSP office within the previous two months to check on their eligibility. Their assessment was based on what they had been told by family or friends or by comparisons that they made of their circumstances with those of other similar people. For example, one elderly nonparticipant focus group member said:

“My cousin, she, the money that she gets don’t equal to mine, but she gets only \$10, so I know I wouldn’t get nothing.”

Other focus group members thought they were ineligible because they had been found ineligible for food stamp benefits previously, often more than a year ago, and still believed they were ineligible despite changes in their circumstances.

Despite this evidence, however, we cannot conclude that an incorrect perception of ineligibility is an important reason for nonparticipation, because many of the survey respondents and focus group members

¹³(...continued)
were ineligible (Coe 1983). Similarly, 51 percent of nonparticipants thought they were ineligible in the 1987 Panel Study of Income Dynamics (General Accounting Office 1988). In the SSI/Elderly Cashout Demonstration survey, 33 percent of nonparticipants said they thought they were ineligible (Hollenbeck and Ohls 1984).

may *actually be ineligible*. To determine the importance of this reason, we need to know whether the nonparticipant is actually FSP-eligible. Determining FSP eligibility requires detailed information on income, assets, expenses, and household composition. No nationally-representative survey that asked questions about nonparticipation has collected this detailed information.¹⁴ And the members of the *Working and Elderly Poor* nonparticipant focus groups were identified using only a simple income screen and so could be ineligible for food stamp benefits.

Another reason people may not apply for food stamp benefits is that they are unaware of the existence of the FSP. We have no hard evidence on how many low-income people are unaware of the program. However, about 12 percent of elderly nonparticipants and about 3 percent of working nonparticipants who responded to the *Working and Elderly Poor* survey pretest said they had never heard of the FSP before the survey interview. Similarly, a few focus group members said they had never heard of the program before they were contacted for the study.

Many focus group members and respondents to the *Working and Elderly Poor* survey pretest said they did not know where to go to apply for food stamp benefits. However, most of these focus group members and pretest respondents also said that this was not the main reason that they did not participate. When focus group members said that this was the reason that they did not participate, further probing revealed that these people were too embarrassed to find out about the program.

2. Perceived Lack of Need

A perception that the household “can get by” without food stamp benefits or that “others need them more” were frequently given as reasons for not participating in the FSP by both survey respondents and

¹⁴Although the *Working and Elderly Poor* survey does ask detailed questions to determine FSP eligibility, the pretest sample was small and not nationally-representative

focus group members. In the survey of the SSI/Elderly Cashout Demonstration, 37 percent of the households who had never applied for food stamp benefits said they did not need food stamp benefits (Hollenbeck and Ohls 1984), and 27 percent of nonparticipants surveyed in the Survey of Food Consumption in Low-Income Households believed that other households needed food stamp more than they did (Blaylock and Smallwood 1984). In the *Working and Elderly Poor* survey pretest, many respondents said they could get by on their own without food stamp benefits, and about one-quarter gave this as the most important reason they did not participate. Similarly, in the *Working and Elderly Poor* focus groups, many focus group members reported that they could get by without food stamp benefits. Examples of comments made by members of working nonparticipant focus groups are:

“For me, the way it is right now, I can do without....[but] it depends on my job stability.

“Like sometimes it gets real tight, but I just barely make it, so, [I don’t participate].”

“Well,[I don’t participate because] I don’t feel desperate enough.”

Typical comments made by members of the elderly nonparticipant focus groups included:

“I can buy my own food and pay my rent and I just figured I don’t need them.”

“I thought, well, as long as I can get along without it, I’ll do so.”

The degree of need for food stamp benefits is clearly an important determinant of FSP participation. Households that participate in the FSP are much more likely to be food insecure than households that do not participate. Using the SIPP Well-Being Module, McConnell and Nixon (1996) found that 11 percent of all participant households reported that they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat, compared with less than 6 percent of all nonparticipant households thought to be eligible for food stamp benefits.

Analyses of food security data from the April 1995 Food Security Supplement of the Current Population Survey found similar results.

In the focus group discussions, the difference between what participants and nonparticipants said about the need for food stamp benefits was striking. Nearly all of the participant focus group members said they “really needed” food assistance, and this need overwhelmed any reluctance they had about applying. Many working focus group members pointed to the need to feed their children:

“I have a one-year old to feed. I mean, yeah, I can skip meals, but she can’t.”

“We owned a restaurant here in town and basically lost everything. And we had no choice. We have five children and we needed to eat.”

A lack of need is likely to be a more important reason for nonparticipation by elderly households than by working households. This is because there is considerable evidence that, in general, low-income elderly households are more food secure than low-income working households. Only two percent of low-income elderly households in the SIPP Well-Being Module reported that they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat, compared with seven percent of working low-income households (McConnell and Nixon 1996).

There is compelling evidence that a lack of need for food stamp benefits is an important reason for the low rates of participation by elderly households and, although to a lesser extent, by working households. However, one should *not* conclude that this is *the* most important reason for nonparticipation until two issues are addressed. The first of these issues is whether those who say they don’t need food stamp benefits actually have resources that make them ineligible for food stamp benefits. As discussed earlier,

many of the respondents to previous surveys and many focus group members could well be ineligible for food stamp benefits, and households that are FSP-ineligible are less likely to need food assistance.

The second issue is how food secure the nonparticipants who say they do not need food stamp benefits really are. No nationally-representative survey has included both questions about nonparticipation and questions about food security. Evidence from the *Working and Elderly Poor* questionnaires and focus groups would suggest that at least some of the people who said they did not need food stamp benefits were not food secure. Some focus group members who said they did not need food stamp benefits later talked about cutting back on meal portions, eating a lot of bread, rice, and beans, or going to other people's houses for meals when there was not enough to eat. When probed about this inconsistency, the focus group members talked about wishing to be "independent" and not wishing to feel like a "failure" because they needed food stamp benefits. Some working focus group members talked about believing their need for food assistance was only temporary until they obtained a better-paying job.

3. Expected Benefits Are Too Low

In deciding whether to participate in the FSP, many low-income households in need of food assistance appear to weigh the benefits and costs of receiving food stamp benefits. The main component of the "benefit" is the amount of food stamp benefits they would receive. Multivariate analyses of the decision to participate have found that the likelihood of households' participation in the FSP increases with the size of the benefit they would receive. This is true for all FSP-eligible households and also for working and elderly FSP-eligible households.¹⁵

¹⁵Although for elderly households who are eligible for large benefit amounts, an increase in the benefit amount decreases the likelihood that they will participate. This puzzling finding was found by both Martini (1992) and McConnell and Nixon (1996).

The existing evidence, although far from conclusive, suggests that a low benefit amount is not a major reason for nonparticipation among working and elderly households. A low benefit amount was a reason given for nonparticipation by only a small proportion of respondents in both the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the Survey of Food Consumption in Low-Income Households, and the *Working and Elderly Poor* pretest. When surveys have found that low benefits were cited more frequently, this reason was always coupled with a comment about the costs of applying for food stamp benefits. In the survey for the SSI/Elderly Cashout Demonstration, for example, about one-fifth of the respondents who had never applied for food stamp benefits said they had not applied because the food stamp benefits were not worth the hassles and other costs required to obtain them. Similar comments were made in the *Working and Elderly Poor* focus groups.

A low benefit amount is probably a more important reason for nonparticipation by elderly households than by working households, because elderly households are typically eligible for only a small benefit amount, while working households are typically eligible for a large benefit amount. Using 1992 SIPP data, we found that, overall, FSP-eligible households were eligible for an average of \$144 in benefits; working FSP-eligible households were on average eligible for \$161; and elderly FSP-eligible households were on average eligible for only \$71 in benefits. Only 13 percent of all FSP-eligible households were eligible for food stamp benefits of \$10 or less, compared with 8 percent of working FSP-eligible households and 27 percent of elderly FSP-eligible households.

4. Reasons Related to Program Administration

Low-income households may be deterred from applying for food stamp benefits because of the perceived time, money, or hassle involved in participating in the program. Table II.2 presents a list of the main concerns related to applying and recertifying for food stamp benefits cited by FSP

TABLE II.2

POTENTIAL CONCERNS RELATED TO PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

1. Getting to the FSP Office Is Difficult

- Problems finding and expense associated with obtaining transportation to and from the FSP office
- Physical difficulties getting to and from the FSP office because of poor health or disabilities
- Difficulties taking time off work or school to go to the FSP office
- Losing pay while at the FSP office
- Having to arrange for dependent care while at the FSP office

2. Applying and Recertifying is Time-Consuming and Complicated

- Having to wait a long time to be served in the FSP office
- Length and complexity of the application form
- Difficulties getting all the necessary paperwork
- Length of the whole application process

3. Questions at Application and Recertification Are Too Personal

- Questions about who lives in the household, especially a boyfriend or child's father
- Questions about income sources, especially child support
- Questions about assets
- Questions about citizenship
- Questions about disabilities

TABLE II.2 (*con't*)

4. FSP Office Staff Are Perceived to Be Disrespectful

- Staff make comments that are viewed as disrespectful

5. The FSP Office is Unpleasant or Unsafe

- Unpleasantness of the inside of the FSP office building
 - Unpleasantness of waiting with the other applicants
 - The crime rate in the neighborhood
 - Lack of parking
-

participants in previous surveys, focus groups in this and other studies, and the *Working and Elderly Poor* pretest.

Applying for food stamp benefits is time-consuming and can involve substantial expenses. Bartlett et al. (1992) estimated that on average it takes nearly five hours to complete the application process, which involves out-of-pocket expenses of over \$10. However, current evidence from surveys and focus groups suggests that while the cost, in terms of time, money, and hassle, of applying and recertifying for food stamp benefits does discourage some people from participating, it is probably not the major reason for nonparticipation for most households.

5. Stigma or Other Psychological Reasons

Undoubtedly, there is a stigma associated with applying for and using food stamp benefits. Painful experiences that focus group members have either been through or fear going through during the application process include: embarrassment, a sense of failure, hurt pride, and the perception that they have lost their independence. Many focus group members believed that they would be treated disrespectfully by caseworkers. Focus group members also talked about the humiliation of *using* food stamp benefits because of the coupons' visibility.¹⁶ They talked of store employees and other customers making comments about what they were buying or about their use of food stamp benefits. The comments of focus group members are illuminating:

"I'm very prideful, [I don't participate in the FSP because] it kind of embarrasses me. Because everybody says, well, she works at [retail store] and she makes big bucks. But it's not true." (A working participant focus group member).

"Yeah. Food stamps mean welfare, and welfare means you're trash." (A working nonparticipant focus group member).

"I wouldn't admit to the fact that I would need help." (A working nonparticipant focus group member).

"[Applying for food stamps] is very degrading and humiliating. They [the FSP] want you to get on your knees." (A working nonparticipant focus group member.)

"My feeling would be that [if I applied for food stamps] I must have failed someplace along the way. I haven't tried hard enough. I haven't taken that good care of my money." (An elderly nonparticipant focus group member).

"We didn't grow up with [accepting welfare]. We really grew up in a work ethic. We did our own." (An elderly nonparticipant focus group member).

¹⁶Evidence suggests that an Electronic Benefit Transfer card, which electronically debits the value of purchases from a food stamp account, is less visible and hence less embarrassing to use than coupons (Beecroft et al. 1994).

“Its about being independent. You want to be independent and not use them. You want to take care of yourself.” (An elderly nonparticipant focus group member).

Survey evidence also suggests that many low-income households feel that there is a stigma associated with food stamps. In the SSI/Elderly Cashout Demonstration survey, Hollenbeck and Ohls (1984) found that only about one-fifth of elderly participants and nearly one-third of elderly nonparticipants were or would be bothered by accepting food stamp coupons. Similar percentages of respondents in the pretest of the *Working and Elderly Poor* survey reported feeling embarrassed about applying for or using food stamp benefits.

Despite the strong evidence that some people feel that there is a stigma about participating, there is uncertainty about how important stigma is as a *reason* for nonparticipation. No national survey has asked directly whether this is a reason for nonparticipation. In the pretest of the *Working and Elderly Poor* survey, less than one-quarter of respondents said this was a reason they did not participate, and less than five percent said it was the most important reason they did not participate.

D. GAPS IN OUR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE REASONS FOR LOW FSP PARTICIPATION IN WORKING AND ELDERLY HOUSEHOLDS

Existing research on the reasons for nonparticipation in the FSP has identified a set of reasons that we believe explains nearly all of the FSP nonparticipation. However, we do not have a thorough understanding of the relative importance of each specific reason for the population of nonparticipants as a whole, and we have even less of an understanding of the relative importance of each reason for working and elderly households.

Two reasons for nonparticipation stand out as important among available evidence: a perception that food stamp benefits are not needed and a perception that the household is not eligible for food stamp benefits. However, nearly all this evidence is based on groups of survey respondents or focus group

members that may include persons who are not eligible for food stamp benefits. Most focus groups and surveys of the reasons for nonparticipation used only crude income screens to determine FSP eligibility. McConnell (1997) shows that even if income is reported accurately, over one-quarter of households found to be FSP-eligible using an income screen of 130 percent of poverty would actually be ineligible based on the household's assets and income net of earnings and other deductions. Including these ineligible households in the samples of nonparticipants will bias upward the proportion of people reporting that they do not participate because they think they are ineligible or because they do not need food stamp benefits.

While previous research has made available some useful information about nonparticipation, it has not been able to provide firm conclusions about the relative importance of each reason for nonparticipation. This is mainly because existing surveys that include questions on nonparticipation have four important weaknesses:

1. ***They asked general, open-ended questions that elicited general answers.*** For example, a common response to a general question about why the household did not participate was that “the benefits are not worth the hassle.” We do not know from this response whether the respondent thought that the food stamp benefits were particularly low, the hassle particularly great, or both. We also do not know the nature and cause of the “hassle.”
2. ***They did not collect sufficient information to make a good determination of FSP eligibility.*** As discussed above, including households that are FSP-ineligible will bias the survey findings.
3. ***Most of the surveys did not ask questions about food security.*** This is an important omission because whether nonparticipation is a cause for concern depends on whether nonparticipants are food secure.
4. ***The sample sizes of nonparticipants were small.*** This precludes making statistically significant inferences about nonparticipation in working and elderly households.

While focus group discussions can be illuminating, what people say in a focus group is often affected by the dynamics of the discussion. Moreover, care should be taken in generalizing from focus groups findings because the people who agree to participate in focus groups are small in number, not nationally representative, and may differ in important ways from the people who choose not to attend the focus groups.

We can only conjecture about possible reasons for identified differences in the characteristics of FSP participants and FSP-eligible nonparticipants found in household survey data. And in many cases the association of a characteristic with FSP participation is consistent with more than one reason for nonparticipation. For example, the association between FSP participation and participation in other assistance programs (such as SSI, TANF, or GA) is consistent with households not participating because they don't know about the FSP but learn about it when they apply for other assistance; with households not needing food stamp benefits or other assistance; and with the "costs" of applying for food stamp benefits being lower when households already receive other assistance.

III. LEARNING MORE ABOUT FSP NONPARTICIPATION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONDUCTING A NATIONAL SURVEY

While existing research has identified many possible reasons for FSP nonparticipation by working and elderly households, we do not yet have a good understanding of the relative importance of each reason. Existing surveys have asked open-ended questions about general reasons for nonparticipation, have not collected sufficient information to determine FSP eligibility, have not collected data on food security, and have used only small samples of working and elderly households. The findings from focus groups are limited because they are based on small samples of people who are not nationally-representative. Reasons for nonparticipation can only be inferred from comparisons of the characteristics of participants and FSP-eligible nonparticipants.

Based on this evidence, we can only speculate about the appropriate policy responses to the low rate of participation in the FSP by working and elderly households. Addressing the question of whether the low participation rates are an indication that policy changes are needed and, if so, what types of changes should be made, requires a national survey of working and elderly FSP-eligible nonparticipants such as the one designed for this study. This chapter describes our recommendations for how a survey on nonparticipation should be conducted. We begin by discussing our recommendations for the content of the questionnaires on nonparticipation. We then discuss our recommendations for the design of the survey.

A. THE CONTENT OF THE NONPARTICIPATION QUESTIONNAIRES

Our study of the reasons for nonparticipation has identified six types of questions that any questionnaire about the reasons for nonparticipation should include. These are: (1) direct closed-ended questions about the reasons for nonparticipation, (2) questions to determine the household's FSP eligibility, (3) questions

to determine the household's level of food security, (4) questions about the household's sources of food assistance other than food stamp benefits, (5) questions about the household's previous experiences applying for and using food stamp benefits, and (6) questions about demographic characteristics of the household. All these types of questions were included in the long versions of the questionnaires designed for this study.¹⁷ We also recommend that the questionnaires be short. We discuss each recommendation below.

1. The Questionnaires Should Include Structured Closed-Ended Questions About the Reasons for Nonparticipation

In previous surveys the questions about nonparticipation were typically broad and open-ended and elicited responses that were too vague to inform policy decisions. Hence in the *Working and Elderly Poor* questionnaires we included a series of direct closed-ended questions about the reasons for nonparticipation. Each question asked whether a particular reason was applicable to the respondent. At the end of the series of questions we asked whether there were other reasons for the respondent's nonparticipation in the FSP. We also asked which was *the most important reason* that the respondent did not participate. These closed-ended questions worked well. On their own, they provided a great deal of detailed information about the reasons for nonparticipation and allowed us to rank the importance of each reason.

We also recommend that the questionnaires include follow-up questions about each reason given by the respondent, as the *Working and Elderly Poor* questionnaires do. Often these follow-up questions are needed to obtain sufficient information to recommend a policy change, if one is necessary. For example, we may learn that elderly persons are deterred from participating because the caseworkers ask too many

¹⁷As a result of our experience in the pretest we recommend some minor revisions to these questionnaires (McConnell, Ponza, and Cohen 1999).

personal questions during the application process. If this were the case, we would like to learn which questions were particularly offensive to the applicant.

2. The Questionnaires Should Collect Information to Determine FSP Eligibility

In any analysis of the reasons for FSP nonparticipation it is important that the sample contain only persons who are eligible for food stamp benefits. Including persons who are not eligible for food stamp benefits will bias the findings. When asked why they do not participate in the FSP, persons who are ineligible for food stamp benefits are more likely to say that they do not need food stamp benefits and that they think (correctly) that they are ineligible for food stamp benefits.

Because of concerns about people breaking off the interview, the interviewer cannot ask all the detailed questions required to accurately determine FSP eligibility during the screening interview. However, some of these questions can be asked later, during the main part of the interview, when the interviewer has established a rapport with the respondent. When the survey data are analyzed, this information can be used to make a better determination of FSP eligibility, and sample members who do not seem to be FSP eligible can be removed from the analysis sample.

We recommend that the questionnaires include detailed questions about household size, income, expenses, vehicles owned by the household, whether the household contains a disabled person (as defined by the FSP), and whether the household contains non-U.S. citizens. We recommend that the questionnaires ask for household income by source, as this significantly reduces the likelihood of it being underreported (Citro and Michael 1995). We recommend that the questionnaires ask questions about vehicles because these questions are easy to answer, nonthreatening, and vehicles make up a substantial proportion of the assets of low-income households. We also recommend that respondents just be asked whether their financial assets exceed the FSP eligibility threshold rather than the amount or type of their assets.

(Questions about whether the respondent's assets exceeded a threshold were included in the *Working and Elderly Poor* screening interview). Experience has shown that asking detailed questions about financial assets leads to a high rate of people refusing to complete the interview, both because they are difficult questions to answer and because people are wary about providing information about their assets to telephone interviewers.

3. The Questionnaires Should Include Questions About Food Security

Any survey designed to determine the reasons for FSP nonparticipation should collect data on food security. Whether or not the nonparticipants are food secure is key to determining whether low FSP participation rates are cause for concern. If many FSP-eligible nonparticipants are found to be food insecure and in need of assistance, the FSP is not meeting its mission of providing food assistance to those who need it. However, if most FSP-eligible nonparticipants are food secure, the FSP may be meeting its mission of providing food assistance to those who need it, in which case low rates of participation are not a cause for concern.

Data on food security may also shed light on the underlying reasons for nonparticipation. In the pretest, many nonparticipants interviewed gave a perceived lack of need for food stamp benefits as the most important reason for nonparticipation. From a policy perspective, it is important to determine whether those respondents who said they did not need food stamp benefits actually were food secure. Our experience based on the focus groups and the *Working and Elderly Poor* pretest was that some persons who said they did not need food stamp benefits were actually food insecure, reporting, for example, that they were anxious that their food would run out, that they ate only low-cost food, or sometimes did not eat

enough. One explanation is that some people may deny needing food stamp benefits because they are embarrassed to admit to their need.

4. The Questionnaires Should Include Questions About Sources of Food Assistance Other Than Food Stamp Benefits

The questionnaires about nonparticipation should include questions on whether the respondent receives other food assistance, and if he or she does, what types of food assistance these are. Knowing the other food assistance programs used by low-income nonparticipants may allow the FSP to coordinate FSP outreach with these programs. Also, with this information we can address the questions of whether nonparticipant households that are food secure are so because they have low food needs and few other demands on their income or because they are receiving food assistance from other sources. The policy response may differ depending on whether these nonparticipants receive assistance from friends or relatives, other government programs, or from private programs such as churches, charities, or other community organizations.

5. The Questionnaires Should Ask Nonparticipants About Previous Experiences Applying for and Using Food Stamp Benefits

At minimum, a questionnaire about nonparticipation should ask nonparticipants the following questions: whether they have begun the FSP application process within the previous several years, whether they completed the application process, whether they were found eligible, and whether they received food stamp benefits. Ideally the questionnaire should also ask about their experiences with the FSP. This information can shed light on whether some of the reasons for nonparticipation are based on real information about the program or on misperceptions or fears by determining, for example, whether the people who think that the application process will be complicated have had experience with the process. A sufficiently large

number of nonparticipants have had previous experiences applying for and using food stamp benefits to make including these questions worthwhile. In the pretest of the *Working and Elderly Poor* questionnaires, we found that 19 percent of working nonparticipants and 10 percent of elderly nonparticipants had received food stamp benefits in the previous three years.

6. The Questionnaires Should Include Questions About Household Demographic Characteristics

From a policy perspective, it is important to determine whether there are identifiable subgroups of working or elderly low-income households that have particular reasons for nonparticipation. Hence we recommend that the questionnaires include questions about the age, gender, and relationships of members of the household and about the race/ethnicity and education level of the respondent. These are simple questions that are neither time-consuming to answer nor, in general, threatening.

7. The Questionnaires Should Address FSP Nonparticipation Issues Arising From Recent Welfare Reform

The recent decline in FSP participation, from 11 million households in 1996 to 8 million households in 1998, cannot be fully explained by a decrease in the number of households in poverty. This suggests that changes associated with the welfare reform provisions of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 may have decreased FSP participation rates. Of the two population groups of interest in this study, welfare reform is more likely to have affected working households, who because they have often have children, may have received TANF. Elderly households are not directly affected by welfare reform but may have been affected indirectly, perhaps through changes in attitudes toward welfare. Although a one-time survey cannot fully explore the reasons for *changes* in the FSP participation rate, we recommend that the questionnaires be revised to include questions that explore the link between FSP participation and welfare reform.

Welfare reform may have affected the FSP participation rate in three main ways. First, FSP participants who *stop receiving* TANF benefits because they find work, reach the time limit, or are sanctioned for not meeting work requirements may discontinue receipt of food stamp benefits even though they may still be eligible to receive them. This may be because they think incorrectly that their households are no longer eligible for food stamp benefits, they no longer think it is worth the “hassle” to receive just food stamp benefits, or they want to be free of receiving any government assistance. Caseworkers may also not be informing clients that they are still eligible for food stamp benefits, and in some cases, may even be incorrectly terminating benefits. We recommend that when respondents are asked about why they stopped receiving food stamps benefits in the survey, they should be asked whether they stopped receiving TANF benefits at about the same time. If they did, follow-up questions can explore how the cessation of TANF affected their FSP participation. The respondents can be asked whether they thought their households were no longer eligible for food stamp benefits, and if so, whether this perception was based on information provided by the caseworker or some other source.

Second, welfare reform may have reduced the likelihood that a person *applying* for TANF would also apply for food stamp benefits. Although food stamp applications can still be made at the same time as TANF applications, local caseworkers may be less likely to tell applicants that they are eligible for food stamp benefits. Many states have developed diversion programs that discourage people from going onto TANF. Some diversion programs offer TANF applicants a one-time lump-sum payment instead of monthly TANF benefits; others require applicants to engage in job search as a condition to be met before they are eligible for TANF. Applicants diverted from TANF may not be aware that they are still eligible for food stamp benefits. Caseworkers may not be informing them about food stamp benefits and may even be improperly holding up the processing of FSP applications until the applicant has completed pre-

application procedures for TANF. This suggests that the questionnaires should ask respondents not only whether they have recently applied for food stamp benefits, but also whether they have recently applied for TANF benefits. Respondents who have recently applied for TANF benefits should be asked follow-up questions about whether they were told about their eligibility for food stamp benefits when they applied for TANF benefits and if they were encouraged by eligibility workers to apply for food stamp benefits also.

Third, welfare reform may have increased the importance of psychological reasons for not participating in the FSP. Welfare reform transformed Aid to Families with Dependent Children from an entitlement program which provided monthly cash assistance to a work-oriented transitional assistance program (TANF) in which employment and leaving welfare is the goal. This transformation may have increased the working and elderly peoples' desire for self-sufficiency and increased the stigma of applying for and using food stamp benefits. The questionnaires already include questions about whether the respondent did or would feel embarrassed applying for and/or using food stamp benefits. For those respondents who report feeling a stigma associated with applying for and/or using food stamp benefits, follow-up questions in the questionnaires could ask whether the respondents feel that the stigma associated with food stamp benefits has increased in recent years. Nonparticipants could be asked whether their desire to be self-sufficient was important in their decision to not participate in the FSP.

8. The Questionnaires Should be Fairly Short

Ideally a survey of nonparticipation would include all the questions included in the long versions of the *Working and Elderly Poor* questionnaires that we designed and tested. However, the long versions of the questionnaires took an average of 26 minutes to administer by telephone.¹⁸ Because of concerns about

¹⁸The interviews took about 9 minutes longer on average when administered in-person.

respondent burden and response rates, we recommend instead using a slightly shorter version of these questionnaires that would take about 20 minutes to administer.¹⁹ We recommend retaining only the six types of questions discussed in this section. We recommend dropping from these questionnaires the following questions: questions about the receipt of food stamp benefits by the respondent as a child and by the respondent's friends, neighbors, and relatives; questions about employment; questions about health and cognitive and physical functioning; and questions about social supports available to the respondent. While these questions are interesting, we did not think that these questions yielded sufficient information about nonparticipation to justify the amount of time required to ask and answer them.

B. THE DESIGN OF THE SURVEY

Several conceptual and operational challenges need to be addressed before a survey about nonparticipation in the FSP is conducted. These challenges include identifying nonparticipants when no lists of nonparticipants are available, screening for nonparticipants eligible for the survey, identifying participants (if they are to be included in the survey), and identifying and interviewing households that do not have telephones. This section recommends ways to meet these challenges.

¹⁹The screening interview would add another three to four minutes.

1. FSP-Eligible Households Should Be Identified for a Stand-Alone Survey Using Random-Digit-Dialing

A major challenge associated with conducting a stand-alone survey²⁰ to determine the reasons for nonparticipation is locating FSP-eligible households that do not participate in the program. No complete or unbiased lists exist of these eligible nonparticipants. In the *Working and Elderly Poor* pretest we located FSP-eligible nonparticipants using random-digit-dialing (calling randomly selected telephone numbers from commercially-produced lists of telephone numbers in a specified area). These lists include telephone numbers that are not in service as well as numbers of businesses and institutions. And most of the households on the lists have income too high to be eligible for food stamp benefits or do not contain an elderly or working person. So once a telephone number is answered and the interviewer determines that the number belongs to a residence, the respondent was administered a short set of screening questions to determine whether he or she met our criteria for inclusion in the sample--they live in a working or elderly household and are likely to be eligible for food stamp benefits.

Our experience in the pretest showed that it is feasible to locate FSP-eligible nonparticipants in this way. However, we also found that it requires considerable survey resources. We called nearly 17,000 telephone numbers to identify 484 eligible nonparticipants from working or elderly households.²¹ We estimate that it would take just over 18,000 hours of interviewer labor to identify a sample of about 1,000 eligible nonparticipants from working households and 1,000 eligible nonparticipants from elderly households.

²⁰By “stand-alone” we mean an independent survey rather than a set of questions about nonparticipation attached to another survey as an additional module.

²¹As a by-product we also identified 92 FSP participants.

The *Working and Elderly Poor* screening interview used the following relatively simple criteria to simulate the FSP-eligibility determination process. Respondents were considered categorically eligible for food stamp benefits if they reported that during either the current or previous month everyone in their households received TANF, SSI, or GA. If everyone in the household did not receive these benefits the respondent was considered likely to be eligible for food stamp benefits only if all the following criteria were met:

1. ***The household's income was less than 130 percent of the poverty threshold.*** This simulates the FSP-eligibility test that requires gross household income not to exceed 130 percent of poverty. Although elderly households and households that contain disabled persons are not subject to this gross income eligibility test, they are subject to a requirement that income net of certain expenses and deductions not exceed 100 percent of poverty. As simulating the net income test requires too many detailed questions for a short screening interview, we approximated the test with the requirement that gross income not exceed 130 percent of poverty for elderly and disabled households.
2. ***The household did not own any vehicle that was manufactured in the past five years.*** For most FSP applicants, the fair market value of their vehicles (exceeding \$4,650) is counted as an asset. McConnell (1997) found that the age of the household's vehicles was a good proxy for their value and a good predictor of whether a household was eligible for food stamp benefits.
3. ***The value of the household's financial assets was less than \$3,000 if the household contained an elderly person, and less than \$2,000 if the household did not contain an elderly person.*** The FSP asset eligibility test requires that the value of all counted household assets, including the counted value of vehicles, not exceed these levels.
4. ***The household had not been informed by the FSP that it is ineligible for food stamp benefits in the previous two months.*** This will screen out some respondents who may be ineligible for other reasons, for example because they do not meet the citizenship requirement or because they are able-bodied adults without dependents who have not met the work requirement.

There is a fine line between a screening interview that makes a good determination of FSP eligibility and one that asks so many detailed and sensitive questions that its response rate is unacceptably low. Most

previous studies of the reasons for nonparticipation in the FSP used crude screening rules to create samples of nonparticipants who were likely to be eligible for food stamp benefits. The *Working and Elderly Poor* random-digit-dialing screening interview used more sophisticated screening rules that required respondents to answer questions about their vehicles and other assets as well as their income. Over 43 percent of the respondents who passed the income screen in the *Working and Elderly Poor* screening interview failed one or more of the asset screens. However, despite the additional screening rules, 38 percent of the respondents found eligible by the screening interview seem to be ineligible for food stamp benefits based on information given later in the interview. Over half of these respondents reported income below the eligibility threshold in the screening interview and then later, when asked in the main part of the questionnaire about the amount of each source of income, reported income that exceeded the eligibility threshold.

2. Efforts Should Be Made to Increase the Response Rate to a Stand-Alone Survey of FSP Nonparticipants

The response rate is the number of people who complete an interview as a proportion of the number of people with whom an interview is attempted. The proportion of persons who do not complete an interview is a concern because the persons who do not respond may differ from those who do in ways that are related to the reasons for FSP nonparticipation. If the factors that determine whether a person responds are related to the reasons for nonparticipation, the survey findings will be biased; the observed findings will differ from the findings that we *would* have observed if there had been no nonresponse.

The response rate to a stand-alone survey about the reasons for nonparticipation is unlikely to be high, for three reasons. First, response rates to random-digit-dialing surveys are typically low. Use of answering machines, call forwarding, and telephone solicitation all contribute to low response rates to random-digit-

dialing surveys.²² It is rare in random-digit-dialing surveys for more than 70 percent of the persons with whom an interview is conducted to complete an interview.²³ Second, the random-digit-dialing screening interview includes questions about household income and assets--questions that are both difficult to answer and sensitive. Third, nonparticipants may be uninterested in topics related to a program that they have chosen not to participate in.

The response rate to the pretest survey was about 51 percent. For every 100 calls made to residential telephone numbers, 60 persons (60 percent) completed a screening interview and 51 of those (85 percent) also completed a main questionnaire. One factor that lowered the response rates in the pretest was that two of the eight pretest sites were large northeastern metropolitan cities that typically have low survey response rates. With the changes to the *Working and Elderly Poor* survey discussed below, we think the response rate to a national survey could be as high as 63 to 67 percent.²⁴ These recommended changes are:²⁵

1. ***The First Questions in the Screening Interview Should Be About the Respondent's FSP Participation.*** The first interview questions should be nonthreatening questions that are related to the topic of the questionnaire. Instead of asking first about household size and income, as we did in the pretest, we recommend asking about the respondent's participation in the FSP and whether his or her household contains a working or elderly person. Household income should be addressed in the fourth question or later.

²²Massey et al. (1997).

²³Massey et al. (1997).

²⁴The response rate to the screening interview could be as high as 70 percent and the completion rate of the main questionnaires as high as 90 or 95 percent.

²⁵McConnell, Ponza, and Cohen (1999) describes in detail these recommendations and recommends some other minor improvements to the *Working and Elderly Poor* screening interview.

2. ***Add More Interviewer Probes to the Screening Interview.*** We found in the pretest that including interviewer probes after an initial nonresponse to the income question was successful at eliciting responses. We recommend adding similar probes after questions about assets.
3. ***Send an Advance Letter to Persons on the Random-Digit-Dialing Sample Frame.*** We recommend that, before they are called, persons sampled from the random-digit-dialing lists who have listed addresses are sent a letter that explains the study and encourages their participation. Only about 20 to 30 percent of those on the random-digit-dialing frame would receive letters because many telephone numbers do not have addresses attached to them (because they are not listed in the telephone book) and many addresses attached to the numbers are incorrect. However, it is still worth sending an advance letter to those for which an address is available because it is relatively inexpensive to do and experience suggests that receiving an advance letter increases the likelihood that the person will complete the interview.
4. ***Lengthen the Field Period.*** One determinant of the response rate in a random-digit-dialing survey is the likelihood that the interviewer is able to determine whether the telephone number belongs to a residence rather than a business or other organization. The interviewer cannot make the determination if the telephone is never answered. We recommend increasing the length of the field period because this increases the number of days on which the calls can be made and the likelihood that the telephone will eventually be answered.
5. ***Decrease the Frequency with Which Respondents Change Between the Screening Interview and the Rest of the Questionnaire.*** Response rates are lower if the respondent who is administered the screening interview does not go on to complete the rest of the questionnaire about nonparticipation. In the *Working and Elderly Poor* pretest we administered the main section of the questionnaire to the person in the nonparticipant households who *would* apply for food stamp benefits if the household decided to participate and to the person who last applied for food stamp benefits in the participant households. For 17 percent of the interviews this person was not the person who responded to the screening interview. We recommend relaxing these constraints and administering the main questionnaire to *any* adult in the household who may apply for food stamp benefits.
6. ***Shorten the Main Questionnaire.*** Of those who completed a screening interview and were assigned a short version of a questionnaire (to be conducted by telephone), 91 percent completed a questionnaire compared with 85 percent for those assigned a long version of a questionnaire (to be conducted by telephone). The long questionnaire took on average 26 minutes to administer, compared with an average of 15 minutes for the shorter one. We recommend that the main part of the questionnaire should be kept to about 20 minutes in a stand-alone survey about the reasons for nonparticipation.

3. Consideration Should Be Given to Excluding FSP Participants From a Survey About Nonparticipation

If the resources available to conduct a survey on FSP nonparticipation are limited, we recommend that FNS consider conducting a telephone survey of only nonparticipants.²⁶ Conducting a survey of nonparticipants only would provide sufficient information to provide guidance on the appropriate policy response to the nonparticipation. While including participants in the survey would add a richness to the data collected, the information collected from the participants may not justify the additional survey resources required to include them in the survey.

We designed the *Working and Elderly Poor* questionnaires to allow two lines of inquiry into the reasons for nonparticipation: (1) a direct approach--asking nonparticipants why they do not participate in the program, and (2) an indirect approach--making statistical comparisons of the characteristics of participants and nonparticipants. The direct approach--asking people directly why they do not participate--is the more informative and does not require that any participants are surveyed. Comparisons of participants and nonparticipants yield findings that are suggestive of reasons for nonparticipation but rarely provide firm evidence that a particular reason is important. Some reasons that respondents give for nonparticipation, such as the view that other people may need food stamp benefits more, would not be uncovered by just comparing the characteristics or experiences of participants and nonparticipants. The direct approach also allows a ranking of the relative importance of each reason for nonparticipation.

If resources permitted including participants in a survey of nonparticipation, including them would yield two main benefits. First, comparing the characteristics and experiences of participants and nonparticipants provides information about the type of people that are more likely to participate. This may be useful in

²⁶Although a survey of non-telephone households should include participants.

targeting efforts to increase participation to specific population groups. Second, including participants allows the survey to explore what factors help participants overcome perceived or real barriers to applying for or using food stamp benefits that the nonparticipants do not overcome. For example, by comparing the experiences of participants and nonparticipants who began the application process but did not complete it, we could investigate whether completing the application process at a place other than the FSP office increases the likelihood that the application process is completed.

Many of these comparisons between participants and nonparticipants can, however, be made with existing survey data. Comparisons between participants and nonparticipants of household demographic and economic characteristics, sources of other food assistance, and food security can be made using the SIPP and the Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey (McConnell and Nixon 1996). Comparisons of experiences applying for and using food stamp benefits between participants and nonparticipants can be made using the National Food Stamp Program Survey. Collecting information on participants and nonparticipants in the same survey has the advantage, however, that the data are directly comparable. This would be important if the reasons for nonparticipation are changing over time because of changes in the FSP or other assistance programs, changes in the economy, or changes in attitudes toward welfare.

4. If FSP Participants Are to Be Included in the Survey, Lists of FSP Participants Are Needed

In the *Working and Elderly Poor* pretest, FSP participants from working or elderly households were identified in two ways: from lists of participants provided by state FSP agencies, and by random-digit-dialing used principally to identify FSP-eligible nonparticipants. Are program lists needed or can sufficient numbers of participants be identified by random-digit-dialing?

With random-digit-dialing, identifying participants as well as nonparticipants *at the same time* requires little additional interviewer time. However, because we found participants to be rarer than FSP-eligible nonparticipants among working and elderly households, it would take more calls to identify an FSP participant than it would to identify an FSP-eligible nonparticipant. Unless the survey design calls for a ratio of nonparticipants to participants of above six for working households and above four for elderly households, the target for the number of nonparticipants in the sample would be reached before the target for the number of participants was.

Once the target for nonparticipants is reached, identifying additional participants using random-digit-dialing would be many times more costly than identifying the participants using lists of program participants would be. This is because over 180 random-digit-dialing calls need to be made to identify one FSP participant who applied for food stamp benefits in the previous three years and belongs to a working or elderly household. Using lists dramatically cuts the number of calls that need to be made to identify one FSP participant. So if it is decided that the survey should include participants, it would be most efficient to use both lists of program participants and random-digit-dialing.

5. Consideration Should be Given to Including a Small Number of Households Without Telephones and Including Questions About Telephone Interruptions

The pretest sample included only households with working telephones. However, estimates from the Census suggest that about 20 percent of low-income U.S. households do not have working telephones. Because households without telephones may have different reasons for not participating than do households with telephones, they cannot be ignored in a national survey of the reasons for nonparticipation.

Including non-telephone households in the survey would require considerable survey resources, however, because of the difficulties identifying households without telephones that meet our criteria for

inclusion in the sample. Working and elderly households that are eligible for food stamp benefits but do not receive them comprise less than 8 percent of the population. As non-telephone households tend to have lower income than households with telephones, and as lower-income households are more likely to participate in the FSP, the proportion of *nonparticipants* in non-telephone households may be even lower. Hence the proportion of working or elderly nonparticipant households without telephones in the population is probably less than 2 percent of the population. It would take considerable interviewer time to find even a small number of eligible non-telephone households, and both the screening questions and the questions about nonparticipation would need to be administered in person to respondents without telephones.

Because of the cost of identifying eligible non-telephone households, the sample of such households would need to be small and would have to be designed to yield a *national* estimate rather than regional estimates of the reasons for nonparticipation by non-telephone households. To reduce survey costs, screening for non-telephone households would take place in areas with a high concentration of these households. The cost of the in-person survey would be lower if it is conducted when the 2000 Census data are available, making possible a more accurate identification of areas with a high concentration of non-telephone households.

The required sample of non-telephone households could be reduced if researchers collect data about past interruptions of telephone service from households currently *with* and without telephones. Many households lose and gain telephone service during the year; they have telephone service when they can afford it and allow it to be disconnected when they cannot. Some households that do not have telephones at a specific point in time have recently had telephone service and, conversely, some households with telephone service at a point in time may have had interruptions in the past. Under the assumption that non-telephone households and households that experience interruptions in telephone service have similar reasons

for not participating in the FSP, data on interruptions in telephone service can be used to statistically adjust for the underrepresentation of non-telephone households (Brick et al. 1996 and Keeter 1995). We recommend including questions in the main questionnaires that ask whether the respondent's household has experienced an interruption in telephone service over the previous 12 months of more than one day and if so, how long the interruption lasted.

We also recommend that both FSP participants and FSP-eligible nonparticipant non-telephone households be administered questionnaires. Our concern is that it will be particularly difficult to find nonparticipants among FSP-eligible non-telephone households. By interviewing respondents in both participating and nonparticipating non-telephone households, information would be collected to determine the FSP participation rate among non-telephone households. It may be that the participation rate is so high among non-telephone households that nonparticipation among them is not a concern.

6. Consideration Should Be Given to Adding a Module About FSP Nonparticipation to Another Household Survey

An alternative to conducting a stand-alone survey would be to add a short module about the reasons for FSP nonparticipation to another household survey. The module would begin with the screening questions, and only persons who meet the criteria in the screening interview would then be asked questions about nonparticipation. At a minimum, we recommend a 15- to 20-minute module that includes:

- The screening questions
- Direct questions about the reasons for nonparticipation
- Questions about food security, sources of food assistance, and income, by source
- Questions about whether the respondent has previously applied for or used food stamp benefits

A module about the reasons for nonparticipation could be added to any nationally representative household survey that contains a sample of low-income households that is large enough to ensure sufficient numbers of FSP nonparticipants who are in either working or elderly households. Ideally the household survey would also collect data on monthly income (disaggregated by source) and data on food sufficiency and sources of other food assistance. The SIPP and the Current Population Survey are both good potential candidates.

Adding a module to an existing household survey would significantly reduce the costs of collecting the data, since only the additional costs associated with a longer interview would be incurred. Depending on the survey to which the module is added, the response rate to the questions may also be higher. Also, if the main household survey contains detailed questions about income disaggregated by source, the screening interview for the add-on module could use this information rather than the respondent's estimate of aggregate household income to determine whether the respondent is likely to be eligible for food stamp benefits. This would allow the screening questions to determine FSP eligibility more accurately.

The disadvantages of using an add-on module rather than a stand-alone survey are that the module probably has to be short and the sample size of FSP-eligible nonparticipants in working or elderly households could be small. Also, the design of the main survey may not be optimal for the module on the reasons for nonparticipation. For example, the respondent to the main survey may not be the person who would or did apply for food stamp benefits requiring a change in the respondent for the module and decreasing the likelihood that the module would be completed.

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