

Food Purchases of Food Stamp Shoppers

Among some people there is a perception that food stamp shoppers generally make poor choices when it comes to food purchases. However, studies of their food purchases over the last 20 years consistently show that this is not the case.

- According to the National Food Stamp Survey (NSPS), conducted for the U.S. Department of Agriculture by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., in 1996 and 1997, sugar and sweets accounted, on average, for only 2.8 % of the total value of food purchases by food stamp households and 6.1 % of calories consumed, and soft drinks, punches and ades only accounted for 5.6% of costs and 4.2 % of calories. In contrast, vegetables and fruits accounted, on average, for 19.6% of food costs, and 10.6% of total calories consumed; grain products accounted for 19.7 % of food costs and 27.6 of calories; dairy products accounted for 12.5 % of costs and 11.5 % of calories; and meats and meat alternatives (e.g., eggs, dry beans, and peanut butter) accounted for 34.9 % of cost and 30.2 % of calories. (Food Stamp Participants' Food Security and Nutrient Availability, July 1999)
- A study using 1989-1991 national food consumption data collected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (the Continuing Survey of Food Intakes of Individuals) looked at the impact of the Food Stamp Program on households' Healthy Eating Index (HEI) score, which is a widely recognized indicator of overall dietary quality and its ten components. The HEI addresses important nutrition issues such as fruit and vegetable consumption and the consumption of high-fat foods. The researchers found that the value of food stamps received had a substantial and statistically significant effect on overall dietary quality. For each dollar of food stamps that a household received, the household HEI score went up—the higher the level of food stamps, the larger the positive nutritional effect. (Basiotis, P.P., Kramer-LeBlanc, C.S., and Kennedy, E.T., Maintaining nutrition security and diet quality: The Role of the Food Stamp Program and WIC. *Family Economics and Nutrition Review*, 1998,11[1 and 2]: 4-16)
- In testimony before the House Subcommittee on Department Operations and Nutrition of the Agriculture Committee, Dr. Thomas Fraker, Senior Economist at Mathematica Policy Research, Inc, reported that, based on the Continuing Survey of Food Intake by Individuals, food stamp recipients consume 35 % less beverages (not counting milk and juices) than do all nonrecipients, and that they also consume less fats, oils, sugars and sweets than do nonrecipients. Also, he reported that food stamp recipients consume less snack foods than do all nonrecipients, including “20 to 50 percent less of cakes, salty snacks, candy, and soft drinks than nonrecipients.” He summarized his testimony by saying that food stamp recipients “devote the majority of their food purchases to foods that are relatively high in nutritional value.” (Food Expenditure and Consumption Patterns of Food Stamp Households, testimony presented to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Department Operations and

Nutrition, Thomas M. Fraker, PH.D., Senior Economist, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 1993)

- U.S. Department of Agriculture research on food stamp shoppers' purchases in the early 1980's showed similar results to the later studies cited above: they found that food stamp shoppers, compared to all other income groups, obtained 7 to 29 % more of each of 11 key nutrients for every dollar they spent on food. (Peterkin, B. B. and Hama, M.Y., Food Shopping Skills of the Rich and the Poor, *Family Economics Review*, 1983, No. 3)