

How Long Does It Take?

Quantifying the Food Stamp Application Process
in Four California Counties

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Executive Summary

Food stamp rolls in California are dropping. This drop has been attributed by observers to many factors, including a time-consuming application process. With more food stamp-eligible people working, it is reasoned, a lengthy process may be making it difficult for many people to find time in their workday to apply for food stamps. This study seeks to quantify how long the application process takes by identifying the number of visits it takes an applicant to complete the process, the amount of time spent in the office per visit and the total time spent in the office for all visits.

Applicants were interviewed and timed at county welfare offices in four different counties during the months of July and August 2000. A total of 3,425 individuals were approached at the four offices, yielding 435 applicants who met the desired criteria (new applicants or people re-applying).

Since not everyone interviewed completed the entire application process during the 4-day study periods, statistical methods to address this issue were used. Specifically, techniques from survival analysis, including a variant of the Kaplan Meier estimator, were implemented. The analyses yielded the following findings:

In order to complete the California food stamp application:

- **In three of the four counties, it averaged nearly three trips to the welfare office.**
- **The average time for each trip ranged from 37 minutes in one county up to 1 hour 40 minutes in another.**
- **The average time to complete the whole process ranged from 1 hour 45 minutes in one county up to 4 hours 45 minutes in another.**

County	Number of Visits	Time per Visit (minutes)	Total Time (minutes)	Total Time (hours and minutes)
Sacramento	2.3672	76.151	180.26	3 hours
San Diego	2.9095	100.459	292.29	4 hours 52 minutes
Santa Cruz	2.8128	37.516	105.53	1 hour 45 minutes
Tulare	2.7974	54.060	151.23	2 hours 31 minutes

The study clearly shows that applicants are making more trips to the office beyond the single face-to-face interview required by law. It took more than two trips to complete the process in all of the counties studied.

In addition, the study found wide variation in total visit times for the four counties. This suggests that there may be greater county flexibility in shortening the process than generally recognized.

In response to these findings, California Food Policy Advocates has several recommendations, including:

- *Encouraging California counties to implement best practices that limit the number of trips applicants make to the office, such as the use of phone interviews or mail-in applications.*
- *Examining the promising practices and efficiencies in counties with faster times, particularly Santa Cruz County, to see if they can be replicated in other counties.*

The study results deserve further discussion and analysis because they prompt a number of questions:

- Since the study focused on time spent in the welfare office and not on the transportation and preparation for each visit, there is an additional time burden not included in the results associated with each trip. What are these additional time burdens?
- Would the result be dramatically different if the counties and the offices in the counties were randomly selected? Were the counties willing to participate those with the most efficient offices? Were the offices utilized in each of the counties the most efficient?
- Finally, what impact is the number of visits and the total application time having on the participation of low-income workers in the food stamp program?

Even before these questions are answered, however, action can be taken to increase participation in the Food Stamp Program. Prior research has shown a long application process to be a reason for non-participation in the Food Stamp Program¹. Since this four county study shows that the process can be faster, it is imperative that the state, counties and advocacy groups jointly take steps to make the process faster and more accessible to working families.

¹ Customer Service in the Food Stamp Program, Mathematica Policy Research for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, July 1999.

Introduction

The Food Stamp Program is our nation's best defense against hunger. This program serves over 1.8 million individuals in California by providing an average of \$72 per person per month in food assistance. Unfortunately, despite consistent demonstrations that the program provides essential nutrition benefits to people who need them, it is failing to reach many eligible people. Separate studies from the U.S. Department of Agriculture² and California Food Policy Advocates³ both show that California has one of the worst food stamp participation rates in the country. Depending on the research and margins of error, California is reaching only 52%-57% of the people eligible for food stamps. This means that roughly 1.5 million people eligible for food stamps are not participating in the program, potentially leaving their hunger and food insecurity unaddressed.

While California has historically had a low participation rate for food stamps, the precipitous drop in participation that has occurred over the last several years is cause for alarm. Since 1995, participation in the Food Stamp Program in California has dropped by more than 40 percent (1.4 million people), from 3,250,000 to 1,864,013.⁴ Two widely assumed reasons for the drop have been discredited by the aforementioned studies. For example, it is often asserted that a good economy has increased Californians' incomes such that they are no longer eligible for food stamps. However, despite this growing economy, prior research at CFPA has shown that the proportion of people eligible for food stamps in California has actually increased slightly.⁵ Others claim that restrictions placed on the eligibility of legal immigrants and able-bodied adults are the cause for the drop. However, research has shown that when these groups are excluded from calculations, California still demonstrates a drop in participation.⁶

Given that a growing economy and eligibility restrictions do not explain the decrease in participation, the question remains, what is driving the drop in California? One theory being promoted and tested by California Food Policy Advocates is that current rules and procedures make it difficult, and often impossible, for low-income working families to receive food stamps.

² Reaching Those in Need: Food Stamp Participation Rates in the States, U.S. Department of Agriculture, July, 2000

³ Uncovering the Causes: Trends in Food Stamp Participation in California, California Food Policy Advocates, September, 2000

⁴ California Department of Social Services, Food Stamp Program participation data.

⁵ Uncovering the Causes: Trends in Food Stamp Participation in California, California Food Policy Advocates, September, 2000

⁶ Ibid.

Changes in the characteristics of food stamp households provide the foundation for this theory. In 1993 only 19% of food stamp households had earned income. In 1999, over 53% of households had earnings from work⁷. This coincides with the move of many people from the CalWORKs program into low-wage employment. So while more low-income people and more food stamp recipients are working, the Food Stamp Program has not adapted to this change.

One recurring complaint from clients and observers is that the food stamp application process is incompatible with work. Generally, food stamp offices accept applications only during normal business hours. This makes it difficult for low-income families working traditional hours to apply. Further compounding this problem is the complaint from recipients that the process is inordinately time-consuming. A lengthy process combined with limited office hours could put a low-income person in a bind: How can I undertake this process and get the food assistance my family needs without jeopardizing my existing employment? Will I need to miss work? Will I be able to squeeze in a visit to the welfare office at the beginning or end of the workday?

California Food Policy Advocates would like to examine this challenge facing hungry working families. The first step in this examination is answering the question: How long does it take to complete the food stamp application process here in California? This is the question that drives this four county study.

⁷ Food Stamp Characteristics Survey for 1999, California Department of Social Services, August 2000.

Methodology

Objective

The primary aim of the study is to estimate distributions for the number of visits required to complete the food stamp application process and the total length of time required to complete the food stamp application process at four different welfare offices. In addition, the mean time required to complete several steps of the food stamp application process is estimated.

The Application Process

The steps in the application process vary from county to county. But in general the process contains several elements:

- Entering the office, getting needed forms;
- Filling out forms and paperwork; and
- A face-to-face interview with a county eligibility worker to determine a variety of eligibility factors, but specifically:
 - Household size (including immigrations status of members),
 - Household income, and
 - Household assets.

Additional steps often include orientations, finger imaging, and subsequent visits to provide verification. This study focuses on the total number of time it takes for all of these steps to occur in the office.

Sample

Four counties' welfare offices were selected based on their willingness to participate and the volume of their Food Stamp Program traffic. Offices that could not provide enough traffic to make the study cost-effective were not used. The offices were therefore not randomly selected. While not randomly selected, there was some diversity as one large county (San Diego), one rural (Tulare), one large urban location (Sacramento) and one small county (Santa Cruz) participated in the study. The addresses for the offices used appear in Appendix E.

Interviewers spent 16 days (4 days at each office) over the course of a four-week period during the summer of 2000. At each office during these four consecutive days, every person who entered the building was asked if they were applying for food stamps (see Appendix A for a copy of the interview questionnaire). A total of 3,425 individuals were approached at the four offices. Only those people who were applying for the first

time, or who were reapplying after their food stamps had been discontinued were asked if they would participate in the study. Thus people currently receiving food stamps who were at the office to maintain their benefits and those individuals applying for benefits other than food stamps were eliminated, yielding 435 applicants who met the desired criteria. In total, 132 people in San Diego, 154 people in Sacramento, 77 people in Santa Cruz and 72 people in Tulare provided the data utilized in this analysis.

Data Collection

Participants were provided with time-logs and timepieces, which they were instructed to give to the county worker(s) at each stage of the application process. The workers filled in the time they started and the time they finished with the applicant. CFPA interviewers recorded the time they entered and the time they exited the building in these time logs, and in addition collected the following information:

- The number of trips the applicant had made pertaining to the current application,
- Whether or not the applicant was applying for other programs, and
- Whether or not further visits were required to complete the application.⁸

Applicants who would be returning at a later date to complete their application were given labeled “reminder cards” corresponding to the identification number on their survey log. Returning applicants were asked to present their reminder card to CFPA staff on their return. This system allowed applicants to be tracked over multiple visits.

⁸ See Appendix A for the questions asked.

Analysis

Estimating the distribution of the number of trips

For each individual, information was collected on the number of trips made prior to entering the survey, as well as the number of trips made during the survey period. The individual's last trip to the office was also noted when observed. To estimate the distribution of the number of trips, two challenges arose. First, many people interviewed during our study did not finish the entire process during four days so that subsequent trips (trips to the "right") beyond the study period would have to be estimated. In technical terms, for most individuals only "right-censored" data has been obtained. This means we know that an individual had to have made more than t trips but it is not known precisely how many more. Second, because the sample contains some individuals who started coming to the office before the study period (the data is left-truncated), individuals who make many trips are over-sampled. The more trips a person makes, the more likely they are to show up during the four day period. Therefore, this over-sampling had to be addressed.

If the number of trips taken is treated as a discrete measure of time, then techniques from survival analysis can be used to estimate the survivor function $S(t)$, the probability that the number of trips an individual has to make is greater than t ($t=1,2,3,\dots$).

Specifically, if the following random variables are defined:

T = total number of visits

C = censoring time

$\Delta = I(T > C)$

C^* = number of visits prior to the start of the study

$\tilde{T} = \min(T, C)$

Then $S(t)$ may be estimated using a variant of the Kaplan Meier estimator:

$$\hat{S}(t) = \prod_{\{j: t_j \leq t\}} \left[1 - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n I(\tilde{T}_i = t_j, \Delta_i = 1, C^* < t_j)}{\sum_{i=1}^n I(\tilde{T}_i \geq t_j, C^* < t_j)} \right]$$

Estimating the mean application time

For each individual the total amount of time spent at the office during the survey period was obtained. In addition to being right censored (many individuals will have spent more time at the office on future visits) and left truncated (individuals who spend a lot of time at the office are over-sampled), the data are also left censored, meaning that many individuals will have spent time at the office before the survey period and so was not recorded. Estimation of $S(t)$ is not feasible because of the incomplete nature of the data. However, the mean application time can still be estimated.

Define the following random variables:

T = total application time

N = total number of visits

X_i = length of i th visit

Then $T = \sum_{i=1}^N X_i$. Assuming that $\{X_i\}$ are independent and identically distributed realizations of a random variable X and assuming X and N are independent, then the mean total application time $E[T] = E[X]E[N]$.

Results

Number of Visits

In each of the four counties it took more than two visits on average to complete the application process. In three of the counties, it required an average of nearly three trips to complete the process. Each visit represents a separate trip on different days to the welfare office.

County	Mean Number of Visits
Sacramento	2.3672
San Diego	2.9095
Santa Cruz	2.8128
Tulare	2.7974

As depicted in Appendix A, all counties had some applicants who were on their fourth visit. Only San Diego and Tulare had individuals making five visits to complete the process.

Time Per Visit

There was a broad range of average times for each individual visit, ranging from 37 minutes in Santa Cruz to an hour and 40 minutes in San Diego.

County	Mean Time per Visit (minutes)	Mean Time per Visit (hours)
Sacramento	76.151	One hour 16minutes
San Diego	100.459	One hour 40 minutes
Santa Cruz	37.516	37 minutes
Tulare	54.060	54 minutes

Total Time for All Visits

The wide range of per visit times resulted in a wide range of time for completing the entire process – from 1 hour 45 minutes in Santa Cruz to 4 hours 52 minutes in San Diego.

County	Total Time (minutes)	Total Time (hours and minutes)
Sacramento	180.26	3 hours
San Diego	292.29	4 hours 52 minutes
Santa Cruz	105.53	1 hour 45 minutes
Tulare	151.23	2 hours 31 minutes

Times for Individual Steps

Within the application process individual steps were measured. The individual steps are identified in Appendix B. The times for each of these steps can be found in Appendix C. Because of time constraints and the complexity of comparing individual county steps, further analysis of this data is needed.

Discussion

Limitations of the Findings

There are several limitations to this study. First, is its generalizability. Since only four of the 58 counties were studied and these counties were not randomly sampled, nor were the offices within these counties selected at random, the results cannot be considered representative of California as a whole. Secondly, there is a possible bias toward faster counties and/or faster offices. Since counties were not randomly sampled and were selected by their willingness to participate, it is possible that only counties with shorter visit times agreed to participate. In addition, within each of the counties studied, the county chose which offices were to be studied. In some cases, such as San Diego, office choices were limited to ones that allowed room for interviewers in the lobby. However, in other cases, since there were not explicit criteria for how the selection, some offices could have been chosen based on their efficiency. Therefore, the amount of time required to complete the food stamp application process may be considerably higher in other counties.

The study also does not take into account the impact that the implementation of new policy initiatives may have had on the results. For example, during the study period the San Diego office was implementing a “No Wrong Door” process, where clients are pre-screened for a wide range of services, such as housing, mental health, and domestic violence services. During the study, county staff were learning new technology and new processes to support this client-focused initiative. This implementation could have increased the interview times, and thus San Diego’s overall performance could be better than the limited snapshot this study provides.

In addition, the issue of the volume of applicant traffic has not been isolated in this study. It is possible that counties may be able to work more quickly if they have fewer applicants to process. Future study should account for this limitation. Also, applicants for food stamps are often applying for other benefits such as Medicaid as well. Dissociating these two processes will be important to gain a more accurate picture of the individual Food Stamp Program application process.

Findings

The study clearly shows that applicants are making more trips to the office beyond the single face-to-face interview required by law. It took more than two trips to complete the process in all of the counties studied.

In addition, the study found wide variation in total visit times for the four counties. This suggests that there may be greater county flexibility in shortening the process than generally recognized.

Finally, the counties with the greater number of steps to their application process (see Appendix B) had the longer times per visit.

Recommendations

Recommendation: *California counties should implement best practices, such as the use of phone interviews or mail-in applications, that limit the number of trips applicants make to the office.*

The number of trips made by applicants in all of the counties needs to be reduced. Federal regulations require only one visit to the office. A single face-to-face visit with county workers should be the goal. Making more than one trip to the office can interfere with work and may exacerbate existing transportation or child care challenges faced by families.

Recommendation: *Promising practices and efficiencies in counties with faster times, particularly Santa Cruz county, should be examined to see if they can be replicated in other counties.*

Secondly, the wide variation in total visit times suggests that there may be greater county flexibility in shortening the process than generally recognized. The Food Stamp Program is a federal program and the bulk of the rules governing the program are established at the national level. Therefore some counties have argued that there is little that can be done to speed up the process because federal rules dictate what information needs to be collected from applicants. However, the findings suggest that there are efficient processes counties may employ to dramatically shorten the process.

Recommendation: *Further analyze the individual steps in each of the counties to determine which steps can be removed or shortened.*

Individual steps in each of the county processes were identified and measured. The counties with longer application times also appear to have more steps in their processes, suggesting that some steps might simply be eliminated. However, because of time constraints and the complexity of comparing individual county steps further analysis of this data is needed.

Recommendation: *Study and quantify the components of the application process that occur outside of the welfare office.*

This study focused only on the time spent in the welfare office. It did not include time spent on other activities associated with the application process, such as the gathering of necessary documents, and transportation. In order to get a more complete understanding of the time and resource commitments required of food stamp applicants, an additional study to quantify the components of the application process that occur outside of the welfare office is needed.

Recommendation: *Expand welfare office hours into evenings and weekends.*

Whether it takes 1 hour and 45 minutes or 4 hours and 52 minutes to complete the process, working families may benefit from expanded evening or weekend hours in the welfare office. For example, if it takes just 1 hour and 45 minutes to complete the process a person working 9:00 am until 5:00pm would benefit if the office were open until 7:00pm. If it takes 4 hours and 52 minutes an individual working Monday thru Friday would benefit from Saturday hours.

Conclusion

The food stamp application process can be a lengthy, time-consuming process. But it does not have to be. Certainly there are changes needed at the federal level to simplify rules and regulations, which may help shorten the process. However, there are steps that counties can take now to ease this burden on working families and increase participation in this vital, underutilized program.

This four-county study shows that the process can be faster. It shows that there is local flexibility and a need for creativity. It is imperative that the state, counties and advocacy groups creatively utilize the flexibility to make the process faster and more accessible to working families.

Appendix A

The following are the resulting tables from the survival analyses:

Number of Visits:

County	P(T>1)	P(T>2)	P(T>3)	P(T>4)	Mean no. of visits
San Diego	0.84507	0.67293	0.26917	0.12235	2.9095
Sacramento	0.70115	0.48102	0.14801	0.037002	2.3672
Santa Cruz	0.78049	0.64275	0.23373	0.15582	2.8128
Tulare	0.83871	0.61406	0.21931	0.12532	2.7974

Visit Times:

County	Visit time (all visits) in minutes			First visit times in minutes		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
San Diego	159	100.46	73.84	72	108.72	85.81
Sacramento	166	76.15	54.21	98	64.63	44.32
Santa Cruz	91	37.52	43.08	42	33.29	40.51
Tulare	84	54.06	33.91	33	61.58	35.84

County	Second visit times in minutes			Third visit times in minutes		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
San Diego	54	96.85	59.03	20	88.60	71.70
Sacramento	49	104.92	63.81	14	61.43	48.19
Santa Cruz	35	44.37	45.79	11	38.27	49.19
Tulare	26	58.31	33.65	15	38.00	30.74

County	Fourth visit times /min			Fifth visit times /min		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
San Diego	11	93.00	66.34	1	67.00	
Sacramento	5	61.20	52.47			
Santa Cruz	3	14.00	9.85			
Tulare	7	42.00	28.79	2	46.00	1.41

County	Sixth visit times in minutes		
	N	Mean	SD
San Diego	1	53.00	
Sacramento			
Santa Cruz			
Tulare	1	25.00	

Application Time:

County	Mean no. of visits	Mean visit time in minutes	Mean application time in minutes
San Diego	2.9095	100.459	292.29
Sacramento	2.3672	76.151	180.26
Santa Cruz	2.8128	37.516	105.53
Tulare	2.7974	54.060	151.23

Appendix B

The following table depicts the individual steps in the process which were recorded at the offices:

County	Step 1 (S1)	Step 2 (S2)	Step 3 (S3)	Step 4 (S4)	Step 5 (S5)
San Diego	Pick up SAWS & screening sheet	Return SAWS & screening sheet	Information assistance & referral	Orientation	Finger Imaging
Sacramento	Triage Counter	Pick up application and screening sheet	Return application and screening sheet	Orientation	Caseworker
Santa Cruz	Pick up application and screening sheet	Return application and screening sheet	Caseworker	Finger Imaging	
Tulare	Completed application at reception area	Received SAWS2 Application	Caseworker	Finger imaging	

County	Step (S6)	Step (S7)	Step 8 (S8)
San Diego	Caseworker	EBT Account Set-up	EBT Card Issuance
Sacramento	Finger Imaging	Food Stamps issued	
Santa Cruz			
Tulare			

Appendix C

The following are tables depicting the length of time required to complete each step identified in Appendix B:

County	Step 1 /min			Step 2 /min			Step 3 /min			Step 4 /min		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
San Diego	52	13.37	15.27	48	96.85	58.57	36	88.60	70.18	22	93.00	63.73
Sacramento	97	1.14	2.62	10	2.60	3.06	43	3.79	6.26	12	9.25	14.25
Santa Cruz	36	0.92	1.08	35	2.83	4.37	18	31.5	19.11	6	2.50	3.67
Tulare	33	61.58	35.84	9	18.22	18.19	25	29.36	18.60	9	6.33	4.30

County	Step 5/min			Step 6/min			Step 7/min			Step 8/min		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
San Diego	30	26.20	13.19	35	41.09	26.38	4	11.00	10.42	9	9.89	12.25
Sacramento	104	20.96	23.99	30	14.40	12.66	2	2.00	0			
Santa Cruz												
Tulare												

Appendix D

This is the survey instrument used in the study:

Interviewer: please complete the following information and read the notes before beginning the interview.

******Fill in the survey I.D. # for the log book here: _____******

Agency name _____

Location (city, county) _____

Please approach each person who walks through the door of the agency office and prescreen them for study unless there is a language barrier. Supply the person with a study time log (STL) only if the person being interviewed has been selected for the study via the following screening questions. Please ask the following screening questions. If applicant fits criteria, please date and time stamp the study time log, tell person what we are doing (see script) and instruct them as to what to do with the STL.

Read aloud! Hi. My name is _____ from California food policy advocates and we are working with the welfare office in your county doing a study to improve the food stamp application process in California. Would you be able to help us out today with this study?

Yes/no/refused

Your answers are completely confidential, there is no way to identify you and this will not affect your eligibility for public assistance in any way.

If yes: we would like to ask you a few questions about why you are here today.

Prescreen questions:

1. Do you currently receive food stamps?

Yes.....1 [GO TO QUESTION 4]

No.....2 [GO TO QUESTION 2]

Language Barrier.....98 [END SURVEY,GO TO NEXT PERSON]

Refused.....99 [GO TO QUESTION 2]

2. Are you here today to apply for food stamps?

Yes.....1 [GO TO QUESTION 3]

No.....2 [GO TO QUESTION 4]

Refused.....99 [END SURVEY,GO TO NEXT PERSON]

3. In this current food stamp application, prior to today, how many trips have you made to the welfare office?

This is first trip.....1 [GIVE SURVEY TIME LOG]

This is second trip.....2 [GIVE SURVEY TIME LOG]

This is third trip.....3 [GIVE SURVEY TIME LOG]

This is fourth trip.....4 [GIVE SURVEY TIME LOG]

I don't know.....98 [END SURVEY]

Refused.....99 [END SURVEY]

4. What is your reason for your trip to the agency office today? **(CIRCLE ONLY ONE ANSWER)**

Applying for Other Public Benefits..... 1

Being Recertified.....2

Dropping Off Paperwork For Caseworker..... 3 **[PROBE: IS THIS FOR FOOD STAMPS?]**

Picking Up Information for Myself or Friend... 4

Other.....5

Refused.....99

READ ALOUD! THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN OUR SURVEY.

Appendix E

Addresses for the welfare offices used in the study and the dates studied:

Sacramento County

Susie Gaines Mitchell Bldg.
2450 Florin Road
Sacramento, CA 95822
(916) 875-8300
Study dates: July 17-20

San Diego County

Oceanside District Office
1315 Union Plaza Court
Oceanside, CA 92054
(760) 754-5757
Study dates: July 24-27

Santa Cruz County

South County Office
119 W Beach St
Watsonville, CA 95076-4557
Study dates: July 31-August 3

Tulare County

1166 North Alta
Dinuba, CA 93618
Study dates: August 7 - 10