The Dollars and Cents of Food Expenses in 2022: SNAP Household Spending Behind Non-SNAP Counterparts

Data from the latest Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Expenditure Survey indicate that households receiving benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) tend to spend less on food at home (FAH) and much less on food away from home (FAFH), compared to non-SNAP households. Before COVID-19, SNAP households spent about 20% less on FAH and 60% less on FAFH than non-SNAP households. Benefit increases in response to the pandemic helped bridge the gaps – in 2021 and 2022, SNAP households’ FAH spending kept pace and FAFH spending increased, though it remained lower compared to non-SNAP household spending (Figure 2).

In the Consumer Expenditure Diary Survey, SNAP households reported the benefit allotment they received over the past 12 months. FAPRI-MU researchers calculated the average monthly benefit (“past month SNAP benefits”) by dividing total benefits over the number of months received and compared with current monthly FAH spending (Figure 1). Due to the lag between when benefits were received and when households were interviewed, the increase in 2020’s past month SNAP benefits should partially reflect changes in 2019, and so on. On average, past month SNAP benefits per household increased significantly for households that were interviewed in 2021 and 2022, reflecting a similar trend observed in USDA Food and Nutrition Service data. Between 2019 and 2020, past month SNAP benefits covered about 75% of SNAP participants’ grocery spending for the current month; in 2022, this rate increased to nearly 90%. Regardless of the increase in benefits, an average SNAP household still spends some of their resources on food but more benefits generally make more money available for them to spend on FAFH or other non-food needs such as transportation, travel or healthcare.

It should be noted that even with the same level of spending, food expenditures account for a bigger share of income for SNAP households; their food bundles could also differ from non-SNAP households. As temporary increases in SNAP benefits ended in early 2023, it is important to continue tracking SNAP households’ food spending to examine how the decline in benefits affect SNAP households’ food security.