The Dollars and Cents of Food Expenses in 2022: Inflation-Adjusted Expenses Higher in SNAP Households

Data from the latest Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Expenditure Survey showed that household expenditures on food at home (FAH) increased significantly in 2022 compared to 2019. However, after adjusting for inflation, differences emerge – FAH spending showed an increase for households that participated in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* (SNAP); this figure remained almost unchanged for those that did not participate in SNAP (Figure 2).

In the survey sample, SNAP household expenditures increased across all major food categories, even after adjusting for food inflation (by converting current expenses to 2019 values). Eggs and other meats, along with fats and oils, were among the food groups that experienced an increase in expenditures in excess of 40%. Other food groups that showed increases by more than 15% included beef, fresh and processed vegetables, nonalcoholic beverages and miscellaneous foods (Figure 1). Although to a lesser extent, non-SNAP households also recorded increases in inflation-adjusted expenditures on processed fruits and vegetables, eggs and fats and oils. Notably, their real expenditures on poultry, beef, dairy products, fresh vegetables, sugar and sweets and miscellaneous foods dropped in 2022 compared to 2019 (Figure 1).

It is likely that benefit increases helped SNAP households maintain and expand their food spending amid high food inflation. On the contrary, high inflation might have a negative impact on households that did not receive assistance. Though our data are unweighted and only imply sample mean estimates, the results are worth further investigation to understand the actual changes in food expenditures for different groups of the U.S. population and the impacts of inflation on households' food and nutrition security. Readers should note that some of the changes in inflation-adjusted expenditures are more likely to reflect changes in prices than major shifts in consumer buying habits.

*SNAP households are those that reported any SNAP benefit receipt in the past 12 months. Non-SNAP households are those that did not receive any benefits.