

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-111](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Agriculture, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

During fiscal year 2015, state SNAP agencies provided about 46 million low-income individuals approximately \$70 billion in federally funded benefits, and an additional \$7.6 billion in federal and state funds was spent in administering the program in fiscal year 2014, according to the most recent data. SNAP agencies use data matching to verify eligibility information about applicant or recipient households, including their incomes, as well as to help detect improper payments. GAO was asked to review issues related to data matching in administering SNAP.

This report examines (1) the extent to which states use data matching to obtain income information and find these matches useful for SNAP eligibility, (2) challenges states experience using data matching, and (3) actions FNS has taken to promote data matching for SNAP. GAO surveyed all state SNAP directors for a 100 percent response rate and interviewed state officials in six states that varied in caseload size, geography, and other criteria, and visited local offices in three of these states. GAO also reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and agency documents and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FNS disseminate information on promising practices to state SNAP agencies, and analyze spending and data needs as it explores ways to reduce costs of using commercial data. FNS agreed with these recommendations

View [GAO-17-111](#). For more information, contact Kay E. Brown at (202) 512-7215 or brownke@gao.gov

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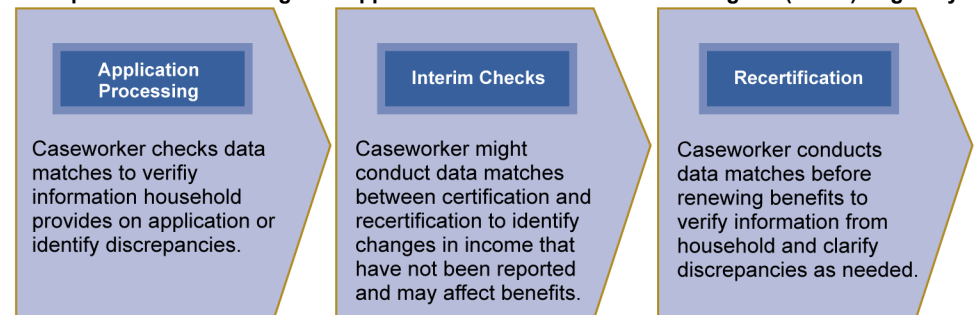
SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

More Information on Promising Practices Could Enhance States' Use of Data Matching for Eligibility

What GAO Found

In administering the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), all state SNAP agencies verify household income by conducting multiple data matches, which they find useful for detecting potential discrepancies related to SNAP eligibility (see figure below), according to GAO's survey of all state SNAP directors. Most states reported that particularly useful data matches provided current information, can be accessed in real-time (i.e., immediately), and are from original sources. Some data sources for unearned income, including from the Social Security Administration, have all these characteristics. Data matches for earned income lacked one or more of these useful characteristics, but can be used as leads to follow up on with households or employers.

Examples of Data Matching for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Eligibility



Source: GAO analysis of information from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and state SNAP agencies. | GAO-17-111

States identified challenges with following up on data matches and with the costs of data matching. The issue states cited most often in GAO's survey as very or extremely challenging was the need to conduct follow-up for data that are not sufficiently recent, accurate, or complete, which can be cumbersome and time-consuming. Officials GAO interviewed in several states were implementing ways to manage follow-up. Over one-third of states also reported that costs associated with accessing certain commercial data to verify earnings were very or extremely challenging, with some states limiting their use of these data due to costs.

The Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), which oversees the SNAP program, has efforts underway to promote data matching to improve program administration, but may be missing some opportunities. For example, FNS has initiated pilot or demonstration projects to improve program integrity or service to households. However, FNS has not actively collected or disseminated information on promising data matching practices, consistent with federal internal controls. Further, 32 states reported in GAO's survey that more information from FNS on promising data matching practices would be extremely or very useful. With more information, states will have increased awareness of other potentially useful or cost-effective practices. In addition, FNS has begun to explore ways to help states reduce the cost of using commercial data, but has not systematically analyzed spending and SNAP needs for these data to consider how to best leverage government buying power through strategic sourcing practices. Without this analysis, FNS may not be able to identify the best ways to lower data matching costs.