



Highlights of [GAO-05-221](#), a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on the Budget, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies that administer means-tested programs are responsible for both ensuring that people have appropriate access to assistance and ensuring the integrity of the programs they oversee. To balance these two priorities appropriately, it is important for agencies to have information on program integrity and program access. Knowing the proportion of the population that qualifies for these programs relative to the numbers who actually participate can help ensure that agencies can monitor and communicate key information on program access.

To better understand participation in low-income programs, this report provides information on: (1) the proportion of those eligible who are participating in 12 selected low-income programs; (2) factors that influence participation in those programs; and (3) strategies used by federal, state, and local administrators to improve both access and integrity, and whether agencies monitor access by measuring participation rates.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretaries and Commissioners whose programs do not currently use participation rate information to consider using this information in managing their programs. GAO makes technical recommendations on how the usefulness of these measures could be improved. The agencies generally agreed with our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-221.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact David Bellis (415)904-2272 or bellisd@gao.gov.

MEANS-TESTED PROGRAMS

Information on Program Access Can Be an Important Management Tool

What GAO Found

For 12 federal programs supporting low-income people, we found that the proportion of those eligible who are enrolled varies substantially both between and within programs. Among entitlement programs—those programs that provide benefits to all applicants that meet program eligibility criteria—these rates range from about 50 to more than 70 percent. Among non-entitlement programs—those with limited funding—these rates ranged from less than 10 percent to more than 50 percent. While it may be neither feasible nor desirable for programs to serve 100 percent of those eligible for benefits, information on the share of those eligible who are enrolled in means-tested programs and on particular recipient groups such as the elderly or families with children, can help program managers more effectively address issues related to program access. However, participation rate estimates must be interpreted carefully because of limitations in the data sources and estimation methodologies used to calculate the estimates.

Many factors influence access to low-income programs—including the type of benefits, ease of access, misperceptions about program requirements, and application and eligibility verification procedures. These factors can impact not only the share of eligible people who participate in low-income programs, but other aspects of program access as well, including the composition of the program caseload and how programs work together to serve low-income individuals and families.

Federal, state, and local administrators have implemented many strategies to achieve the goals of access and integrity, but federal agencies generally put more emphasis on tracking information and outcomes related to program integrity than program access. To better ensure that program administrators achieve program integrity goals, agencies have begun to develop measures to track and report on program integrity. Federal agencies have developed participation rate estimates for several low-income programs, but only four—CCDF, food stamps, WIC, and EITC—either currently collect and report information on the extent to which they are reaching their target populations or plan to do so. Such information can guide administrators in setting priorities and targeting scarce resources, even among programs that were not intended to serve everyone eligible for program benefits.

The 12 Federal Means Tested Programs Reviewed

<p>Health and Human Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporary Assistance for Needy Families • Child Care and Development Fund • Head Start • Medicaid • State Children's Health Insurance Program <p>Housing and Urban Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Choice Vouchers • Public Housing 	<p>Agriculture Department</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food Stamps • Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition <p>Internal Revenue Service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earned Income Tax Credit <p>Social Security Administration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplemental Security Income <p>Education Department</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earned Income Tax Credit
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Source: GAO.