UNDERSTANDING THE RATES, CAUSES, AND COSTS OF CHURNING IN THE SUPPLEMENT NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)

OMB CLEARANCE PACKAGE: SUPPORTING STATEMENT, PART B

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Food and Nutrition Service
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SUPPORTING STATEMENT

B. COLLECTIONS OF INFORMATION EMPLOYING STATISTICAL METHODS

1. Respondent Universe and Sampling Methods

Describe (including a numerical estimate) the potential respondent universe and any sampling or other respondent selection method to be used. Data on the number of entities (e.g., establishments, State and local government units, households, or persons) in the universe covered by the collection and in the corresponding sample are to be provided in tabular form for the universe as a whole and for each of the strata in the proposed sample. Indicate expected response rates for the collection as a whole. If the collection had been conducted previously, include the actual response rate achieved during the last collection.

This section first describes the methods for identifying the data to be used in the quantitative research, focusing on the selection of the six participating states. Following this is a description of the approach for selecting the sites and respondents for the qualitative research within each of the participating states.

The basic unit of analysis for the study will be the SNAP case, consisting of those persons who live at a common address and purchase and prepare food together. At the level of the participating SNAP case, churn is characterized by two spells of benefit receipt separated by a brief spell of nonreceipt (defined as four months or less).

The universe of SNAP cases for the quantitative research consists of SNAP cases receiving benefits during the 24-month period encompassed by calendar years 2010 and 2011. At the state level, alternative measures of churn will be estimated using administrative microdata on SNAP cases. These measures differ according to whether the basis of the calculation is case closings, case openings, or active cases. Thus, the rate of churn can be expressed as the percentage of case closings that are followed by a brief nonreceipt spell and re-entry, the percentage of case openings that are preceded by a brief nonreceipt spell, or the percentage of active cases that subsequently (within a specified interval) experience a brief nonreceipt spell and re-entry.

The research team will ask for the full population of SNAP cases each month for the entire 24-month period, and thus will not use sampling methods.

To investigate the key research questions, six states will be selected to participate in the study, on the basis of the following criteria.

- Variation in program policy and administrative practices, including simplified reporting procedures, length of certification periods, on-line applications, on-line change reporting, call centers, and waiver of face-to-face interviews: preferred states are those exhibiting within-state or intertemporal variation in the use of such policies and practices.

- Variation in involvement of community-based organizations (CBOs): preferred states are those that have received waivers allowing CBOs to conduct applicant interviews (Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Oregon, and Texas). Of particular interest will be whether CBOs assist in the recertification process or provide other assistance beyond the initial application.

- Variation in urban/rural caseload: preferred states are those with a substantial representation of both urban and rural cases. Rural families may face challenges and costs of recertifying that differ from those faced by urban families. States with an urban-rural caseload mix will provide insight into whether and how the additional challenges faced by rural families affect churning.

- Availability of linked longitudinal data: among the six states, one or two will be selected that have the ability to link the administrative data on SNAP participation with data on earnings from quarterly unemployment insurance wage files. This will enable analysis of whether churners may have been income-eligible for SNAP benefits during their spell of nonreceipt. Among such potential states are seven (Maryland, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Texas, California, and Florida) that have been involved in a project (under funding from the Economic Research Service of USDA) to link SNAP and Unemployment Insurance administrative data, to better understand the interaction of these two programs during a time of recession (Kirlin and Wiseman 2010).

- Once the six states are selected, a total of six local sites will be selected for the qualitative research. The most likely scenario is that one local site will be selected in each state. It may be advantageous, however, to concentrate the local sites in a subset of the states. For example, if the study includes a state with intrastate policy differences, two local sites within that state could be selected to learn more about the implications for churn of these policy differences.

2. <u>Information Collection Procedures</u>

Describe the procedures for the collection of information including:

- **Statistical methodology for stratification and sample selection,**
- **Estimation procedure,**
- **Degree of accuracy needed for the purpose described in the justification,**
- **Unusual problems requiring specialized sampling procedures, and**
- **Any use of periodic (less frequent than annual) data collection cycles to reduce burden.**

Administrative Data

Upon selecting the six participating states, the researchers will work with state program administrators and staff to obtain the administrative data files on SNAP participants for the specified 24-month calendar period. If possible in some states, data will be obtained for a period of longer than 24 months. Efforts will be taken to ensure that data will be available from all six states for calendar years 2010 and 2011. States will be asked to provide data for all participants for all months in the 24-month period. There will not be a sample.

Interviews and Focus Groups

Qualitative data will be collected through on-site interviews and focus groups at the local sites. Hour-long semi-structured interviews will be conducted with local SNAP administrators, SNAP caseworkers, and directors of community-based organizations involved with the SNAP program. The interview respondents will be selected in consultation with the senior program administrators at each site. Semi-structured discussions, using a guide with key topics and open-ended questions rather than close-ended questionnaires (rigidly specified and directly quantifiable questions) are the best data collection method for documenting implementation of policies, procedures, and programs. The semi-structured discussion approach will allow flexibility in adapting the discussion guide to capture variation in program details, depending on the position of the respondent in the program and the objectives of the interview.

Focus groups will be conducted with SNAP participants who have experienced churning, providing unique information on the client perspectives. Each site visit will include two focus groups, and each group will consist of approximately five individuals. Ideally, participant recruitment will allow the research team to conduct one focus group with participants who exited the program but continued to meet income, resource, and other requirements ("benefit-eligible churners"). The other focus group would include recipients who were ineligible at exit but became eligible again within a short period of time. The purpose of the focus groups is to describe participants' experiences with churning. Focus group sessions are generally planned to last one-and-a-half hours. The field research teams will be prepared to conduct the focus groups in either English or Spanish, as needed. At least one member of each research team will be fluent in both Spanish and English. The Spanish translations of the focus group instruments are shown in Appendix B.

The focus group participants will be recruited by the research team via telephone calls to a list of cases that have recently churned, as provided by the local site.

The use of NVivo software will allow the study team to quantify some of the qualitative information. This, in turn, makes it possible for some of the information gathered through interviews and focus groups to be included in quantitative analyses. For example, the study team will analyze whether and how the reported experiences of SNAP participants vary depending on selected characteristics of the state or local office. Such analyses that include the data from the interviews and focus groups as well as administrative data for the specific localities visited also can examine the extent to which specific office procedures can help explain variations in churning.

3. Methods to Maximize Response Rates

Describe methods to maximize response rates and to deal with issues of non-response. The accuracy and reliability of information collected must be shown to be adequate for intended uses. For collections based on sampling, a special justification must be provided for any collection that will not yield "reliable" data that can be generalized to the universe studied.

The researchers will select several states and ask for data on all SNAP participants in each month in the 24 months of calendar years 2010 and 2011. The six states from which the team will collect data will ultimately be based on which states are able to provide the data. We will ask for a full population of data from those states. We will *not* be collecting a sample.

The researchers will take a number of steps to minimize the burden to the interview respondents and focus group participants and maximize response rates. First, the site visits will be scheduled in a manner that allows the local offices to identify the most convenient time for the visit within the study timeframe. Second, flexibility will be exercised in adjusting the specific order, timing, and location of the on-site interviews to meet the respondents' needs.

Additionally, the focus groups will be scheduled at times and locations that will be convenient to the recruited participants. For example, focus groups may be arranged in the evening to accommodate work or school schedules and at locations that will be readily accessible via public transportation.

For both interviews and focus groups, the respondents will receive reminder calls several days, to confirm the scheduled time and location of the meeting. The scripts for these reminder calls are provided in Appendices A and B.

Finally, as noted earlier, a $30 incentive will be provided to each focus group participant.

4. <u>Tests of Procedures</u>

Describe any tests of procedures or methods to be undertaken. Testing is encouraged as an effective means of refining collections of information to minimize burden and improve utility. Tests must be approved if they call for answers to identical questions from 10 or more respondents. A proposed test or set of tests may be submitted for approval separately or in combination with the main collection of information.

In mid-March 2012 a two-member interviewing team from the Urban Institute pre-tested the interview guides with three selected SNAP administrators and staff at the Rockville and Silver Spring offices of the Montgomery County (MD) Department of Social Services and with a representative from the Wheaton (MD) office of Catholic Charities, a community-based organization involved in client outreach. The SNAP agency respondents in Maryland included the county SNAP director, a supervisor, and caseworker.   Each respondent was debriefed following their interview to provide feedback on the content and order of questions.

The focus group guide was pre-tested in late April 2012 with three selected SNAP participants (two Spanish-speaking) as identified by community-based organizations in Silver Spring (MD). Two additional pre-test interviews with SNAP staff were also conducted by telephone in late April 2012 with staff of the Rhode Island Department of Human Services.

5. Statistical Consultants

Provide the name and telephone number of individuals consulted on statistical aspects of the design and the name of the agency unit, contractor(s), grantee(s), or other person(s) who will actually collect and/or analyze the information for the agency.

The design of the administrative data collection and analysis was developed by the following project staff at the Urban Institute, listed by name, degree, project role, and telephone number:

- Gregory Mills, Ph.D., Principal Investigator (202-261-5841)
- Caroline Ratcliffe, Ph.D., Quantitative Analysis Co-Lead (202-261-5548)
- Laura Wheaton, M.P.P., Quantitative Analysis Co-Lead (202-261-5559)
- Tracy Vericker, Ph.D., Quantitative Analyst (202-261-5892)

Each of these individuals has many years of experience in the evaluation of social programs, including nutritional assistance, employment and training, welfare reform, and services for low-income families and children. They each have extensive expertise in evaluating administrative process and program implementation. They have all been involved in the design of complex studies requiring interviews with program administrators and staff, and interviews or focus groups with program participants.

The statistical design was also reviewed by Eric Porter (202-720-3489) of the Methods Branch of the National Agricultural Statistical Service.