

# Participation in the U.S. Social Safety Net: Coverage of Low-Income Families, 2018

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## Key findings

- Participation in the social safety net varies widely across programs—from 15 percent among persons eligible for subsidized child care (CCDF) to over 75 percent for Medicaid/CHIP and EITC.
- Participation differs by race and ethnicity, yet patterns are not consistent. In general, rates differ more across programs than between race and ethnic groups.
- In 2018, entitlement benefits (child support, EITC, Medicaid/CHIP, SNAP, and SSI) had participation rates above 50 percent, whereas non-entitlement programs (CCDF, housing assistance, LIHEAP, and TANF) had rates below 30 percent.

## Introduction

The federal social safety net—consisting of a range of federal benefit programs—offers vital support to Americans facing economic challenges.<sup>1</sup> This brief is the first in a series examining trends in social safety net benefits designed for Americans whose income falls below the poverty line or who need assistance to cover basic necessities. Understanding national trends in safety net coverage provides vital information for program and budget decisions regarding how best to reach the millions of Americans struggling to attain economic stability. This is particularly true in the context of the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which sharply increased unemployment and poverty and exacerbated economic inequities in communities of color, with particular impact on women.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, the period of this analysis predates federal safety net expansions in response to the pandemic, such as increased funding for child care subsidies. Of note, the official poverty rate in 2018 was 11.8 percent, slightly higher than the 11.4 percent in 2020.

In this brief we assess eligibility and participation in 10 public programs that account for a sizable share of the U.S. social safety net.<sup>3</sup> We also explore differences in program participation by the largest race and ethnic groups. Five programs target the most economically vulnerable segments of the population with direct income assistance, and five help Americans with a particular need. In-kind benefits—such as home heating and cooling, food and nutrition assistance, and health care coverage—reach a wider population. In comparison, benefits in the form of income assistance tend to be targeted specifically to children, very low-income workers, children and their parents living in deep poverty, or low-income persons with a disability. Box 1 lists the public benefit programs assessed in this brief.

In 2018 poverty in the U.S. was at its lowest level in nearly two decades, yet more than one in four persons in the

### Box 1. Federal Social Safety Net Programs Included in This Analysis

- Income maintenance—
- **Child support**<sup>5</sup>
  - Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)
  - Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
  - **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)**, including solely state funded (SSF) programs
- In-kind support—
- **Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)**
  - Housing assistance
  - **Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)**
  - **Medicaid/Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP)**
  - Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
  - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Note: Programs in bold are administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

<sup>1</sup> See ASPE’s report [Poverty in the United States: 50-Year Trends and Safety Net Impacts](#)

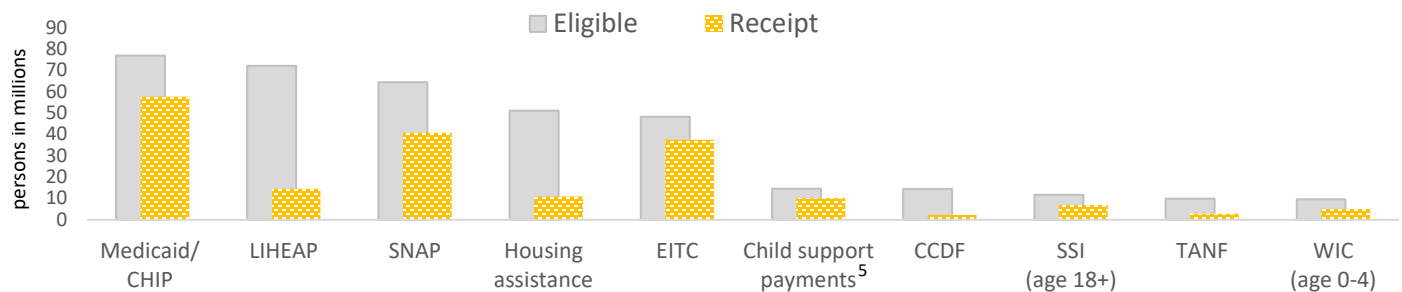
<sup>2</sup> For details, see the ASPE brief [COVID-19 and Economic Opportunity: Unequal Effects on Economic Need and Program Response](#).

<sup>3</sup> Multiple benefit receipt is discussed in a companion brief (forthcoming). Because of limitations in the source data, the current analysis excludes unemployment insurance. The cross-sectional data do not allow us to determine eligibility for individuals unemployed in all weeks of the year. In subsequent work we will use TRIM3 microsimulation model to simulate long-term unemployment and apply corrections to adjust for underreporting of unemployment insurance.

United States (93.6 million) had income below 200 percent of the official poverty threshold—about \$40,500 for a family of three.<sup>4</sup> While this population is easily identified, the share of people who sought assistance from public programs is more difficult to determine. This is largely because federal program offices do not consistently track applications but focus on the people they serve. Rather than count those who actually seek assistance, researchers can more readily identify eligible people through survey data. In the economic context of 2018, we report the number of persons eligible for and the number of persons who received a safety net program benefit. Child support analyses in this brief is the exception in that we report the percent of families who are owed child support that receive it, not the percent of eligible families who participate in the public Child Support Enforcement Program. Figure 1 illustrates and Table 1 reports these estimates and the level of participation for each program. Participation is calculated as the share of individuals eligible for a program that received a benefit. Box 2, found at the end of the brief, provides details on the methods used to produce estimates.

**Participation in the social safety net varies widely across programs, ranging from 15 percent for CCDF to over 75 percent for Medicaid/CHIP and EITC.**

**Figure 1. Eligible and Beneficiary Populations for Select Programs, 2018**



**Table 1. Number of Persons Eligible and Beneficiaries by Program, 2018**

	Eligible (in millions)	Beneficiaries (in millions)	Participation rate
Medicaid/CHIP	77.0	57.8	75%
LIHEAP	72.2	14.5	20%
SNAP	64.4	40.9	63%
Housing assistance	51.1	11.0	22%
EITC	48.4	37.8	78%
Child support payments <sup>5</sup>	14.6	10.2	70%
CCDF	14.4	2.2	15%
SSI (age 18+)	11.8	6.9	59%
TANF	10.0	2.8	28%
WIC (age 0-4)	9.6	5.1	53%

Source: Estimates based on Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement 2019, TRIM3 microsimulation model, administrative data, and Current Population Survey Child Support Supplement 2018. EITC participation is from the IRS.

<sup>4</sup> In 2018 the Census Bureau's 200 percent [poverty threshold](#) (used for statistical purposes) was \$40,500 for a family of three. Federal poverty guidelines are a simplified version of the thresholds updated for inflation at the end of the year (see [federal poverty guidelines](#)). Though the Census Bureau does not define a low-income category, scholars continue to use income at twice the poverty threshold as a research tool. See *Kids Count Data Center*, [Children in low-income working families](#) by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and [Distribution of the Total Population by Federal Poverty Level](#) at Kaiser Family Foundation site.

<sup>5</sup> Child support analyses is unique among the programs showing the percent of families who are owed child support that receive it, not the percent of eligible families who participate in the public Child Support Enforcement Program. Seventy percent is the share of people eligible for a support payment who received a payment during the year 2017. Eligibility is based on custodial parents entitled to support and their eligible children with a parent living elsewhere. In this brief beneficiaries are people who received any support payment in 2017. Estimates include but are not limited to public cases in the Title IV-D Child Support Enforcement program. See also [Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2017](#), U.S. Census Bureau (P60-269) and [Child Support Enforcement: Program Basics](#), Congressional Research Service (RS22380).

**Medicaid and CHIP**—administered by HHS—are two of the largest programs and provide health coverage to low-income people and people in poverty.<sup>6</sup> In an average month in 2018, 77 million adults and children were eligible for one of these programs, representing one in four Americans. There were 57.8 million Medicaid/CHIP beneficiaries in 2018, for a participation rate of 75 percent among those eligible. We estimate three out of four children and adults who needed health care coverage and qualified for Medicaid or CHIP received the benefit—one of the highest levels of participation among programs (see Table 1). However, administrative records suggest the rate may be higher.<sup>7</sup> Medicaid and CHIP are entitlement benefits, meaning that funding for health coverage is not limited by appropriations and any eligible person can be covered.

Second only to Medicaid/CHIP in beneficiaries, nutrition benefits through **SNAP** reached more than six out of ten people eligible for the program. Our model estimates that one of every five people in the United States—64.4 million persons—was eligible for a SNAP benefit in 2018. We estimate that 40.9 million among the eligible population received food assistance, a program participation rate of 63.4 percent.<sup>8</sup> SNAP is an entitlement benefit administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and each state and available to all eligible applicants.

The **EITC** is a refundable tax credit providing an annual payment to many eligible families. The benefit was created to provide income support while promoting work and economic mobility among low and middle income families with children. The EITC has one of the highest participation rates among safety net programs.<sup>9</sup> However, due to data limitations our model cannot estimate the probability of participation among those eligible. The Internal Revenue Service reports 78 percent participation in recent years.<sup>10</sup> Applying this estimate to our model of eligible persons yields an estimated 37.8 million EITC participants in 2018. To be eligible for the EITC, workers need to have earnings below a threshold.<sup>11</sup> The benefit for a family with one child was \$3,461 in 2018. The full benefit was available to parents earning less than \$24,400 for a married couple and less than \$18,700 for a single parent. Families with more children (up to three) receive a higher benefit. We estimate that 48.4 million people were members of an eligible tax filing unit in 2018.

The EITC is unique among programs for its high level of availability to qualifying applicants, but many very low-income persons are not employed and therefore cannot access the benefit. Before the pandemic and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (Public Law 117-2), the credit amount was low compared with federal poverty guidelines (maxing out at \$529) for earners in a household with no children.

**LIHEAP** has the second largest number of eligible persons among all programs. An estimated 72.2 million people in the United States were eligible for home heating or cooling assistance through the program in 2018, and about 14.5 million people lived in a household that received a benefit. LIHEAP is not an entitlement, and its funding is limited by federal appropriations. Many states and tribes run out of funding before serving all who are eligible. Unique among programs, LIHEAP helps people with non-recurring payments toward their seasonal utility bill and is not a monthly benefit. We estimate that LIHEAP benefits reached one in five eligible persons, for a program participation rate of 20 percent in 2018—among the lowest of the programs studied.

**Housing assistance** refers primarily to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's housing choice vouchers, Section 8 rental assistance, or public housing. It also includes the rural rental assistance program of the USDA.<sup>12</sup> We estimate that 51 million persons, one of every six people in the nation, are eligible for housing assistance. The need for affordable housing significantly exceeds housing supply and assistance is not an

<sup>6</sup> Under Medicaid and CHIP, children and pregnant women are eligible for coverage up to about 200 percent of the federal poverty guideline in all states. Coverage for low-income adults is more limited. The Affordable Care Act of 2010 expanded eligibility to adults with near-poverty income (100 to 138 percent of HHS poverty guidelines); by 2018 14 states had not adopted the expansion. In those states, coverage for working-age adults without disabilities, if available, typically goes to those with very low income, below 50 percent of the poverty line (\$8,710 for a two-person family in 2021).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of different calculations, see the ASPE research brief [Understanding Participation Rates in Medicaid](#) (2012).

<sup>8</sup> USDA estimates a higher national SNAP participation rate ([82 percent](#)) based on 36 million recipients in 2018 under federal rules and excluding broad based categorical eligibility under state rules. Broad based categorical eligibility is included in TRIM3.

<sup>9</sup> See Hungerford and Thiess (2013). [The EITC and CTC: History, Purpose, Goals, and Effectiveness](#) at <https://www.epi.org/>.

<sup>10</sup> The Internal Revenue Service provides EITC participation rates by state. See IRS webpages at [eitc.irs.gov](http://eitc.irs.gov).

<sup>11</sup> Income eligibility varies. In 2020, the maximums were 242 percent of the poverty threshold for a single parent with one child and 219 percent of the poverty threshold for two parents with one child. Beneficiaries must have a Social Security number (an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number does not qualify) and file a tax return. See Congressional Research Service Report R43805, *The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC): How It Works and Who Receives It* (2021), available from <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

<sup>12</sup> The USDA aids rural Americans with homeownership and repair. See rural housing assistance at <https://www.rd.usda.gov>.

entitlement benefit. Given the structure of programs providing the benefit, data on eligibility for housing assistance is considered broadly. Although eligibility for a benefit does not necessarily mean that a person needs that benefit, research suggests that eligibility for housing benefits is highly related to the need for affordable housing. One study using nationally representative data from the U.S. Census Bureau found that nearly all low-income households also experienced high housing cost burden (costs exceeding 30 percent of income).<sup>13</sup> In 2018 an estimated 51.1 million persons were eligible for assistance with rental housing costs, and 11.0 million of those eligible reported receiving assistance in the form of public housing, rent subsidies, or housing vouchers, yielding an estimated participation rate of 22 percent (Table 1).

The Census Bureau reports 30 percent of all children in custodial families (children with one parent living outside the household) lived in poverty in 2017, the most recent data available from the CPS Child Support Supplement survey. The national **child support** program is intended to connect middle-income and low-income children with resources by promoting parental responsibility. A major objective of the child support program is to establish legal paternity for children, which must occur prior to establishing a child support agreement. Nationally, less than one-half of custodial parents (42 percent) were entitled to child support in 2017 while more than one in four of all U.S. children and youth under age 21 (21.9 million) had a parent living outside the household and lived with a custodial parent.

For this brief we analyzed the population of custodial parents *and* children owed child support (14.6 million). Fewer than one-half of persons owed child support received all payments owed (46 percent), 24 percent received some payment and 30 percent received no payments.<sup>14</sup> Including partial payments, more than two-thirds (70 percent) of parents and children owed support received some payment during the year. Among custodial parents owed support, more than one in five (22 percent) lived below poverty in 2017.

**SSI** is an entitlement benefit administered by the Social Security Administration (SSA) and provides basic income support to adults and children who have low income and resources, and who are age 65 or older, blind, or have another disability. We estimate that in 2018, 11.8 million adults were eligible, and 59 percent of eligible adults participated. ASPE's annual [Welfare Indicators and Risk Factors](#) report analyzed SSI in greater detail, finding that program participation declined gradually since 2000, even as the pool of eligible people modestly increased.

The **WIC** program supports lifelong health for children in low income families by providing nutrition benefits to infants, children, and women who are pregnant or postpartum.<sup>15</sup> Counting only children, WIC has the smallest eligible population among programs studied at around 9.6 million. We estimate that 53 percent of eligible children younger than age 5 received WIC benefits in 2018. With a caseload of around 5.1 million, the WIC program reached millions more children in 2018 than programs providing child care benefits (CCDF) or income support (TANF).

We estimate that 14.4 million children, guardians, and parents were eligible for **CCDF** child care subsidies.<sup>16</sup> Funding for CCDF is limited by federal appropriations and state contributions, resulting in lower participation. We estimate 15 percent participation in CCDF in 2018 (see Table 1).

The **TANF** program is administered by states and HHS and provides basic income assistance to very poor children and their families. States set their own criteria for TANF eligibility and in each state income levels for eligibility are significantly below the poverty guidelines. Federal funding (through block grants) is contingent upon states observing certain work participation requirements and time-limits.

In 2018, the TANF caseload broadly defined<sup>17</sup> consisted of nearly 2.8 million individuals (2.0 million children) receiving a cash benefit, among an estimated 10 million eligible persons. Nationally more than two out of three beneficiaries (73 percent) were children due to parents or guardians being determined ineligible. Access to TANF

<sup>13</sup> The American Community Survey defines housing cost burden as housing costs greater than 30 percent of household income. This category includes 23.1 million households with annual income less than \$35,000. See Table B25106, *Tenure by Housing Costs in the Past 12 Months, 2018*, available from <http://data.census.gov>. See summary, [Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University](#).

<sup>14</sup> See [2017 Child Support Detailed Tables](#).

<sup>15</sup> WIC funding is [discretionary](#). [Federal rules](#) set maximum income eligibility for WIC at 185 percent of federal poverty guidelines.

<sup>16</sup> CCDF eligibility in this brief counts only subsidies administratively considered to be CCDF and includes adults and children. This differs from estimates in ASPE's [Factsheet: Estimates for Child Care Eligibility and Receipt for Fiscal Year 2018](#) which includes subsidies paid through non-CCDF federal funds and reports 12.8 million eligible children in 2018.

<sup>17</sup> In the model TANF includes separate state (SSP) and solely state funded (SSF) programs to capture income assistance broadly and for this reason our estimates will not match published data from HHS Office of Financial Assistance which excludes SSF cases.

income assistance among eligible persons varies widely across states.<sup>18</sup>

The TANF program has fewer persons eligible or receiving benefits than most of the other programs. Overall, we estimate participation in TANF at 28 percent among eligible persons, placing TANF in the bottom half of programs analyzed in this brief for access to benefits. During 2018 the Census Bureau estimates 11.9 million children lived in poverty. In an average month during the year, we estimate 2.0 million children benefited from TANF.

### Participation in programs differs by race and ethnicity, but patterns vary across programs.

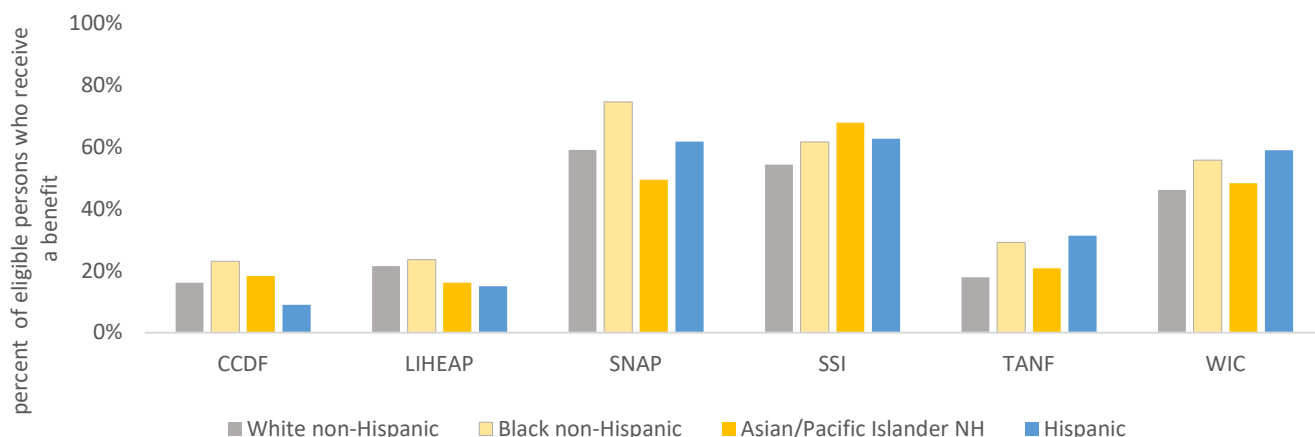
Benefit use differs at the national level among race and ethnic groups. Six programs—CCDF, LIHEAP, SNAP, SSI, TANF, and WIC—are captured in the survey and can be modeled for comparisons of participation rates by race and ethnicity.<sup>19</sup> We find differences in participation among groups and recognize the need for additional analyses, particularly at the state and region levels, for interpretation of differences across programs.

We estimate participation rates for the largest race and ethnic groups—White non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander non-Hispanic, and Hispanic persons of any race. We regret that due to small sample size other race and ethnic groups—such as American Indian and Alaska Native—are not available in the data for this analysis. In general, we find rates differ more across programs than among race or ethnic groups. Figure 2 illustrates participation rates among eligible people by race and ethnicity.

For **CCDF**,<sup>20</sup> Black non-Hispanic parents and children had the highest participation rate (23 percent) among groups. Participation rates among White non-Hispanic persons and Asian/Pacific Islander non-Hispanic persons were 16 percent and 18 percent, respectively. In comparison, eligible Hispanic parents and children participated at roughly half the level of other groups, with a rate of 9 percent.

**LIHEAP** participation rates were comparable among White non-Hispanic persons and Black non-Hispanic persons at 22 percent and 24 percent respectively. Asian/Pacific Islander non-Hispanic persons and Hispanic persons of any race had lower rates, at 16 percent and 15 percent respectively.

**Figure 2. Percentage of eligible persons who are program beneficiaries by race and ethnicity, 2018**



Source: Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement for 2018, and microsimulation model TRIM3.

Participation in **SNAP** varied with rates lowest among Asian/Pacific Islander non-Hispanic persons at 49 percent, comparable between White non-Hispanic persons and Hispanic persons at 59 percent and 62 percent respectively, and highest among Black non-Hispanic persons at 75 percent. **SSI** receipt had less variation among groups. Participation rates ranged from 62 to 68 percent for Black non-Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander non-Hispanic, and Hispanic persons. White non-Hispanic persons had the lowest participation rate at 54 percent.

<sup>18</sup> State eligibility criteria vary. Among eligible persons in states with the largest caseloads, we estimate 2018 participation in TANF as follows: CA 68%, FL 18%, IL 22%, MA 45%, NY 49%, OH 30%, PA 29%, TN 17%, TX 7%, WA 40%.

<sup>19</sup> Results are simulated for LIHEAP and SSI as public records do not include race-ethnicity. Housing assistance programs provide sufficient public data, but preparations for modeling by race and ethnic origin were not available for this brief.

<sup>20</sup> CCDF participation rates in this brief include parents and guardians and may differ from published rates.



For **TANF**, given the small sample size for some groups, we used estimates based on administrative caseload totals (see Box 2.) We found White non-Hispanic persons had the lowest participation rate (18 percent), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander non-Hispanic persons (21 percent). Participation was closer to the average rate of participation among Black non-Hispanic persons (29 percent) and Hispanic persons (31 percent).

**WIC** participation rates ranged from 46 to 48 percent for White non-Hispanic persons and Asian/Pacific Islander non-Hispanic persons and from 56 to 59 percent for Black non-Hispanic and Hispanic persons.

## Discussion

The federal social safety net provides vital support for many low-income people as they work toward economic self-sufficiency and strive for upward mobility. The number of people eligible for each benefit program varies because eligibility rules vary across the programs with regard to consideration of income, assets, family and household composition, and other factors. And, as detailed in this brief, participation levels among eligible individuals vary across programs. Based on our analysis, Medicaid/CHIP, EITC, and child support had the highest participation rates, and housing assistance, LIHEAP, and CCDF had the lowest rates. We observed differences in participation related to whether the programs are entitlements—available to anyone eligible—or limited by federal appropriations. In 2018, the entitlement benefits examined in this brief had participation rates above 50 percent, whereas the four non-entitlement programs (TANF, housing assistance, LIHEAP, and CCDF) had rates below 30 percent.

Research is needed to understand the differences in participation rates across racial and ethnic groups as our analysis finds that results across programs are not consistent. For example, CCDF and SNAP had highest participation among Black non-Hispanic persons relative to other groups; SSI had highest participation among Asian and Pacific Islander non-Hispanic persons; and LIHEAP had highest participation among White and Black non-Hispanic persons, relative to other groups. Some differences may be due to the complex interaction between state program offices' outreach efforts, eligibility criteria and the characteristics of a state's population. These factors may include average age, poverty status, and family composition. For example, SNAP participation was highest among children (82 percent) and lowest among older adults (32 percent)<sup>21</sup> while TANF participation was higher among single female families with children. LIHEAP benefits in our 2018 model were less commonly reported among eligible people in metropolitan areas (19 percent) compared with nonmetropolitan areas (24 percent).

Poverty rates and income levels—which differ across racial and ethnic groups—may also influence participation. In 2018, poverty rates were lower for Asian and Pacific Islander people (10 percent) and White non-Hispanic people (8 percent) than for Hispanic people (18 percent) and Black non-Hispanic people (21 percent), which may in part explain higher participation in some programs. Participation in SNAP and CCDF is higher among persons below the poverty line (persons above the poverty line can be eligible), though this is not the case for all programs.

The interaction of regional population characteristics with federal and state program administration and program rules may affect the national demographic profile of program recipients. That is, state policy choices may impact the national profile of program participants. The interplay between different racial and ethnic groups and different sets of program rules by state needs to be better understood. One example of this interaction is TANF. Eligibility rules were moderate and program participation rates for TANF higher—upwards of 45 percent—in California and New York in 2018. At the same time residents in these states were among the most racially and ethnically diverse in the nation. Our model suggests Hispanic people had access to benefits with a rate of program participation above the national average, but because California and New York account for more than 40 percent of the program caseload, the result may be a better description of access in these states rather than in the nation overall. The intersection of federal and state policy with demographics informs our interpretation of program participation, however, more research is needed to understand the affect of program rules on access to benefits among groups.

Program benefits lift millions of families out of poverty and are tied to improved economic and well-being outcomes for children later in life.<sup>22</sup> This brief provides baseline information about program eligibility and participation. More

<sup>21</sup> USDA estimates higher SNAP participation rates among children and among older adults. See [Trends in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates: Fiscal Year 2016 to Fiscal Year 2018](#). May 2021.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, S. Ettinger de Cuba, M. Chilton, A. Bovell-Ammon, et al. (2019). [Loss of SNAP is Associated with Food Insecurity and Poor Health in Working Families with Young Children](#). *Journal of Health Affairs*. Vol. 38, No 5.

work is needed to identify the reasons for varying participation rates among race and ethnic groups across programs and their policy and programmatic implications.

### Box 2. Methods

Our analytical approach relies on assumptions to identify members of program assistance units. In general, microsimulation model TRIM3 constructs assistance units from detailed characteristics provided in the survey. For example, the model applies SNAP and TANF program rules to simulate assistance units and the number of eligible people per household. Similarly, family income data and tax rules are used to construct tax filer units to assess EITC and Medicaid eligibility. For WIC we are unable to identify expectant mothers (respondents are not asked about pregnancy) and therefore count only children as eligible for the benefit. For SSI we are able to identify adults age 18 and older but not children eligible for the benefit.

In the current analysis we use persons as the unit of analysis, and as a result, the estimates in this brief are less likely than other program estimates from TRIM3 to match administrative caseload characteristics. This work takes a broad view of the social safety net, relying on comparable estimates across programs. We recognize this approach works better for some programs than others. We apply rules for Medicaid eligibility to each family member, for example, but for benefits such as housing assistance and LIHEAP, we count each household member as a program participant.

The reference period for this analysis is 2018. We counted people and household members—the noninstitutionalized population—as program participants if they were eligible and reported a program benefit or coverage during the year. Microsimulation model TRIM3 also assigned program benefits to some people to make up for underreporting of benefits in the Current Population Survey (CPS) and to match administrative records. TRIM3 augments the survey data to match the size and characteristics of the caseload according to HHS, USDA, and SSA. In this analysis, programs modeled to simulate administrative totals include CCDF, LIHEAP, SNAP, SSI, TANF, and WIC. Medicaid/CHIP estimates reflect those reporting coverage whether or not the model confirmed eligibility. Annual estimates are shown for child support, the EITC, housing assistance, and LIHEAP; otherwise program eligibility and benefit receipt are average monthly estimates. People were counted as eligible or as receiving a benefit if they were included in a program’s “assistance unit”; the assistance unit may be a person, a family, a tax unit, or an entire household.

Program eligibility is based on federal and state program rules for each of the 10 programs assessed with the exception of child support (for which custodial parents self-report that child support is owed in the CPS Child Support Supplement). Microdata consisting of person, family, and household characteristics, including age, family type, family size, income, assets, housing costs, and employer-sponsored health coverage, among other characteristics, determined program eligibility. Eligibility for housing assistance is estimated broadly for renters with income less than 80 percent of local median income as established by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, among other criteria. SSI estimates are shown only for adults because of the difficulty of assessing disability for children. Data on child support comes from the Child Support Supplement of the CPS conducted in April every other year.

For data by race and ethnicity, we compared results in this brief to administrative data where possible and found similar results in many cases but some noticeable differences. For SNAP we completed a sensitivity analysis examining only states with low rates of missing data. The SNAP quality control data which provides input for TRIM3 have high rates of missing race and ethnic origin data, particularly in some states. Among the 24 states in which 90% or more records included the householder’s race-ethnicity, results were comparable to those in this brief though overall participation rates were lower as follows: White non-Hispanic (48%), Black non-Hispanic (75%), Asian/Pacific Islander non-Hispanic (38%), and Hispanic (50%). To better understand access to SNAP, we would need more quality control data with race and ethnic origin. Note that publicly available caseload data for LIHEAP and SSI do not include race or ethnic origin. For these programs, and where data is missing, we implicitly assume the level of under-reporting found in the CPS is similar across groups. To assess data reliability, we calculated rates using our eligible populations as denominators and administrative caseload counts as numerators. For TANF the brief shows these results in order to report data for the smallest group. Results from the comparison with administrative records differed somewhat for Asian and Pacific Islanders with participation in CCDF estimated lower at 11% and participation in WIC somewhat higher at 57%. Results based on administrative records were similar for White and Black non-Hispanic persons and Hispanic persons. Note that TANF administrative records report race and ethnicity for the householder only and CCDF program data is based on children’s race-ethnic origin rather than parents and children. We note more data is critical for measuring equitable access to the programs that comprise the social safety net.

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The Urban Institute maintains and operates the Transfer Income Microsimulation model, version 3 (TRIM3). Private and public organizations may contract for specific analyses. Access to detailed programmatic decisions, inputs, and algorithms are shared with the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation’s permission. The Urban Institute also offers a public use version of TRIM3 data: <http://trim3.urban.org/T3Welcome.php>