

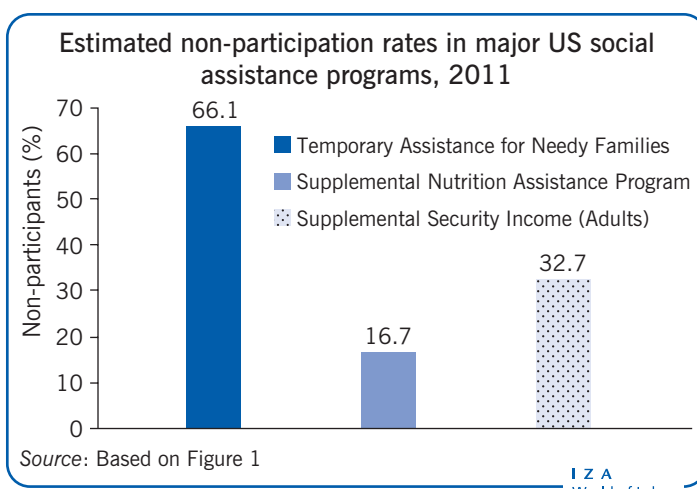
How to improve participation in social assistance programs

Government agencies can lower barriers that impede people's take-up of social assistance

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ELEVATOR PITCH

Social assistance programs are intended to improve people's well-being. However, that goal is undermined when eligible people fail to participate. Reasons for non-participation can include inertia, lack of information, stigma, the time and "hassle" associated with applications and program compliance, as well as some programs' non-entitlement status. Differences in participation across programs, and over time, indicate that take-up rates can respond both positively and negatively to policy change. However, there are clearly very identifiable ways in which relevant agencies can improve take-up.



KEY FINDINGS

Pros

- ⊕ Although there are many tangible and intangible barriers to participation in some social assistance programs, there are strategies that agencies and organizations can follow to improve access.
- ⊕ Increased access can reduce stigma—potential clients are more likely to take up benefits when they see other people and broader groups of people also taking up benefits. This can have reinforcing effects on participation.
- ⊕ Strategies that simplify program rules can lower agencies' administrative costs.

Cons

- ⊖ Some strategies for increasing participation, such as outreach campaigns and more convenient operating hours, have direct costs.
- ⊖ Other strategies, such as simplified program rules or less onerous reporting requirements, can undermine program integrity.
- ⊖ Increased assistance program access is costly in and of itself because more benefits will be used.
- ⊖ We lack information regarding how much specific access interventions change people's behavior, making cost–benefit comparisons difficult.

AUTHOR'S MAIN MESSAGE

Many disadvantaged people miss out on financial support by not participating in assistance programs. This can be because of the stigma of receiving benefits, or because of onerous application processes, confusing rules, misinformation, and demeaning delivery methods. Agencies can lower these barriers and boost participation by providing reminder notices, opt-in defaults and automatic enrollment to overcome inertia. They can also conduct outreach campaigns to reduce information gaps and stigma and develop simpler program rules that ease administrative burdens.