Food Stamp Enrollment and Barriers in Colorado’s Ski Resort Counties

Research Summary by Hunger Free Colorado

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BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES

Colorado’s ski resort counties—Eagle, Pitkin, Routt and Summit—have some of the lowest estimated rates of food stamp enrollment (Program Access Index) when compared to other Colorado counties and the state average.

“SNAP Access in Colorado Ski Resort Counties,” a research study conducted by Alyson Williams and Joël McClurg for Hunger Free Colorado, determines what constitutes as a “ski resort” county and analyzes various characteristics of this county subgroup to identify possible correlations to county enrollment rates for food stamps, federally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP. The study addresses the following questions:

1) What are common trends among these counties that may impact food stamp enrollment; and
2) What resources exist to increase enrollment in food stamps, thereby addressing and ultimately reducing hunger in the community?

METHODS

This study first defined the characteristics of a ski resort county, and as a result four counties were determined to meet these criteria: Eagle, Pitkin, Routt and Summit. Eight different county demographics such as race, age, and income were then collected and analyzed to identify statistically significant relationships between food stamp enrollment, or Program Access Index (PAI), and these demographics.

PAI is a measure of estimated low-income residents enrolled in food stamps developed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The Colorado Department of Human Services’ (CDHS) reported counts of county residents enrolled in food stamps were divided by U.S. Census Bureau’s five-year estimates from 2009 to 2013 for county populations at or below 125 percent the federal poverty line ($1,238 monthly for a single person) during that same time period. These point-in-time estimates for the county percent of low-income enrolled were compared to the aforementioned county demographics.

DATA LIMITATIONS

While PAI is the federally accepted measure of food stamp access, it is in fact a broad measure of program access applied to county estimates, which measures the share of the population with income at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty line who are enrolled in food stamps. Thus, it does not adjust for eligibility requirements for food stamps, such as student or resident status and, therefore, does not precisely measure a participation rate among an estimated eligible population. Low-income estimates may be higher or lower than what was actually reported.
KEY FINDINGS

• There is a strong, statistically significant, inverse correlation between per capita or median income, and food stamp enrollment (PAI). As the per capita or median income in a county rises, the percent of estimated low-income population who are enrolled in the nutrition program decreases. Ski resort counties are among the highest rates of median and per capita income of all Colorado counties.

• Conversely, county poverty has a strong, direct correlation with food stamp enrollment (PAI). As the rate of poverty in a county rises, the percent of estimated low-income individuals who are enrolled in the nutrition program also rises.

• The employment category for “Accommodation and Food Services” represents the highest overall percent of average employment for all four ski resort counties. This includes hospitality and ski resort work.

• Unemployment in ski resort counties is lower than the state average, except during the two “off-season” months of May and November when unemployment in these locales spike above the state average.

• Analysis of age demographics indicates that the working-age population of 18 to 64 years is significantly higher in these ski resort counties than compared to the rest of the state.

• California has two definable ski resort counties—Alpine and Nevada—with higher performing food stamp PAIs than the Colorado ski resort counties. These California counties also have higher poverty and lower per capita income (as compared to the Colorado state average) than those in Colorado. These California counties also benefit from dedicated outreach funding and strategic plans for increasing utilization of food stamps.

CONCLUSION

Colorado ski resort counties are unique environments with correspondingly unique barriers to food stamp enrollment. While these counties are below the state average in terms of food stamp access as measured by PAI, they also have novel demographics that are uncommon when compared to all other counties in Colorado.

Eagle, Pitkin, Routt and Summit counties have higher than average per capita and median income, and lower rates of poverty; these measures seem to correlate significantly to poorer rates of existing low-income populations enrolling in food stamps. This possibly is a result of stigma or shame in accepting public benefits within a community where one’s neighbors are visibly affluent. Simultaneously, there is likely less word-of-mouth promotion and communal knowledge about the nutrition program and its guidelines in these counties where low-income residents may feel more isolated from one another.

In addition, data indicates that Colorado ski resort counties have more working-age residents, as well as lower rates of unemployment for most months out of a calendar year. Working adults may be deterred from utilizing the food assistance because their earned income only makes them eligible for fewer benefit dollars per month, or they may find it difficult to apply for the program given their work schedules. As a result, some working adults with low incomes may not enroll in the program due to a perception that the return in terms of benefits is outweighed by the cost of finding the needed time to apply, provide verifications, and attend an interview with a county caseworker.

Access the full report at HungerFreeColorado.org/Ski-Report.