
Low-Income Aged: Eligibility and Participation in SSI*

This article reports on a study undertaken to evaluate the Social Security Administration's (SSA) methods for estimating the number of persons eligible for Federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments. SSA estimates that 65-70 percent of the aged eligible for SSI actually participate in the program. It has been argued that the actual participation rate may be either higher or lower than SSA estimates because SSA misestimates the size of the eligible population. SSA bases its estimates of the number of persons eligible on data in the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS). In this study, a sample of 2,000 low-income aged persons was interviewed in 1979, and two sets of information were collected: One duplicated the data used by SSA to make its estimates; the other duplicated the type of information collected when a person actually applies for SSI. When the two sets were compared, it was found that the methodology that SSA uses to estimate the size of the eligible population and the information collected from SSI applicants produced estimates that were quite similar.

The study also evaluated theories to explain why some persons eligible for SSI do not claim benefits. The study found that the elderly are more likely to participate in SSI if they live in States that supplement Federal SSI payments and that do not have a history of imposing liens on the property of welfare recipients. Participants also tend to have somewhat lower incomes (excluding SSI) than nonparticipants. No evidence was found that variations in practices among Social Security district offices could account for differences in SSI participation rates.

In 1972, Congress enacted the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, which, for the first time, established Federal minimum income guarantees and uniform eligibility criteria for assistance to the needy aged, blind, and disabled. Until then, these persons had been covered by individual State-administered programs

*Prepared by Linda Drazga, Melinda Upp, and Virginia Reno, Office of Program Analysis, with assistance from Michael Staren, Division of Supplemental Security Studies, Office of Research and Statistics, Office of Policy, Social Security Administration. The study on which this report is based was performed by Urban Systems Research & Engineering, Inc., of Cambridge, Massachusetts. A public use data tape of responses from the 2,000 aged persons in the survey is available from the Social Security Administration.

jointly funded by the States and the Federal Government. The SSI program is federally funded, although States are required to supplement the Federal payment for persons who were receiving more under the old State program than they would be guaranteed under SSI; States may also voluntarily supplement the Federal benefits for some or all categories of beneficiaries.

Estimates made while the SSI legislation was being debated in Congress indicated that twice as many persons would participate in the Federal program as were receiving benefits under the State-administered programs. It was projected that 90 percent of an estimated 6.7 million eligible persons would participate in the

Federal program. These figures were based on the assumption that more people would be eligible for and participate in SSI because the guarantee level (\$130 a month for an individual and \$195 a month for a couple in 1974)¹ was higher than the payment standards in most States and because provisions believed to discourage participation in some States were not retained in the Federal program.²

In January 1974, when the Social Security Administration began implementing the SSI program, 3.1 million recipients were converted from the State assistance programs. The size of the SSI caseload grew to 4.0 million by the end of 1974 and to 4.3 million by the end of 1975. Despite this growth, the number of participants remained considerably smaller than the number that had been estimated to be eligible. Special outreach activities were undertaken to enroll eligible nonparticipants, but the number of participants did not increase.³

The reason for the discrepancy between the number estimated to be eligible and the number actually participating has not been clear. Some have theorized that the participation rate in fact is higher than it has appeared because the number of persons who are eligible has been overestimated. There was interest, too, in finding the presumed reasons for nonparticipation. Several theories were put forth. In 1977, SSA's Office of Research and Statistics, responsible for estimating the size of the eligible population, contracted for a study to evaluate both SSA estimating techniques and the primary theories advanced to explain nonparticipation.

The study was limited to the aged and was not intended to be representative of the low-income aged population as a whole. Thus, the precise results do not necessarily apply generally. The study was designed to test specific hypotheses that might explain differences between the number of persons estimated to be eligible and the number actually participating. This article summarizes the study's methodology and findings.⁴

Hypotheses Tested

One objective of the research was to determine whether SSI participation rate estimates are inaccurate

¹ The monthly benefit rate is adjusted each year by the Consumer Price Index. The monthly Federal benefit rate from July 1, 1981, through June 1982 is \$264.70 for an individual and \$397.00 for a couple.

² In some States, for example, liens were attached to a person's property or estate as a condition of payment receipt.

³ As of July 1981, 3.6 million aged, blind, and disabled persons received Federal SSI payments. Although the number of participants has declined since 1975, the number of aged estimated to be eligible has also declined, largely as a result of increased coverage and benefits under the Social Security program.

⁴ The project was intended as a pilot for a national study and was limited to the aged population because (1) most of the public concern has been about participation rates in the aged population and (2) selecting a sample of aged persons was considerably easier than a sample of those potentially eligible for disability benefits.

because the size of the eligible population is overestimated. To make its estimates, SSA uses information related to the main SSI eligibility and benefit level criteria—income, assets, and living arrangements—from the March Current Population Survey (CPS) administered by the Bureau of the Census. The CPS data provide, however, only rough approximations. For example, SSI eligibility depends on an applicant's current income, but the CPS collects information only about a respondent's income in the year before the survey. In the study, a sample of elderly persons was asked both the type of questions included in the CPS and those included in processing an actual claim for SSI benefits. When the results were compared, it was found that SSA's estimates based on CPS data were not overstating the size of the eligible population. In fact, the study found that estimates based on the two types of information are quite similar.

A second objective was to test factors thought to influence program participation. Two factors indicated by previous research to be associated with higher participation rates were the availability of State supplements to the Federal SSI benefit and the absence of liens against welfare recipients' property under State assistance programs preceding SSI. The availability of State supplements, by increasing the value of the total SSI payment, was thought to make it more worthwhile for those eligible for relatively small Federal benefits to apply for the combined payments. And lien laws may have discouraged participation in the programs whose participants were converted to SSI when SSI was enacted and thereby continued to affect SSI participation. This development might have occurred either because persons potentially eligible for SSI but not for the preceding program were not automatically converted and were unaware of the new program or because they thought the lien laws still applied.

Other factors tested for their potential effects on participation included:

- Population characteristics such as urban/rural residence, income, age, sex, race, marital status, living arrangements, education, and assets.
- Knowledge, experience, and attitudes of eligible nonparticipants.
- District office procedures for processing applications and staff attitudes toward applicants.

As expected, the study found participation rates highest in States that both offered supplements to the Federal benefit and had no prior lien laws. Eligible nonparticipants had slightly higher average incomes from sources other than SSI and were somewhat younger, better educated, and more likely to be white and female than participants. Almost half the nonparticipants said they had not heard of the SSI program although non-

participants had as many social contacts, listened as often to radio and television, and read newspapers as much as participants. No correlation was found between district office practices or staff attitudes and participation rates. A large majority of both participants and nonparticipants thought they had been treated with courtesy and respect when they visited the local district office.

Sample Design

To test the various hypotheses, a sample of 2,000 low-income elderly persons was interviewed. These persons lived in 34 SSA district office areas in 18 locations throughout the country. Some 500 SSA staff from the 34 offices also were interviewed. The offices were located in four types of States: Those with State supplements and no prior lien laws, those with supplements and prior lien laws, those without supplements but with prior lien laws, and those without supplements or prior lien laws. Rural and small, medium, and large urban areas were selected; within the large areas, inner-city, blue collar, and more well-to-do suburbs were included. The sites were not intended to be nationally representative but rather to reflect site characteristics thought to affect program participation.

The sample of low-income elderly was drawn from two sources: (1) Those already receiving SSI were selected from the Supplemental Security Record (SSR), SSA's master file of SSI recipients, and (2) persons not receiving SSI were selected from the Master Beneficiary Record (MBR), SSA's file of persons entitled to Social Security benefits or enrolled in Medicare. Since almost all persons aged 65 or older are eligible for Medicare, and since the Medicare participation rate is nearly 100 percent, this file was considered the best source available to identify aged persons who might have been eligible for, but were not receiving, SSI.⁵

The sample of nonrecipients was screened twice before the final sample selection. Those with Social Security benefits high enough to make them ineligible for SSI were excluded. Then a brief mail survey was used to screen out those whose total income was above the SSI eligibility range and those who were institutionalized. Personal interviews were conducted in the summer of 1979—both with those receiving SSI and with those whose response to the mail survey indicated their in-

⁵ Although it was the most efficient source available to identify low-income aged persons, the MBR may leave out some eligible nonrecipients. The MBR identifies all persons aged 65 or older who are enrolled in Medicare and who do not receive SSI and who either do not receive Social Security benefits or receive relatively low amounts. The MBR would, however, exclude anyone who was neither receiving Social Security nor SSI, nor had enrolled in Medicare. Because the same sample was used for the two sets of estimating procedures, it could affect estimates of total participation rates but not differences between the two procedures.

comes might be low enough for them to be eligible for SSI but who were not receiving it. Interviews were completed with 522 recipients and 1,509 nonparticipants. Among the latter, 522 were found to be eligible for SSI and 987 were ineligible, primarily because they did not meet the SSI assets test or other eligibility criteria. Thus, the final analysis was based on a sample of 1,044 eligible participants and nonparticipants.

Estimates of the Number Eligible for SSI

As noted earlier, two sets of questions for determining SSI eligibility were asked of each person in the sample. The first set duplicated the questions in the March Current Population Survey (CPS) on demographic data, living arrangements, and last year's income that are now used to estimate SSI eligibility. The second set of questions replicated, to the extent possible, the questions asked when a person actually applies for SSI—living arrangements, the value of current asset holdings, and monthly and quarterly income (both retrospective information about last month's and quarter's income and expected income for the next month and quarter). The study then looked separately at the effects of using each of the "proxies" SSA derives from the CPS data (for income, assets, and living arrangements), and at the combined effect of using CPS data. From these estimates the study calculated the number of eligible persons who were not receiving but were eligible for SSI. When SSA estimates the number of persons eligible for SSI, it uses as its basis the entire aged population, including those receiving SSI. The difference between these two modeling procedures was also compared.

CPS Income and Reporting Period

Use of CPS income data was thought to affect the accuracy of eligibility estimates for two reasons. First, the March CPS provides detailed information on income amounts and sources for the preceding year. SSI eligibility is based on current income, not income received last year. Thus, some types of income reported for last year in the CPS may no longer be received at the time of the survey, or new types of income could be received. Second, amounts received may be incorrectly reported. For example, other analyses of CPS income data have indicated that the CPS, like other surveys, tends to underreport even recent income. Such underreporting is particularly a problem with asset income or other types of income received only irregularly or in small amounts during the year and therefore might be overlooked when a person is asked to recall income for an entire year. Underreporting of income in the CPS could result in an

overestimate of SSI eligibility. On the other hand, the March CPS may have errors of overreporting of last year's income from programs with indexed benefits such as Social Security. If persons report Social Security income as 12 times their current monthly rate, last year's income would be overstated because benefits are increased for the cost of living in July of each year. Overreporting of income would result in an underestimate of SSI eligibility.

The study found that, on balance, the CPS income data produced a slightly higher estimate of the income of the low-income population and that therefore SSA's methodology, based on CPS income data, produced a slightly smaller estimate of the eligible population. As shown in table 1, the difference is small and not statistically significant; that is, there is at least a 5-percent chance that the "real" difference is zero.

Asset Holdings

The SSI program imposes an asset as well as an income test to determine eligibility. An individual with financial assets of more than \$1,500 (\$2,250 for a couple) is ineligible for SSI payments. Certain types of assets, such as a home, are not counted in the asset test.

The CPS does not gather information on the value of asset holdings, although it does ask about income from assets—rents, dividends, and interest—during the past year. SSA uses the asset income information from the CPS to impute the value of countable asset holdings by assuming that reported income from assets represents a 6-percent annual return on the value of assets held.

Because asset income is known to be underreported in surveys, some have speculated that estimates based on this procedure would underestimate asset holdings of those potentially eligible for SSI and therefore tend to

Table 1.—Differences between current and study estimate of number of aged persons eligible for SSI in 34 district office locations

| Source of difference | Percent difference ¹ | Percent standard deviation ² |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Use of CPS proxy for— | | |
| Income eligibility | - 1.6 | 2.6 |
| Asset eligibility | 1.7 | 2.6 |
| Living arrangements | - 5.0 | 2.6 |
| Total proxy data | - 5.1 | 2.6 |
| Modeling differences | 3 - 9.2 | 2.1 |
| Total difference | 3 - 13.9 | 2.4 |

$$^1 \text{ Difference} = \frac{\text{Current Estimate} - \text{Study Estimate}}{\text{Study Estimate}}$$

² Statistical significance at the 95-percent level of certainty is calculated by multiplying the difference (for example, - 1.6 percent) by 1.96 times the standard deviation (2.6 percent) and adding and subtracting the product (5.096) from the difference. There is a 95-percent chance that the "true" difference lies somewhere within a confidence interval, which, in this case, equals - 1.6 plus or minus 5.096, or - 6.696 to + 3.496. If zero lies within the confidence interval, as it does in this case, the difference is not statistically significant because there may be no (zero) difference between the two estimates.

³ Significant at the 95-percent level of confidence. See footnote 2.

overstate the number of persons eligible for SSI. However, because those with higher incomes are more likely to have assets, any underestimates of assets for those with income below the SSI benefit rate may be relatively small. The study results indicate that SSA's imputation of asset holdings from CPS data does not produce an estimate of SSI eligibility that is significantly different from estimates based on questions used in the application process.

Living Arrangements

For those who live in another's home and do not establish that they contribute their share of household expenses, the Federal SSI income guarantee is reduced by one-third (to \$176.47 for an individual in July 1981). Thus, when an aged person lives with others, SSI eligibility is affected by homeownership and within-household expenditure patterns, as well as the aged person's current income. For example, a person with \$200 in monthly Social Security benefits would be eligible for an SSI benefit of \$84.70 if he or she lived independently but would be ineligible if living in another's home and not sharing in household expenses.

The March CPS does not gather information on homeownership or on the extent to which individuals within households share expenses, but indicates only whether a person is a "household head" and presumably, therefore, paying for at least part of household expenses. In deriving its estimates, SSA thus must make some assumptions about which income guarantee to apply to aged persons who live with others. SSA assumes that the full benefit rate applies if the aged person or spouse is designated the "household head." If someone other than the aged person is designated the "household head," the aged person would be considered in another's household and the reduced benefit rate would apply in SSA's estimation procedures.

It was expected that current methods for taking account of living arrangements would understate the number eligible for SSI because persons other than the household head may also pay a pro rata share of household expenses. The study found that this may be true, but again the difference was not significantly different from zero.

Combined Effect of Using CPS Data

Even when the effects of using CPS data as proxies for all these aspects of the application process—income, assets, and living arrangements—were combined, the difference in the estimates of the size of the eligible population was not statistically significant. Thus, it appears that the accuracy of SSA's participation rate estimates is not affected by relying on CPS data.

Modeling Differences

In making its estimate of the eligible population, the study calculated the number of persons found to be eligible for, but not receiving, SSI. That number was then added to the number in its sample who were known to be receiving SSI. It was assumed that all who were receiving SSI were in fact eligible for it. The research did not independently verify that eligibility.

In contrast, SSA's modeling procedures do not assume that participants are eligible for SSI. Instead, eligibility is simulated for the total population, including both participants and nonparticipants. Independent quality assurance data for 1979 indicate that, in fact, about 4 percent of the entire SSI caseload (including the blind and disabled) do not meet the eligibility criteria. Not surprisingly, then, the study produced a higher estimate of the eligible population. The difference—about 9 percent—is statistically significant. If the number of noneligible participants is considered, however, the difference is only about 6 percent.

Total Effects

When both the effects of using SSI claims application data and of estimating eligibility of only nonparticipants are considered, the study estimated a somewhat larger eligible population than was estimated using SSA's method. SSA's method produced an estimate of the eligible population about 14 percent lower than the study's method. When the difference is adjusted to take account of ineligible participants, however, it becomes even smaller—about 11 percent.

Because this study was exploratory in nature and was not designed to represent the national population, the exact magnitude of difference between the two estimates should be interpreted with caution. The main finding is that current methods seem to produce reasonably accurate estimates of eligibility.

Reasons for Nonparticipation

The second part of the study was designed to evaluate why some eligible persons do not participate in SSI. As noted earlier, among the variables considered were the effects of State policies such as prior lien laws and supplements to Federal payments, socioeconomic characteristics of nonparticipants, attitudes and knowledge of nonparticipants, and district office practices. For this portion of the analysis, the study's estimates of program participation rates for the sample are compared across sites. Because the study's sample was not designed to represent the national population, this research focused on differences between participants and nonparticipants. Specific estimates of characteristics of either group may not reflect the national population.

State Supplements and Lien Laws

One of the theories thought to explain nonparticipation is that eligible nonrecipients may be eligible for only small payments and may therefore feel it is not worth the effort to apply. If this were the case, one would expect participation in the Federal program to be significantly higher in States that provide supplements to Federal payments than in States that do not.

The study did find slightly higher participation rates in the States providing State supplements, as shown in table 2. The difference, however, was not large enough to be statistically significant. Similarly, participation rates are slightly lower in the States that had, in the past, imposed liens on the property of assistance recipients. This difference is also not statistically significant. Only when the effects of both past and current State policies are combined do participation rates vary significantly. The participation rate is highest for study sites with State supplements and no past lien laws. The lowest rate is for States with prior lien laws and no State supplements.

Socioeconomic Characteristics

The study compared SSI recipients with eligible nonrecipients to determine whether nonrecipients have certain characteristics that explain their nonparticipation. In this section the two groups are compared by demographic characteristics, income sources or amounts, and asset holdings.⁶

Demographic characteristics. As did previous studies, this analysis found that those receiving SSI include relatively large proportions of women, unmarried persons, blacks and members of other minority races, and persons with limited education. These attributes also describe the group eligible for, but not receiving SSI, as

Table 2.—SSI program participation rates by site characteristics for a sample of low-income aged in 34 district office locations

| State policy | Participation rate |
|---|--------------------|
| State supplement | 73 |
| No State supplement | 67 |
| Former lien law | 69 |
| No former lien law | 73 |
| Combined effect: ¹ | |
| State supplement and no lien law | 79 |
| State supplement and lien law | 69 |
| No State supplement and no lien law | 70 |
| No State supplement and lien law | 60 |

¹ The difference in participation rates was found to be significant at the 5-percent level of confidence.

⁶ For this portion of the analysis the elderly persons' answers to the survey questions were reweighted to reflect the relative size of the recipient and nonrecipient groups found in the study. The reweighted sample consists of 729 recipients and 254 nonrecipients.

shown in table 3. The study indicates some differences between the two groups, however. The nonrecipients were somewhat younger, with an average age of 73.9 years, compared with 75.3 years for recipients. More nonrecipients were women—79 percent, compared with 73 percent of recipients—and fewer lived alone—34 percent, compared with 42 percent of the recipients. More of the nonrecipients were married—26 percent, compared with 21 percent of recipients. The nonrecipients have more education—an average of 7.3 years, compared with 6.8 years for recipients. Participation rates did not vary significantly between urban and rural areas or between large and small cities.

Income. When SSI payments are taken into account, the SSI recipients had higher average total incomes than

Table 3.—Demographic characteristics of a sample of SSI recipients and eligible nonrecipients in 34 district office locations

| Characteristic | Recipients | Eligible nonrecipients |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------------------|
| Total number | 729 | 254 |
| Percent | | |
| Age: ¹ | | |
| Under 70 | 24 | 34 |
| 70-74 | 28 | 24 |
| 75 and over | 48 | 42 |
| Years | | |
| Average age | 75.3 | 73.9 |
| Percent | | |
| Sex: | | |
| Men | 28 | 21 |
| Women | 73 | 79 |
| Race and Hispanic origin: | | |
| White | 60 | 66 |
| Black | 27 | 23 |
| Hispanic | 12 | 9 |
| Other | 1 | 3 |
| Language: | | |
| English | 85 | 87 |
| Spanish | 9 | 6 |
| Other | 7 | 7 |
| Marital status: | | |
| Married | 21 | 26 |
| Separated | 6 | 6 |
| Divorced | 11 | 7 |
| Widowed | 53 | 53 |
| Never married | 10 | 9 |
| Living arrangements: | | |
| Living alone | 42 | 34 |
| With spouse only | 15 | 18 |
| With others | 43 | 48 |
| Education: ¹ | | |
| None | 9 | 8 |
| Less than 8 years | 60 | 59 |
| 9-11 years | 14 | 16 |
| High school graduate | 7 | 12 |
| Some college | 6 | 3 |
| Years | | |
| Average educational attainment | 6.8 | 7.3 |

¹ Differences significant at the 5-percent level of confidence.

did those eligible for but not receiving SSI, as shown in table 4. This difference is to be expected, since SSI is designed to supplement income for those with low incomes. When SSI payments are not counted, then the eligible nonrecipients, particularly the couples, had higher average incomes from other sources than did the SSI recipients. This finding suggests that the eligible nonrecipients, on average, may be eligible for smaller Federal SSI payments than is the case for SSI recipients and is consistent with the theory that some of those eligible only for relatively small benefits may think it is not worth applying for benefits.

Social Security is the most common type of income received by both the SSI recipients and the eligible nonrecipients, as shown in table 5. However, more of the nonrecipients received Social Security—95 percent, compared with 74 percent of SSI recipients. Although they were more likely to receive Social Security, the eligible nonrecipients had smaller average amounts of Social Security income than did SSI recipients.

Earnings were another potential source of income for the SSI recipients and eligible nonrecipients. Under the SSI program, a certain amount of earned income is disregarded in determining eligibility for payments—the first \$65 in monthly earnings and half of earnings above that amount. Relatively few of those eligible for SSI had income from earnings, but it was an important source for those who did. The eligible nonrecipient couples were somewhat more likely to have earnings—25 percent, compared with 4 percent of recipient couples.

Asset holdings. Both the recipients and eligible nonrecipients were less likely to be homeowners than were persons in the aged population generally. The eligible nonrecipients, however, were more likely than recipients to own their homes. About two-fifths of eligible nonrecipients, compared with one-fifth of recipients, owned or were buying their homes.

Both recipients and nonrecipients had limited amounts of liquid assets, as would be expected given that SSI eligibility is based on asset holdings. The eligi-

Table 4.—Average monthly income of a sample of SSI recipients and eligible nonrecipients in 34 district office locations

| Category | Participants | Nonparticipants |
|-------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Average total income | | |
| Total | \$274 | \$196 |
| Married couples | 404 | 310 |
| Individuals | 242 | 157 |
| Average income other than SSI | | |
| Total | \$142 | \$193 |
| Married couples | 209 | 307 |
| Individuals | 126 | 153 |

Table 5.—Percent receiving an average monthly amount of income from selected sources for a sample of SSI recipients and eligible nonrecipients in 34 district office locations

| Income sources | Recipient | | | Eligible nonrecipients | | |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| | Sample size | Percent receiving | Mean amount | Sample size | Percent receiving | Mean amount |
| Total number..... | 720 | ... | ... | 247 | ... | ... |
| Earnings..... | ..... | 2 | \$316 | ..... | 12 | \$292 |
| Social Security..... | ..... | 73 | 172 | ..... | 97 | 162 |
| SSI ²..... | ..... | 96 | 138 | ..... | 6 | 69 |
| Other income..... | ..... | 10 | 102 | ..... | 8 | 64 |
| Couples, total | | | | | | |
| number..... | 144 | ... | ... | 64 | ... | ... |
| Earnings..... | ..... | 4 | 641 | ..... | 25 | 445 |
| Social Security..... | ..... | 72 | 229 | ..... | 98 | 199 |
| SSI ²..... | ..... | 92 | 212 | ..... | 5 | 64 |
| Other income..... | ..... | 11 | 147 | ..... | 8 | 43 |
| Individuals, total | | | | | | |
| number..... | 576 | ... | ... | 183 | ... | ... |
| Earnings..... | ..... | 2 | 122 | ..... | 8 | 118 |
| Social Security..... | ..... | 74 | 158 | ..... | 96 | 149 |
| SSI ²..... | ..... | 97 | 121 | ..... | 6 | 70 |
| Other income..... | ..... | 10 | 90 | ..... | 8 | 71 |

¹ Mean amount for those receiving.

² The data on income sources and amounts are based on the study survey, rather than on program records. Because some respondents misreport the sources of their income, a few of the SSI recipients reported no SSI income while a few of the nonrecipients reported they received it.

ble nonrecipients were slightly more likely to report having any liquid asset holdings—72 percent, compared with 68 percent for recipients. The mean value of liquid assets for those who had them was \$451 for eligible nonrecipients, compared with \$518 for recipients. This difference was not statistically significant.

Although the demographic profile of eligible nonrecipients differs slightly from that of recipients, no strong explanation for their nonparticipation emerges. The nonparticipants do have slightly higher incomes from sources other than SSI and are somewhat more likely to own their homes.

Knowledge, Experience, and Attitudes

Some of the theories to explain nonparticipation in the SSI program suggest that nonparticipants may be unaware of the program or may have negative experience with or attitudes toward government programs. The survey explored various dimensions of these theories.

Social contact and mobility. Some researchers have hypothesized that the aged who don't participate in SSI are unaware of the program because they are more isolated, less mobile, and have fewer social contacts than do SSI recipients. The study, however, found no difference in mobility between the SSI recipients and eligible nonrecipients, and it found only a slight difference in social contact. Nonparticipants are about as likely to watch television more than 2 hours a day (56 percent,

compared with 59 percent) and are more likely than participants to read newspapers (55 percent, compared with 37 percent) and listen to a radio each day (63 percent, compared with 54 percent). If anything, these responses would suggest greater, not less, social contact on the part of nonparticipants.

Experience with Social Security offices. Because the Social Security Administration is responsible for administering the SSI program, all of the SSI recipients had had contact with Social Security offices. Virtually all of the eligible nonrecipients had also had experience with Social Security. The large majority of both groups (88 percent) felt they were treated with courtesy and respect by the Social Security office. Few (about 10 percent) mentioned any serious problems in applying for Social Security benefits. The kinds of problems that were mentioned most frequently include "too long a wait" or problems in verifying necessary information. When asked to rate their overall experience of Social Security offices as satisfactory or unsatisfactory, the large majority of both groups rated it as satisfactory (80-84 percent) or at least "so-so" (10-15 percent). Only about 5 percent rated it as unsatisfactory. The study therefore suggests that elderly persons' nonparticipation in SSI is not associated with negative experience with the Social Security office.

Experience with welfare departments. Some persons have hypothesized that the elderly who don't participate in the SSI program may be reluctant to apply for means-tested payments even though such payments are administered by SSA. This theory was tested by asking nonparticipants about their experience with local welfare offices.

The study found that the eligible nonrecipients were far less likely than SSI recipients to have had any experience with local welfare departments. Only 22 percent of the eligible nonrecipients, compared with 51 percent of the SSI recipients, reported they had ever contacted a welfare department to request such assistance as cash payments, food stamps, or medical assistance. Thus, if experience with welfare departments is an indication of the willingness to claim means-tested payments (including those administered by the SSA), it appears that the nonparticipants are less inclined to have sought such aid. Of those who had sought assistance, the eligible nonrecipients were less likely to have received the aid they sought.

SSI knowledge and experience. Some persons have hypothesized that the elderly do not participate in SSI because they do not know about the program. The study found, however, that 55 percent of the eligible nonrecipients report that they had heard of the SSI program, although 45 percent said they had not. The experience of those who had heard of SSI indicates that awareness of the program is not always sufficient to prompt par-

ticipation.⁷ Sixty percent of the nonparticipants who said they had heard of SSI also said they had never tried to find out if they could get it. They usually gave such reasons as they did not think they were eligible, did not need it, or had not considered it. A few said they did not like the application process.

An analysis of program records revealed that just under 10 percent of all eligible nonparticipants had previously received SSI payments but subsequently lost their eligibility and then were again found eligible at the time of the study. This finding suggests that the composition of the eligible population may not be as static as some persons have previously assumed. Some of the low-income elderly seem to move in and out of eligibility status.

District Office Operations

Some persons have speculated that variations in attitudes and practices of district office workers who take applications for income security payments might result in differences in program participation rates. When SSA was given responsibility for implementing the Federal SSI program in 1974, one of the aims was to provide uniform administration of the program throughout the Nation. Thus, any variations in program participation rates that might be caused by differences among district offices would be of particular interest to SSI program administrators.

The study was designed to examine the relationship between district offices' practices and SSI participation rates. All claims representatives in the offices visited were asked to complete a written questionnaire. For the analysis, two techniques were employed. First, for some comparisons, the district offices were divided into

groups of those with low, average, and high participation rates. Second, the proportion of claims representatives with a specific characteristic was compared with the estimated participation rates.

Several hypotheses regarding the impact of district office operations on participation rates were tested. First, some have hypothesized that possible negative attitudes of claims representatives toward SSI applicants or toward the job of administering the SSI program could discourage participation. All claims representatives in each site were asked a series of questions about their perceptions of SSI recipients and their attitudes toward the job of administering the SSI program. None of the hypothesized relationships between claims representatives' attitudes and area participation rates were found.

Next, some have speculated that relatively low SSI participation rates might be explained by an hypothesized district office practice of discouraging formal applications when it appeared likely that the claim would be denied. Claims representatives were asked how they would handle a series of hypothetical cases with borderline potential eligibility. No significant relationship was found between the claims representatives' reports of how they would treat the hypothetical cases and area participation rates.

Finally, some have hypothesized that differences in SSI participation rates could be explained by differences among district offices in the degree to which they help applicants establish their entitlement to payments. A number of hypothetical cases were developed for which claims representatives could "go by the book," give an applicant the benefit of the doubt, or handle the case more strictly than is absolutely necessary. In all instances, no relationship was found between the claims representatives' reports of how they would handle these cases and the area participation rates. The informal conversations with claims representatives reinforced the finding that, in general, claims representatives provide the kind of impartiality required by the Social Security Administration.

⁷ After the study was completed, about 300 of the nonparticipants were sent a letter indicating that they might be eligible for SSI payments and should contact their local Social Security office. Only about 10 subsequently applied for and received payments. Thus, even personal letters from SSA did not substantially increase participation.