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The study found a 6.3 percent national SNAP benefit payment error rate, which reflects the percentage of SNAP dollars that are issued either to ineligible households or to eligible households in excessive or insufficient amounts. | Gene J. Puskar/AP Photo

USDA releases SNAP error rate data after 2-year halt

By **ALEXANDER NIEVES** | 06/28/2018 01:33 PM EDT

USDA on Thursday released a report on error rates in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for the 2017 fiscal year after not releasing the information for the prior two fiscal years amid an examination into the reliability of the data and DOJ investigations into how several states have administered the program.

The study found a 6.3 percent national SNAP benefit payment error rate, which reflects the percentage of SNAP dollars that are issued either to ineligible households or to eligible households in excessive or insufficient amounts. Roughly 80 percent of the total error rate was attributable to overpayments.

The 6.3 percent figure is an apparent increase from the 3.66 percent national error rate in 2014. USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, which administers SNAP on the federal level, said the increase was largely attributable to improved data accuracy that has resulted from procedural measures the agency has implemented in recent years.

In 2015, the USDA Office of Inspector General issued a report that found FNS' quality control was weak and its two-tier process for determining SNAP's national error rate was vulnerable to state abuse. The OIG report also found that states were taking steps to reduce error rates, including using private consultants or internal committees to eliminate errors, rather than reporting them to the USDA.

FNS instituted a review of the program following the OIG report, a process that led to corrective action plans being developed with more than three dozen states.

“The performance rates released today reflect an improved reporting process designed to provide an accurate measure of errors that can be identified and corrected to ensure taxpayer dollars are invested wisely and decisions are made based on solid facts,” said Brandon Lipps, USDA’s acting deputy undersecretary for food, nutrition and consumer services.

A total of 42 states have worked with USDA to address reporting processes since the Department of Justice and the Office of Inspector General opened investigations into SNAP error rate data. These investigations found that states were purposefully hiding errors from the USDA in order to receive annual bonuses given for reductions in SNAP payment mistakes.

The FNS report for fiscal 2017 made clear that improper SNAP payments do not necessarily indicate fraud, but were instead most often attributable to human error.

Approximately 60 percent of the errors identified for fiscal 2017 were linked to state agencies through administrative or processing errors, along with cases where agencies failed to verify or act upon data matches. The other 40 percent came from SNAP recipients failing to provide accurate information to officials.

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