

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOOD SECURITY IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW STUDY - SUMMARY

Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis

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Background

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides nutrition assistance to low-income households to reduce hunger and improve health and well-being. While previous research has assessed whether the program is achieving these objectives, less is known about the challenges low-income families face and their coping strategies to remain food secure.

Methods

The in-depth interviews discussed in this report consist of detailed discussions with 90 SNAP households with children in 6 States (California, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Texas) about their financial situations, their use of SNAP, and their overall food security. Interview questions focused on household expenditures and income, SNAP and food shopping habits, eating habits, nutrition, triggers of food hardship, and food-related coping strategies.

Findings

General Financial Circumstances: The fundamental reality of most SNAP recipients' lives is that expenses often outstrip income. SNAP households experience both recurring and episodic financial strain that is eased but not alleviated in full by participation in SNAP. SNAP allows families to set aside more easily a portion of their resources for food and to prioritize a healthier, more consistent diet without compromising as much on obligations such as rent, utilities, transportation, and other basic needs. Families often build their monthly budgets around SNAP, allocating their fungible cash resources toward their bills and other, often urgent, financial needs triggered by a sudden loss of income or increase in expenditure.

SNAP eases the financial tradeoffs families must make as they strive to bring their budgets into balance and may stave off material hardships. Financial struggle often occurs despite access to the social safety net, as well as the significant efforts families make at belt tightening.

Food Hardships and Coping Strategies:

Families typically manage their food budgets with great care, but small changes in income or expenditures can result in food hardship. The most common triggers were temporal variation in resources or expenses, unusually high recurring expenses, unexpected and sudden financial shocks, and loss or reduction in benefits from government programs.

Respondents employed coping strategies that are both reactive—to deal with food hardship—and proactive—to avoid it. Proactive strategies included restricting food intake; altering the kinds of foods consumed; turning to networks; visiting food pantries; and scouring ads for sales, traveling from store to store to ensure the best bargains, and planning meals almost entirely around the sales.

SNAP recipients are usually strategic in trying to stretch their SNAP benefits out over the course of the month. Yet most also report that they compromised nutrition and variety in their diets to ensure that they could provide enough food for the least expense. Though most families are conscientious in trying to provide a balanced meal every day for dinner, nearly all emphasize that they would shop differently—buying fresh vegetables instead of frozen, or leaner cuts of meat or fish—if their food budgets permitted.

To ensure that their food budget stretches, many households clip coupons and compare prices across stores, but some are particularly adept at shopping avidly for bargains, shopping often and at several different stores to capitalize on sales,

and carefully planning their menus around items that are on sale rather than on what the family would prefer to eat.

Many of the especially savvy shoppers are able to build reserves of cheap non-perishable foods for leaner financial times. These reserves are drawn upon at the end of the month, when SNAP benefits are often gone, at times of the year when expenses typically rise or revenues fall, and in the face of a financial shock. Despite numerous cost-cutting strategies, most families find that they must maintain a repetitive diet of lesser quality to keep their family fed throughout the month.

Eating and Food Dynamics Within the Household: Respondents mostly eat simple meals for breakfast and lunch, favoring foods that are quick to prepare, especially pre-packaged “instant” items. Yet most respondents also expressed considerable awareness of, and concern over, the need to provide nutritious, balanced meals and focus on dinner to meet that need.

While parents strive to deploy their SNAP benefits to maintain consistent and nutritious meals for their children, nearly half report restricting their own food intake to ensure their children have enough to eat throughout the month. Skipping meals is frequent in this sample of SNAP participants, so much so that such sacrifices have become routine and are seldom defined as food hardship; many say that they intentionally skip meals to ensure they will have enough food to last through the month.

Role of SNAP in Helping Households Meet Family Food Needs: For most households, the SNAP benefit is not meant to cover all of a family’s food needs in a given month. Nevertheless, families often indicate that SNAP enables them to buy more and healthier food than they otherwise might by ensuring that a

portion of their resources—the SNAP benefit—is devoted solely to food. It also helps parents ensure that their children seldom suffer food hardship, even if they themselves must go without. Many households organize their budgets around the expectation that SNAP will suffice for the whole month, an expectation that is seldom realized. Most families usually had to scramble to some degree to meet their food needs at the end of the month.

Summary

The study findings suggest several directions for future research:

- Obtaining more information on fluctuations in household expenses and income to understand how SNAP households’ reallocate scarce resources to meet obligations such as rent, utilities, transportation and other basic needs.
- Exploring family networks as a food coping strategy.
- Understanding household food purchase decisions and how this relates to food security.
- Examining food and financial resource management and budgeting decisions.
- Determining how SNAP could use lessons from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) to encourage healthier eating. Many respondents seemed to feel that WIC could serve as a “model” program and could potentially offer ideas for improving SNAP.

For More Information

Edin, Kathryn, Melody Boyd, James Mabli, Jim Ohls, Julie Worthington, Sara Green, Nicholas Redel, and Swetha Sridharan. *SNAP Food Security In-Depth Interview Study*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, March 2013. Available online at www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.

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