

Building an Evidence Base for State and Federal Policy on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), known as CalFresh in California, plays a valuable role in lifting low-income households out of poverty and mitigating food insecurity. Providing billions of dollars in nutrition assistance benefits to nearly 48 million children, adults, and seniors, SNAP has great potential to support health and healthful eating. Policymakers are currently considering proposals to restrict the purchase of certain foods and beverages with SNAP benefits. Any such changes require rigorous testing to assess the effects on SNAP participants and the program at large.

Objectives

The research team set out to convene a Scientific Advisory Board that would draw on expertise in economics, public health, nutrition, law, public policy, poverty, and behavioral sciences to inform the design of a CalFresh restriction-incentive demonstration project. While pursuit of the demonstration project was ultimately deemed unfeasible, the team successfully congregated a Scientific Advisory Board to produce two policy briefs that communicate SNAP's existing strengths and challenges, as well as opportunities to encourage participants to make healthier choices.

Scientific Advisory Board

The research team held two meetings for a Scientific Advisory Board, comprised of Berkeley faculty, California Food Policy Advocates members, Berkeley Food Institute leadership, students, and postdoctoral fellows. The group drafted a policy brief and companion study design and evaluation document to assist the California Food Policy Advocates in creating a SNAP demonstration project to test the effects of purchase incentives paired with



Source: USDA

restrictions.

However, in May of 2015, it became clear that the level of detail focusing on incentives and restrictions was not politically feasible. Due to a lack of interest at the state level, the California Food Policy Advocates withdrew their involvement in the demonstration project in July of 2015. Several other barriers have prevented the further pursuance of the demonstration project.

The research team pivoted to look at SNAP incentives to address food poverty, through a model of community engagement that aims to assess perceptions of food insecurity, identify resources related to food, and identify and prioritize solutions to address food insecurity. These goals intertwine the exploration of barriers to participating in SNAP and the identification of potential strategies to increase SNAP enrollment. This research has culminated in the production of two policy briefs that focus on improving diet quality using SNAP. Highlights from these briefs are found on the subsequent page.

Policy Recommendations

Two companion policy briefs titled “The Future of SNAP” and “SNAP Can Support Health” summarize challenges and opportunities to increase participation and improve nutrition for SNAP recipients.

Key Challenges

1. Participation is incomplete

The number of eligible individuals who receive SNAP in California is one of the lowest in the country at 57 %.

2. Nutrition remains inadequate

SNAP participants tend to eat less fruits and vegetables and are more likely to become obese than non-SNAP participants.

3. Coping mechanisms lead to adverse health effects

Monthly fluctuations in food insecurity can lead to coping strategies such as hoarding, fasting, and bingeing, all of which can be severely harmful.

4. Political opposition to SNAP is increasing

As SNAP participation has risen, political hostility has grown: the 2014 Farm Bill authorized \$8.6 billion in cuts to SNAP over the next ten years.

In light of these challenges, efforts to improve SNAP should focus on the program’s strengths. SNAP can be better tailored to help low-income Americans achieve a nutritious diet in the following ways:

Increasing Participation

1. Connect enrollment with other state and federal programs

Pursue dual enrollment strategies for programs such as CalFresh and Medi-Cal (California’s Medicaid program), which could streamline the application process for 12 million people.

2. Make the application process more accessible and user-friendly

Set up regular enrollment clinics in local communities, and provide pre-screening and assistance to applicants through call centers.

3. Reduce benefits formula in the eligibility criteria

Reduce the expected family contribution from 30% to 13–17%—an amount that reflects more typical food spending.

Improving Nutrition

1. Increase funding for nutrition education (SNAP-Ed)

The current budget of the SNAP-Ed program is half a percent of the overall SNAP budget and reaches only a small fraction of the eligible population.

2. Improve food offerings at allowed retail outlets

Improve in-store marketing for healthy foods by providing guidance for healthy-product placement.

3. Prioritize incentives/restrictions

Incentivizing consumption of fruits and vegetables and restricting sugar-sweetened beverages may reduce the risk of diabetes and obesity. More research is needed.

Conclusions and Implications

The research makes policy recommendations to ensure nutritional health and economic welfare nationwide with SNAP. Together, leading researchers from UC Berkeley and other universities as well as representatives from respected non-profit organizations and government agencies have provided a launching point for future research in creating a more equitable food system.

Research Team

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