

# Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Emergency Food Pantry Use

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To determine the association between *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* (SNAP) participation and pantry use.

**Design:** A pretest–posttest design that compared pantry use at program enrollment and after 6 months of participation while controlling for household, economic, and geographic characteristics.

**Setting:** *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* Food Security Survey: a national telephone survey of SNAP new-entrant households conducted in 2011–2012.

**Participants:** A total of 3,191 households that completed baseline interviews and were still participating in SNAP approximately 6 months later.

**Main Outcome Measure:** Received emergency food from pantries in the past 30 days.

**Analysis:** Logistic regression analysis of pantry use with SNAP participation and time-varying household characteristics as independent variables. Statistical significance was assessed using *t* tests. The authors applied a Bonferroni adjustment to account for multiple comparisons performed.

**Results:** Participating in SNAP for 6 months was associated with a decrease in pantry use by 5.2 percentage points ( $P < .001$ ), representing a 24% reduction (from 21.8% to 16.6%).

**Conclusions and Implications:** *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* benefit allotments are sufficient for some households, but 76% of SNAP households that enter the program while using pantries continue to do so about 6 months later, which underscores the need to assess the adequacy of SNAP benefit allotments in ensuring access to sufficient food for a healthy, active life.

**Key Words:** SNAP, food stamps, food pantry, emergency food, benefit adequacy (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2017;49:647–656.)

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## INTRODUCTION

Federal nutrition assistance programs and local emergency food pantries contribute to the safety net that strives to reduce hunger in the US. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers 15 food and nutrition assistance programs, the largest of which is the *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* (SNAP).<sup>1</sup> Formerly known as the *Food Stamp Program*, SNAP provides a monthly benefit to be spent on food to low-income households that meet federal

eligibility guidelines set by Congress. The maximum SNAP allotment is intended to provide participating households an amount that, together with families' own resources, allows them to have access to a healthy diet.<sup>2</sup> The *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program* has long been one of the most important nutrition assistance programs for low-income households, but its significance has grown even larger in recent years as it experienced record-high levels of participation during the most recent economic recession. In fiscal year 2012, the pro-

gram provided benefits to about 47 million Americans each month.<sup>3</sup> Despite decreases in participation since the economic recovery, a large number of Americans continue to participate in SNAP. In fiscal year 2016, the program provided benefits to 22 million households representing about 44 million (or about 1 in 7) Americans each month.<sup>3</sup>

An expansive network of emergency feeding organizations that make up the Emergency Food Assistance System (EFAS) supplement SNAP. These organizations, which include food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, food banks, and food rescue organizations, constitute a network run largely by private organizations with some federal support to help meet the food needs of the low-income population.<sup>4,5</sup> The most recent USDA report characterizing the EFAS indicated that there were 33,000 pantries in 2002.<sup>6</sup>

Food pantries are distribution centers that provide groceries and other

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basic necessities and are important components of the EFAS because they offer community-based assistance to needy, low-income households and individuals. Although a large volume of work examined factors associated with participation in SNAP,<sup>7-9</sup> much less is known about receipt of food from pantries. Several studies found that pantry use and SNAP participation supplement each other in helping low-income individuals meet their household food needs.<sup>10,11</sup> Other studies, however, found SNAP participation to decrease or have no association with pantry use.<sup>12-14</sup>

The Institute of Medicine committee posed a question regarding whether SNAP benefits were adequate to meet the food needs of participants.<sup>15</sup> One indication of the adequacy of SNAP benefits is the extent to which SNAP households must also acquire food from pantries. Given the levels of participation in pantries and federal food assistance programs,<sup>4,7,16</sup> the extent to which SNAP participants also receive food from pantries is important information that can inform research and policy. This longitudinal cohort study used the largest and most recent nationally representative survey of SNAP households to examine the association between SNAP participation and food pantry use among households recently enrolled in SNAP. The authors tested the hypothesis that 6 months of SNAP participation was associated with decreased pantry use. Factors

associated with pantry use were also explored.

## METHODS

### Research Design and Data Collection

Data were drawn from the SNAP Food Security survey, a computer-assisted telephone survey conducted by Mathematica Policy Research for the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), USDA, from October, 2011 to September, 2012 to assess household food security of program participants. (The complete methodology is described in the study report.<sup>17</sup>)

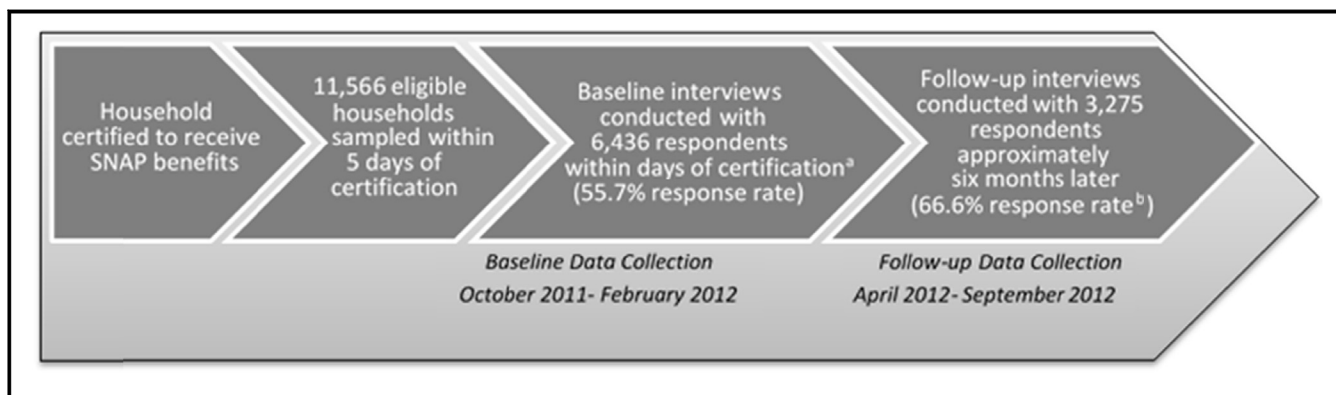
The sample was taken from administrative caseload files provided by 30 state SNAP agencies and consisted of households that had been certified for SNAP within the previous 5 days (new-entrant households) (Figure).<sup>17</sup> States were selected using probability proportional to size sampling using the number of SNAP households in each state as the measure of size. For larger states sampled with certainty, the sample size was set proportional to the size of the state's caseload. For smaller states not chosen with certainty, equal-sized samples of newly certified households were taken.

Sampled households received an advanced letter that explained the purpose of the study, included a \$20 gift card to a local store as a prepaid incentive, and promised an additional incentive upon completion of the sur-

vey. Telephone interviewers then contacted the household and described the study, received the household's consent to participate, and conducted the interview. Baseline and follow-up interviews were completed with 3,275 households. Follow-up interviews with SNAP households were conducted approximately 6 months after baseline interviews, relative to other lengths of time, to allow enough time after program enrollment for households to adjust their food purchasing behavior while avoiding sample loss owing to program attrition. Nearly all households (99.7%) referred to as 6-month households confirmed in the screening section of the survey that they had participated in SNAP for around 6 months, and were not asked to report exactly how long; the remaining 0.3% of households reported having participated for 4 or 8 months.

### Survey Instrument

Although the main objective of the survey was to collect information about SNAP households' food security, it also asked about food coping strategies. The survey included a question on pantry use: In the past 30 days, did you or other adults in your household ever get emergency food from a church, a food pantry, or food bank? If probed, interviewers responded that this included all religious and charitable organizations. For simplicity, this is referred to as receiving



**Figure.** SNAP indicates *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*. <sup>a</sup>About 16% of new-entrant households were interviewed before receiving SNAP benefits, 13% within 5 days of receiving the benefit, 23% within 10 days, 24% within 11–15 days, 13% within 16–20 days, and 11% within at least 21 days; <sup>b</sup>Of the 6,436 baseline interviews, 4,921 were eligible for a follow-up interview. Baseline respondents who were ineligible for a follow-up interview included those in 66 households that participated in an in-depth qualitative interview after the baseline interview and 1,449 baseline respondents who were no longer participating in SNAP at the time of the follow-up interview.

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