



Delivering Summer Electronic Benefit Transfers for Children through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children: Benefit Use and Impacts on Food Security and Foods Consumed



Anne R. Gordon, PhD; Ronette R. Briefel, DrPH, RD; Ann M. Collins, MPA; Gretchen M. Rowe, MPP; Jacob A. Klerman, MA

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ABSTRACT

Background The Summer Electronic Benefit Transfers for Children (SEBTC) demonstration piloted summer food assistance through electronic benefit transfers (EBTs), providing benefits either through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) EBT.

Objective To inform food assistance policy and describe how demonstrations using WIC and SNAP models differed in benefit take-up and impacts on food security and children's food consumption.

Design Sites chose to deliver SEBTC using the SNAP or WIC EBT system. Within each site, in 2012, households were randomly assigned to a benefit group or a no-benefit control group.

Participants Grantees (eight states and two Indian Tribal Organizations) selected school districts serving many low-income children. Schoolchildren were eligible in cases where they had been certified for free or reduced-price meals during the school year. Before the demonstration, households in the demonstration sample had lower incomes and lower food security, on average, than households with eligible children nationally.

Intervention Grantees provided selected households with benefits worth \$60 per child per summer month using SNAP or WIC EBT systems. SNAP-model benefits covered most foods. WIC-model benefits could only be used for a specific package of foods.

Outcome measures Key outcomes were children's food security (assessed using the US Department of Agriculture food security scale) and food consumption (assessed using food frequency questions).

Statistical analyses Differences in mean outcomes between the benefit and control groups measured impact, after adjusting for household characteristics.

Results In WIC sites, benefit-group households redeemed a lower percentage of SEBTC benefits than in SNAP sites. Nonetheless, the benefit groups in both sets of sites had similar large reductions in very low food security among children, relative to no-benefit controls. Children receiving benefits consumed more healthful foods, and these impacts were larger in WIC sites.

Conclusions Results suggest the WIC SEBTC model deserves strong consideration.
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TO ADDRESS CONCERNS ABOUT FOOD INSECURITY among low-income children during the summer, when children do not receive subsidized school meals, Congress required the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to conduct research on possible improvements to summer nutrition programs. As part of this effort, FNS created the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration. During 2012, the demonstration

provided randomly selected low-income households with benefits worth about \$60 per school-aged child per summer month. Benefits were provided through EBT cards that could be used to purchase food. Grantees in eight states and two Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) issued benefits either through their existing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) system or through their Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) system. Before the demonstration, households in the demonstration sample had lower incomes and lower food security, on average, than low-income households with children nationally.¹ The design and overall impact of the SEBTC demonstration are described in detail elsewhere.^{1,2}

Federal budgets through fiscal year 2016 have included funds for expanding the SEBTC pilot program and proposals for an ongoing national program. The goal of this article is to inform policy discussions about whether to implement such a program using the SNAP or WIC system or to let each state choose. To that end, this article explores differences in program take-up and impacts between the households served in SEBTC sites using SNAP and WIC benefit distribution models.

BACKGROUND

Food insecurity (FI) is defined as lack of consistent access to food sufficient for an active, healthy life due to lack of money or other resources.³⁻⁵ FI rates among all households increased dramatically during 2007 at the time of the Great Recession (from about 11% in 2007 to 14% in 2008, an increase of about one-third). The overall rate of FI remained between 14% and 15% through 2014, although unemployment fell to prerecession levels. During 2014, 19% of households with children (regardless of income) were food insecure.³ Not surprisingly, FI was much more common among poor households with children (45%; 2.9 million households).

Household food security is measured using the 18-item USDA Household Food Security Survey module.⁵ The household measure includes 10 adult or household-focused questions, and eight child-focused questions (for households with children). This article focuses on very low food security (VLFS), when food intake of household members is reduced and their normal eating patterns are disrupted because the household lacks money or other resources for food. The article also considers FI, which is when household members (adults and/or children) experience either low food security (LFS) or VLFS. LFS occurs when household members experience reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet because the household lacks money and other resources for food, but show little or no indication of reduced food intake. The study focused on LFS and VLFS among children, which are based primarily on the eight child-focused questions. Food security is measured using a 12-month reference period or a 30-day reference period. The SEBTC study used a 30-day reference period to capture effects of the summer benefit.

PROGRAM CONTEXT

School-based nutrition assistance programs, such as the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, play a major role in federal efforts to reduce FI among children. During the school year, these programs serve meals for free or at a reduced price (FRP) to children from

households with incomes at or below 185% of the poverty level. However, subsidized meals are less available during the summer. In 2014, only 16% of students who received FRP meals during the school year received meals from the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) or other USDA summer nutrition programs.⁶ The SFSP offers meals to children in congregate settings, most often in low-income neighborhoods, where meals are served free to all children (open sites). SFSP sites are sponsored by school districts, local governments, or nonprofit community groups. Participation in these programs is limited by funding availability, challenges attracting sponsor agencies and site locations, lack of transportation to program sites, and lack of programs open for the full summer vacation period.^{6,7}

To address summer gaps in access to food among low-income children, the 2010 Agricultural Appropriations Act required and funded USDA FNS to test approaches to providing food assistance to children during summer. The SEBTC demonstration was by far the largest of several Summer Food for Children demonstrations that were funded. The rigorous random-assignment design allowed the study to test whether a new summer benefit reduced VLFS and FI among children and improved children's food consumption. Although the comparisons between SNAP- and WIC-model sites are less rigorous, because grantees and sites were not selected randomly, comparing impacts across the two models is informative about the choice of how to implement a future SEBTC program and potentially about US nutrition assistance policy more broadly. Thus, this article also compares the impacts in each type of site descriptively, with the caveat that other between-site differences may affect impacts.

DESIGN AND METHODS

Demonstration Design

SEBTC provided food benefits during summer to households with eligible school-aged children via EBT cards, using either EBT systems for SNAP or WIC. Agencies of states and ITOs that received grants (ie, grantees) proposed specific sites (school districts or contiguous groups of school districts) within their states to implement SEBTC, and chose which EBT system to use for distributing benefits. Ten grantees administered the program in 14 sites in 2012 (six with one site and four with two sites). Half of the grantees used the WIC model (in six sites) and half used the SNAP model (in eight sites). The full SEBTC demonstration evaluation covered summers 2011 to 2013, with 2011 serving as a pilot with five grantees, all of which continued the program in 2012. This article focuses on 2012 because the largest sample (and largest number of sites) occurred in that year, and because later study years tested two levels of benefits with no control group. [Table 1](#) provides an overview of the demonstration sample, grantees, and sites in 2012.

Across all sites, the evaluation sample for 2012 was approximately 42,000 households. Households were eligible for SEBTC in cases where they had school-aged children certified for FRP meals. Early in 2012, grantees identified households with eligible school-aged children in the demonstration areas and obtained informed consent. The independent evaluation team then randomly assigned consenting households either to receive a benefit worth about \$60 per month per child (roughly equivalent to the cost of

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