

Participant Satisfaction with a Food Benefit Program with Restrictions and Incentives

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ABSTRACT

Background Policy makers are considering changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Proposed changes include financially incentivizing the purchase of healthier foods and prohibiting the use of funds for purchasing foods high in added sugars. SNAP participant perspectives may be useful in understanding the consequences of these proposed changes.

Objective To determine whether food restrictions and/or incentives are acceptable to food benefit program participants.

Design Data were collected as part of an experimental trial in which lower-income adults were randomly assigned to one of four financial food benefit conditions: (1) Incentive: 30% financial incentive on eligible fruits and vegetables purchased using food benefits; (2) Restriction: not allowed to buy sugar-sweetened beverages, sweet baked goods, or candies with food benefits; (3) Incentive plus Restriction; or (4) Control: no incentive/restriction. Participants completed closed- and open-ended questions about their perceptions on completion of the 12-week program.

Participants/setting Adults eligible or nearly eligible for SNAP were recruited between 2013 and 2015 by means of events or flyers in the Minneapolis/St Paul, MN, metropolitan area. Of the 279 individuals who completed baseline measures, 265 completed follow-up measures and are included in these analyses.

Statistical analysis χ^2 analyses were conducted to assess differences in program satisfaction. Responses to open-ended questions were qualitatively analyzed using principles of content analysis.

Results There were no statistically significant or meaningful differences between experimental groups in satisfaction with the program elements evaluated in the study. Most participants in all conditions found the food program helpful in buying nutritious foods (94.1% to 98.5%) and in buying the kinds of foods they wanted (85.9% to 95.6%). Qualitative data suggested that most were supportive of restrictions, although a few were dissatisfied. Participants were uniformly supportive of incentives.

Conclusions Findings suggest a food benefit program that includes incentives for purchasing fruits and vegetables and/or restrictions on the use of program funds for purchasing foods high in added sugars appears to be acceptable to most participants. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2017; ■:■-■.

THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps, is a federal program that provides low-income families with funds for purchasing food. About one in seven Americans participates in SNAP.¹ Although SNAP is successful at reducing food insecurity,² SNAP participants tend to have poorer diet quality^{3,4} and higher rates of obesity in comparison with income-eligible nonparticipants.^{5,6} Consequently, policy makers are considering changes to SNAP to encourage participants to make more nutritious food purchase decisions. A variety of program changes have been proposed, including incentivizing the purchase of foods such as fruits and vegetables (F/V) and prohibiting the use of program funds for purchasing foods deemed less beneficial for overall health, such as sugar-sweetened beverages.⁷⁻¹⁴

The perspectives of SNAP participants may be useful in understanding the potential consequences of program food purchase incentives and restrictions. Yet, to date, the acceptability of these initiatives to SNAP participants has been largely hypothetical, assessed via survey, with the exception of one implementation study.^{15,16} In the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Healthy Incentives Pilot study, SNAP participants received an incentive of 30 cents for every dollar of SNAP benefits that they spent on targeted F/V at participating retailers. Study participants who received the incentive reported a high level of satisfaction with it.¹⁷ Although this study provides some insight into the acceptability of incentives, more data are needed. Furthermore, no data on the perceptions of restrictions in a real-world setting are available.

RESEARCH

The purpose of this study is to determine whether financial incentives for F/V purchases made with food benefit program funds and/or restrictions on the purchase of foods high in added sugars with food benefits were acceptable to study participants randomly assigned to one of four food benefit programs, which varied with respect to whether an incentive and/or restrictions were included in the program. In addition, analyses were carried out to evaluate whether levels of program satisfaction varied by experimental condition.

METHODS

Data were collected as part of a randomized trial in which lower-income adults were randomly assigned to one of four financial food benefit conditions for a 12-week period: (1) Incentive: 30% financial incentive on eligible F/V purchases using food benefits; (2) Restriction: not allowed to buy sugar-sweetened beverages, sweet baked goods, or candies with food benefits; (3) Incentive plus Restriction; or (4) Control: no incentive or restriction. The financial incentive of 30% was adopted from the USDA Healthy Incentives Pilot.

Participants in all conditions were given a study-specific debit card to which funds for the purchase of food were added every 4 weeks for a 12-week period. The amount of funds added to the card was the average benefit amount provided by SNAP to those with the same size household within Hennepin/Ramsey County in the Minneapolis/St Paul, MN, metropolitan area. The [Figure](#) provides food purchase rules for each condition. As part of the study measures, participants were asked to submit all household food receipts on a weekly basis. All receipts were reviewed against the transaction history provided by the debit card vendor to ensure submission of all study card purchases; receipts were monitored for compliance with the study restrictions, if applicable, and any incentive earned by

participants was calculated based on the itemization detail (either by the store or via annotations made by the participant) of receipts submitted for purchases made with the study debit card.

Study Sample

Participants who were eligible or nearly eligible for SNAP were recruited through in-person recruitment events at local food distribution centers and pantries, the posting of study flyers in community locations in lower-income neighborhoods, and referrals from organizations that serve lower-income households in the Minneapolis/St Paul metropolitan area. Eligibility criteria included (1) not currently participating in SNAP nor planning to enroll during study participation; (2) household income <200% of the federal poverty level; and (3) ability of the household member primarily responsible for grocery shopping to read and speak in English. Additional criteria to determine SNAP eligibility (eg, asset test, conviction history) were not applied. Participants were recruited in five waves, from July 2013 through January 2015.

No power calculation was conducted for the secondary data analysis of the participant satisfaction data presented subsequently in the Results section. The sample size for the main study was determined using a power calculation that would enable a detection of, at minimum, a 4.5% decrease in energy intake over time, one of the study's primary outcomes. The initial target sample was 320 households, later revised to 280 households because of budget cuts. More information on the sample size computations can be found elsewhere.¹⁸

Measures

Participants completed both a baseline and a follow-up study visit, both of which took place in private conference rooms at

Food purchase rules	Experimental Condition			
	Incentive	Restriction	Incentive plus Restriction	Control
Not allowed to purchase alcoholic beverages, restaurant foods, and dietary supplements with debit card (same exclusion criteria as SNAP ^a)	x	x	x	x
Not allowed to purchase sugar-sweetened beverages (water-based beverages with added sugar such as soft drinks, fruit drinks, energy drinks, and sports drinks), candy (all types), and prepared sweet baked goods (eg, pies, cakes, cookies, donuts) with debit card		x	x	
30% incentive on eligible ^b fruits and vegetables; incentive amount calculated weekly from food purchase receipts and added to debit card. Text/e-mail sent notifying participant of amount added as incentive.	x		x	

^aSNAP=Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

^bFruits and vegetables not eligible for 30% incentive include fruit juices; fruits canned, frozen, or dried with sugar/syrup; vegetables canned or frozen with a sauce; pickled vegetables; and white potatoes.

Figure. Description of the four experimental conditions to which participants were randomly assigned in a study of an experimental food benefit program with restrictions and incentives.

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