

Improving Nutrition by Increasing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Benefits



Ann M. Collins, MA, Jacob A. Klerman, MA¹

The diets of Americans fall far short of recommended dietary guidelines, and those who live in low-income households have even poorer diets than higher-income households. Many low-income Americans rely on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The program's dual goals are to improve food security and nutrition. Among the possible strategies to address dietary shortfalls among low-income Americans is to increase the SNAP benefit. This article uses data from the random assignment evaluation of the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children demonstration to add new insights on the impact of SNAP on diet quality for households receiving SNAP who also received SNAP-like benefits through Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children. Households received \$60 each month per eligible school-aged child. The objective of the evaluation was to see if Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children improved children's food security and nutrition. The evaluation surveyed these households to collect information about food expenditures, food security, and children's diets. For households receiving SNAP in sites that used the SNAP Electronic Benefit Transfer delivery system, the analysis showed increases in food expenditures and decreases in levels of food insecurity. The analysis also indicates improvements in dietary quality among school-aged children, but the impacts were modest.

Am J Prev Med 2017;52(2S2):S179–S185. © 2016 American Journal of Preventive Medicine. Published by Elsevier Inc. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

INTRODUCTION

The diets of Americans fall far short of the recommended dietary guidelines, leading to poor health outcomes.^{1,2} Those living in low-income households have even poorer diets than higher-income households.^{3–7} The goal of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is “to alleviate hunger and malnutrition ... by increasing food purchasing power for all eligible households who apply for participation,” as stated in the Food Stamp Act of 1977, as amended (P.L. 108-269). SNAP provides supplementary resources to be spent on food, with the expectation that households spend 30% of non-SNAP income on food.

Theoretically, the additional purchasing power provided by SNAP could have positive, negative, or neutral effects on the diet quality of participants. To the degree that “healthy” foods (e.g., fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains) are more expensive than “unhealthy” foods (e.g., foods containing high levels of carbohydrates, sugars, and fats)⁸—and to the degree that SNAP participants find them more desirable—participants could use the additional resources to increase food purchases and resulting consumption that move their diets closer to recommended dietary guidelines. However, households receiving SNAP

may not desire more-expensive healthy foods and might instead use increases in SNAP to purchase additional quantities of the unhealthy foods⁹ that they already purchase, resulting in poorer diets. Finally, households might substitute for more-expensive unhealthy foods with the less-expensive options that they previously purchased (e.g., prepackaged baked goods with fresh ones), resulting in neither a positive nor a negative effect on diet quality.

Doubtful that raising SNAP benefits alone will address the nutrition gap for low-income households, policy-makers and others have suggested restructuring SNAP in several ways, which include:

1. prohibiting the purchase of unhealthful foods with SNAP benefits;

From the ¹Abt Associates Social and Economic Policy Division, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Ann M. Collins is an independent consultant

Address correspondence to: Jacob A. Klerman, MA, Abt Associates, Social and Economic Policy Division, 55 Wheeler Street, Cambridge, MA 021387. E-mail: jacob_klerman@abtassoc.com.

This article is part of a supplement issue titled The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's Role in Addressing Nutrition-Related Health Issues.

0749-3797/\$36.00

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2016.08.032>

2. making SNAP more like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) by only allowing (some portion of) SNAP to be used for the purchase of healthful foods; and
3. providing incentives to encourage the purchase of healthful foods.¹⁰

These approaches are described in more detail in other articles that are part of this supplement. However, some worry that adding restrictions on foods that can be purchased with SNAP will reduce its use because of lack of availability of these foods or stigma. Others have expressed concern that some of these approaches will further increase the stigma of using SNAP, discouraging its use and worsening food security.^{9,11}

The question of the relationship between SNAP participation and healthy eating has been the focus of research for many years. Many studies have attempted to determine the association between SNAP and diet quality. The results are mixed. In 2004, Fox and colleagues¹² conducted a review of 26 studies, published between 1978 and 2002, on the impact of the Food Stamp Program (FSP, the former name of SNAP) on diets of FSP recipients. The authors determined that there was little evidence that participation in FSP “consistently affects” dietary intakes. The authors also noted that only a few of the studies reviewed looked at the impact of FSP on carbohydrates, fat, saturated fat, sodium, or fiber.

A more recent literature review was conducted by Andreyeva and colleagues,¹³ using 25 relevant studies published between 2003 and 2014. Sixteen of these studies compared the diet and nutrition of SNAP participants with income-eligible nonparticipants. Though there were some exceptions, most studies found no differences between the two groups in energy intake or fruit and vegetable consumption. Two studies that looked at whole grain intake found it to be lower in SNAP participants compared with income-eligible nonparticipants. Of the ten studies that looked at the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, six did not report a difference and four studies found higher rates of consumption among SNAP participants.

The majority of the papers reviewed by Andreyeva et al.¹³ relied on nationally representative data sets, such as the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. All but three studies attempted to adjust systematic variation between SNAP recipients and non-recipients. Three of the reviewed papers did more than regression correction for unobservable characteristics. Gregory and colleagues⁴ and Todd and Ver Ploeg¹⁴ both used instrumental variables based on interstate variation in SNAP policies. One article used maximum likelihood methods.¹⁵ Even these more methodologically sophisticated approaches may fail to address unobservable characteristics that are associated with both the choice

to participate in SNAP and healthy eating (Bitler¹⁶ came to a similar conclusion).

These unavoidable limitations may confound the studies’ findings on the impact of additional SNAP assistance on nutrition. By contrast, the evaluation of the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) provides random assignment evidence on the direction and magnitude of the impact of unrestricted food assistance on nutrition.¹⁷ As such, its design takes account of both observable and unobservable individual characteristics that also could affect impacts. The demonstration and the evaluation methodology are described below. The article then presents the findings for a subsample of the participating households—those who reported receiving SNAP at baseline and in sites that used the SNAP Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) system to deliver the summer benefits—to provide additional evidence about the potential impact of SNAP on food expenditures, food security, and more generally on nutritional outcomes.

SUMMER ELECTRONIC BENEFIT TRANSFER FOR CHILDREN DEMONSTRATION

Concerned about the food security of low-income children in the summer, when they did not have access to the National School Lunch Program or the School Breakfast Program, the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Department of Agriculture created the SEBTC demonstration, designed to address children’s food security issues in the summer, when school was not in session. During the summers of 2011–2013, approximately 100,000 households in 16 sites were randomly assigned to receive SEBTC or be in a control group. Households were eligible to participate in the evaluation if they had school-aged children who were certified for the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, or both in the prior school year. These households had incomes <185% of the federal poverty limit.

Grantees provided SEBTC in the form of an EBT card for the summer months. Grantees could choose to deliver the SEBTC benefits through either WIC or SNAP EBT systems. Households receiving SEBTC through the SNAP EBT system followed the SNAP rules and could purchase all SNAP-allowable foods (i.e., most foods with the exception of alcohol, nutrition supplements, hot food, and food to be eaten in the store). Conversely, households that received SEBTC through the WIC EBT system were limited in their choices of foods to a subset of items from the regular WIC food package, selected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to be appropriate for school-aged children.

METHODS

Although the SEBTC impact study occurred over a 3-year period, this analysis used data from 2012 only from a subset of the 14 sites that participated in 2012. In that year, households were randomly

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/8817089>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/8817089>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)