

Issue BRIEF

Julie Worthington and James Mabli

Emergency Food Pantry Use Among SNAP Households with Children

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

- Six months of receiving SNAP benefits was associated with a reduction in the use of emergency food pantries by 35 percent.
- The size of the reduction in pantry use was influenced by differences in household urbanicity, supermarket access, and availability of social support networks.
- Even after the large reduction in pantry use, 13 percent of SNAP households still use pantries after six months, which underscores the need to learn more about how households with children use available resources to meet their food needs.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest federal food and nutrition assistance program, providing benefits to about 44 million Americans each month in 2016.¹ SNAP provides benefits to many households that are vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity, including households with children; 44 percent of households that received SNAP benefits in 2014 had children.²

A vast network of community-based organizations that includes food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, food banks, and food rescue organizations make up the Emergency Food Assistance System (EFAS). Organizations in the EFAS that provide groceries and necessities to low-income households (referred to as “pantries”) supplement SNAP for some households with children. Households with children made up 40 percent of the clients who obtained food from pantries in 2014.³

Recently, the Institute of Medicine has asked whether SNAP benefits are adequate to meet the food needs of households with children.⁴ Pantry use is one indicator of a low-income household’s need to supplement its food purchases. However, limited research exists on the relationship between SNAP participation and pantry use, especially among households with children.^{5,6,7} This issue brief examines the association between SNAP participation and pantry use for households with children recently enrolled in SNAP.

METHODS

The SNAP Food Security (SNAPFS) study is the largest national survey of food security among SNAP participants to date. It was conducted from 2011 to 2012 and compared the food security of households when they were just entering the program and after about six months of participation. The SNAPFS survey obtained detailed information from respondents on factors associated with benefit adequacy, including food coping strategies such as whether they had received emergency food from a pantry in the past 30 days.

This analysis used a pretest-posttest design to compare pantry use at program enrollment and after six months of participation for households with children. By using information from newly entered households, the study was able to mitigate the selection bias typically found by comparing outcomes of SNAP participants with all nonparticipants (many of whom do not eventually enter SNAP). Multivariate regression analysis was used to estimate the association between SNAP participation and pantry use, accounting for differences across households in education level, employment, language, income, household size and composition, and changes in housing or employment in the past six months.

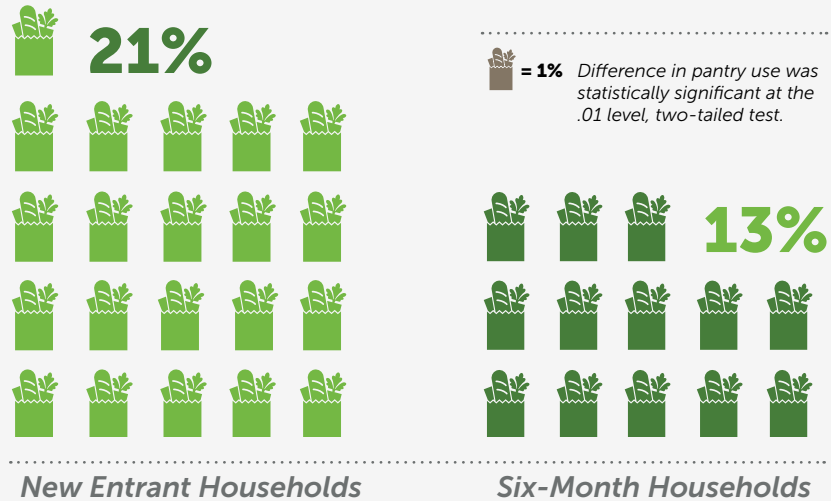
WHAT DOES THIS CHANGE IN PANTRY USAGE REFLECT?

- 15 percent of households reported pantry use at SNAP entry but had stopped using pantries after six months on SNAP.
- 7 percent of households received food from a pantry at program entry and continued to do so after six months on SNAP.
- 6 percent of households did not use pantries at entry but were receiving food from a pantry after six months on SNAP.
- 71 percent of households did not receive food from a pantry at program entry nor after six months on SNAP.

FINDINGS

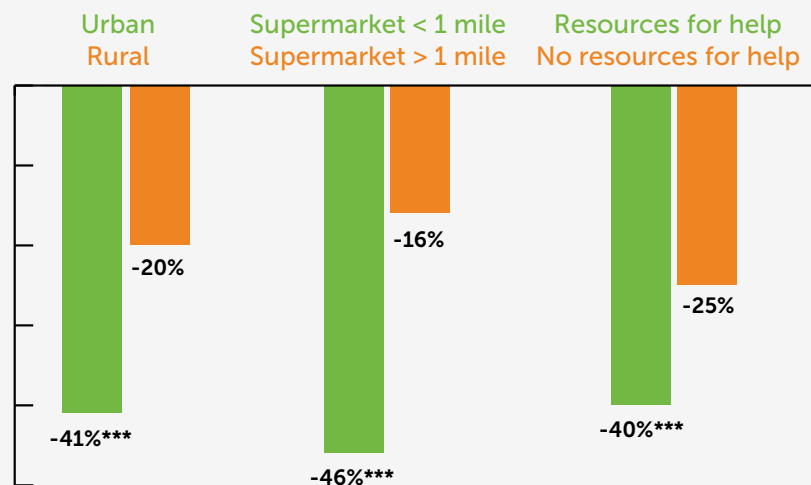
Participating in SNAP for six months was associated with an 8 percentage point reduction in pantry use among households with children, from 21 percent of new-entrant households to 13 percent of those same households six months later (six-month households)—a 35 percent reduction (see below).

Pantry Use in SNAP Households with Children



Some households with children experienced greater reductions in pantry use than others. Urban households saw a 41 percent reduction in food pantry use; there was no statistically significant change for rural households. Households that had access to a supermarket within one mile of home experienced a 45 percent decrease in pantry use; there was no statistically significant change for households whose members had to travel more than a mile to a supermarket. Households that reported having family, friends, or community resources they could rely on if they needed help also had a 40 percent reduction in pantry use after six months on SNAP; households lacking these resources did not experience a statistically significant change.

Percent Change in Pantry Use after Six-months on SNAP in Households with Children



***Difference in pantry use was statistically significant at the .01 level, two-tailed test.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Examining how the reduction in pantry use differed by households' geographic access to food and social support networks shows that environmental barriers, such as living in a rural area or living further from a supermarket, may reduce the combined food purchasing power of households' own income and their SNAP allotment and make continued use of pantries necessary. Support networks may also play an important role in how families with children are able to meet their food needs; households that can rely on family, friends, and community members in their networks may be able to reduce pantry use more readily than households that have fewer places to turn.

However, for 13 percent of households with children, SNAP did not eliminate the need for emergency food assistance. An analysis of factors associated with pantry use after six months on SNAP showed that some characteristics might mediate a household's ability to acquire food. Households that participated in SNAP for six months were less likely to use pantries if the head of household was employed full time or had more education. Nine percent of six-month households with a head that was employed full time used pantries compared to 15 percent of households with a nonemployed head. However, there was no significant difference in pantry use between households with a head employed part time and households with a nonemployed head, suggesting that part-time work may not provide enough resources for SNAP households to meet food needs. Pantry use was also associated with education level. The percentage of six-month households that used pantries was 20 percent for households with a head that did not complete high school, 14 percent for those that completed high school, 11 percent for those that completed some college, and 8 percent for those that completed college.

Other household characteristics were associated with using a pantry after six months on SNAP. Although 23 percent of households with a disabled member of the household used pantries, only 12 percent of households without a disabled member did so after six months on SNAP. Of six-month households that had received SNAP benefits before their current spell, 16 percent used pantries, compared with 11 percent of households that had never received SNAP benefits before. These findings suggest certain households might

have barriers that make it challenging to acquire adequate provisions of food, despite receiving SNAP benefits.

Ensuring that all families with children have adequate resources to meet their food needs is important for daily nutrition and healthy child development. This evidence suggests a need to further investigate the ways that SNAP households meet their food needs in the context of their environment, their networks, and their household composition.

To read more about how SNAP affects pantry usage for all households, see the recent article published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*.

ENDNOTES

¹U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. "Monthly Data Summary." Available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>. Accessed November 10, 2016.

²Farson Gray, Kelsey, and Shivani Kochhar. "Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2014." Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, 2015.

³Weinfield, N.S., G. Mills, C. Borger, M. Gearing, T. Macaluso, J. Montaquila, and S. Zedlewski. "Hunger in America 2014: National Report Prepared for Feeding America." Chicago, IL: Westat and the Urban Institute, 2014.





⁴Institute of Medicine, and National Resource Council. "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Examining the Evidence to Define Benefit Adequacy." Washington, DC: Institute of Medicine, 2013.

⁵Bartfeld, J. "Single Mothers, Emergency Food Assistance, and Food Stamps in the Welfare Reform Age." *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2003, pp. 283–303.

⁶Duffy, P.A., G.G. Hallmark, J.J. Molnar, L. Claxton, C. Bailey, and S. Miklouchich. "Food Security of Low-Income Single Parents in East Alabama: Use of Private and Public Programs in the Age of Welfare Reform." *Southern Rural Sociology*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2002, pp. 48–81.

⁷Wood, D.K., J.A. Shultz, S.N. Butkus, and M.E. Ballejos. "Patterns of food coping strategies among food pantry clients." *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2009, pp. 185–202.

Factors affecting pantry use among six-month SNAP households

-  Employment
-  Education
-  Disability
-  Prior SNAP receipt

This analysis provides evidence from a large national study that SNAP is associated with a reduction in pantry use for households with children by more than one-third.

Follow us on:   

Mathematica® is a registered trademark of Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.



Scan this QR code to visit our website.