

Food Insecurity and Nutritional Quality of Foods Acquired for At-Home Consumption by SNAP-Eligible Households

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Resource constrained households often have insufficient access to nutritious food, leading to high risk of food insecurity and unhealthy diet. SNAP participation decreases food insecurity but its impact on diet quality is mixed. Although previous studies have examined the association between income and food insecurity, most existing evidence on various strategies and food choices households make used small samples and limited analytic methods. This study uses the USDA's National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey (FoodAPS) to explore whether households facing limited resources and environmental challenges choose to buy foods of low nutritional value as a coping mechanism to remain food secure at the margin. Specifically, regression models are estimated to determine whether the nutritional quality of foods acquired for at-home consumption as well as various budget-stretching behaviors mediate the relationship between income and food insecurity. A total of 4,235 household observations from the FoodAPS data were used for analysis. The model used log household income, food security raw score, Healthy Eating Index (HEI) score, and use of coupons or store savings in a mediating variables framework.

This study found little evidence of households' strategic use of low-quality diet to overcome resource strain and maintain food security. Although this study was unable to demonstrate how households may use coupons or store savings to overcome resource constraints, the households that used those budget stretchers acquired better nutritional quality foods and alleviated food insecurity. Future research that accounts for type of primary store for each household as well as local food price and other market characteristics may shed light on why households with lower incomes are not any more likely to use budget stretching strategies in grocery shopping.

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