

Food Security: The Role of SNAP, Transportation, and Store Access

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While research has assessed the role of SNAP in alleviating food insecurity and improving participants' access to healthy food, less is known about the specific resource allocation decisions faced by resource-constrained households. The National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey (FoodAPS) data presents a unique opportunity to examine how households' in varying social, economic, and environmental contexts acquire and consume food, and how these decisions are related to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) program goals. This research will examine the complex relationships among households' resources, food acquisition patterns, and SNAP program goals of reducing food insecurity. Specifically, what are the determinants of food insecurity for low-income households; specifically SNAP participants and non-SNAP participant households? Second, does access to transportation and distance to food stores differ for low-income households; specifically SNAP participants and non-SNAP participant households?

The FoodAPS data include 4,286 households' detailed week-long food purchases and otherwise-acquired food to be consumed at home or away from home, including grocery stores, non-food retail stores, and other sources. The dataset is a nationally representative survey of non-institutionalized US households. The dataset includes information specific to the primary respondent for the household (main food shopper or meal planner) and household-level information. The FoodAPS data allows for analyses with four specific subpopulations; SNAP participants, non-SNAP participants with income less than the federal poverty threshold (FPL), between 100-188% of FPL, and those greater than or equal to 185% of FPL (Economic Research Service, 2015).

Primary respondents were primarily female among the total sample and subsamples (66-73%) and were primarily White (63-86%). Household sizes averaged at 2.43 for the total sample and ranged from 2.18-3.06 for the subsamples, with all non-SNAP subsamples being significantly different in size from SNAP households. More SNAP households (51%) had children present compared to non-SNAP participant households (26-31%), but the opposite was true for the presence of elderly in the household non-SNAP ranged from 25-35% whereas 17% of SNAP households had elderly household members. Univariate results show that most households (88%) in the sample own their own vehicle, but that rate is lower for SNAP participants (68%). Supercenters (43-47%) and super markets (42-46%) comprised the largest portion of primary food stores among the total and subsamples. In the total sample 16% of households were food insecure, while 44% of SNAP participant households were food insecure. Food insecurity rates from non-SNAP participant households in the middle (25%) and upper (6%) income categories were significantly different from SNAP participant households.

To the extent that SNAP and complementary assistance programs can improve access to a healthy diet by augmenting food budgets or permitting households to shift resources to meet other basic needs reducing other economic hardship, the SNAP program can be modified to improve program outcomes. Importantly, with FoodAPS data these modifications can be examined and studied with empirical evidence previously not available to inform policy recommendations.

References

Economic Research Service. (2015). FoodAPS National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey, U.S. Department of Agriculture, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/foodaps-national-household-food-acquisition-and-purchase-survey.aspx> (Accessed 02/03/2015).

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