SNAP Food Security
In-Depth Interview Study

Final Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the largest of the 15 food and nutrition assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a central component of our nation’s nutrition assistance safety net. SNAP provides nutrition assistance benefits and nutrition education services to low-income individuals and families in an effort to reduce hunger and improve the health and well-being of low-income people nationwide. While evaluation research has assessed whether the program is achieving these objectives, less is known about the challenges low-income families face and their coping strategies to remain food secure, defined as having adequate access to food for an active, healthy life.

This report presents findings from the qualitative In-Depth Interview component of the SNAP Food Security (SNAPFS) study. The main SNAPFS study was conducted for the Food and Nutrition Service of the USDA from October 2011 through September 2012, and examined the effects of the program on food security for 6,436 SNAP households just entering the program and 3,275 households on SNAP for approximately six to seven months. The in-depth interview effort discussed in this report was conducted between February 2012 and June 2012 and consisted of detailed qualitative discussions held with a small subset of 90 SNAP households with children in six states about their financial situations, their use of SNAP, and their overall food security. Interviews were held in the homes of the respondents, unless they preferred to meet in a public location like a library or coffee shop. Interview questions focused on expenditures and income, SNAP and food shopping habits, eating habits, nutrition, triggers of food hardship, and food-related coping strategies. The purpose of this formative, qualitative study was to provide important insights into the challenges low-income families face and their coping strategies to purchase all of the food that they need in the face of a shortfall in resources, and to inform the direction of future research on food security, including hypothesis generation and instrument design.

This analysis was descriptive; however, for each theme, we systematically assessed whether there were especially large differences in general financial circumstances, food hardships and coping strategies, eating and food dynamics, and in the role SNAP plays in meeting a family’s nutritional needs by food security level and by race/ethnicity. We observed several of the former but almost no meaningful differences among the latter. As qualitative works which involve similar types of analysis have noted, a small qualitative study cannot make causal claims; therefore, the analysis in this study should be read as helpful descriptions to guide the formation of hypotheses about the mechanisms and processes that might underlie variations in food security, and the role of the SNAP program.

FINDINGS

General Financial Circumstances and the Role of SNAP in Beneficiaries’ Finances

The fundamental reality of most SNAP recipients’ lives is that expenses often outstrip income. SNAP households experience both recurring and episodic financial strain that is eased but not alleviated in full by participation in the SNAP program. SNAP allows families to set aside more easily a portion of their resources—SNAP—for food, and to prioritize a healthier, more consistent diet without compromising as much on obligations such as rent, utilities, transportation, and other basic needs. Families in this study often build their monthly budgets around SNAP, allocating their fungible cash resources toward their bills and other, often urgent, financial needs triggered by a
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sudden loss of income or increase in expenditure. SNAP cases the financial tradeoffs families must make as they strive to bring their budgets into balance, and may stave off material hardship in a variety of domains. Nonetheless, the families in this study do frequently run short of the financial resources necessary to purchase all of the food that they need. We show that though many recipients experience these shortfalls routinely—as often as the end of every month—few earmark additional cash resources for food. These resources are often fully allocated to other purposes. However, households who run out of food benefits toward the end of the month frequently find ways of allocating some additional cash for food even though it may not have been earmarked earlier.

Financial struggle often occurs despite access to the social safety net, as well as the significant efforts families make at belt tightening: keeping the lights off to lower the utility bill, or even forgoing a trip to church to save on fuel. It also occurs despite the fact that families often “juggle”: they pay some of their bills while negotiating with or even defaulting on other creditors. These practices, besides incurring late fees and reconnection charges, put many households in serious debt—debt that constrains future access to credit. Other strategies include doubling up with relatives, gleaning other kinds of network support, running up credit cards, and bringing in small amounts of extra cash via entrepreneurial activities such as braiding hair or selling tin cans or plasma. However, these ways of dealing with overburdened monthly budgets have sharp limitations and are not equally available to all.

Differences Among the Food Secure and Food Insecure Related to Food Hardships and Coping Strategies

Financial Shortfalls and Food Security

A household is “food secure” if it has access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all its members and “food insecure” if it has difficulty getting enough food because of a lack of resources. Households that experienced particularly severe levels of food insecurity are designated as having “very low food security.” Similarly, in this report, the term “financial shortfall” is used to mean a situation where a family is unable to pay one or more of its non-food bills for a month or more.

The families interviewed in our study typically manage their food budgets with great care, but small changes in income or expenditures can result in an episode of food hardship. A job loss, the birth of a child, a medical emergency or expensive prescription, or the high cost of gasoline can precipitate an unstable situation in which families must make sacrifices to maintain their food security. We found the following triggers of financial shortfall, in order of frequency: (1) temporal variation in resources or expenses; (2) unusually high recurring expenses, (3) unexpected and sudden financial shocks in income or expenditure, and (4) loss or reduction in benefits from government programs.

As would be expected, there are strong associations between the financial shortfalls we document with regard to food and the level of food security a household was experiencing at the time of the survey. We found that the less food secure the household is, the more likely it is that a household has experienced a financial shortfall due to an abrupt loss of income or a sudden increase in expenses. Also, households with very low food security are more likely to report a financial shortfall due to high recurring expenses such as prescription drugs or, for those with a considerable commute to work, gasoline for the car. Finally, we note what appears to be a strong relationship between experiencing a financial shortfall due to a disruption in government benefits and household
food security status as measured by the quantitative SNAPFS survey. Most typically, this relates to the loss of or reduction in SNAP benefits due to changes in income or failure to comply with program recertification requirements or administrative error. Notably, no household in the food secure group reported that an unexpected drop in government benefits triggered a spell of financial hardship.

**Food Coping Strategies and Food Security**

We found that respondents employed coping strategies that are both reactive—to deal with food hardship—and proactive—to avoid it. The latter type include (1) restricting food intake; (2) altering the kinds of foods consumed; (3) turning to networks; (4) visiting food pantries; and (5) scouring the ads for sales, traveling from store to store several times a month to ensure the best bargains, and planning meals almost entirely around the sales.

We also noted differences in coping strategies used across food security levels. The least food secure were considerably more likely to say they had to restrict food intake—skip meals—to cope with a shortfall than those who were more food secure. This is not surprising, as the definition of food security takes skipping meals into account. Note, however that there were a number of food secure households who report routinely skipping meals; they do so with such regularity that it is considered routine and may thus be under-reported. There was also a notable relationship between a household’s food security status and whether it changed the type of food it consumed toward the end of the month to cope with a shortfall, such as by shifting from meat to ramen noodles.

Another coping strategy that differed by food security status was related to family networks. We found that a significant minority of the food secure households take advantage of frequent invitations to relatives’ homes for meals and receive contributions of groceries and cash from their family and friends. These households can usually rely on their networks to provide cash, groceries, or meals when SNAP benefits run out toward the end of the month. Those who are less food secure have less access to such resources. In fact, households with very low food security often explicitly state they do not have networks that are able or willing to provide. And even those in this group who do often cannot rely on them, usually because the donor is in a financial situation similar to their own. Those who shared their SNAP with others not in the official SNAP household were also clustered in the very low food security group, suggesting that when respondents extend charity to the even less fortunate, it is costly to their own well-being.

Finally, those households who are the least food secure are also the least likely to engage in a key form of proactive coping. This strategy involves carefully researching the best prices on particular products, traveling to multiple grocery stores—sometimes a considerable distance away—several times a month to capitalize fully on sales, and carefully planning the meals around what is on sale rather than on the households’ food preferences. Managing one’s food budget in this way requires considerable skill, and this skill is often richly evident in the narratives of the food secure.

**Strategies Households Use to Meet Food Needs**

SNAP recipients are usually strategic in trying to stretch their SNAP benefits out over the course of the month. Yet most households also reported that they compromised nutrition and variety in their diets to ensure that they could provide enough food for the least expense. Though most families are conscientious in trying to provide a balanced meal every day for dinner, nearly all emphasize that they would shop differently—buying fresh vegetables instead of frozen, or leaner
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cuts of meat or fish—if their food budgets permitted. To ensure that their food budget stretches, many households clip coupons and compare prices across stores, but some are particularly adept at shopping avidly for bargains, shopping often and at several different stores to capitalize on sales, and carefully planning their menus around items that are on sale rather than on what the family would prefer to eat. However, few among those lowest in food security are able to employ these more elaborate strategies, in part because their overall circumstances are less stable (more have had to double up and more have experienced a recent financial shock, for example).

Many of the especially savvy shoppers are able to build reserves of cheap non-perishable foods for leaner financial times. These reserves are drawn upon at the end of the month, when SNAP benefits are often gone, at times of the year when expenses typically rise or revenues fall, and in the face of a financial shock. Despite numerous cost-cutting strategies, most families find that they must maintain a repetitive diet of lesser quality to keep their family fed throughout the month.

Eating and Food Dynamics within the Household

Respondents mostly eat simple meals for breakfast and lunch, favoring foods that are quick to prepare, especially pre-packaged “instant” items. Yet most respondents also express considerable awareness of, and concern over, the need to provide nutritious, balanced meals and focus on dinner to meet that need. Most say they cannot afford to consume the healthy diet they would wish to, but do adopt their cooking strategies to make the diet they can afford as healthy as possible. For example, a few bake rather than fry meat, and most make sure to serve vegetables—even if frozen or canned—with the evening meal, while also providing ample starches to ensure that no one goes to bed hungry. Many try to instill a habit of healthy eating in their children, and many parents report that they provide their children with all the fresh fruits and vegetables they can afford. Yet children often prefer food with little nutritional value, and parents sometimes “splurge” so they can buy their children an occasional “treat” such as ice cream. When families entertain—usually to celebrate a birthday—many report often saving for months to be able to afford any extra food expenditures such occasions require.

While parents strive to deploy their SNAP benefits to maintain consistent and nutritious meals for their children (and generally succeed), a striking number—nearly half—report restricting their own food intake to ensure their children have enough to eat throughout the month. This is especially likely for the least food secure but is also evident for a sizeable minority of the food secure. Skipping meals is frequent in this sample of SNAP participants, so much so that such sacrifices have become routine and are seldom defined as food hardship; many say that they intentionally skip meals to ensure they will have enough food to last through the month. Those with health problems within the household, such as diabetes or food allergies, are often unable to adjust their diets to avoid sacrifice, or to fully accommodate their illness.

Role of SNAP in Helping Households Meet Family Food Needs

For most households, the SNAP benefit is not meant to cover all a family’s food needs in a given month, because the family is expected to buy some food from its own resources. Nevertheless, families often indicate that SNAP is a “lifesaver”. It enables them to buy more and healthier food than they otherwise might by ensuring that a portion of their resources—the SNAP benefit—is devoted solely to food. It also helps parents ensure that their children seldom suffer food hardship, even if they themselves must go without. SNAP can also prevent hardship in other domains, as cash resources are often fully devoted to bills and other critical financial needs. When
families lose SNAP—a more common occurrence among the less food secure—they often forgo paying bills (credit cards, the phone bill, the utilities, or even the rent) to ensure that their children can eat, but the food they consume during these times is less plentiful and less nutritious. Beneficiaries often complain that their SNAP is exhausted in two or three weeks; this is especially so for the least food secure, in part because they seldom employ the elaborate money-saving grocery shopping techniques that are evident for about a quarter of those in the other, more food secure, groups.

Interestingly, many households organize their budgets around the expectation that SNAP will suffice for the whole month. This expectation is seldom realized among any group, but is an expectation especially common among the very low food secure. Even though experience might indicate that they must also earmark a portion of their cash resources for food, they generally do not. But even if they desired to do so, frequent budget shortfalls and income shocks might make it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to earmark much cash for food needs, especially among the least food secure, for whom income shocks were most common.

Most families at all food security levels had to usually scramble to some degree to meet their food needs at the end of the month. For those with strong, generous networks—more common among the more food secure—the scramble was greatly eased. Because SNAP is often central to households’ food planning, the loss of or a reduction in SNAP benefits, even for a brief period, can have a catastrophic impact on the family budget. Respondents often complain that even small changes in earnings can lead to destabilizing benefit reductions, and that a slight paperwork delay at the periodic renewal can result in the loss of SNAP for a month or more. The loss of other government benefits leads to financial shortfalls as well, but none plays as large a role as SNAP.

Many respondents complained about what they perceive as caseworker error or administrative issues such as the long waits at the Public Assistance office when reapplication requires in-person visits that can take hours away from work and wages. Many say that these strains are intensified by the negative attitudes of SNAP caseworkers, whom beneficiaries commonly perceive to be apathetic toward their plight and rude in face-to-face interactions. These characterizations stand in strong contrast to WIC, which is perceived favorably. Most respondents reported not having received any nutrition education advice or instruction from the SNAP program. By contrast, clients who were in both SNAP and WIC often cited the nutrition education they had received from WIC as being very useful. Overall, many respondents expressed a need for additional nutrition education assistance in SNAP.

**POTENTIAL DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The study’s findings suggest several directions for future research.

- Obtaining detailed information about fluctuations in household expenses and income. This would include seeking more detailed information about SNAP participants’ expenditures and incomes just after entering SNAP and following them through the first few months. It would allow researchers and policymakers to understand how households reallocate scarce income resources once they receive SNAP benefits to meet obligations such as rent, utilities, transportation, and other basic needs.

- Exploring family networks as a food coping strategy. Obtaining more detailed information related to households’ access to family networks and the role of family
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networks in alleviating food insecurity would offer a greater understanding of the availability of help from family, friends, and community members; the extent to which households use these resources; and how this use varies throughout the month.

- Food access and proactive coping strategies to maintain food security. More research is needed on how households make food purchase decisions and how this relates to food security. In particular, more information is needed about the extent to which the proactive coping strategies described in the in-depth interviews help to alleviate food insecurity.

- The relationship between physical and mental health in needing SNAP. The findings in the current study suggest that health issues, both mental and physical, may contribute substantially to patterns of SNAP use—both in determining patterns of entry and exit and also in altering the probability of long term dependency. However, more research is needed about the incidence of such health-related factors in the SNAP population.

- Planning for the end of the month, when SNAP benefits typically run out. The findings in this study suggest that many households fail to budget money with which to buy food after exhausting their SNAP benefits. More research is needed to determine whether this is an aspect of the program that is not communicated adequately to participants, and if so, how the program can change this disconnect between program users and design.

- WIC versus SNAP – What works best in one that could be applied to the other? Many of our respondents seemed to feel that WIC could serve as a “model” program and could potentially offer ideas for improving SNAP. Additional interviewing of households participating in both programs would be useful, in order to focus more directly on comparing them. Such detailed probing might also be able to shed additional light on reasons for various attitudes expressed and the degree to which those attitudes are experience-based.

Much of the research suggested above might reasonably consist of a combination of in-depth interviews to obtain input from SNAP recipients, together with standard survey methods to obtain data for related quantitative analyses. For example, for fluctuations in expenditures and income, SNAP participants might provide input about expenditures and income through in-depth interviews, but standard survey methods could be used to learn about the actual fluctuations in circumstances that occur over time. For the relationship between SNAP use and physical and mental health, research could potentially involve a combination of closed-ended survey methods to obtain detailed information about health histories over time and also in-depth interviewing to obtain information on how respondents believe that health factors have affected them and their participation in SNAP.
VI. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF SNAP IN HELPING HOUSEHOLDS MEET FAMILY FOOD NEEDS?

What are respondents’ experiences when they apply for SNAP benefits, how long do they stay in the program, and what do they like best and least about SNAP? Most applied in the face of an economic shock; usually job loss, loss of a partner, a pregnancy, childbirth, or health issue that limited work. Most respondents reported that SNAP helped them significantly to weather the financial shocks, and several referred to SNAP as a “lifesaver.” Some said that SNAP also allowed them to purchase foods of better quality or more variety than they otherwise could have. Respondents had a multitude of complaints about SNAP, however. Many complained that their benefits did not last the whole month. Though SNAP was never designed to provide all of families’ food needs for all households (see Chapter IV), it is a common perception that the benefits ought to do so. Perhaps due to this expectation, many families fail to set aside cash for food, and instead earmark their cash for other bills. This is not surprising, since these households are often living in the red.

Families also expressed frustration over their treatment by caseworkers, the overwhelming paperwork demands, the inflexibility of the process, the opacity and, in their view, unfairness of eligibility determinations, and the amount of time they had to spend waiting in line, often repeatedly, at their local SNAP office to apply for and maintain their SNAP benefits. Another primary complaint about SNAP was interruption, reduction, or loss of benefits without warning. Respondents seldom received any nutritional information or guidance from SNAP, but SNAP beneficiaries who were also WIC participants often said the WIC program was a valuable source of nutritional information. Respondents shared a number of ideas of how SNAP might be improved.

A. SNAP Participation Patterns

Enrolling in SNAP

Past quantitative research has suggested that changes in household structure or economic circumstances frequently precede entry into assistance programs (Mabli et al. 2011). Consistent with this, most IDI respondents applied for SNAP as a result of an abrupt change in income or household size or composition. For some, this event was childbirth, a loss of income due to a job loss, loss of income due to reduced hours, or the loss of a wage-earning partner due to death, divorce or breakup, or incarceration. Natural disasters can also lead to a spike in SNAP applications. A few of our respondents in Texas said they sought food assistance after Hurricane Ike, which had not only affected food availability and prices, they claimed, but also caused them to lose their jobs or have their work hours reduced.

Length of SNAP Tenure

Our respondents have been receiving SNAP benefits for varied lengths of time, from a few weeks to several years. Few have been continuously on SNAP; most report that changes in income and household size have rendered them ineligible from time to time, and they have had to reapply when times got tougher again. For example, we asked one respondent, “Tell me, when did you first apply for SNAP?”
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“I first applied when Destiny was very young and at the time I didn’t qualify. Then I applied again and I only qualified for $16 because I was making quite a bit of money. Then…when I lost my job, I think I waited about a year and I applied again. We got it and I think I had had it for about three months and then you know she [went to live with her dad] so I reported that she wasn’t with me so again, I didn’t qualify for food stamps. So in July of last year, she came back. I waited, and I applied in February…and I qualified.”129

B. What Respondents Like Most About SNAP

Several respondents referred to SNAP as a “lifesaver,” a testament to the extent to which SNAP benefits affect the lives of the families we interviewed. Almost all respondents said that what they liked most about the program is that it eased their monthly budget struggle—they could devote more of their cash to their bills—and it helped them place more and higher-quality food on their tables because it provided resources that could only be devoted to food and could not be traded off in the face of other financial demands. With SNAP benefits to draw on, families felt less pressured to juggle bills and other payments to make room in the monthly budget for food. We asked one respondent, “What do you like the most about SNAP?” She replied, “They help me and how much we save because that’s money that we’re saving towards either a bill or anything extra. With little kids, diapers and stuff like that.”130 In addition, many reported an alleviation of anxiety and stress; figuring out how to feed the family when cash resources had run dry ceased to be an often epic struggle.

We asked one respondent who had had two recent spells of unemployment, the first without any SNAP, “So let’s think back to the time that you didn’t have SNAP, and your unemployment spell, how was that different than this time around?”

“I’m much better off financially [after my job this time], because [then] I had no [SNAP]. The last time it was extreme struggle, because I had no idea. I mean food was killing me….

(Interviewer: So tell me more about that time. So were you able to make bills in the same way that you’re…)

It was hard. I was behind. Yes, I was seriously behind…. I was having to call and make payment plans on all of my bills. And I was [seeking] deferred payment, “Can I pay half this?” because it was a struggle—it was. Yes….

(Interviewer: Anything else that you had to do in that time to get through?)

No…. Thank God, I [became] employed. Someone hired me.”131

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129 P66: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 64, 2-person household
130 P20: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 23, 4-person household
131 P43: Low Food Security, Black Non-Hispanic, Female, Age 54, 2-person household

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We asked another, “So you applied six months back. Okay. What do you like best about SNAP?”

“Well I just like the freedom of buying what I can for my son and not like having to worry about, ‘Oh, I can’t afford to buy this because even though it’s better quality, I can’t afford it so we have to go with the cheap stuff that's maybe not so good for you or whatever,’ so I just like that I have that liberty to be able to [buy the healthier stuff].”

C. What Respondents Like Least About SNAP

Too Much Red Tape/Overly Rigid Process

Many respondents complained that the process of applying for SNAP benefits was long and complex. Some also claimed that the treatment they received when applying was demeaning. For any given SNAP office, there is often a reasonably strict sequence for the filing of paperwork, in-person appointments, mailings, and phone calls. Respondents claim that even small departures from this sequence—even missing a phone call—can result in a benefit termination or a delay in receiving SNAP benefits. In sum, the system is perceived as overly rigid—many claim that the smallest technicality can result in benefit terminations or delay.

One respondent related the following story:

“Like when I applied for Food Stamps, it took literally four months to get approved because even though I took all the information down there in their office, left it in their box, that lady claimed she didn’t get it and then she sent me a letter that I did not get and so it was like a back and forth thing and then they cancelled my application and I had to start all over again.…

It was bad…. It was crazy. I bought all kinds of stuff. I bought so much food; I ate and ate and ate. That was the only time I did that was the first time I got Food Stamps because I was hungry. You know…, I needed help but no…, they’re not interested in helping you. They’re interested in just doing the absolute minimum that they have to do in order to get you out of their office.”

We said to another respondent, “Tell me about your interaction with the office or what you think about the processes.”

“The process? It takes a while…. They tell you we have within 30 days but a lot of times, the caseworkers…, they’ll take longer than 30 days.

(Interviewer: …How often do you have to update your file?)

132 P30: Very Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 29, 2-person household

133 P7: Very Low Food Security, White Non-Hispanic, Female, Age 41, 4-person household
You’re supposed to do it like every six months reoccurring but there have been a few times like it lapsed and I send the paper back right away and I was like a day or [so late]. If you’re even one day off, they cut you off completely. There’s no like consideration, no nothing.

(Interviewer: And then what happens?)

You struggle.

(Interviewer: When will they consider you again?)

Not until—like they have 30 days to process it…. It takes like a whole month.

(Interviewer: So that’ll be one month that you don’t get any SNAP at all?)

Yeah and then because you applied for that month, sometimes [you’ll] get the amount [you were missing] back, [but that] doesn’t help you for the month that you didn’t have it. Yeah, I [may] have a lot of money this month but it doesn’t help me for last month when I didn’t have it.”

Many feel that performing all the necessary checks to ensure eligibility is warranted the first time around, but having these steps/questions/verifications repeated each time they are recertified or have to reapply for benefits is time-consuming and viewed as unnecessary. According to some, the practices are even insulting. In the words of one respondent,

“Well, what I like most about it, of course, is the help. That’s one less bill or one less expense that I need worry about. And what I like least about it is…they gave it to me for a couple of months, then they said I didn’t qualify again. [They said my husband] had made too much money. So they cut me off and I was off for like two months or something. Two or three months. And then I told them his hours had gone down, so I took in the new pay stubs to show them what he was making. And they said I had to essentially reapply. I said, ‘Well, why is [my case] still open? Why do I get the letters?’ They’re like, ‘Well, it’s essentially just like reapplying.’

So I was like, okay. So I had to make an appointment, go in, go through all this stuff again. Bring in all this paperwork. And then I got it again for—this will be the third month. And [they just sent me a letter] it was time for a recertification again. I was like, ‘I just did it. And you guys said—the paper that I got said it was good for a year!” And they’re like, “Well, you still need to come in.” So, I was like, “Okay”. So I went in and took in the new stubs. And he probably got five hours more [last month] than he got last time [we applied], and now we don’t qualify. It’s frustrating.”

134 P50: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 22, 3-person household

135 P2: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 45, 3-person household
 Interruption in SNAP Benefits Without Warning

In addition to frustrations with the red tape associated with accessing SNAP benefits, another common complaint was that SNAP benefits had been interrupted, reduced, or cancelled without warning. Program regulations call for providing participants with information about key anticipated case actions. However, either these case action notifications were not always sent to (or received by) respondents, or else the respondents may not have understood them. In any event, multiple respondents shared stories of having their benefits reduced without prior notification. When the changes in benefits occurred, this caused severe financial strain; in this small sample, benefit loss was a common trigger of food hardship among those the survey found to be food insecure, as we show in Chapter VI. Although sometimes these changes were made in error and were eventually fixed, most changes were for reasons that respondents did not understand, which we discuss next.

Disagree With or Do Not Understand Rules

Many respondents were frustrated about what they felt were unjustified cuts to their SNAP benefits. Most did not understand why their SNAP amount had been reduced or why they were no longer eligible for SNAP, and claimed changes were unwarranted because their household and financial circumstances had not changed, or had not changed very much. Others were outraged that necessities like cars were considered luxuries and counted against them when their benefits were tallied.\textsuperscript{136} For example,

“They count the fact that I have a car…. I have to have because of doctors and stuff like that…. I have a machine under my bed that monitors my heart. And I have to have a car if an emergency happens. They look at that as a luxury but in my mind it’s a necessity. It’s a lot. It’s a lot. I won’t do it no more. I won’t go back there no more.

(Interviewer: And they didn’t understand when you were like ‘No, this is not a luxury. This is a medical necessity.’)

They didn’t care. It took a lot for me to go there. Oh my God, it took a lot.

(Interviewer: How was that?)

Actually, I went off on them. I went off because I felt like it shouldn’t matter what’s on the paper [about the car]. I’m not just a guy who wants to come in and try to beat the system. I needed the help all the time. They wasn’t trying to hear it so I cussed them out. To me it’s just not fair sometimes…. I’m not going to take from the system if I don’t really need it.”\textsuperscript{137}

We asked another, “Okay. What do you like best about Food Stamps?”

\textsuperscript{136} Technically, the existence of one or more vehicles does not affect the benefit level. However, it can, under some circumstances, affect eligibility.

\textsuperscript{137} P73: Low Food Security, Black Non-Hispanic, Male, Age 38, 3-person household
“That you don’t have to buy [food] out of cash and you can use the Food Stamps. That’s what kind of I like is kind of handy but [what] I hate [is] how they often cut your Food Stamps knowing, [even] if you get the same income, they’ll still cut it and that’s what I don’t like…. That happened a couple of months to me. They had lowered it down to $200 something. I was getting $200 something and they lowered it down a little more and I was kind of mad and I wanted to call them with like why [when] I was still getting the same income.

[Then] I was cut off one month. That was—I want to say March. I was cut off because they claim that I didn’t show up for my interview and stuff and I didn’t know [I was supposed to] show up. They tell me they sent something to my address. And then I went up there and I was cut off for that—they said because [I had not reported a change of] address. I said [I] used to get my mail [forwarded]. Why is it not getting [forwarded] now [all of a sudden]? So I got cut off and I didn’t end up getting…my Food Stamps [until] like real late.”

Long Wait Times at SNAP Office

Many also complained about the length of the wait times at their local SNAP offices. One respondent told us about the frustrating process of setting up and waiting for an appointment at his local office,

“A lady I know applied online. People had told me that they would come in and wait for about six hours [so I wanted to avoid that]. She said that I could go online and they would give me an appointment. Well I got the appointment. Well I had to work so I had to reschedule my appointment.

So they rescheduled it for three days later. People were passing out in the office because it was overcrowded in there. It was also really hot that day. I was standing in line for three hours. Once I was seen I had to wait another two hours to see someone else. I was actually there from 8:00 to 4:45. The supervisor came out and took me into her office. Then they said because you do work, we’ll have to mail the card to you. Usually they give the cards out while you are there. But that is only for the people that do not have jobs.

I didn’t receive my card so I had to go back up to the office and told them that I never received my card and the lady made me show ID and she gave me my LINK card right then. I really didn’t know why they didn’t do this the first time. I did get $280.00 on my card which was really nice.”

One respondent noted that the long wait times at the SNAP office had a direct negative impact on his wages.

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138 P59: Low Food Security, Black Non-Hispanic, Female, Age 22, 3-person household
139 P62: Very Low Food Security, Black Non-Hispanic, Male, Age 36, 2-person household
“Your [lost hours are] deducted [from your pay] each time you leave work to go over there and to ask for help. You lose an hour of work and that’s an hour that the company’s not going to pay anyone. I went to talk to them to ask what’s going on…. It’s a two…hour wait each time. It’s…always full of people looking for help and you have to get in line and wait and wait and wait…. And each time that I would go I would lose two hours of work or at least a two hours and a half, understand, and you don’t get those back so your paycheck is lower.”

SNAP Caseworkers Are Rude

Poor treatment at their local SNAP offices is a common complaint. Respondents were asked, “What do you like least about the SNAP program?” The following response is typical:

“When you go to the offices…the people are rude. Not all of them, but it’s when you go to the offices and the people, they talk to you in a [certain] way. When I first got Food Stamps, the one lady she talked to me like I was just 10. Then the next time I went in there I had to lay the line, “My kid don’t even talk to me like this so we’re not going to talk to each other like this.” Sometimes they’re just too rude. I don’t know if it’s because we’re the ones that need help [or what]. Especially the one over there on [Name of Office], they’re rude and the one down here is real rude.”

This treatment compounded many respondents’ sense of shame about not being able to get by without government assistance. One respondent offered the following account:

“The thing that I like the least about it is that they want to pry into everything about your life and make it so difficult for you…. I don’t care how much people evolve and how open minded they are, it’s never going to be like you’re royalty because you’re on Food Stamps or on welfare. I mean seriously I’ve never seen anybody in my entire life ever run through the grocery store or up and down the streets going “Oh, we’re on welfare. We’re wonderful thank God! Yay!” or going through school going “We’re on welfare and you’re not”—like it’s something so cool. It’s degrading. It’s embarrassing. It’s shameful…. There have even been people that I know that they said they would rather starve to death than go through the embarrassment…of everything because it’s like they want blood. They literally, almost literally want you to bleed for them in order to prove that you are poverty stricken enough that you need this. It’s just completely ridiculous. It’s like okay, I’m not going to come to you and tell you that I want you to give me Food Stamps or money or medical stuff if I don’t really need it. I have these kids. They need to be taken care of and that’s the only reason I go to Food Stamps. Because if it was me by myself I would starve half to death nearly every day and

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140 P74: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Male, Age 57, 5-person household
141 P48: Low Food Security, Black Non-Hispanic, Female, Age 19, 6-person household
night [rather than go to Food Stamps for help]. But I have children, they are my only reason that I have food stamps that I go, that I apply, that I try to keep it.”\textsuperscript{142}

The quote below summarizes the general attitude respondents have toward the SNAP program: “So what has been your experience with the program…?” we asked.

“It is good; I have had some bad times. Most of the time it has done what I needed it to do and it is there for me. It is a pain […] to be honest. Some people are just hard to deal with and a lot of times you go to the office and it is hard. Sometimes I feel like [it might be because] there are a lot of people out there taking advantage of the system. [When I’ve been there] there are people that are clearly on their phones making drug calls and it just sucks. It makes it harder for the people that are actually there and need it. For instance, why do I have to show you my birth certificate? I was born here! What are you talking about? You are not going to give me this because you won’t accept a copy? It is just a lot of paper work and being on time with your deadline and meeting the requirements that they have set for you.”\textsuperscript{143}

D. What Happens When There Is No SNAP in the Household?

Only 11 respondents reported that their SNAP benefits covered all their monthly household food expenses. As noted above, SNAP was not designed to meet this goal. Respondents used a variety of strategies (sometimes in combination) to acquire food once their SNAP benefits had been exhausted for the month. Many purchase some additional food with cash, though cash is hard to come by toward the end of the month, and families seldom reserve any of their cash resources for food in anticipation of the SNAP shortfall. Others rely on support from family members, garner food from churches or food pantries, or cut back on meeting other financial obligations in order to have sufficient cash for food. Others reduce the amount and/or types of food they purchase and consume. We cover these later themes under the “Coping Strategies” heading in Chapter III.

We said to one respondent, “…lots of people are struggling in trying to make ends meet in order to make it through to the end of the month. How has it been for your family?”

“Since I’ve been receiving the food stamps it’s been a little better. I am able to buy the food for 15 days; sometimes we’re able to make it to 22 days with the food stamps that I get; then we make more groceries for the last week.

(Interviewer: What do you do in order to purchase your food when your [Food Stamps] run out?)

I use cash, [basically].

(Interviewer: Out of your pocket?)

\textsuperscript{142} P4: Very Low Food Security, White Non-Hispanic, Female, Age 35, 6-person household

\textsuperscript{143} P3: Food Secure, White Non-Hispanic, Female, Age 28, 3-person household
Yes, out of pocket.”

We asked another, “…tell me about the last time that you lacked the money you needed for food.”

“Well how do I tell you? The problem as I explained to you, last month they gave me all of SNAP completely the month of April and this month they gave me only a portion. For example what is the date? Is it the 15th?

(Interviewer: The 15th.)

The 15th and everything is gone. It’s all gone now from here to the end [of the month]. I am now taking it out of my pocket from the little bit that is left from my pay. And on top of that I need to keep aside a weekly amount for the rent and for the rest of the expenses that I explained to you, the gas, the electricity, the cable, and that’s is what is happening because all the Food Stamps are all gone now. We make one big purchase and you know that with three children eating and everything is getting used…. That’s how it is.”

E. SNAP/WIC and Nutrition Education

Almost all respondents said that SNAP does not provide any nutrition information, but WIC does. Respondents appreciated the nutritional information that WIC provides and said they felt their visits to the welfare office to procure SNAP were focused mostly on paperwork, eligibility, and benefit determination. This is not surprising, as SNAP caseworkers are not required to provide nutritional education. Other sources of nutrition information were scarce, but some named their doctor’s office and their own internet/television research. One frustration respondents shared is that despite the nutrition information WIC and other venues provide, “healthy” food, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, is simply too expensive or too likely to “go bad” before it can be used. Therefore, they cannot always follow through on the advice they receive.

The SNAP Office—No Information, All Business

Almost across the board, respondents said that SNAP did not provide them with nutrition information. In the majority of cases, when asked if SNAP gave them information about nutrition, respondents answered by simply saying “no,” or “nothing at all.” Some noted they wouldn’t know—they have not even been to the SNAP office because they applied online. Respondents sometimes volunteered the view that the SNAP program does not care about them as people or about their nutrition, and is concerned only about making sure they qualify and do not use SNAP for products that are not allowed. We asked one respondent, “What do they tell you at the SNAP office about what foods to eat and so on?”

“No way. They don’t care.

144 P31: Very Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 30, 2-person household
145 P74: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Male, Age 57, 5-person household
(Interviewer: Do they provide any information about nutritious foods or…?)

Absolutely not. I mean, they might have information down there but they don’t present it to - their main focus is to get you processed through the program and verify the information you’re giving them. They’re not interested in how you spend money. I’ve never had that experience where somebody actually sat down and said, “We offer a food preparation program to teach you how to cook [healthy foods].” I pretty much had to teach myself or learn on TV and the internet. No one ever sat down and said, “Oh, you can save money - a lot of money if you do it this way…."

The Food Stamp office could be very influential, I think, if they had other information or required that participants in the program take a class on how to prepare food and how to, or if they offered coupons preloaded [on the SNAP card to] encourage people…make the dollar go further.”

Many respondents said exactly the same thing: that when they went to the SNAP office, it was just “here is your card.” In the words of one respondent: “At WIC they tell you to eat a lot of fresh vegetables, fruits and stuff like that. But at the food stamp office I don’t remember it was pretty much just, ‘Here is your card.’”

WIC—Very Helpful

In contrast to SNAP, almost everyone who was on WIC said WIC does provide nutrition education; indeed, it is a required part of the program. Most respondents appreciated the information they received. Some had met with a dietician/nutritionist there, while others had their children weighed and lead levels tested. Others were required to watch nutrition/cooking videos, and some were able to practice cooking healthy meals. We asked one respondent, “And what about at the WIC office?”

“Really, really helpful and they care. Like every time you go, they will check the baby’s weight. I really appreciate WIC. It’s a really good program.

(Interviewer: They weigh him each time you go?)

Yeah, they have a check [up] time. It was three months, I guess. You don’t have to reapply, so they make sure that everything is right and documents and all that. They care about your child’s health and the lead, everything. They help in every way you imagine, like when I was breastfeeding, they gave me a pump and they gave me the electric pump.”

The theme that WIC is helpful in contrast to SNAP dominated the answers to our questions in this domain:

146 P7: Very Low Food Security, White Non-Hispanic, Female, Age 41, 4-person household
147 P36: Food Secure, White Non-Hispanic, Female, Age 19, 3-person household
148 P11: Food Secure, White Non-Hispanic, Female, Age 32, 5-person household
“Yeah, WIC they’re like a lot more into it. They give me like brochures about the steps, the triangle and all that stuff.

(Interviewer: The food pyramid?)

Yeah, the food pyramid. And they tell me, they asked me questions about my kids, what they drink, what they eat, how much juice or they give me tips about vegetables, making it fun and stuff. I think it’s better at WIC because SNAP never told me that.”\(^{149}\)

**Other Nutrition Information**

A few respondents mentioned other sources of information, such as the doctor’s office, a child protection worker from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, the internet or television, a drug rehabilitation program, and a child’s school. One said, “The outpatient rehab that I’m going to, they helped with that a lot because we’re, well we do parenting class. When I was in inpatient rehab we covered that a lot for our children.”\(^{150}\) Another told us, “The pediatrician yes, I love her. She’s Hindu and she has a lot of beliefs, like old school beliefs. And she’s like, ‘No more bottle, he’s two.’ My Department of Children and Family Services social worker for the child [also] tells me no more bottle.”\(^{151}\) A third told us, “The doctors always tell us about, to stay away from certain stuff, especially…. Because the three of us, we’re all, you know, big people.”\(^{152}\)

One respondent credited the dietician at a drug rehabilitation center where she received treatment for substance abuse.

“(Interviewer: …You said that you have a dietician [at the rehab center] and they tell you to eat little meals frequently. What else do they tell you about?)

Tell me what to stay away from, like I can’t have sodas, the salt so I drink Crystal Lite, which my family has all got to change over to Crystal Lite. They just tell you basically what to stay away from, how much portions to eat, how much vegetables to have and stuff like that.”\(^{153}\)

Several said their main source of information was television or internet. We asked one, “So you mentioned Dr. Oz and Rachel Ray. Where do you get your information about healthy eating?”

“From them. And then I read a lot. I listen to other people’s issues and kind of try to fix my issues. [On Dr. Oz], you got people coming to the hospital will tell you what they do, how they get to this age, how many cigarettes they smoke, how many they

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\(^{149}\) P20: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 23, 4-person household

\(^{150}\) P27: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 31, 5-person household

\(^{151}\) P27: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 31, 5-person household

\(^{152}\) P8: Very Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 32, 3-person household

\(^{153}\) P73: Low Food Security, Black Non-Hispanic, Male, Age 38, 3-person household
drank. So I look at my life and I say, ‘Ah, I can better that if I do this.’ You know? You know, [and] I watch The Biggest Loser.”\textsuperscript{154}

Another told us,

“Well I do a lot of my own like online [research] and stuff. They have a lot of the healthy—the websites about health and feeding your children and stuff like that so I look them up at those kinds of pages and just get ideas on like vegetables and stuff and different ways to introduce them to him.”\textsuperscript{155}

F. Other Food Programs

WIC was the only food program other than SNAP that our respondents participated in with any frequency. Respondents had varying thoughts about WIC. As has been indicated previously, for the most part, people were very positive about it. Several offered powerful testimonials about how WIC is what got them through the month, and some talked about how they had enough food until they lost WIC, and then no longer had enough. A few people had to discontinue WIC because they were unable to make it to appointments. Some stopped participating because they did not like that WIC weighed their children and gave them nutrition advice. For the most part, however, respondents were positive about WIC, and for many respondents it was a major reason they avoided food hardship.

We asked one respondent, “So what do you like best about WIC?” She replied, “What do I like best? It gets you through the month.”\textsuperscript{156} Another answered that question as follows: “That I get like the milk and the eggs and the cheese, like all the little things that I get, that’s saving me from wasting on my food stamps. So that’s one little good benefit I have for it. And I get it until she’s five, so that’s good.”\textsuperscript{157}

Several respondents talked about how WIC had made the difference in allowing them to have enough food each month, and how once their children aged out, things got tougher. One said,

“You know what I wish is that I still could get WIC. Do you know that WIC program?

(Interviewer: Yeah.)

Cheese, cereal and milk. That would save me so much money, but she’s too old for that. But yeah, that’s what I put back [at the grocery store] the most, is cheese because right when I get to the end, I realize oh, $4.00, $3.00, you know?”\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{154} P81: Low Food Security, Other, Female, Age 29, 2-person household

\textsuperscript{155} P30: Very Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 29, 2-person household

\textsuperscript{156} P28: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 27, 3-person household

\textsuperscript{157} P49: Food Secure, Hispanic, Female, Age 24, 6-person household

\textsuperscript{158} P10: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 37, 2-person household
Another shared a similar story, “When I was actually getting WIC for both of my kids, it was enough. It was more than enough, actually. I didn’t have to complain; I always had enough food for them. But now that I’m only getting WIC for one, it’s harder.”

Most respondents first learned of WIC through their doctor, usually when they were pregnant. A few said a SNAP caseworker referred them to WIC, and some said that family members told them about the program.

Many liked the fact that WIC limited the type of food a family could acquire, because it virtually guaranteed healthy eating. One respondent said,

“I think it’s a good program because they only allow you to get milk, juice, cheese, and the healthy cereal that’s how I started eating the Honey Oats and all that. Beans. I think that they give you peanut butter. So I think that it’s really good. And now they give you like a $10 in your WIC card for fruits and vegetables only. So that’s good.”

Additionally, respondents also say the WIC offices themselves, and the treatment they receive there, is also very positive, especially in contrast to the SNAP offices. One respondent compared the WIC and SNAP offices, saying,

“The WIC office was actually very pleasant. Sometimes you go to the Food Stamp office, you know, you have to sit in there and there’s all these people and kids popping up. But, no, [WIC] just kind of send[s] you in and nowadays it’s, like, it’s really nice. You just do things on the internet. You take all the tests with them, and they upload the card and you’re good, you know?”

Another contrasted WIC and SNAP in this way, “WIC has been pretty good because WIC is fast. Like they—whoever handles WIC, they just see you right there. They’re always very fast, like out of there. You don’t have to wait like no time. They’re very on top of everything. The people are courteous….” Another explained that “Paperwork for WIC is also more—it’s simpler than that for Food Stamps.”

Even though the majority of respondents were positive about WIC, some did say that the frequent appointments and check-ins required were difficult to attend and in some cases, were not helpful. Some respondents stopped participating in the program because of this. We asked one mother, “Have you ever been on WIC before?” She explained, “I signed up on it out here but I had trouble, like I just got a car to where I can go back and forth places it before [I had it] I had problems getting to my appointments and stuff. So I missed the appointment for the WIC.”

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159 P58: Very Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 28, 3-person household
160 P34: Very Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 28, 5-person household
161 P77: Very Low Food Security, White Non-Hispanic, Female, Age 25, 2-person household
162 P28: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 27, 3-person household
163 P14: Food Secure, White Non-Hispanic, Female, Age 30, 3-person household
G. Respondents’ Ideas About How SNAP Could Be More Supportive

When respondents talked about food and SNAP, several themes came up repeatedly. First, many respondents talked about food becoming just too expensive, and they wish the government could do more to regulate food prices. Second, many respondents thought they needed more help from SNAP, and said they wish SNAP took expenses, and not just income, into account. Respondents also talked about the need for more information about nutrition and how to budget. Respondents did not talk about these latter needs for themselves, but rather noted they felt others needed such education.

**Food is Too Expensive**

Many respondents talked about how expensive food is, and how they felt the amount of money they receive from SNAP has not kept up with other price increases. In fact, under program rules, benefits levels are set to reflect food price changes. Nevertheless, it is useful to identify respondent perceptions on this issue.

One respondent shared this view: “Well the cost of living has gone up so I think the cost of living in Food Stamps should rise also. It should be budgeted on expense.” 164 Another said,

“...the little bit of money that I get really doesn’t help. I mean, it helps but it really doesn’t help because the food cost, the food is so high. The cost of everything is so high so they’ve got to take that into consideration a little bit more. They can’t raise the price of steak or chicken and expect you to still get the same amount. Our cost of living jumps up a dollar when something else jumps up $3.00. Remember back in the day $120 would have been a lot. Now it actually doesn’t mean nothing. It’s just a little more reconsideration as far as the average person goes.” 165

Another also commented on the rising cost of food, and the failure of SNAP to help families adjust to these increases,

“These grocery companies should have a ceiling put on their products so that they couldn’t be gouging people like they are. There’s no reason for a person to have to pay $2-$3 for one stupid beefsteak tomato when one plant grows 50 of them, especially when they’re doing it in July. That’s what’s going on; too much corporate greed. All of the small mom and pop stores are gone and the big ones don’t [care] about anything when they’ve got more than they can ever use in a lifetime themselves.” 166

Several noted that given their expenses, “just a little bit more” would help. One told us, “The only thing that I could say is that it would be nice if they could give me little bit more to work it out. But they’re not, SNAP is not really adding up the things that we pay, you know. They’re just adding

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164 P31: Very Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 30, 2-person household
165 P73: Low Food Security, Black Non-Hispanic, Male, Age 38, 3-person household
166 P12: Very Low Food Security, Other, Male, Age 57, 3-person household
up what we make. It’s hard.”167 Another said, “Maybe if they keep it a little bit more on the food stamps. A little bit more on the Food Stamps and yeah… $70, $80 more, just a little bit more.”168

Administrative/Program Improvements

Suggested administrative improvements were the flip side of many of the complaints about SNAP. These suggestions include having a shorter interval between filing for SNAP and receiving benefits, advance notice of any changes in benefits, clearer explanation of the rules associated with benefits, and less red tape.

One respondent shared the opinion that,

“…the program should be designed a little better.

(Interviewer: Your thoughts on that?)

Just in general, the way that they work. I mean, they have no concern for anybody. Like if you go past one day, I think I was like - I had it by 1:00 and I sent it at 3:00 and they denied it and I had to wait 30 more days.

(Interviewer: More flexibility?)

More flexibility in the program and just faster, I guess, because the 30 days [is a long time]. [And] sometimes whenever you talk to the caseworker, they’re really rude. They don’t care.”169

Several respondents suggested having some kind of play area in the SNAP office so children could be entertained during the long wait times.

Finally, several talked about the need for classes about budgeting and nutrition. Interestingly, not a single respondent who raised this issue wanted such classes for themselves; instead, they all talked about seeing other SNAP recipients either wasting money due to a lack of budgeting/efficient food buying and/or buying unhealthy food.

“Give them classes on nutrition - nutritional classes - because a lot of time people buy food but it’s not really healthy food. And in the end, you run through it so fast it doesn’t even matter if you have food or not because the calories that you are eating, they’ve done burned off as soon as you’ve ate them because it’s bad food. So I think they should have nutritional classes. And if, they should have weigh-ins to make sure that you’re monitoring these families because I see a lot of people that have, I know, I know the food - you know, people say you know who get Food Stamps because they have three or four baskets of stuff. But I think you should help them with that.

167 P37: Very Low Food Security, Other, Female, Age 66, 3-person household
168 P45: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 30, 2-person household
169 P50: Low Food Security, Hispanic, Female, Age 22, 3-person household
You should be strict on trying not to make our children obese and sick, you know? Childhood diabetes is not a joke. And these children are having heart attacks and strokes. And it’s just, that’s, that’s crazy. I just, I just think you should, they need, a lot of people need help. They need to learn how to [eat right].

Another offered similar recommendations: “Yeah. More helpful if they created a way that would teach people how to make their dollar go further because the reality is they’re never going to stop the Food Stamp program. If you’re going to have the program, why don’t you teach people how to make those dollars last?”

Two respondents had interesting, outside-the-box ideas about how to improve SNAP. One respondent talked about possibly having coupons preloaded onto SNAP cards, both to save money and to encourage healthier eating.

“If Food Stamps came preloaded with some type of coupons that are loaded by the manufacturer for purchase...—coupons that already exist out there. Like with Sam’s Club—you go into Sam’s Club and you scan your card...it automatically prints out [coupons] based on your purchases, coupons for things you’re likely to spend money on. Well, it would be simple for the USDA to do the same thing with manufacturers so that people can automatically save money on food that they’re already purchasing.”

Another talked about the possibility of giving small SNAP bonuses near holidays like Christmas, when people need to buy more food.

“[They should] do more on the SNAP to maybe, like...give an extra $5.00 or $10.00 onto your SNAP. I would say like every three months, yeah every three months to or when it’s close to the major holidays.... I mean, it would help [during] the biggest [holidays] and would be nice to give it at Christmas, when most people do the majority of cooking.”

H. Chapter VI Summary

SNAP recipients report varied experiences with SNAP, both in their interactions with SNAP offices and in the help SNAP gives them to maintain a constant supply of food in their household. Many say that, most importantly, SNAP benefits help relieve some of the pressure they feel to juggle their financial obligations while keeping enough food on the table. Families at all levels of food security told us that SNAP allowed them to purchase more food, and more healthy food than they would otherwise be able to “afford.” This is because they must use their SNAP benefits for food; resources in this form cannot be traded off to meet other urgent financial needs. Given their often
In precarious economic circumstances, many claimed they would not be able to eat in the absence of SNAP. Those who had recently lost SNAP benefits did often report that they skipped bills to cover their food needs, but they also skimped on food purchases, skipped meals, and sometimes even “starved”—went without any food for a day or more—as a result. A Chapter III showed, loss of SNAP benefits is a common trigger of food hardship, especially among the less food secure.

At the same time, respondents frequently asserted that their SNAP funds carry them through the first two to three weeks of the month, while the “end of the month” is spent scrambling to meet food needs; households do not tend to set aside cash resources to purchase food during that last week or so. A common perception among respondents is that food has gotten more expensive, and benefits have not kept pace. The cycle of bills, income, and benefits is strained by the volatility some find in their eligibility for the program; respondents who have been on the program for a longer period of time gave accounts of repeated and abrupt losses of benefits. These unpredictable changes in monthly budget calculations can greatly disrupt a family’s ability to meet their food needs. Other frequent sources of frustration for respondents revolved around interactions with their local SNAP offices. Caseworkers’ poor attitudes, the unyielding eligibility policies, and the interminable application lines all contributed to the nearly universal perception that the SNAP program and its employees lacked empathy and treated beneficiaries with condescension. These views contrasted quite dramatically with respondents’ experiences with the WIC program, which was acclaimed for its provision of nutrition information and its focus on health outcomes instead of eligibility concerns only.
REFERENCE


