ESAP State Enrollment Data Collection Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The purpose of AARP Foundation’s Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP) State Enrollment Data Collection Project is to provide critical information to AARP Foundation about the effect of receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits on food security among low-income older adults who apply for these benefits through ESAP. AARP Foundation awarded grants to organizations to enroll households with low-income older adults in SNAP through the ESAP process, as applicable, and participate in the ESAP State Enrollment Data Collection Project. This project uses a pre-post survey design to collect food security data at two points in time from low-income older adults who volunteer to participate. Grantees administered the pre food security survey (referred to as baseline) in person or over the phone by using an online tool after helping older adults apply for SNAP. Mathematica administered the post food security survey (referred to as follow-up) over the phone approximately six months after baseline survey completion. AARP Foundation provided grantees with initial training and ongoing support in baseline survey administration to help ensure data integrity.

Baseline data used in this report were collected between March 2019 and May 2020; follow-up data were collected between September 2019 and November 2020. Grantees helped interested and eligible low-income households with older adults apply for SNAP through the ESAP process. To be eligible to apply for SNAP through this process, all members of a household must be at least 60 years of age (or with a disability and at least 50 years of age) with no earned income. Low-income older adults were eligible to participate in the data collection project if they applied for SNAP through the ESAP process and had not received SNAP benefits in the last six months. Grantees obtained consent from older adult SNAP applicants for participation in the data collection project and administered the 10-minute baseline survey.

Mathematica conducted the follow-up survey five to seven months after baseline completion, notifying respondents in advance via mail shortly after the baseline survey and again about one week before the follow-up survey. After respondents completed the follow-up survey, Mathematica mailed them a $10 gift card as a thank you. The response rate for the follow-up survey was 57.8 percent.

Among follow-up survey respondents (993 individuals), 30.0 percent were food secure at baseline (including 12.6 percent with high food security and 17.4 percent with marginal food security). Most respondents (61.7 percent) reported receiving SNAP benefits at follow-up, receiving a median SNAP benefit of $59 a month. Respondents who received SNAP benefits had lower rates of baseline food security than those not receiving benefits (Figure 1).
Rates of food security improved from baseline to follow-up for both SNAP participants and nonparticipants, but the increase was much greater for SNAP participants (21.9 percentage points compared to 12.5 percentage points for nonparticipants) when holding constant demographic and other characteristics (Figure 2). This difference of 9.3 percentage points was statistically significant. Differences in marginal and very low food security were not statistically significant in the overall sample, although both SNAP participants and nonparticipants reported decreases in very low food security.
These effects were likely driven in part by the federal government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic, which spread across the United States beginning in March 2020, prompted Congress to pass the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) on March 18, 2020. This law temporarily increased SNAP benefits for all participating households to the maximum benefit level for each household size. Beginning in April 2020, SNAP benefits increased to $194 a month for one-person households and $355 a month for two-person households. We compared outcomes for respondents interviewed before the extra benefits went into effect to those interviewed after they were in place. SNAP benefits for the first group were quite low, with a median benefit of $20 a month. The effect of these benefits on food security was modest. The evidence suggests that these benefits largely moved respondents from low to marginal food security. There was no effect on very low food security. By contrast, respondents who likely received the extra benefits reported much higher benefit levels—a median of $92 a month. They saw much greater effects on food security, including declines in the incidence of very low food security and increases in the incidence of high food security.

These results underscore the importance of the amount of SNAP benefits received when seeking improvements to food security. The evidence this study provides is consistent with prior research showing that improvements in food security due to SNAP benefit receipt depend on the amount of the benefits. The proportion of the sample whose follow-up data collection likely occurred before respondents received the extra COVID-19 SNAP benefits might better reflect the effect of these benefits on food security in a typical policy environment for the target population of this study. The amount of SNAP benefits participants receive depends on their circumstances. Applicants—and organizations assisting them—can maximize the benefits they receive by claiming all income deductions available to them. Beyond that, further permanent increases in benefit levels would require action from Congress.

This analysis, which uses a difference-in-differences design and statistical controls, isolates the effect SNAP benefit receipt had on changes in food security. Because the comparison group (respondents who did not receive SNAP benefits) was not randomly determined, the study cannot demonstrate that SNAP participation caused changes in outcomes, but it does provide strong suggestive evidence that receiving these benefits improved recipients’ food security.