Reducing Barriers to Successful SNAP Application and Participation among Indiana Households with Young Children

Executive Summary

Overview

While the 2019 national rate of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participation was 85% of eligible individuals, the Indiana participation rate was considerably lower at 75% (USDA FNS, 2019). Given the relationship between food insecurity and public health, closing the gap between SNAP participation and food-insecure households with young children would increase health equity across Indiana. Our community-involved project investigated the SNAP application process and barriers to successful SNAP participation among food-insecure households with young children in Indiana.

Questions

1. What are the barriers to applying for SNAP benefits in Indiana?
2. Are SNAP benefits sufficient for Hoosier households, particularly those with young children, and if not, what are the limitations and potential solutions?
3. What program and policy changes would make SNAP benefits more equitable, accessible, and sufficient to meet the needs of Indiana households with young children?

Methods

Administrative Data Analysis

We examined census-tract level SNAP administrative data along with socioeconomic data from 2017-2019. We used statistical analysis of SNAP participation to examine the participation rate (approved applications) and the dynamics of the application process that starts with a larger pool of applicants (submitted applications) and may end with a non-participation (denied applications).

Stakeholder Focus Groups and Interviews

First, we conducted six focus groups with 40 SNAP caseworkers and managers representing 25 Indiana counties. Next, we conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with Indiana households experiencing food insecurity. We estimate that we reached 103 households, which included both SNAP participants and non-participants.

Household Survey

We partnered with Qualtrics to administer a statewide survey to over 650 Indiana households who have had some experience with food insecurity in their lifetime. Qualtrics provided a random sample of food-insecure households in Indiana. Community partners supplemented with targeted surveying of under-represented populations not reached in Qualtrics's sample.

Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) Calculations

We first translated the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) 2021 TFP model from GAMS to MS Excel. We modeled minimum cost diets for a sample household with young children and compared these costs to the TFP calculated by USDA to set the maximum SNAP benefit. We also modeled diets that align with average consumption patterns and nutritional requirements to compare these costs to the USDA calculations.

Findings

Application Barriers

Our focus group discussions, interviews, and household survey conclude that barriers include participation stigma, fear of being a public charge and denied residency or citizenship, onerous paperwork and verification requirements associated with the application, and SNAP benefits not being adequate in proportion to the application burden. Our statistical analysis of SNAP administrative data confirms anecdotal findings that one of the most difficult hurdles in the application process is timely navigation through the application process with evidence of increased time in the application process for communities

with high SNAP denial rates. We also find that broader socioeconomic trends in a community are associated with application submission rates while applicants' personal circumstances better predict denial rates.

Benefits Sufficiency

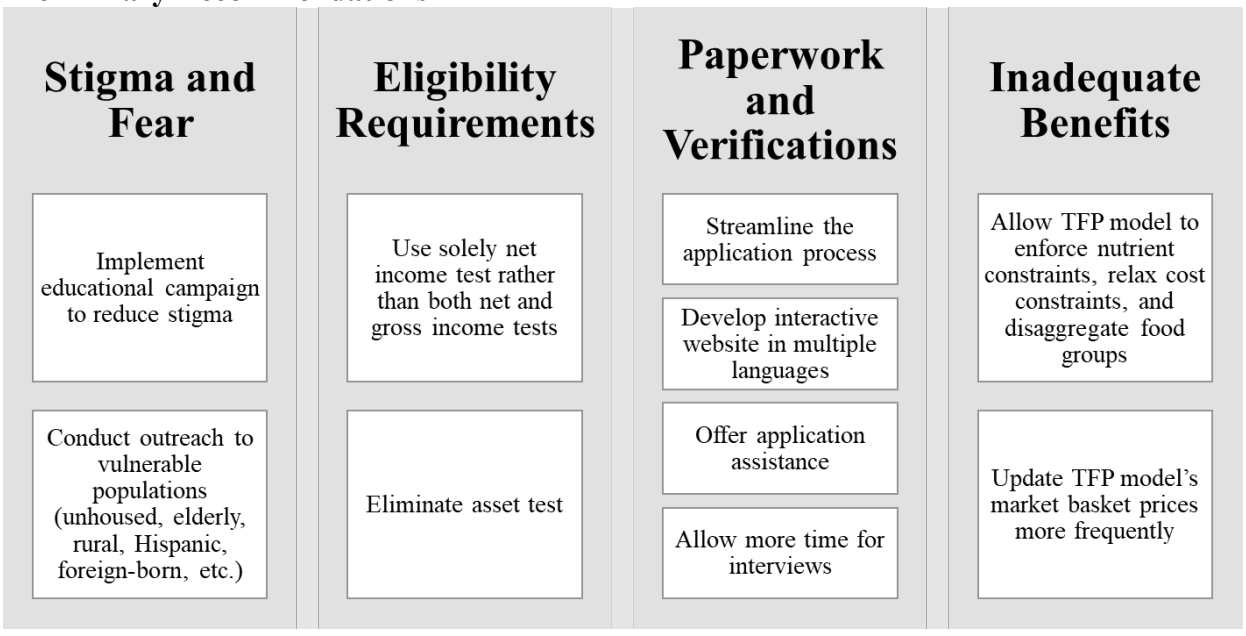
The table below shows household survey responses to the benefits sufficiency question, "How would you rate the monthly SNAP benefit you received (during specified time period)?"

	Time Period			
	Before April 2020	April 2020 – December 2020	January 2021 – September 2021	After October 2021
Less than enough	146 (50%)	66 (24%)	59 (21%)	68 (25%)
Enough	123 (42%)	173 (62%)	179 (65%)	170 (61%)
More than enough	22 (8%)	41 (15%)	39 (14%)	39 (14%)
Total households	291	280	277	277

TFP Limitations

We find USDA TFP models fail to meet micronutrient and FPED (so-called "helping") requirements in many cases for the modeled age/sex groups. Minimum cost TFP models (aka Stigler models) which meet all diet requirements have daily costs above those generated by the USDA TFP for children 4-8 years old. Food prices within USDA TFP do not adequately reflect the cost of certain restricted diets (e.g., lactose intolerance). Fully meeting dietary requirements may, depending on model formulation, result in daily food costs above the allocated amount by 33% for adults and 37% for children.

Preliminary Recommendations



Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [grant no. 77304]. We acknowledge our community research partnerships with Bloomington Food Policy Council, Cultivation Lab, Elkhart County Food Council, Food Council of Northeast Indiana, Gene B. Glick Co., Indy Hunger Network, IU Center for Evaluation, Policy, & Research, Marshall County Food Council, St. Joseph Community Health Foundation, St. Joseph Food Access Council, and Wayne County Food Council.