

When Benefits Stop: SNAP Disruptions and Food Insecurity Among People Experiencing Homelessness in Los Angeles County

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Introduction

SNAP is the nation's primary nutrition assistance program that supplements low-income households' grocery budgets. People experiencing homelessness (PEH) are eligible for SNAP, and should be using it as a critical source of food support. But, PEH do not consistently receive SNAP benefits, due to administrative barriers. PEH as they are faced with unique food access barriers such as unstable living conditions, limited food storage and preparation capacity, and constrained access to emergency food systems. They may also have limited access to informal support networks that could help buffer temporary financial disruptions. The federal government shut-down which began on October 1st and lasted until November 12th, 2023, has disrupted fundings for SNAP. SNAP benefit distribution goes by a staggered schedule related to the case number on their application. Those who are scheduled earlier in the month were comparatively safer during the disrupted period. Therefore, this created a natural experiment, as some recipients had unexpected delays in benefits while the others received their as normal.

Current Study & Methods

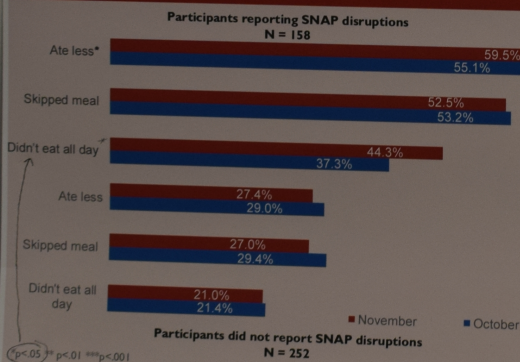
Research Questions:

- Among PEH, Who are receiving SNAP?
- Did benefit disruption during governmental shutdown worsen food insecurity among PEH?

Methods:

- Data drew from the Periodic Assessment of Trajectories of Housing, Homelessness, and Health Study (PATHS).
- SNAP participation is measured at baseline and at biannual follow-up surveys.
 - Monthly survey included questions about delays during shutdown, and 3 binary indicators for food insecurity.
- Final sample included 410 participants with longitudinal survey data from October and November.
- T-test and chi-square to compare characteristics of SNAP enrollees and non-enrollees.
 - Within-person changes in food insecurity outcomes assessed using McNemar's test for paired data from before shutdown and during shutdown, stratified by SNAP disruption status.

Results



Strengths and Limitations

This study is among the first to examine the impact of acute SNAP benefit disruptions among people experiencing homelessness (PEH). The PATHS dataset is considered broadly representative of the PEH population in the Los Angeles area, enhancing the relevance of findings. Its longitudinal design enables within-person comparisons over time, strengthening inference beyond cross-sectional analyses. Additionally, the natural experiment context of the federal shutdown allows for comparison between individuals experiencing benefit delays and disruptions were current enrollees, which may introduce misclassification and recall bias. Additionally, reliance on self-reported measures of disruption and food insecurity may be subject to reporting bias. Finally, findings may have limited generalizability beyond this Los Angeles-based cohort.

Conclusion

Using longitudinal data from a cohort of people experiencing homelessness (PEH), this study finds that SNAP benefit disruptions during the federal shutdown were associated with short-term increases in the most severe forms of food deprivation. In contrast, individuals without disruptions showed relatively stable outcomes. These findings underscore the importance of consistent and reliable benefit delivery in maintaining minimal food access among PEH.

Conclusion

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