

Engaging

Arkansas Stakeholders

to improve

SNAP's Public Health Impact

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Executive Summary

Overview

The *Engaging Arkansas Stakeholders to Improve SNAP's Public Health Impact* project engaged a variety of stakeholders distributed throughout Arkansas to discuss strategies to increase access to healthy foods for individuals participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Problem

Arkansas is a rural state with high rates of poverty related to persistent income inequality, barriers to education, work skills and community support, geographic location, and number of earners within a household.ⁱ Arkansas consistently has among the highest prevalence of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and other diet-related chronic conditions.ⁱⁱ SNAP is vital to the health and wellbeing of Arkansans, but Arkansans from low-income households face multiple barriers to enrollment and utilization of SNAP for healthy food and beverages.

Project

This project, led by the Office of Community Health and Research at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) and the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance (AHRA), with support from the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), sought opinions from diverse stakeholders throughout the state. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with 34 Arkansans from low-income food insecure households to gain first-hand perspective on the role of SNAP in diet-related health. Additionally, a statewide convening was held with 21 subject matter experts and representatives from local SNAP-focused organizations and three interviews were conducted with key informants of the policy environment in the state.

Results

Three strategies emerged with the highest support from food insecure individuals and participants in the convening:

- Improve Eligibility and Enrollment in SNAP
- Improve SNAP Benefit Allocation and Frequency of Issuance
- Implement, Expand or Enhance SNAP Incentives for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

Findings provide administrators, decision-makers, and support and advocacy organizations with feedback vital for constructing and improving practices and policies that are effective and welcomed by SNAP participants.

Background

The **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** is the nation's largest food program and a powerful tool for mitigating food insecurity. SNAP recipients include adults who work low-wage jobs, unemployed workers, people with disabilities, and individuals with fixed income. Nearly half of SNAP recipients live in households with children or people with disabilities, and more than one-third of SNAP households include senior citizens.ⁱⁱⁱ SNAP provides a food safety net and nutrition assistance to over 13 million participants, including over **330,000 individuals in Arkansas** as of August 2021.^{iv}

Food Insecurity in Arkansas

SNAP has particular significance in Arkansas. The state has the **fourth highest prevalence of poverty**^v and is the **sixth most rural** in the country,^{vi} with among the highest prevalence of healthy food **grocery gaps**¹ in the U.S.^{vii} **Over 16%** of the state's population lives **below the poverty line**^{ix}, which is exacerbated by persistent income inequality, barriers to education, work skills and community support, geographic location, and number of earners within a household family structure.ⁱ All 75 Arkansas counties have **grocery gaps**, and 49 counties (65%) have five or fewer grocery stores, relying on convenience and dollar stores for food retail.^x Arkansas has 2,808 authorized SNAP retailers across the state, of which 1,326 (47%) are convenience stores which typically offer limited quantity of products.^{xi} Still, the majority of U.S. SNAP shoppers shop at grocery stores and big box retailers that meet SNAP-authorization standards to stock and sell staple food items.² Food insecurity has worsened due to the far-reaching economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, 17.3% of Arkansans were food insecure. During the pandemic, **food insecurity rose to 22.5%**, the second highest prevalence among U.S. states.^{xiii} Arkansas consistently ranks amongst the worst states on the incidence of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and other diet-related chronic conditions. Arkansas has the **third highest diabetes-related death rate** (29.8 per 100,000) of any state.ⁱⁱ Heart disease (1st) and diabetes (7th) are leading causes of death in the state.

¹Grocery gaps are geographic areas with **limited access to affordable healthy foods** such as fresh fruit and vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat milk.^{viii}
²Staple food items are those which make up a significant portion of one's diet and are typically prepared at home.^{xii}



1 in 5 people in Arkansas face hunger^{xiii}

SNAP provides assistance to over **330,000 Arkansans**^{iv}

In Arkansas in 2017 there were:

8,270

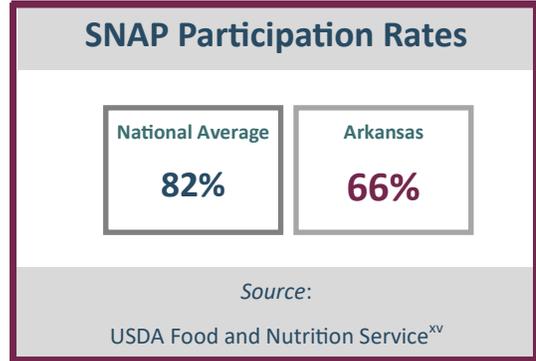
Deaths due to heart diseaseⁱⁱ

1,180

Deaths due to diabetesⁱⁱ

SNAP in Arkansas

Nationwide, SNAP is the primary source of nutrition assistance for millions of low-income households and implements strategies that promote healthy choices and mitigate negative effects of food insecurity and diet-related chronic disease.^{xiv} However, SNAP continues to remain underutilized in Arkansas. SNAP participation numbers in Arkansas are consistently and significantly lower than the national average: only 66% of eligible residents accessed SNAP in 2018, compared to 82% nationally.^{xv}



SNAP is vital to the health and wellbeing of Arkansans, but existing restrictions on its use and low enrollment in the state compound the issue of poor nutrition among the state’s participants. The need for a larger, ongoing conversation regarding the intersection of public health, food insecurity, and nutrition has become increasingly pertinent in the state of Arkansas. Stakeholder engagement and mobilization can lead to identification and implementation of policy interventions that meet healthy food and nutrition needs of SNAP recipients in the state.

Barriers

Enrollment and Eligibility

Arkansans from low-income households face multiple barriers to enrollment and utilization of SNAP. Some of the most significant barriers are related to work requirements and eligibility criteria. For many Arkansans, the state’s restrictive policies impede access to the program. The state uses **the strictest allowable asset limits for SNAP eligibility** (\$2,250) and is one of only nine U.S. states to disallow use of broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE)³ flexibilities.

Arkansas also enforces **time and work-reporting requirements for adults ages 18-59 who are considered “able-bodied adults”** and receive SNAP benefits. The requirement imposes a 3-month limit within a 3-year period on SNAP benefits for these individuals not working at least 20 hours a week or in job training, even if job opportunities are limited.^{xvii} The federal government allows a state waiver for this work requirement; however, Arkansas opts out of this flexibility (including during the COVID-19 pandemic)^{xxiv} and is moving forward in 2022 to expand work requirements to more adults, including some with minor dependents.^{xxv}

³BBCE flexibilities allow states to waive asset limits and make it possible for households to grow their personal savings or supplement their nutritional expenses without fear of losing eligibility. ^{xxi}

The 2019 public charge rule, which limited immigrants and their families from accessing government services, such as SNAP, is no longer in effect. However, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the fear and confusion it created continues to be a barrier to accessing public services for this population.^{xxvi} Additionally, parents not compliant with child support custodial arrangements could lose SNAP benefits.^{xviii} Lawmakers believed this policy would improve child support compliance; however, supportive evidence does not exist and rather **puts child nutrition and welfare in jeopardy**.^{xix} People ineligible for SNAP include most college students, undocumented immigrants, some lawfully present noncitizens, workers on strike, some convicted felons, and some unemployed, childless adults.^{xviii}

Benefit Issuance and Adequacy

In FY 2018, Arkansans who successfully accessed SNAP received an average monthly benefit issuance of \$239.^{xv} The average Arkansas benefit issuance amount is consistent with the national average. However, the average Arkansas household is larger than the average national household size, thus total dollars per person is less in Arkansas.^{xv} Benefit inadequacy has been linked to poor health, food and housing insecurity, and risk of developmental delays in children.^{xix} These negative health outcomes related to food insecurity are often experienced by SNAP households that exhaust their benefits before their next issuance.^{xx}

In October 2021, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) revealed plans to increase SNAP benefits by about 25% as a result of a re-evaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), a plan which sets SNAP benefits based on cost estimates and dietary guidance.^{xxii} The re-evaluation represents the largest SNAP adjustment since the program's inception in 1975. The increased benefit allocation aimed to reflect the true cost of a nutritious diet and costs associated with culturally specific foods and special dietary needs. The benefit increase is expected to give households more flexibility in their budgets, decrease food insecurity, and enhance overall well-being and long-term health outcomes. SNAP households can anticipate an increase of \$12 to \$16 per person per month.^{xxiii}

Impacts of COVID-19

Arkansas has made several COVID-related adjustments to SNAP for temporary assistance. The state expanded participation by implementing the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer for K-12 students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and instituted emergency supplemental SNAP for the duration of public emergency. It also extended allowable duration of SNAP participation. Program access was improved by relaxing (not eliminating) work requirements, allowing applicant phone interviews, and waiving signature policies. The state also received a waiver for participation in online SNAP shopping and payment, which became a permanent adjustment as of October 2021.^{xxi} SNAP households now have the option to shop online through Amazon and Walmart.

Facilitators

Incentive Programs

Fresh fruit and vegetable (FFV) incentive programs exist for SNAP participants in Arkansas and across the country. Double Up Food Bucks (DUFb), implemented by the Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention and supported with federal funding, is one FFV incentive program in Arkansas where shoppers using SNAP are given matching funds (up to \$20) for every dollar spent on FFV purchases at farmers markets and farm stands and participating grocery stores located throughout the state.^{xxvii} In two Arkansas counties, Double Your Dollar (DYD), funded by the Walmart Foundation, matches SNAP dollars used to purchase SNAP-eligible products at farmers markets and from a local food hub that sells directly to consumers.^{xxviii} Other examples include the Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP) program in Massachusetts that offered a 30-cent credit on EBT cards for eligible fruit and vegetable purchases.^{xxix} The Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) encourages fruit and vegetable (FV) purchases by offering SNAP customers incentive tokens, vouchers, or loyalty cards to spend on more FVs.^{xxx} GusNIP is a national grant program run by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) that allows grantees to run their own incentive programs.

SNAP-Ed

SNAP Education (SNAP-Ed) is a USDA program supporting SNAP participants in healthy and active lifestyle skills. Arkansas SNAP-Ed is implemented by the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension, the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, and the Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention.^{xxxi} The program reached over 50,000 individuals in 2020, including adults, parents, schools, and youth across 524 Arkansas sites.^{xxxii} Arkansas SNAP-Ed teaches people how to shop for and cook healthy foods, and how to use their SNAP dollars most effectively. Implementing agencies can contract with USDA to provide SNAP-Ed programs, such as nutrition and cooking classes, and social media campaigns.

Arkansas SNAP Community Engagement Project

Arkansas is an opportune location for community engagement to discuss strategies to improve SNAP. Recent policy adjustments and increased awareness of the importance of health and food security due to the pandemic provided an opportunity to engage Arkansas SNAP stakeholders. In particular, this project engaged SNAP recipients, key leaders, and policy informants on their perspectives of how to empower people to access SNAP and alleviate symptoms caused by chronic diseases that are related to diet. These perspectives are critical to developing and communicating a vision for the direction of SNAP in Arkansas that will emerge from the pandemic.

Over the six-month period between March and August 2021, with support from the Center for Science in the Public Interest, several partners collaborated to gather input from key stakeholders on SNAP's ability to improve access to healthy food and beverages. Leading the project were the **Office of Community Health and Research at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS)**, a leader in community-engaged food research and programs in Arkansas, and the **Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance (AHRA)**, a statewide community-based non-profit active in helping shape hunger-related public policy and raising awareness of consequences of hunger. Additional community advisors representing six community organizations were engaged as collaborators. For a full list of partners, see Collaborators on page 2. Partners were selected in collaboration with the AHRA to reflect a mix of geographic locations, sectors, and service providers in Arkansas. These partners represent expertise in SNAP and food insecurity in Arkansas and provided additional perspectives on the SNAP political landscape in Arkansas.

This SNAP statewide community engagement project assessed interest and support for **several SNAP policies** aimed at improving health. The project involved stakeholders in its design; centered the voices of racially, economically, and geographically diverse food insecure Arkansans through focus groups and interviews; convened stakeholders to prioritize strategies; and gathered policy environment insight from key informants. The project collected opinions on SNAP strategies from three groups of stakeholders: food insecure Arkansans (those in focus groups and interviews who currently use SNAP or have experienced food insecurity in the last 12 months), participants in an online convening (representatives from SNAP-focused community organizations), and key informants (those with insight into the policy environment in Arkansas). Findings provide decision-makers and advocacy organizations with end-user centered feedback vital for constructing and passing policies that are effective and welcomed.

Key Findings

The key findings capture the highlights from the study in Arkansas. The research methods utilized in this study are described in the next section of the report.

Eight SNAP strategies for improving healthy food and beverage choices were discussed with stakeholders engaged in this project. These policies were selected based on the project team's understanding of the SNAP policy landscape nationally and in Arkansas, as well as priority strategies based on peer-reviewed literature,^{xxxiii} and expert recommendations provided by the National Hunger Commission,^{xxxiv} the Bipartisan Policy Center.^{xxxv}

The following eight strategies were considered by stakeholders:

- Implement, expand or enhance SNAP FFV incentives
- Improve eligibility and enrollment in SNAP
- Improve SNAP benefit allocation and frequency of issuance
- Increase reach of SNAP-Ed through policy, systems, and environment-focused interventions
- Healthier food environments in SNAP retailers
- Sugar-sweetened beverages disincentive combined with SNAP FFV incentive
- Sugar-sweetened beverages tax with revenue earmarked for SNAP FFV incentives
- Limit or restrict items that can be purchased using SNAP benefits

For each strategy, we describe: background of the strategy, feedback from focus groups and interviews with food insecure Arkansans, feedback from participants in the convening, and feedback from key informants. A table is provided in the discussion illuminating the strategies which received the highest and lowest support per stakeholder group. For focus group and interview participants, level of support was gauged by the prevalence of positive and negative comments per strategy. Level of support from participants of the convening is based on the results of pre- and post-convening rankings. Key informant interview findings were used to gauge acceptability and political buy-in of the strategies discussed. The strategies are described in the order of their post-convening ranking.

Implement, Expand, or Enhance SNAP Incentives

Background

The strategy to implement, expand, and enhance incentives was described at the convening as expanding policies such as those at some stores and farmers markets where extra SNAP benefits are offered to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. An example that was presented to food insecure focus group and interview participants was: for every dollar you spend on fresh fruit or vegetables you get an extra dollar to spend, or you may get a set of coupons to buy more fresh fruit or vegetables. Incentive programs have grown in participation over the years of implementation in Arkansas and there are partnerships in place to grow the program further. Currently, Double Up Food Bucks, a federally funded program, operates in 32 vendors across 29 of 75 Arkansas counties^{xxvii} and the Double Your Dollar program, funded by the Walmart Foundation, operates at five farmers markets and a food hub in two counties in Northwest Arkansas.^{xxviii}

Focus Groups and Interviews with Food Insecure Participants

This strategy had significant support from focus group and interview participants. Participants felt incentives could increase access and affordability of FFV and encourage healthier eating and purchase decisions. **Some focus group and interview participants had positive things to say about incentives:**

“You just pull up in the community, and you see all these fresh produce. It’s just like there. So, I think [additional benefits for farmer’s markets is] a good way to encourage people to eat and consume more fresh fruit and vegetables, too. So, yeah. I think that would be wonderful.”

“I really like that [Double Up Food Bucks] gives people with the SNAP benefits access—or increased access to these healthier foods [and the revenue] goes to the farmers and people who are growing this food locally. I think that’s really important for me [that the revenue] is staying in the [local] Arkansas economy.”

Although the participants had primarily positive opinions about this strategy, **they also shared barriers to accessing the current incentive programs:**

“There are a couple of issues to me with it in that it’s, one, you have to know about it. Two, you hafta feel confident enough to go navigate a busy farmer’s market, find the farmers market stall, and be confident enough to take your EBT card over there and not feel ashamed around all these bougie farmers market Fayetteville people.”

“Well, there’s a limited number of vendors that take [Double Up Food Bucks] vouchers. That’s the only issue.”

Statewide Convening

At the start of the statewide convening, participants were asked to rank their support for the eight strategies. This strategy was ranked their 2nd preferred strategy. **Post-convening, this strategy was ranked their 1st preferred strategy.** In general, this is a highly favored strategy, with **77% of participants in the convening listing it in their top three preferred strategies.** During the convening, facilitators and barriers to this strategy were discussed. Some facilitators that emerged at the convening were increased incentives at the retailer to create more accessibility, and the opportunity for a statewide marketing campaign for incentives. Participants in the convening felt that the current programs had **many access barriers**, including a short window to join, confusing messaging around the policy, limited knowledge of the current benefits, and the inaccessibility of farmer's markets to some community members. Participants in the convening indicated that the current program needs strengthening by expanding eligible retailers to include more grocery and convenience stores. It was also suggested that providing provisions such as grocery pick-up or delivery and more funding could grow the program.

Key Policy Informants

Interviews with key informants suggested this was a favored strategy. Key informants suggested that SNAP customers are naturally inclined towards incentives and would likely make use of them, when offered. Overall, there is a **significant amount of support** for this strategy and ongoing effort to facilitate partnerships between growers and retailers, establish more retailers as incentive-eligible, provide technical assistance, and reach more SNAP customers. Key informants also suggested that increased demand and use of incentive programs could help garner additional support from policy makers.

Improve Eligibility and Enrollment in SNAP

Background

The strategy to broaden SNAP eligibility and improve the SNAP enrollment process included aspects, such as raising the asset limit, removing the work requirement, strengthening partnerships with other safety net programs, and introducing broad-based categorical eligibility. These barriers also create stigma for SNAP users. This stigma is socially and politically reinforced by policy and messaging that frames participants as unskilled and burdensome.^{xxxvi} Historically, public assistance has been linked to individuals who are faceless and neglected, thus inhibiting the desirability of "outing" oneself to seek help. Addressing SNAP stigma would require a reframing of public perception about food insecurity and circumstances which influence poverty, such as structural racism, income inequality, and community supports.

Focus Groups and Interviews with Food Insecure Participants

Many focus group and interview participants felt that the current process was not working, and that **eligibility and enrollment could be improved**:

*“The wait time on stuff—the application process alone is tedious. It’s, um, poorly designed. Like if you wanna talk about accessibility... It almost feels like they’re **trying to trick you into failing the application** [process]—they make it so difficult. It almost feels like they do it on purpose, and, like, they don’t want you to get the help that you need.”*

*“You **have to be almost without anything to qualify** [for SNAP] and that can be very rough ‘cause you make just that little bit too much [...] I think maybe their ceiling may be too low.”*

*“One thing that really concerns me is the [eligibility] grid. [When] I lost my job, but then when I started workin’ again, [SNAP] kicked me out at, like, maybe right at \$4, makin’ too much for two people. They don’t look at what you bring home. **They [only] look at what you make.**”*

Others felt that **stigma was an enrollment barrier**:

*“I think they need to do something to [end the stigma] of those who [are] on food stamps because some people won’t do it because they’re **embarrassed and humiliated** that they have to get food stamps to feed their family.”*

*“I know a few people that **frown upon SNAP** and stuff. They didn’t wanna have benefits and stuff from the government or whatever, but to be able to support yourself, I think that it’s, you know—it’s just like getting a stimulus check [...] sometimes you just need a little help.”*

Spanish-speaking focus group participants had concern about how SNAP benefits are counted towards the public charge rule and if the rule was still in effect. This was a barrier for them when considering applying for benefits.

Statewide Convening

Overall, there was high support for this strategy during the convening; it ranked as participants’ 1st preferred strategy of 8 at the start of the convening and their **2nd preferred strategy of 8 after the convening**. Participants in the convening discussed facilitators of this strategy including increasing the allowable income and/or asset limits, which would generate more SNAP recipients. However, participants at the convening indicated that there are still perceived barriers to this strategy that might limit new enrollment, such as the stigma associated with SNAP, and the difficulties in the application process, especially for those without internet access. **Participants in the convening reported that for this strategy to be successful, there is a need to reframe SNAP to decrease stigma.**

Key Policy Informants

Key informants agreed that there is a need to reframe SNAP to decrease the stigma many households face when asking for help. Informants believed low asset limits in Arkansas contribute to SNAP churn, or cycling on and off the program, and can discourage households from building their savings. It was also mentioned that Arkansas is one of the most restrictive states in the U.S. when it comes to eligibility. Informants believe that by introducing broad-based categorical eligibility and eliminating child support enforcements, more Arkansas households would be eligible for SNAP. Facilitating transportation, improving online application processes, and enhancing communication and relationships with applicants were also suggested as worthwhile strategies for improving enrollment.

Improve SNAP Benefit Allocation and Frequency of Issuance

Background

This strategy includes increasing the amount of benefits and modifying the frequency of issuance. Benefit inadequacy is linked to poor health, food and housing insecurity, and risk of developmental delays in children.^{xix} SNAP households are at a higher risk of these negative health outcomes when benefit amounts are inadequate and/or exhausted before their next issuance.^{xx} In Arkansas, benefits are issued once within the first two weeks of the month.^{xxxvii}

Focus Groups and Interviews with Food Insecure Participants

Some focus group and interview participants felt that the current allotment limited their ability to purchase healthy food and beverages:

*“When you got to stretch [your benefits] you will buy the cheapest thing. It’d be bologna, hot dogs, you know, a lot of processed foods [...] because **you’re trying to stretch your stamps out** for the end of the month.”*

*“Um, for me as far as tryin' to get healthy food, with food stamps, it doesn't work. Because those foods are so high... **It costs to eat healthy.**”*

Statewide Convening

Among participants in the convening, **this strategy was ranked their 3rd preferred strategy of 8 both pre and post convening.** In general, there was mixed support for increasing the amount allocated to SNAP participants regarding the effectiveness of this approach. There was concern that passing legislation in Arkansas would be a significant challenge. There was greater support for and more positive comments about an increase in the frequency of benefit allocation. Participants in the convening identified facilitators of this strategy, including that more dollars would help people afford healthier foods and that issuance twice a month could help with budgeting and stretching the money over the month.

Perceived barriers were also identified by participants in the convening: increasing the allocation amount would be difficult to pass in the legislature and would need a tax supporting it; without an education component, diet is unlikely to change; and this policy would not necessarily increase access to healthier foods. There was discourse among participants in the convening about whether more dollars would lead to healthier choices. More often participants in the convening reported that they did not think an increase in benefits would translate to healthier food and beverage purchases on its own. Those that believed an increase would result in healthier food and beverage purchases said that the quality of food and beverages increases as family income increases. Some participants in the convening reported that the strategy is more likely to be successful if combined with SNAP incentives. SNAP benefits have since increased following the Thrifty Food Plan re-evaluation, as earlier noted.

This strategy did not elicit sufficient feedback from key policy informants to include in reporting.

Increase Reach of SNAP-Ed Through Policy, Systems, and Environment-focused Interventions

Background

This strategy was described as increasing reach of SNAP-Ed through policy, systems, and environment interventions. The USDA defines SNAP-Ed in the following way: “SNAP-Ed teaches people how to make their SNAP dollars stretch, how to shop for and cook healthy meals, and how to stay physically active... SNAP-Ed initiatives include nutrition education classes, social marketing campaigns, and efforts to improve policies, systems, and the environment of communities.”^{xxxviii}

This strategy did not elicit sufficient feedback from focus group and interview participants to include in reporting.

Statewide Convening

This strategy **ranked their 4th preferred strategy of 8, both before and after the convening.** Participants in the convening identified several facilitators to this strategy, including that key state partners already have staff in place for this strategy, the perception that UAMS has the ability to dedicate staff time for SNAP-Ed outreach, and that there is the existing engagement with the faith community and SNAP-Ed. Participants in the convening indicated that a primary barrier is the broad definition of this strategy. Some participants in the convening had the perception that the strategy requires extensive buy-in, the strategy is complex and requires significant collaboration, and the evidence for retention of SNAP-Ed information is not conclusive.

Participants in the convening also discussed ideas to implement this strategy. Some ideas to come out of the convening were coupons for produce given at SNAP-Ed, incentives in grocery stores with special kiosks for SNAP-Ed in-store, and partnering with Federally Qualified Health Centers to refer patients to SNAP. Overall, some participants in the convening felt **there is infrastructure in place for this strategy** and if executed, the strategy could create high impact. However, there were concerns about the complexity of the strategy.

Key Policy Informants

Key informants believed education on healthy eating and lifestyles should always be a component of SNAP in Arkansas. It was expressed that most households are intrinsically motivated to make healthy decisions for themselves and their families, especially when information is accessible and relevant. It was suggested that if incentive and/or disincentive programs are introduced in Arkansas, SNAP-Ed would be a worthwhile means of education and communication for SNAP customers about these changes.

Healthier Food Environments in SNAP Retailers

Background

This strategy included ways to facilitate healthier food environments in SNAP retailers, such as expanding or enhancing minimum stocking standards, limiting marketing of unhealthy food products, and implementing choice architecture, such as placing nutritious items in more prominent places.

Focus Groups and Interviews with Food Insecure Participants

While this strategy was not explicitly discussed with focus group and interview participants, some felt including hot prepared foods as eligible for purchase with SNAP benefits could increase access to healthier foods.

Statewide Convening

This strategy was **ranked their 5th preferred strategy of 8, both pre and post discussion during the convening.** Participants in the convening discussed perceived barriers including the fact that size of the retailer would dictate how feasible this is and their perception that there are not existing relationships between advocates and retailers, which could hinder implementation. Participants in the convening discussed facilitators of this strategy: it is already being implemented in some stores, and it could alter perceptions of “faster food” (convenient healthy food such as cut fruit, ready-to-eat produce, grab-and-go healthier food options) and who healthy food is for. Participants in the convening noted that to make this strategy feasible there would need to be advertising combined with the ease of “faster foods.” Overall, their perception was that this strategy **has infrastructure and familiarity** but retailer participation would **not be equitably distributed** among large and small retailers and there would need to be a shift in supply and distribution.

This strategy did not elicit sufficient feedback from key policy informants to include in reporting.

Sugar-Sweetened Beverages Disincentives combined with SNAP FFV Incentives

Background

Food items, including sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) are allowable for purchase with SNAP benefits. Non-food items, such as dietary supplements, alcohol, tobacco, and paper products, are ineligible for purchase with SNAP. This strategy of SSB disincentives combined with SNAP incentives was described to participants with

examples such as extra benefits specifically for fresh fruits and vegetables, but SSBs become a SNAP-ineligible item; extra benefits that can be spent on any food item, but SSBs are SNAP-ineligible items; and fresh fruits and vegetables costing 30% less with SNAP, while SSBs cost 30% more with SNAP.

Focus Groups and Interviews with Food Insecure Participants

Focus group and interview participants had mixed support for this idea. Some supported the idea of SSB disincentives combined with SNAP FFV incentives:

"I actually support the idea of [restricting sugar-sweetened beverages] as somebody who drinks soda myself. Yeah, take that away. Put it towards [...] things that are actually more nutritious."

*"I think [restrictions are] **a good payoff**. You know, you get more money to spend on other things. And, you know, the only cost to you is, you know, buying less or no sugary drinks. I would be for that policy."*

Others felt that these restrictions would inhibit their freedom of choice, even if offered a FFV incentive:

*"I just **don't think that it would be fair** for them to [restrict] flavored juice [but] they could take the sodas off."*

*"It's just another way to control poor people and put them in like an oppressed state, I feel like. So, um, it's **just not their business**. I don't even drink soda."*

"If you're a controlled parent and you have to watch your budget, then, no. Like, one sugary drink is not gonna kill my child."

Statewide Convening

This strategy had low support during the convening: it was ranked their 7th preferred strategy out of 8 pre-convening, and **rose to their 6th preferred strategy out of 8 post-convening**. During the convening, several facilitators to the strategy emerged, including that it **makes good choices easier**, might inspire people to want to eat healthier, and that restricting SSB is easy to identify versus restricting "unhealthy" foods. Multiple barriers were also discussed, including that it is difficult to effectively communicate to recipients and that it might be a legal barrier to charge more for something. Generally, in the convening, participants felt that this option was better than a restriction, but that there would need to be extensive education and promotion for this to be understandable. Additionally, there was **hesitancy to take away choice**, and a perception that incentives would work better in rural areas over cities.

Key Policy Informants

Policy environment key informants also expressed hesitancy for this strategy, noting that while it may be a good compromise, SSB disincentives may not be appropriate while food access remains a significant issue. Informants felt that the **complexity of messaging** and **navigating implementation** makes this strategy challenging and outweighs potential benefits.

Sugar-Sweetened Beverages Tax With Revenue Earmarked for SNAP FFV Incentives

Background

One strategy was a SSB tax with revenue earmarked for SNAP FFV incentives. The proposed SSB tax was described to community informants as a one-cent-per-ounce tax (e.g., 12 ounce soda would be taxed an extra 12 cents) on sugary drinks that would affect everyone who buys them, not just people using SNAP. Revenue from the tax would be earmarked to help make fresh fruits and vegetables cheaper to buy with SNAP benefits. While the exact type of tax was not discussed during the focus groups and convening, the strategy in practice would be executed as an excise tax that would be applied to manufacturers and distributors and passed along to consumers at the point-of-decision. It was not discussed how this tax would affect the soft drink excise tax that already exists in Arkansas,^{xxxix} which contributes to the state's Medicaid Program Trust Fund^{xl}. The tax covers soft drink syrup (\$2.00 per gallon of soft drink or simple syrup), bottled or canned soft drinks (\$0.21 per gallon), and powders and base products for preparing soft drinks (\$0.21 per gallon).

Focus Groups and Interviews with Food Insecure Participants

Focus group and interview participants expressed some support for this idea:

"[A SSB tax to increase SNAP benefits is] a-another great idea. Because, you know what? At the end of the day, we need fruits and vegetables. So, any way to make that more affordable for us, whether it's by choice or by force, you can't lose with that. So, I think that would be wonderful."

*"[The combined approach] actually sounds like a really great idea and a really good compromise because then it **would make it easier to access** [cheaper fruits and vegetable]. I know it would [help] with my family to, you know, get more of the things that are better for us."*

However, some focus group and interview participants felt this strategy would not be successful:

*"I think it may work better to try praising people [for eating healthy]. I find that, you know, **scolding people just doesn't work well** when they're adults...[I prefer a] reward-ing system and trying to teach [people] about better foods definitely works better."*

*“I like that SNAP people are benefiting, but I don’t like that this [tax strategy] is **reliant on people continuing to buy the soda and drinks**, if the goal is to make people healthier.”*

*“I don’t think [the tax strategy] is fair because if, you know, people that doesn’t have SNAP are payin’ the taxes on it, they still don’t get the cheap fruits and vegetables [...] I think that would be like a big argument at first. People will **probably try to boycott** buying any type of those things.”*

Statewide Convening

This strategy had low support at the convening and ranked 6th out of 8 pre-convening, and **fell to their 7th preferred strategy out of 8 post-convening**. During the convening, participants mentioned that a facilitator for this strategy is it **generates funds for SNAP**. The barriers mentioned were that all taxes related to food are barriers for low-income individuals, and that the administration and allocation of tax dollars is questionable. Additionally, participants in the convening had questions about whether the tax revenue would be appropriated for state or federal use, and how the cost increase would be initiated at the point of sale. Overall, participants in the convening felt that the complexity of this strategy may make it **difficult to gain public support**, and the message may get muddled with other similar taxes on food.

Key Policy Informants

Key informants suggested that a new SSB tax would be unfavorable to Arkansas legislators and the public at large given the state’s existing tax burden and high rate of poverty.

Limit or Restrict Items That Can Be Purchased Using SNAP Benefits

Background

Another strategy proposed was to limit or restrict items that can be purchased using SNAP benefits. This was described to participants as disallowing SSB purchases and limiting or restricting purchases of other unhealthy foods, such as candy and junk food.

Focus Groups and Interviews with Food Insecure Participants

Focus group and interview participants were not directly asked about standalone restrictions, but had mixed responses to restrictions if implemented in combination with incentives. Participants suggested that restrictions can cause undue harm to SNAP customers because it takes away their freedom of choice and assumes users are not capable of making their own decisions. Overall, participants felt more favorable towards incentives that reward healthy purchases than disincentives that punish other purchases.

Statewide Convening

During the convening, this strategy ranked as participants' last preferred strategy (8th out of 8) both before and after discussion. Participants in the convening discussed facilitators for this strategy including the notion that incentives would be better received, and that it might combat negative thoughts about the SNAP program. However, there were considerably more barriers than facilitators shared about this strategy: limiting and restricting would not be well received as it limits freedom through making diet choices for people; retailers may lose money and get negative responses; and those who do not have access to healthy food, especially in grocery gaps, would have even more restricted access to food. Additionally, participants in the convening had questions about who would determine which items would be restricted and the cost of implementing this strategy.

Key Policy Informants

Interviews with policy environment key informants suggested that **sugar can be addicting** and does not contribute to one's health, but restricting or limiting purchases of specific foods would be viewed negatively by vendors and consumers alike.

Additional Policy and Practice Suggestions

Food insecure focus group and interview participants and key informants were given the opportunity to suggest changes they would like to see in the SNAP program. The following suggestions are in no particular order and reflect how participants believe SNAP could be improved, and access to healthy foods could be enhanced. These strategies may warrant further exploration to determine support and feasibility:

- Better coordination of healthy food systems statewide in Arkansas, including community organizations and food retailers;
- Bring farmer's markets to Arkansas Department of Human Services offices;
- Designate markets or vendors exclusively for SNAP recipients;
- Engage schools in more health and nutrition education;
- Expand SNAP vendors to include more convenience stores;
- Facilitate farmers selling directly to consumers in their neighborhoods/communities via food trucks;
- Increase allowances for individuals with dietary restrictions, health conditions;
- Make more delivery and online ordering services eligible on SNAP;
- More benefits for kids during school breaks;
- More flexibility on income verification;
- SNAP benefits for picking own food at farms/local gardens;
- Stiffer penalties for selling SNAP benefits.

Food insecure participants in focus groups and interviews also discussed items that they thought should be SNAP-eligible. These comprised personal hygiene and specialty items including: child care items (diapers, wipes), hot food and deli items, household items (paper goods, cleaning supplies), personal and feminine care items, pet food, pots and pans, and protein powder. Some items mentioned are already SNAP eligible and represent a knowledge gap among SNAP customers including: water, ice, and seeds for growing a garden.

In addition to incentives for fresh fruits and vegetables, SNAP participants desired extra benefits for dairy, eggs, meat, non-dairy alternatives, frozen fruits and vegetables, and whole grains.

Discussion

The following table represents a summary of support for strategies among focus group and interview participants, participants in the statewide convening, and key informants. Focus group and interview participant support was gauged on the prevalence of positive and negative comments made about the strategies. Level of support from participants of the statewide convening are based on pre- and post-convening rankings of each strategy. Key informant support was gauged on comments indicating approval or disapproval of strategies.

| Strategy | Focus groups/interview with food insecure participants | Stakeholders from convening (post-convening ranking) | Key informants |
|--|--|--|--|
| Implement, expand, or enhance SNAP incentives | Mostly positive things to say about this strategy | 1st | Significant amount of support |
| Improve eligibility and enrollment in SNAP | Supportive of this strategy | 2nd | Supportive of this strategy |
| Improve SNAP benefit allocation and frequency of issuance | Supportive of this a strategy to facilitate healthy eating | 3rd | N/A (They did not discuss this strategy) |
| Increase reach of SNAP-Ed | N/A (They were not asked directly about this strategy nor did it come up in focus groups or interviews) | 4th | Supportive of this strategy |
| Healthier food environments in SNAP retailers | They were not asked directly about this strategy, but expressed that they would like hot prepared foods to be included as SNAP purchases | 5th | N/A (They did not discuss this strategy) |
| SSB disincentives combined with SNAP incentives | Some support for this strategy mixed with concerns about choice | 6th | Challenges outweigh benefits |
| SSB tax with revenue earmarked for SNAP incentives | Some support for this strategy mixed with concerns about its efficacy | 7th | Not supportive |
| Limit or restrict items that can be purchased using SNAP benefits | N/A (They were not asked directly about this strategy, but had concerns about restrictions when asked about them in combination with incentives) | 8th | Not supportive |

Key policy informant feedback reflected insight into acceptability and political buy-in of the strategies discussed. Each strategy had pros and cons reflective of the informant's understanding and experiences with the SNAP policy landscape in Arkansas. However, there was general consensus that SNAP in Arkansas can be enhanced by improving eligibility and enrollment so more food insecure Arkansans can access affordable, nutritious food. Informants also agreed that an additional SSB tax is unfavorable.

These findings suggest that, of the eight strategies, improving eligibility and enrollment, and implementing, expanding, or enhancing SNAP incentives are highly favored strategies as they had support by food insecure participants, convening stakeholders, and key informants. Findings similarly suggest that implementing a sugar-sweetened beverages tax with revenue earmarked for SNAP FFV incentives, and limiting or restricting items that can be purchased using SNAP benefits are not favorable among these groups.

SNAP is a vital component of ensuring all Arkansans have access to affordable, nutritious food. All Arkansas households in need of benefits should be able to access them and be provided the resources to safeguard their and their family's health and wellbeing. SNAP provides assistance to some of Arkansas's most vulnerable populations: children, seniors, people with disabilities and individuals experiencing poverty. However, SNAP implementation in Arkansas still has room for improvement in ensuring Arkansans in need are supported efficiently and effectively. The findings of this study indicate that key SNAP stakeholders believe important changes need to be made to the program, specifically regarding benefit eligibility and enrollment, benefit adequacy and issuance, and opportunities to expand and improve access to incentive programs. Improving the administration and implementation of SNAP could not only get more food on Arkansas tables, but also improve health outcomes that are negatively influenced by poor nutrition and diet, and poverty. In the state, policy and practice improvements are already being discussed and explored, including raising or eliminating the asset limit, restricting purchases, implementation of the SNAP matching incentives, and faster application processing. Through these improvements we can get closer to closing the gap between Arkansans eligible for SNAP benefits and those receiving benefits, as well as improving the adequacy of benefits received. Results from this community engagement project also point to addressing the stigma associated with SNAP and more broadly, public assistance. Efforts could be made to reformulate policies and systems which stigmatize those seeking assistance and emphasize opportunities to empower Arkansas households and families along the path to providing their families with the nutritious foods that they need.

Research Methodology

The Arkansas SNAP study utilized three primary data collection methods:

- Focus Groups and Individual Interviews to gather the perspectives of Arkansans with food insecurity;
- Key Informant Interviews to understand the SNAP policy environment in Arkansas;
- Statewide Convening of SNAP-focused community organizations

Focus Groups and Interviews

Qualitative data was collected from online video focus groups and phone interviews between May and June 2021. Focus groups for all participants were initially planned, but some participants were more willing to respond to questions via one-on-one interviews and we shifted the structure of the project to accommodate this. Focus groups and phone interviews used semi-structured interview and focus group guides developed by members of the UAMS research team. Data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive design to explore the experiences and perceptions of food insecurity, the SNAP program, and perceptions of SNAP healthy food policies. Interview and focus group interviewees comprised individuals who experienced food insecurity in the last 12 months and/or who were current SNAP recipients.

UAMS engaged a statewide network of community organizations, including food pantries, food banks, school districts, advocacy organizations, public housing partners, and other food systems research partners to assist with recruitment for the focus groups and interviews. Recruitment partners included the Arkansas Community Foundation, Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, Arkansas Minority Health Commission, Arkansas Peace and Justice Memorial Movement, Fayetteville Housing Authority, Northeast Arkansas Food Bank, Targeting Our People's Priorities with Service, and the University of Arkansas.

Community organizations utilized recruitment flyers and word-of-mouth to encourage participation from potential individuals of interest, who were screened through a bilingual online survey to determine their eligibility for the study. Each focus group and interview participant received a \$50 gift card for participating in the study.

In May and June 2021, UAMS conducted online video focus groups and phone interviews with 34 Arkansans. Among interview and focus group participants, 65% identified as White, 15% identified as Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin, 18% identified as Black or African American, and one participant identified as Pacific Islander. Of the 34 participants, 33 (97%) identified as female, and one (3%) as male. The mean age of participants was 43 years old. The focus groups and interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred languages of either

English or Spanish. UAMS facilitators conducted five focus groups in English with 17 total participants, one focus group in Spanish with two participants, and 16 one-on-one interviews in English. Participation in an interview versus a focus group was dependent upon participant availability and preference. One respondent participated in both an English focus group and an interview. On average, the focus groups lasted about 60 minutes. The length of the one-on-one interviews were between 15 and 30 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded with the study participants' consent and subsequently transcribed.

Data were analyzed for themes and trends using template analysis, a flexible analysis method for organizing data to achieve pragmatic goals.^{xxxv} The analysis explored strategies related to SNAP experiences and perspectives, based on four SNAP healthy food policies, and an open-ended discussion for additional policy and practice suggestions. Templates were developed to explore perceptions of SNAP healthy food policies across four broad topics:

1. Implementing, Enhancing, and Expanding SNAP incentives, such as fresh food purchase credits;
2. Combining Incentives and Disincentives, such as earmarked revenue models, sugar-sweetened beverages disincentive taxes combined with fresh food incentives
3. Introducing SNAP Disincentives, such as limiting or restricting allowable purchases (including sugar-sweetened beverages) and marketing of unhealthy foods, revising stocking standards;
4. Revising SNAP Policies, such as enrollment expansion, improved benefit allocation, increased reach of SNAP-Ed, etc.

Key Informant Interviews

In May and June 2021, the UAMS team conducted three phone interviews with key SNAP policy informants in Arkansas. Informants were chosen to leverage their experience with SNAP policy advocacy and implementation of the program in either the Arkansas state legislature or the non-governmental setting. Key informant interviews engaged stakeholders with influence and insight on decision-making to whom the current SNAP issues are of high importance.

While the key informant interviews covered the same topical areas as the focus groups and interviews with SNAP users, the key informant interviewer asked targeted follow-up questions relevant to the acceptability and political buy-in associated with the SNAP healthy food policies identified as potential avenues to increase fresh fruit and vegetable consumption and decrease sugar sweetened beverages consumption.

Key informants were recruited from the UAMS investigators' networks. On average, interviews lasted about 60 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded with the informants' consent and transcribed before analysis. These data were analyzed for themes and trends using the template analysis method prepared for the SNAP users' focus groups and interviews.

Statewide Convening

AHRA and UAMS hosted a statewide virtual convening of representatives from SNAP-focused community organizations and subject matter experts on June 22, 2021. The goals of the convening were to analyze policies and strategies to improve access to healthy food within SNAP, and to prioritize policies and strategies that would increase access to healthy food within SNAP. Participants in the convening were recruited using a recruitment email and word-of-mouth promotion from a network of statewide organizations representing expertise in SNAP, food access and nutrition, health equity, health care access, and SNAP policy and advocacy. A total of 21 participants from 16 organizations attended the convening.

The participants represented the following organizations:

- AARP Arkansas
- Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families
- Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention
- Arkansas Department of Health — Healthy Active Arkansas
- Arkansas Foodbank
- American Heart Association
- Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance
- Arkansas Immigrant Defense
- Cooking Matters
- Curricula Concepts
- Excel by Eight
- Food Bank of Northwest Arkansas
- Ikarus Youth Outreach Program
- The Manna Center
- Seeds That Feed
- University of AR System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension
- University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Northwest

The convening was structured into four broad sections:

A. Introductory vote: Prior to the convening, an agenda with brief descriptions of the policies and strategies of interest was distributed to the participants. At the start of the convening, the facilitators requested the participants to provide a ranked-choice vote of eight policies and strategies per their initial understanding, expertise, and experience. Facilitators and representatives of state organizations refrained from voting. Twelve participants provided initial ranked-choice votes.

- B. Education on SNAP strategies: Following the initial vote, UAMS researchers communicated facts and details about each of the eight strategies to the participants. The researchers also addressed participants' questions relating to the strategies.
- C. Discussion: Participants then had the opportunity to discuss factors that facilitate or hinder the implementation of SNAP strategies of interest in breakout rooms. Facilitators were assigned to each of four breakout rooms to lead a 15-minute discussion on two strategies per room, and ensure that voices in the room were represented to the extent that they were willing to participate. Participants were randomly assigned to the four rooms using the random assignment feature of the conferencing software. At the end of the timed discussion in one breakout room, participants were randomly assigned a different room. The process was repeated three times. Thus, each participant had the opportunity to discuss a 6-strategy subset of the eight strategies of interest with other participants.
- D. Conclusion vote: Lastly, participants re-engaged in a ranked-choice vote on the eight SNAP strategies based on their perceptions at the end of the convening. If a participant felt they did not have enough information to rank a strategy, they were instructed to leave it unranked. Facilitators and representatives of state organizations refrained from voting. 13 participants provided concluding ranked-choice votes.

Based on the participants' discussion at the convening, the focus group facilitators assigned each perceived barrier and facilitator an influence score between 1 and 5. A score of 5 represented very strong facilitators or barriers, and a 1 represented very weak facilitators or barriers. These scores were used by the research team to organize this report.

Advisors' Meeting

The findings from the focus groups, interviews, and statewide convening were reviewed by a group of advisors representing expertise in, and lived experience with food insecurity, SNAP policy, health equity, nutrition, and grassroots organizing. Advisors served as liaisons for interpreting findings and clarifying emergent themes discovered in the focus groups, interviews, and statewide convening.

Limitations of the study

Participation in focus groups, interviews, and the convening was limited to people for whom SNAP policy was likely to be particularly relevant. Other stakeholders, including food industry trade associations, are expected to have more influence on SNAP policies than some stakeholders included in this study. However, the research team prioritized lived experiences of SNAP recipients as the focus of this project. Additionally, this study relied upon existing networks and organizations for recruitment, so it is possible that the participants were not representative of SNAP recipients in Arkansas.

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Resources from Focus Groups & Interviews

A. SNAP Focus Group and Interview Eligibility Screener

The following survey (administered through a browser-based survey software) was used to recruit focus group and interview participants with food insecurity:

SNAP Policies in Arkansas

UAMS researchers and the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance are hosting focus groups as part of a research study with people in Arkansas about experiences accessing and using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Our goal is to hear from people who EITHER currently use SNAP or are experiencing food insecurity and are interested in enrolling in SNAP.

We will conduct up to 5 focus groups with up to 8 individuals in each group about experiences related to accessing and using SNAP. Focus groups will be approximately 60 minutes long and will be audio recorded. This research study is voluntary, and you can decide at any point in time that you would no longer like to be a part of the study. Each participant will be compensated for their time with a \$50 Walmart gift card. Participants' personal information will be kept private and confidential. Interview responses will be de-identified (your name will not be connected with any of your responses).

If you would like to participate in these focus groups, please complete the brief screening questions below. Your information will only be used for the purposes of this research, and all information will be stored securely on UAMS servers and accessible only by the research team. If you are selected, our team will reach out to you to schedule a focus group.

1. Do you or someone in your household currently receive benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (also known as SNAP or EBT) in Arkansas?
 Yes
 No

2. What is your age (in years)? _____

3. Are you able to participate in a focus group in English or Spanish over a video-based platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams?

Yes

No

The next two questions provide two statements that people have made about their food situation. For each statement, please tell me whether the statement was often true, sometimes true, or never true for your household in the last 12 months.

4. Within the past 12 months, we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.

Often True

Sometimes True

Never True

I don't know

5. Within the past 12 months, the food we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more.

Often True

Sometimes True

Never True

I don't know

6. In which language would you prefer to complete the focus group?

English

Spanish

Other (please specify)

7. Have you lived in Arkansas in the last 12 months?

Yes

No

Participants were screened as eligible for the focus groups and interviews if they were adult SNAP users who resided in Arkansas within the last 12 months, spoke Spanish or English, and could participate in discussion over a virtual platform. These participants were then prompted to provide their contact information. A total of **124 individuals** responded. 34 individuals were identified to participate in the focus groups and interviews.

B. Focus Group/Interview Facilitation Guide

The following focus group/interview guide was used to facilitate the discussions:

Introduction

Good evening and welcome to our session. Thanks for taking the time to join us to talk about your experiences with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, while living in {Insert geographic region relevant to study}. My name is ***, and assisting me is ***. We're both with {Name of Organization}. We have invited you here today to better understand your experiences with accessing nutritious food through SNAP as part of a research study. We'd like to hear what you think about potential changes to the SNAP program. We want to know what your experiences have been, what you like, what you don't like, and how the program might be improved. We are having discussions like this with several groups across {Insert geographic region relevant to study}. You were invited because of your participation in the online survey and in SNAP.

Please keep in mind that there are no wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. Keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful.

To facilitate our discussion, and to make sure that everyone is comfortable, we have a short list of rules.

[Facilitator reads list]. Are all of these clear? Do we need to add any rules?[on slide]

- Feel free to speak your mind
- Be respectful
- Focus on our discussion (please turn off your cell, go somewhere quiet where you can concentrate)
- One voice at a time

We are going to record this session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. If you would not like to be recorded, please let us know now through a private message, and we will follow up with you separately.

As a reminder, please mute yourself whenever you are not talking using the small microphone icon in the bottom left of your screen. Please also change your name to just include your first name by walking through the process on the screen (slide with photos of how to change name). If you have any comments you would like to make or questions, you can also include those comments in the comment box in the bottom right of the screen, like we did during our orientation call.

Well, let's begin. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the table. Tell us your first name, what region of Arkansas you live in, and what brought you here today.

We're going to start recording now.

Now I'm going to ask you a little bit about your experiences applying for SNAP and learning about the program.

1. Tell me about your experience applying for SNAP.
Probe: Did anything make it difficult?
2. Do you feel your current benefits meet your family's needs?
Why or why not?
3. Are there items you would like to be able to purchase that you currently cannot?

Probe: this could include non-food items or other food items you maybe want to purchase but cannot afford.

4. How do SNAP benefits support your health?

- a. How do SNAP benefits open up room in your budget for other needs that support your health?

Probe: essential household items, clothing, personal care, housing, transportation, healthcare, utility bills

Thank you so much for your feedback so far. We will be now discuss SNAP policies that impact costs of various items you may be purchasing. Policymakers are considering different ways to make nutritious food more available and affordable for SNAP users. We are now going to walk through some of their ideas for policies and ask for some of your feedback.

Incentives & Disincentives

[Background for moderator: Incentives would likely be in the form of: discounts at the point of sale (or possibly a coupon received prior to purchase); match (\$1 back for every \$2 spent on specific foods. Often provided as a voucher or token); rebate (cash back after purchase); subsidy (provides a fixed cash value for the purchase of specific foods. Usually provided ahead of time in the form of a voucher, token, or coupon.) Disincentives would be in the form of disallowing sugary drinks to be purchased with SNAP or making sugary drinks more expensive when purchased with SNAP.] [We're essentially probing for thoughts and feelings about combining INCENTIVES with DISINCENTIVES.]

5. Some stores and farmers markets offer extra SNAP benefits to buy fresh fruits and vegetables, like for every dollar you spend on fresh fruit or vegetables you get an extra dollar to spend there, or you may get a set of coupons to buy more fresh fruit or vegetables.

Probes:

- Has anyone used this kind of program?
- What did you like about it?
- Is there anything that you didn't like about it?
- How did it affect what you bought?
- For how long? (Just that shopping trip, or subsequent trips as well?)
Probe: For those who haven't had these incentives, what are your thoughts?
- Would you like to have additional SNAP benefits specifically to buy fresh fruits and vegetables?
Probe: For everyone, would you like to get extra SNAP benefits to use for other items besides fresh fruits and vegetables—like for frozen fruits and vegetables, for whole wheat bread and other whole grains, or for milk?

6. Lawmakers in some states are considering a policy where you would receive extra SNAP benefits—like more money for fruits and vegetables—as an incentive to use a version of SNAP where sugary drinks are no longer SNAP-eligible foods. [Note to moderator: this does not include 100% juice, flavored milk or diet soda]

- What are your thoughts on this idea?
 - How would this affect what you/ your family buys/ drinks?
 - Would you feel differently if the incentive for not purchasing soda was extra money on your SNAP EBT card every month that could be used to purchase all foods (other than sugar-sweetened beverages) and not restricted to only fruits and vegetables?
7. Another idea proposed by some lawmakers would be to automatically make all fruit and vegetable purchases 30% cheaper and sugary drinks 30% more expensive when purchased with your SNAP EBT card.
- What are your thoughts on this idea?
8. One last strategy to ask you about: some lawmakers are discussing using a tax on sugary drinks to help make fruits and vegetables cheaper to buy with SNAP benefits. This tax would be about 1 cent per ounce, so a 12 ounce soda can would be taxed an extra 12 cents. This would affect everyone who purchases sodas, not just people using SNAP. The money generated from the tax would go towards allowing fruits and vegetables to be cheaper for SNAP participants at grocery stores.
- What are your thoughts on this idea?
9. Do you have any other thoughts on how SNAP could... [Probe on any not yet mentioned]
- Make it easier to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables? More fruits and vegetables overall—including frozen and canned?
 - Make it easier to purchase other healthy foods (give examples: whole grain products, low-fat dairy, lean protein, etc.)
 - Discourage people from buying candy, sugary drinks, and other junk food?
10. If you had the power to make any changes to current SNAP programs in Arkansas, what changes would you make? [**Probe** for one of the above policies]
11. Is there anything that we missed, or didn't discuss, that you would like to tell us about? Thank you for your time!

C. Field Notes Template

The following template was utilized to record notes in the focus groups and interviews:

Date of event:

Project: CSPI SNAP

Note-taker:

Facilitator:

Any other individuals present outside of participants:

Pre-group Checklist:

| | |
|---|--|
| Participants linked with demographics | |
| Consent Completed | |
| Facilitator and co-facilitator recording discussion | |
| Facilitator and Co-facilitator introduce selves briefly | |

Post-group Checklist

| | |
|--|--|
| Thank participants | |
| “Gift card link will be sent via text after the group” | |
| Recordings uploaded to R:drive | |
| Gift card link sent to all participants | |

Participant names and PID (please list all individuals whose data will be included for analysis):

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Focus group or interview notes:

Time that recording was started (note time as precisely as possible):

Please use the space below to take notes. Each note should include a time code (to help in linking notes to transcripts), who is speaking, and any pertinent information that may be significant during analysis OR may not be captured by the final transcript.

| Time (hour and minute) | Name of speaker | Topic/key ideas or questions |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| hh:mm | | |
| hh:mm | | |

D. Template Analysis Guide

The analysis of the data gathered in SNAP participants focus groups and interviews and key informant interviews was conducted using the following template:

Template analysis
Interview conducted:
Facilitator:
Analyzed by:
Analysis date:

FOR SNAP PARTICIPANT FOCUS GROUPS:

[Record table for each participant, populated from screening survey]:

| | |
|---|--|
| Record ID | |
| Age | |
| Sex/Gender | |
| Race/Ethnicity | |
| Experienced food insecurity in last 12 months | |
| # children in home | |
| # children in home using SNAP | |
| # adults in home | |
| # adults in home using SNAP | |
| Employment status | |
| Housing status | |
| Current SNAP user? | |
| # years using SNAP last 5 years | |

| Master Template: SNAP Community Engagement | |
|---|---|
| Domain | Categories |
| <p>Positive SNAP Experiences and perspectives</p> <p>Definition: This domain covers all of the positive experiences regarding the SNAP program.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economics/Budget • Health/Diet • Other |
| <p>Negative SNAP Experiences and perspectives</p> <p>Definition: This domain covers all of the negative experiences regarding the SNAP program</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers to enrollment • Eligibility • Other |
| <p>Benefit Adequacy</p> <p>Definition: This domain captures specific comments of how SNAP benefits meet or do not meet a household's needs</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequacy • Inadequacy |
| <p>SNAP and Health</p> <p>Definition: This domain captures specific recollections of how SNAP promotes or hinders a person's ability to maintain their health.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers to Healthy Eating • Enablers to Healthy Eating • Health Impacts SNAP spending |
| <p>SNAP Fruit and Vegetable Incentives</p> <p>Definition: This domain is to collect primary opinions about including FFV incentive policies for SNAP</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Perspectives • Negative Perspectives |
| <p>SNAP SSB Restrictions/Disincentives</p> <p>Definition: This domain collects primary opinions about including SSB restrictions for SNAP</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Perspectives • Negative Perspectives |
| <p>SNAP Incentive/Disincentive Perspectives</p> <p>Definition: This domain collects primary opinions about the incentive/disincentive relationship for SNAP policy</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Perspectives • Negative Perspectives |
| <p>Additional SNAP Policy changes</p> <p>Definition: This domain collects specific opinions about additional SNAP policy changes outside of FFV incentives and SSB restrictions</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Policy Changes • Products interested in receiving extra benefits for • Products interested in being SNAP eligible |

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