

Capturing Participants' Experiences of the 2019 SNAP Food Assistance Benefit Disruption to Inform Future Policy

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Introduction

The federal government shutdown from December 22, 2018 – January 25, 2019, the longest in U.S. history, created an unprecedented disruption in issuance of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.¹ While most Americans realize the shutdown affected the employment of **thousands** of federal workers, fewer may recognize the impact it had on **millions** of Americans participating in SNAP.

Participants received February SNAP benefits early, by January 20, leaving a much-longer-than-usual gap between benefit receipt for February and March. This caused households whose budgets already are extremely tight to face heightened difficulties affording food.

The fact that participants received benefits despite the shutdown, is a tremendous success. However, it is critical for decision makers, service providers, and the public to understand that the 2019 federal government shutdown and subsequent SNAP benefit disruption felt devastating to many SNAP participants.

We conducted a study to assess how the disruption affected the wellbeing of California's SNAP participants.

Why SNAP Matters?

- In 2018, SNAP lifted 3.2 million people out of poverty.²
- More than 67% of SNAP participants are families with children and almost 34% live in households with members who are elderly or have disabilities.⁴ More than 43% of participants are in working families.⁴
- While SNAP reduces the overall prevalence of food insecurity by as much as 30%, more than 37 million Americans, including more than half of households participating in SNAP, still live in households that struggle with food insecurity.^{5,6,7}
- The current COVID-19 pandemic is highlighting the importance of safety net programs, particularly the urgency to feed people during a health crisis.^{8,9}

Project Goals

The aim of this study was to capture the ways in which the SNAP disruption affected the food security, health, and wellbeing of California's SNAP participants. Although the monthly cycle of food insecurity among SNAP participants is well-documented, this study is believed to be the first to capture the short- and potential long-term effects a disruption of SNAP benefits had on households.

Methods

Researchers collaborated with community partners to host 4 focus groups, three in English and one in Spanish, with 26 low-income adults in four counties in California from February 28, 2019 to May 15, 2019. Counties were selected to include urban (Los Angeles, San Francisco), suburban (San Mateo), and rural areas (Tuolumne).



Figure 1: Selected counties for focus groups mapped above.

Results

Figure 2: Selected focus group participant characteristics (n = 26).

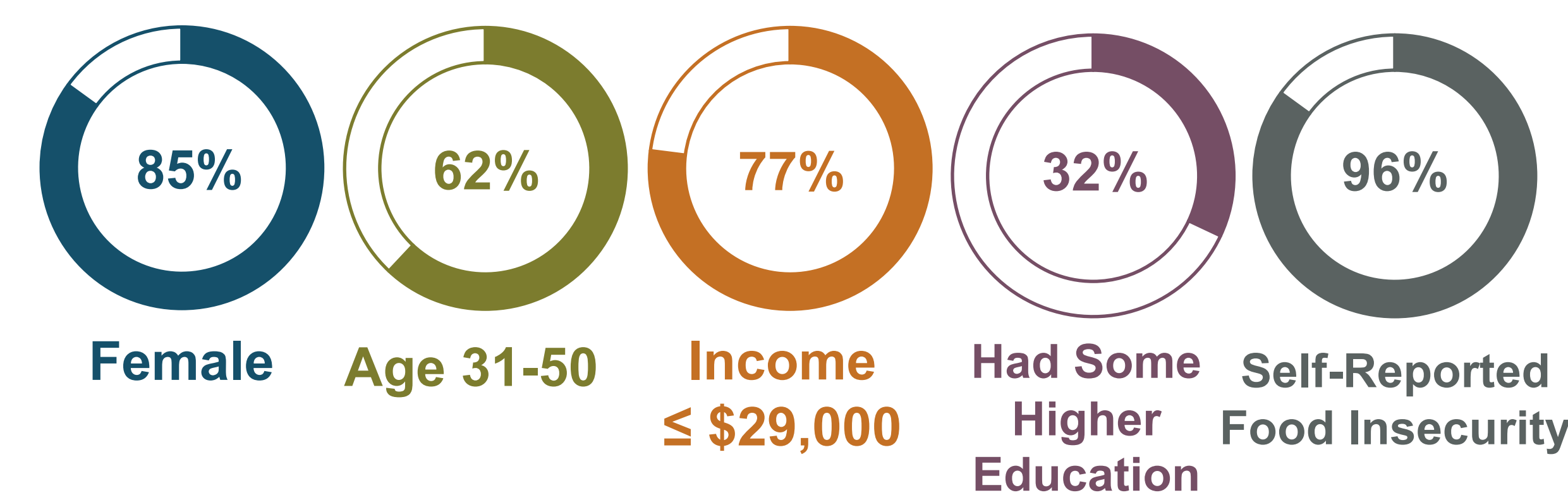


Table 1: Race/ethnicity of focus group participants (n = 26).

Race/Ethnicity	n (%)
White	11 (42)
Latinx	10 (38)
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	2 (8)
African American	1 (4)
Asian	1 (4)
Other	1 (4)

SNAP participants routinely struggle to secure an adequate, healthy diet.

Participants reported that the high costs of living, inadequate or low-wage employment and/or employment/disability status meant that they routinely faced food insecurity. While gratitude was expressed for SNAP, the sentiment expressed most frequently was that SNAP benefit levels are inadequate to meet participants' food needs.

You know, with our incomes, and especially with the rent is so high and our bills... it gets really stressful trying to be like, 'Okay, where's my next meal gonna come from? How am I going to feed my kids...'

When participants received benefits early they experienced initial relief, followed by hardship.

Having what felt like extra money in January led some participants to feel a sense of relief that they wouldn't go hungry in January. Some participants shared stories of doing things that many Americans likely take for granted: treating themselves or their children or eating the whole, healthy foods that enable them to feel well.

"You don't even think about it, [suddenly having extra money to buy food] is just a big stress relief..."

Participants reported negative experiences and that the shutdown shook their faith in the gov't.

The disruption resulted in many participants feeling more insecure about their SNAP benefits. They experienced confusion, fear, anxiety, and stress due to real uncertainty about whether they would receive future SNAP benefits.

I was worried that I needed to spend it ... I didn't know if they would take it away with the government shut down, so I had to spend the whole thing.

The disruption highlighted challenges in communications with SNAP offices.

Few participants reported being informed about the disruption in a timely manner, if at all.

But the communications for this welfare office... I have called them and called them and called them and you know, they won't return any phone calls... they don't want to talk to me. I don't know why, but maybe it's just the way they treat everybody.

SNAP Participant Recommendations

Participant recommendations focused on three main issues in which the SNAP program could be improved to better meet their needs and support their families:

- 1 Increase benefit levels.**
- 2 Better address cost-of-living and working by modifying eligibility determinations and benefit calculations.**
- 3 Improve customer service.**

Conclusions

The government shutdown leading to a disruption in timing of SNAP benefits caused harm to participants who are routinely struggling to feed themselves and their families. Taking care of people who rely on the safety net is a key responsibility of government. It is critical that the federal government functions as intended and continues providing SNAP benefits on time.

Policy Goals

- Establish policies to protect funding for social safety net programs like SNAP if future shutdowns occur.
- Implement participants' recommendations for SNAP.
- If we can continue to share voices and experiences of SNAP participants to all stakeholders involved in making SNAP policy decisions and those serving SNAP participants, this may encourage further research and drive policy change.

Acknowledgments

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