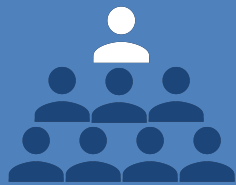




How SNAP Participants Experienced the 2018-19 Government Shutdown and SNAP Benefit Disruption

Why SNAP Matters

SNAP reaches **39,810,673** participants in the United States, or **12%** of the total population.² **(about 1 in 8 Americans)**



More than **68%** of SNAP participants live in **households with children.**³

Almost **33%** live in households with members who are **elderly or have disabilities.**³

More than **44%** are in **working families.**³



Nearly 1/3 of **US children** aged 4 years and younger participate in SNAP.⁴

SNAP lifted 3.2 million people out of poverty in the United States in 2018.⁵

The federal government shutdown disrupted SNAP benefit distribution.

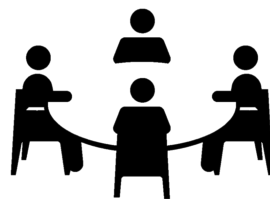
The government shutdown from December 22, 2018 to January 25, 2019-- the longest in U.S. history-- created an unprecedented disruption in issuance of SNAP benefits.¹ While most Americans realize the shutdown affected the employment of *thousands* of federal workers, fewer may recognize the impact it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

Due to the shutdown, SNAP participants received February benefits early, in mid-January, leaving a much-longer-than-usual gap (up to 40 days) before March benefits were issued.

We conducted a study to assess how the disruption impacted California's SNAP participants.

The Nutrition Policy Institute in partnership with UC Cooperative Extension Advisors conducted focus groups in English and Spanish with SNAP participants, to capture their experiences of the benefit disruption. We heard stories of routine deprivation and struggle that were exacerbated by the disruption.

This brief shares our findings. While it is a tremendous success that participants received SNAP benefits at all during the shutdown, it is critical for policy makers, service providers, and the public to understand that the SNAP benefit disruption felt devastating to SNAP participants.



Researchers collaborated with community partners - two food banks, an elementary school, and a homeless shelter - to host focus groups.



Four focus groups were held in February-March 2019 with low-income adults in four counties in California that included large urban, suburban, and rural areas.

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Link to full report: <http://bit.ly/NPI-r-112519>

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1. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/many-snap-households-will-experience-long-gap-between-monthly-benefits-even>
2. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>
3. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/a-closer-look-at-who-benefits-from-snap-state-by-state-fact-sheets#California>
4. Fernald, L., & Gosliner, W. (2019). Alternatives to SNAP: Global Approaches to Addressing Childhood Poverty and Food Insecurity. *AJPH*.
5. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2019/demo/p60-268.pdf>



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. Participants repeatedly talked about how food, especially healthy food, is too expensive and how difficult it is to balance food costs with other expenses. 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 February's benefits early (in mid-January) 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 run out of food in January. Some shared stories of doing things that many Americans likely take for granted: treating their children to favorite foods, sharing food with friends, or eating the healthy foods that enable them to feel good.

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

"That's what changed ... In these last two weeks, I had to take from the money we were saving to pay the rent, which had never happened."

Participants reported confusion, fear, and stress due to the shutdown and benefit disruption. Some reported losing faith in the government.

The disruption resulted in many participants feeling more insecure about their SNAP benefits, and some losing faith in the government. 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 shutdown, so I had to spend the whole thing."

"The news I heard said... that they were not going to give benefits anymore, and that was why they paid the month in advance... I thought that there was not going to be any help anymore..."

The disruption highlighted challenges in SNAP communications.

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

"I have called [the welfare office] 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 Participants' Recommendations

Participant recommendations focused on four 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 actual costs-of-living and working by modifying eligibility determinations and benefit calculations.**
- 3 Improve customer service.**
- 4 Do not disrupt SNAP benefits again.**



Conclusion

SNAP plays a critical role in reducing food insecurity and improving child and adult health, employment, and other outcomes. The government shutdown that disrupted the timing of SNAP benefits caused harm to participants who routinely struggle to feed themselves and their families. Providing support to people relying on the safety net is a key responsibility of government. It is critical that the federal government reliably provide SNAP benefits on time to prevent further harms to Americans experiencing poverty and food insecurity.