Does Limiting Choice in Food Assistance Programs Affect Dietary Quality Among School-Aged Children?

Phil Gleason, Mathematica Policy Research

Rethinking Food Assistance Policy:
New Experimental Evidence on Improving Food Security and Nutrition among Low-income Families and Implications for Policy
An APPAM Forum Co-Sponsored by Abt Associates
Key Design Decision for Food Assistance Programs

More Food Assistance

Limit Food Choice?

Yes

More Food Expenditure?

More and Better Food Intake?

Improved Food Security and Dietary Quality?

No

More Food Expenditure?

More and Better Food Intake?

Improved Food Security and Dietary Quality?
SNAP: Few Limits on Food Choice

More Food Assistance

Limit Food Choice?

No

More appealing to participants

But do they choose healthful foods?

More Food Expenditure?

More and Better Food Intake?

Improved Food Security and Dietary Quality?
WIC: Choice Limited to Specific Food Package

- More Food Assistance
  - Limit Food Choice?
    - Yes
      - More Food Expenditure?
        - More and Better Food Intake?
          - Improved Food Security and Dietary Quality?

Less choice may lead to less spending on food
But ensures that foods program provides will be healthful
SEBTC Offers Chance to Explore Tradeoff

6 sites used WIC delivery system in 2012

8 sites used SNAP delivery system in 2012

More Food Assistance

Limit Food Choice?

Yes

More Food Expenditure?

More and Better Food Intake?

Improved Food Security and Dietary Quality?

No

More Food Expenditure?

More and Better Food Intake?

Improved Food Security and Dietary Quality?
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Improved Food Security and Dietary Quality?

Do These Effects Differ???
Less Benefit Use Under Limited Choice

Percentage of Benefits Used: SNAP Sites

Percentage of Benefits Used: WIC Sites

- % Benefits Used
- % Benefits Did Not Use

[VALUE]
Smaller (Positive) Increase in Food Expenditures Under Limited Choice

Impacts on Monthly Food Expenditures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SNAP Sites</th>
<th>WIC Sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$582</td>
<td>$566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$596</td>
<td>$59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$59 Increase*  
$30 Increase*

* Treatment-control difference is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

Difference in impacts between WIC and SNAP sites is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.
No Significant Difference in Food Security Impacts

Impacts on Very Low Food Security Among Children (VLFS-C)

- **SNAP Sites**
  - Treatment: 6.9
  - Control: 10.1
  - -3.2 Pct. Point Impact*

- **WIC Sites**
  - Treatment: 5.8
  - Control: 8.7
  - -2.9 Pct. Point Impact*

* Treatment-control difference is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

Difference in impacts between WIC and SNAP sites is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level.
Favorable SEBTC Impacts on Children’s Consumption of Key Food Groups

### Overall Impacts: Key Foods
(daily cup/ounce equiv.)

- **Fruits & Vegetables**
  - Treatment: 3.1
  - Control: 2.7

- **Whole Grains**
  - Treatment: 2.2
  - Control: 1.7

- **Dairy**
  - Treatment: 2.5
  - Control: 2.3

*Note: Treatment values compared to Control values.*

### Overall Impacts: Added Sugars
(daily teaspoons)

- **Overall**
  - Treatment: VALUE
  - Control: VALUE
  - Change: **-0.2**

- **Sweetened Drinks**
  - Treatment: VALUE
  - Control: VALUE
  - Change: **-0.7***
Impacts Larger Under Limited Choice

Impacts on Key Foods: SNAP (daily cup/ounce equiv.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Group</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fruits &amp; Vegetables</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Grains</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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* Treatment-control difference is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

Impacts on Key Foods: WIC (daily cup/ounce equiv.)

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<th>Control</th>
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<tr>
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<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Grains</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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* Treatment-control difference is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

Differences in impacts between WIC and SNAP sites are statistically significant at the 0.01 level for each food group.
Impacts Larger Under Limited Choice

Impacts on Added Sugars: SNAP
(daily teaspoons)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sweetened Drinks</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>VALUE</td>
<td>VALUE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweetened Drinks</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td>VALUE</td>
<td>VALUE</td>
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Impacts on Added Sugars: WIC
(daily teaspoons)

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>VALUE</td>
<td>VALUE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweetened Drinks</td>
<td>-1.3*</td>
<td>VALUE</td>
<td>VALUE</td>
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Differences in impacts between WIC and SNAP sites are statistically significant at the 0.01 level for each food group.
Summary of Findings

- Summer food assistance led to improvements in children’s dietary outcomes
  - Increase in consumption of healthful foods
  - Reductions in added sugars from sweetened beverages

- Limiting food choice by offering assistance through WIC was associated with …
  - Larger positive impacts on children’s dietary outcomes
  - Similar impacts on food security

- …even though limiting choice was also associated with…
  - Less benefit use
  - Smaller increases in food expenditures