

SNAP Decisions: Uncovering decision processes to design Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) policy interventions that promote health

A Dissertation Proposal Presented to
The Faculty of the Heller School for Social Policy and Management
Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts
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The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) aims to reduce hunger by providing food-purchasing assistance to low-income households. Since SNAP was created, US population-level nutrition concerns have expanded from hunger to dietary quality and diet-related illnesses including obesity. Given SNAP's influence on food purchasing among low-income households at high risk for diet-related illness and poor nutritional intake, SNAP is a potential platform to promote dietary quality. However, more detailed, empirical analysis is needed to inform SNAP initiatives to promote healthy purchasing, specifically on how SNAP policy influences decision making and dietary quality, and how SNAP recipients make decisions about spending SNAP.

Aims: **1:** Develop a model of how the monthly SNAP benefit transfer cycle influences SNAP spending decision processes; **2:** Identify strategies used by SNAP recipients with children to make decisions about allocating SNAP versus other income/food sources; and **3:** Determine how SNAP recipients' and administrators' perspectives can inform SNAP intervention design.

Naturalistic Decision Theory (NDT), behavioral economic (BE) theory, and assets theory inform this dissertation. NDT frames SNAP spending as a context-dependent rational decision process. BE identifies specific tools for analyzing SNAP spending decision processes. Assets theory identifies food-purchasing resources to be examined at the individual and community levels.

This qualitative study design uses multiple methods and data sources. The study population is SNAP recipients with children, and a secondary study population is local/state-level SNAP administrators. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews (IDI), interactive process observation (IPO), and focus groups. Secondary sources including the US Census and Baltimore Food Environment Map will provide community-level data on participants' decision environments. Data will be analyzed through coding and memo writing, using a cognitive task analysis approach to identify relevant aspects of decision processes.

Results will be presented as three papers: (1) a process model and narrative; (2) an analytic description and matrix of common decision strategies; and (3) data-driven policy recommendations. This research can inform the design of state/local SNAP policy modifications, pilot trials, and national-level studies. It can also contribute to the literature on NDT and behavioral economics by providing *in situ* data on consumer decision-making.

Dissertation Committee:

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Proposal Hearing:

Wednesday, October 29, 2014

10:00am – 12:00pm

Heller School, Room 147