

Fueling the Future: Long-term Economic and Health Benefits of SNAP

OVERVIEW

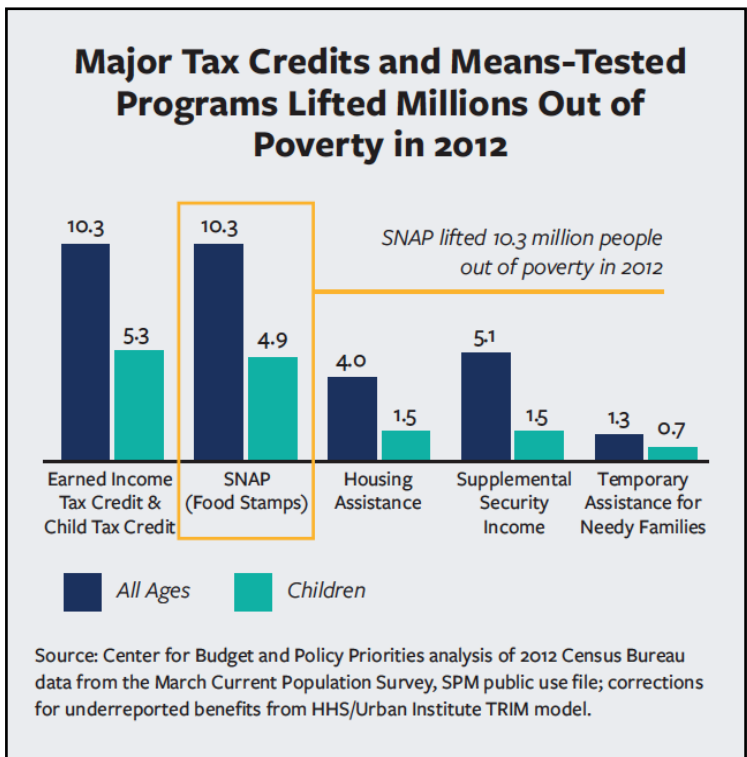
The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, is the largest anti-hunger program in America, with 46 million low-income people receiving modest sums they can use to purchase food. During the Great Recession, the program grew, as it was designed to – leading to calls for an overhaul.

In part because it is available to so many Americans, SNAP is difficult to evaluate. It is designed so that there is no “control group” of people who would be eligible but not receive the help, and there is little variation between states (or over time) to compare. Dr. Hilary Hoynes, a professor at the Goldman School of Public Policy at UC Berkeley, has stepped in to add information to the debate.

THE RESEARCH

Dr. Hoynes discovered that the Food Stamp Program was rolled out over 15 years in 3,000 counties more or less randomly. This gave her the opportunity to compare a world in which SNAP didn’t exist, and one where it did, isolating the difference the program made.

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This Research Highlight is a part of a series featuring research by Berkeley Food Institute Affiliated Faculty. The Berkeley Food Institute, based at the University of California, Berkeley, works to catalyze and support transformative changes in food systems. For more information, visit food.berkeley.edu.

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She and her coauthors had heard about the “fetal origins hypothesis” from epidemiologists: Studies of formerly prosperous, suddenly famine-stricken areas had shown that a pregnant mother’s nutrition could affect her child’s health outcomes for a lifetime. If a fetus is exposed to poor nutrition or too-few calories, its metabolism develops to be excessively efficient. When normalcy returns, the metabolism doesn’t reset, leading to hypertension, high blood pressure, and diabetes.

She theorized that the expansion of the safety net would have the opposite effect, even in less-extreme scenarios. And in fact, it did. The more years of childhood spent “exposed” to the Food Stamp Program, the better lifelong health outcomes people in her study experienced.

THE POLICY IMPACT

These findings greatly expanded the scope of the dollars-and-cents cost-benefit analysis of this crucial social program. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a major social policy think tank in Washington D.C., has cited Hoynes’ research in its widely read policy briefs and in Congressional testimony. Her research on SNAP and other safety-net programs has been featured in pieces in *The New York Times*’ Economix blog and its opinion page, *Washington Post*’s Wonkblog and *Salon*. She met with President Barack Obama and a small group of researchers in March 2015 to discuss the importance of the safety net.

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On the importance of SNAP research, Hoynes says, “I think SNAP is the most important program for low-income Americans. If you’re interested in health and nutrition and wellbeing, this program touches the most people. We’ve got to know what it does.”

LESSONS LEARNED

In her estimation, it took Dr. Hoynes about 15 years to start really talking to people involved in policymaking about her research. “Most academics get into the work for the science, not the policy,” she said. And there are few traditional incentives for academics to talk to people outside academia. Her advice is to find a nongovernmental organization that understands your work, knows that it’s high quality, and can help you share it. For Hoynes, the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities was that valued partner.

Additionally, in 2014 the California Endowment funded Dr. Hoynes to convene a meeting of SNAP policy experts from across the country to share research and develop solutions.

Featured Researcher:

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