Going hungry in America

Nutrition programmes feed more people than ever in the United States but, asks Suzy Frisch, are they helping participants to eat healthily?

Suzy Frisch

In the United States, 49 million Americans are food insecure, meaning that they lack access to enough food for an active, healthy life. That equates to about one in six people and includes nearly 16 million children. The government spends about $80bn (£47.5bn; €59bn) on its primary initiative, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programme (SNAP), to make sure people have enough food.

The SNAP debate

Although enrolling in SNAP has been found to reduce food insecurity, some recent studies question whether it goes far enough in improving participants’ diets. Overweight and obesity rates are higher among women and children in households that utilize SNAP benefits than among other low income people who don’t receive SNAP, reports a study of national dietary survey data by the Food Policy Research Center at the University of Minnesota.

Additionally, SNAP benefits do not substantially improve participants’ food security or dietary quality, according to a 2013 study in the Journal of Nutritional Education and Behavior. There was no meaningful improvement in the diets of Massachusetts SNAP participants during the three month study, yet there was a significant increase in their consumption of refined grains and no effect on their consumption of total calories or nutrients.

“We looked at 107 people who were in the same socioeconomic status, some who were on SNAP and some who weren’t,” said Eric Rimm, study coauthor and an associate professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health. “We wanted to see if they were using SNAP to make good choices. We found it didn’t help them buy more fruits and vegetables, and it was giving them more access to sweets and baked goods. It moved people to be less food insecure but it didn’t help them choose healthier food.”

It’s not as if SNAP doles out money and walks away, though. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) devotes one arm of the programme to education. The USDA, which runs SNAP and 14 other nutrition programmes, spends nearly $400 million annually on SNAP-Ed, officially called the Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Grant Program, to emphasize those twin goals. Today, SNAP serves record numbers—47 million people each month—with the primary goal of reducing hunger and food insecurity, says Kevin Concannon, USDA Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services. “It also has a very important impact on lifting millions of people out of poverty and mitigating the impact if they are in deep poverty,” he added. “We define the role of SNAP as responding to the crisis of people in the country who are hungry as well as people who are obese. We think of them as two sides of the same coin.”

And in reality, people on SNAP reflect the collective health and eating habits of Americans. US residents tend to eat more processed foods than anyone else in the world, in portions that have ballooned since the 1970s, Concannon says. The USDA’s Healthy Eating Index, which looks at consumption patterns and their alignment with dietary guidelines, gives Americans an average score of 58 out of 100. Low income people not enrolled in SNAP scored 51, and SNAP recipients scored 49.

Food support in the US

The United States has offered its poor citizens some form of food assistance consistently since 1961. Recipients of food stamps, as they were initially called, literally used government issued stamps to pay for food. The programme evolved in the 2000s to offer debit like cards for beneficiaries to use at participating retailers. It was renamed SNAP in 2008. The average person receives $133.07 in benefits, or less than $1.50 per person per meal, according to the USDA. Though SNAP is not intended to be recipients’ sole food support, about 20% of beneficiaries have no other income, says Ross Fraser, spokesman for Feeding America, the largest hunger relief charity in the US. Fifty percent of SNAP participants belong to households in extreme poverty, with income less than half of the federal poverty line of $23 550 for a family of four. Despite a 70% spike in participants between 2007 and 2011 during the recession, SNAP still effectively “moves people from
hunger to non-hunger, and it lifts many households out of poverty.” Fraser says.

SNAP has few restrictions on what people can purchase, with the exception of alcohol, cigarettes, nonfood items like soap or vitamins, or prepared foods. Even with endless choices, participants gravitate to processed foods because they cost much less than fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Fraser recalls talking with a woman whose husband lost a union coal mining job in Virginia’s Appalachian region. The only job he could find was working part time at a big box retailer making $8.10 an hour. They relied on SNAP to buy groceries. “She explained that because they were on food stamps, they can’t eat well,” he says. “When she goes to the grocery store the first things she buys are hot dogs, frozen French fries, and macaroni and cheese. She said, ‘The last thing I can ever afford is fresh produce.’”

The USDA has been making efforts to change that. It is widening SNAP recipients’ access to healthy and fresh foods and teaching people how to shop for and cook with more nutritious ingredients. It offers wide ranging, evidence based curricula for various audiences, from low income seniors to low income children from preschool to high school. Each state receives some SNAP-Ed funding and administers its own programmes.

But educators have a big mountain to climb. “What we’ve seen is that people on SNAP are bad off. Not surprisingly, they are people who have one or several jobs, several kids, or they are unemployed,” says Rimm. “There are many stressors in this population and a lot of the time, there is a lot of bad food being purchased with SNAP dollars.”

**Food 101—educating to eat**

There are many ways to encourage SNAP recipients to eat better, from restricting what they can buy to offering incentives. And thanks to the Agricultural Act of 2014 or so called “farm bill,” SNAP-Ed will now have $100 million to promote healthy eating among participants. Those dollars could go a long way toward addressing obesity and poor nutrition in the US, says Lisa Harnack, a professor of epidemiology and community health at the University of Minnesota, who coauthored the Food Policy Research Center study.

“My hunch is that it will take multiple things together to get people to move in the right direction,” says Harnack. “We need people to be educated about what a healthy diet looks like and why it’s important, and we need incentives in place to make those choices.”

One potential fix would make SNAP more like the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programme, which more tightly regulates what participants may buy with its funds. They may purchase infant formula and baby food, milk, fruits and vegetables, meats and other proteins, whole grains, and more. Items like soda pop and white bread are not allowed.

It’s a controversial idea, though. “People will argue on both sides to death,” Rimm says. “Some of it is technology, and some say, ‘How dare we stare over people’s shoulders and tell them what they can eat and cannot eat. But with $2bn to $4bn of the $80bn in SNAP being spent on sugar sweetened beverages, not telling them what they can and cannot drink means they are using a free subsidy to buy soda. We’re setting people up to fail and setting children up to fail. It’s detrimental to people’s health.”

A different approach rewards SNAP participants when they buy healthy foods. The USDA recently ran a test programme in Massachusetts called the Healthy Incentives Pilot, in which participants received 30¢ in SNAP benefits for every dollar they spent on fruits and vegetables, up to $60 monthly. A preliminary evaluation found that participants receiving the incentive ate one fifth of a cup—or 25% more—fruits and vegetables than those who didn’t.

The USDA’s SNAP Education and Evaluation Study reported that other programmes worked when they educated low income students or seniors about eating more fruits and vegetables, and then coupled the programmes with take home materials for parents and caregivers. Children increased their fruit and vegetable consumption at home by a quarter to one third of a cup and were more likely to choose low fat or fat free milk. Seniors added a half cup of produce.

To encourage people to buy more produce, the USDA launched a pilot farmers’ market programme. Grants helped more than 4200 markets and farm stands to install card readers that accept SNAP and WIC payments. “We’ve been on a mission to increase access to farmers’ markets,” says Concannon. “They have fewer processed foods, more fruits and vegetables, and their dollars go back to the local economy.”

Other suggestions for improving SNAP include increasing benefits to pay for more nutritious foods, making SNAP payments biweekly instead of monthly to encourage recipients to buy fresh items throughout the month, and allowing retailers to offer discounts when SNAP participants purchase healthier items.

**Other directions to create change**

Some believe that education certainly helps, but more effort needs to go into changing the overall US food culture. “There is robust literature that shows that those types of approaches alone won’t create change,” says Michele Polacsek, an associate professor of public health at the University of New England, which administers Maine’s SNAP-Ed programmes. “We also need policies, programmes, and environments that support people making healthy choices in their lives.”

For starters, that might mean working with grocery stores to stop marketing junk food to SNAP recipients right after they receive their monthly benefits, Polacsek says. Others would work with food pantries on securing more fruits and vegetables to give out.

“Unless you make it easy and affordable for people,” the programmes aren’t as effective, says Polacsek. “Even going to a farmers’ market is more work when you’re working three jobs. That’s why I go back to making this about policies and the environment, too. We need to make it automatic for people, and we haven’t been able to do that yet.”

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