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Rutgers SNAP GAP Project: Community-Based Participatory Research on SNAP Enrollment

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Abstract

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Keywords

supplemental nutrition assistance program, food access, school-based research, food security

Disciplines

Public Administration | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration | Public Policy

Presenter Information

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RUTGERS SNAP GAP PROJECT: COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH ON SNAP ENROLLMENT

Abstract

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is critical in achieving food security, yet many eligible individuals do not enroll due to stigma and various perceived barriers. Food access barriers can be influenced by cultural and social factors. Understanding these aspects helps in tailoring food security programs and interventions to respect cultural values and practices. This project worked to elevate community voices across the state of New Jersey about their experiences and perspectives of SNAP. The SNAP Gap is the difference between who is eligible for and who is participating in SNAP. The objectives of this exploratory study were to identify the reasons why some New Jersey families who may qualify for SNAP are not enrolled in it and propose solutions to increase SNAP enrollment. Working with 6 school districts across the state, the team conducted 19 focus groups with SNAP-eligible caregivers of school-aged children. Additionally, five Department of Human Services administrators were interviewed to learn their ideas on how to increase SNAP enrollment. Focus group findings highlighted issues with the SNAP application process and lack of awareness of the benefits SNAP offers. Interviews with SNAP administrators confirmed challenges in the application process and communication barriers. Based on concerns raised by study participants, and successful existing strategies, the researchers recommended prioritizing promotion of SNAP in schools, streamlining the application process, prioritizing the use of technology to submit the SNAP application and providing updates to the community on any changes about SNAP requirements. This study confirmed that schools are important locations to engage in SNAP promotion. Researchers continue to work with the New Jersey Office of the Food Security Advocate to share study findings to support systems change.

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INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity in New Jersey

In 2021, 8.8 % of New Jersey residents experienced food insecurity, meaning just over 810,000 residents did not have access to enough food for an active, healthy life (Feeding America, 2021a). In the same year, this rate was higher among children, with 9.8% of New Jersey children experiencing food insecurity (Feeding America, 2021b). In comparison, at the national level, 10.4 and 13% of the population and children, respectively, experienced insecurity in 2021 (Feeding America, 2021c, d).

Overall, New Jersey has lower rates of food insecurity in comparison to the United States. However, food insecurity does not affect all geographic areas of New Jersey equally. Six of the twenty-one New Jersey counties have overall food insecurity rates higher than the national average, and seven New Jersey counties have childhood food insecurity rates that are higher than the national average. These counties include Atlantic, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Essex, Hudson, and Passaic (New Jersey Department of Health, 2022).

Longstanding inequities among racial and ethnic groups, in addition to geographical location, affect rates of food insecurity in New Jersey. In 2021, 14% of Black and 18% of Latino households experienced food insecurity compared to 5% of White and 3% of Asian households in New Jersey (Food Research and Action Center, 2022).

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

The first food stamp program began in 1939 to connect Americans facing high levels of unemployment with unmarketable food surpluses. That program lasted four years. A similar food stamp program was piloted from 1961 until the Food Stamp Act was signed in 1964 establishing a permanent program. At that time, it was estimated that the Food Stamp Program would reach 4 million people and cost \$360 million (USDA, 2024a).

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, is now the largest federal nutrition assistance program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service and was allocated \$111.2 billion in Federal Fiscal Year 2023 (FY 2023 Budget Summary, 2023). SNAP provides assistance to households experiencing financial hardship by supplementing their grocery budget enabling households to afford nutritious food essential to support health and well-being (USDA, 2024b).

In 2022, 1 in 11 New Jersey residents (9%) were enrolled in SNAP. Of the 857,300 New Jersey residents receiving these benefits, more than 63% were in families with children, over 47% included family members who were older adults or disabled, and over 44% were in working families (New Jersey, 2023). SNAP is administered by the New Jersey Department of Human Services statewide and managed locally by each county's Board of Social Services (BSS).

The SNAP Gap is the difference between who is eligible for and who is participating in SNAP. The most current data from 2018 shows a nationwide average of 18% of those eligible missing out on benefits (FRAC, 2024). New Jersey was slightly over the national average at 19% overall, with the rate for the working poor jumping to 28% (FRAC, 2024). The working poor are those eligible for benefits that live in a household in which at least one person earns an income (FRAC, 2024).

Rutgers SNAP Gap Project

Rutgers Cooperative Extension, in collaboration with the New Jersey Office of the Food Security Advocate, conducted an exploratory study to assess the perceived barriers and motivators to applying for the SNAP among families participating in the Free and Reduced-Price School Meal programs. The Rutgers SNAP Gap Project explored the relationship between SNAP and school meals by collecting voices of residents with lived experience through focus groups. Additionally, the Rutgers SNAP Gap project team invited the input of county SNAP administrators to learn about ways schools can support their efforts.

The primary objective of this project was to better understand why New Jersey families, whose children may qualify for SNAP, are not enrolled in the food assistance program. The second project objective was to develop recommendations on how schools can increase SNAP awareness and participation among parents and/or caregivers while also decreasing stigma.

This project directly engaged food-insecure individuals to better understand the perceived barriers to participation in New Jersey food assistance programs. Through collecting personal stories around food insecurity and pairing these stories with practical information about how to participate in SNAP, the study aimed to understand the perception of SNAP and develop a plan to stimulate participation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Rutgers Cooperative Extension contracted with The Melior Group, a PeopleMetrics company, to conduct focus groups of caregivers and interviews with county-level SNAP administrators. The procedures were approved by the Rutgers Institutional Review Board (Protocol # 2023000458). In this section, each study will be discussed separately.

Caregiver Focus Groups

1. Participants and recruitment.

Schools were selected based on a wide geographic reach, ethnic and racial diversity, varying SNAP eligibility and participation, and varying rates of free and reduced meals participation. Figure 1 provides a summary of demographic information of each participating school compared to the state.

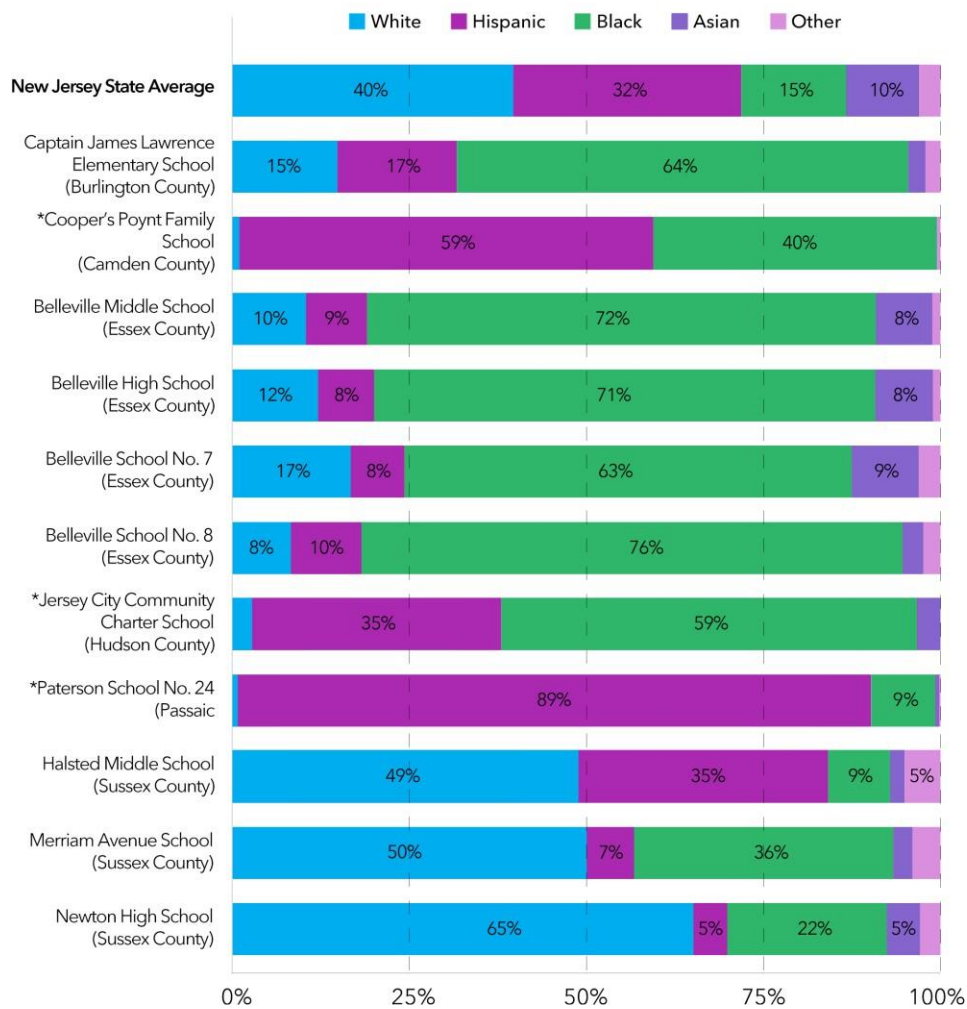


Figure 1: Enrolled Student's Demographics in Focus Schools Compared to New Jersey: 2021-2022. Source: NJDHS, 2021-22 Data. (Values less than 5% are not labeled).

*School has community eligibility to receive Free and/or Reduced Lunch.

Between April and June 2023, researchers conducted 19 focus groups with a total of 113 participants in 6 New Jersey counties. Table 1 provides a breakdown of language and format. Caregivers (including parents and guardians) were recruited by the individual schools that their children attended, which hosted their session. Eligibility was determined by a) being enrolled in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) program and b) not being currently enrolled in SNAP. Participating schools sent flyers and emails to their listserv of eligible families to recruit participants to either in-person or online focus groups and to complete a scheduling questionnaire. Participants were selected on a first-come-first-served basis. Each participant received a financial incentive for their participation in the form of a \$175.00 gift card.

Table 1: Number of focus groups and participants by language and county.

County	English		Spanish		Total	
	Focus Groups	Participants	Focus Groups	Participants	Focus Groups	Participants
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Burlington County	3 (20)	24 (30)	-	-	3 (16)	24 (21)
Camden County	3 (20)	14 (18)	-	-	3 (16)	14 (12)
Essex County	2 (13)	8 (10)	-	-	2 (11)	8 (7)
Hudson County	4 (27)	16 (20)	1 (25)	6 (18)	5 (26)	22 (19)
Passaic County	-	-	3 (75)	28 (82)	3 (16)	28 (25)
Sussex County	3 (20)	17 (22)	-	-	3 (16)	17 (15)
Total	15 (100)	79 (100)	4 (100)	34 (100)	19 (100)	113 (100)

2. Procedure.

The focus groups were led by a senior PeopleMetrics researcher with a Rutgers researcher present to oversee the consent and interview process and, in some cases, answer questions from the participants. All participants provided written and verbal consent prior to beginning the focus group. The median focus group length was 77.5 minutes, with a range from 64 to 91 minutes. All sessions were recorded and transcribed, and sessions conducted in Spanish were also translated and transcribed into English. Focus group moderators followed a discussion guide, in English or Spanish, to direct the focus groups through four major themes: SNAP awareness and understanding, where to find information about SNAP, SNAP registration experiences, and school support for families. Questions directed participants to share personal stories about how they have learned about SNAP, what are the benefits and drawbacks to the program, comparing SNAP to other benefit programs, and how they felt about schools helping families for SNAP benefits.

County SNAP Administrator Interviews

1. Participants and recruitment.

The research team conducted three online and two in-person semi-structured qualitative interviews with seven county SNAP administrators. These administrators were identified for participation by the head of each participating county's social services office and invited to participate by the research team.

The interviews were conducted between April and June 2023. A senior PeopleMetrics researcher led each interview, with at least one Rutgers research member present. All participants provided written and verbal consent prior to beginning each interview. Each session lasted between 34-51 minutes, with a median of 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

2. Procedure.

The semi-structured qualitative interview protocol began with questions about the participants' tenure and role in the county office, then asked about questions regarding SNAP applications, including the process for enrolling and how it might be improved. They were then asked about how schools currently assist with SNAP and how they might be able to better do so in the future. Examples of questions include:

- How well does the enrollment process work, in your opinion?
- Please walk me through the process of getting someone on SNAP.
- Moving forward, in your opinion, what can be done to improve the enrollment process?
- Ideally, what role COULD schools play in enrolling families in SNAP? What could they do to help you make this happen?
- How would you describe your relationship with the schools?
- If you had a magic wand and could change any part of the process to make it easier to get people enrolled in SNAP, what would you change? Why?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Rutgers team originally grouped the focus group discussion questions into 5 categories (SNAP Awareness & Need, Access to SNAP Information, SNAP Registration Experience & Barriers, SNAP Benefits & Utilization, and School Support). The Melior Group's themed findings align with those categories, identifying comments that were most frequently voiced while also showing the range of perspectives participants shared. In the focus groups, participants were asked to navigate to the NJ SNAP website and share comments about usability. The report by Melior Group was aligned with the categories of topics for the focus groups and interviews, with the addition of the NJ SNAP website review.

Awareness and understanding of SNAP varied throughout the focus groups of caregivers with lived experiences. Several participants indicated that they were not familiar with SNAP and none of the participants were aware of the new \$95 monthly SNAP benefit minimum. It is important to note that the New Jersey \$95 monthly minimum benefit became effective in March 2023 and the focus groups took place between April and June of 2023. Many participants lacked clarity around the SNAP application process and the benefits of receiving SNAP assistance. Only a few participants said they learned about SNAP through professionals (e.g., healthcare providers, school professionals) in their communities. Most information came to participants through word of mouth in the community and from family members.

Some participants who had never previously applied for SNAP benefits in New Jersey expressed that they do not want to go through the SNAP application process because they had heard about poor experiences from family and friends. Many participants also expressed concerns that the application was intrusive, requiring a great deal of personal information and documents from others, such as landlords, employers, or ex-partners. Those who have applied for SNAP benefits in New Jersey indicated that they often received written communications from their Board of Social Services (BSS) about their application with very little lead time or after the scheduled interview appointment.

Other concerns were raised about experiences at the BSS office. Many focus group participants expressed feeling vulnerable and, at times, humiliated when entering their local BSS office, citing a challenging and strained experience. Applicants experienced spending excessive time in their county BSS office without resolving their SNAP application-related issues.

Some mentioned they had received mixed messages from different staff about what was needed to complete their application. Long wait times for determining household eligibility was also a concern for focus group participants. Spanish speaking participants indicated that it was difficult to find or work with translation services.

When asked about the process from the SNAP applicants' point of view, SNAP administrators indicated that the Federal Poverty Level guidelines are too restrictive based on the cost of living in New Jersey. SNAP administrators also expressed concerns about application review backlogs and staffing when discussing the application process. The expiring federal administrative waivers from the pandemic created some confusion and frustration as guidelines were constantly shifting and the BSS staff needed to be aware of changes.

Administrators suggested that updated internal systems that communicate with each other and provide access to up-to-date electronic verification documents would streamline the application process from their end. Other concerns include language and comprehension barriers, delays in mailing in verification documents, and difficulties with completing the online application.

CONCLUSIONS

The proposed conclusions and solutions presented here are opportunities to improve the application system and administration of SNAP benefits in New Jersey. These improvements were identified based on this study that included focus groups with caregivers and interviews with SNAP administrators from six participating counties. It is important to note that these proposed solutions will require additional resources and capacity and should not necessarily be the burden of the county BSS offices. While this was an exploratory study and not meant to be generalizable, the findings did find recurring themes.

First, it is recommended to increase SNAP promotion and ensure all outreach is accurate. It is suggested to continue to prioritize streamlining the New Jersey SNAP website information and functionality and to encourage partner organizations to remove outdated information about SNAP from their websites. Social media utilization should be continued to promote SNAP services, updates, and requirements. County BSS offices can partner with community organizations to disseminate SNAP information to community members. Finally, initiatives that create awareness about hunger and food security in a stigma-free way should be prioritized.

Streamlining the SNAP application process may encourage community members to apply. County offices can increase the number of staff dedicated to promoting SNAP and supporting the application process, as appropriate. It was reported that some counties authorize overtime to help reduce the backlog of applications. Temporary state funding for counties with high backlogs may streamline the SNAP application review process and allow counties to catch up on their accumulated applications. Additionally, if verification document requirements can be reviewed at the state and federal level to identify ways to reduce the requirements, there may be ways to reduce the amount of time required to process applications and reduce the back and forth between BSS and applicants. It may be helpful to review and consider the WIC enrollment processes and best practices. In all groups, there were participants who expressed positive experiences with the WIC enrollment process.

With proper resources and training, schools can be great community partners to increase SNAP promotion in stigma-free ways. Schools can include SNAP marketing materials with meal applications and other school communications, such as email newsletters, social media posts, Back to School Nights, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, and school events geared towards caregivers. These materials should include information such as the New Jersey SNAP website, an application link and/or QR code, eligibility guidelines, verification document requirements,

process timelines, and the local authorized SNAP Navigator agency for direct assistance. Schools can hold events where SNAP Navigators and others can be present to explain the benefits of SNAP and the application process. Finally, schools can send out information regarding scheduled SNAP Navigator visits to the school, with opportunities for parents and/or caregivers to sign up for individual private meetings with SNAP Navigators.

Rutgers has been funded for the 2023-2024 school year to continue this research with additional schools across New Jersey. In addition to the caregiver focus groups, the research team will be interviewing school administrators about SNAP promotion and surveying school staff to understand their perceptions of SNAP. Schools will also be asked to pilot methods to promote SNAP in stigma free ways to their communities.

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