

Double Up Food Bucks and Hunger



Fair Food Network works at the intersection of food systems, sustainability, and social equity to develop solutions that support farmers, strengthen local economies, and increase access to healthy food—especially in our most underserved communities. Fair Food Network’s Double Up Food Bucks program provides SNAP program participants with matching dollars to buy additional produce when they spend their federal nutrition benefits on locally grown fruits and vegetables. The Double Up program began in five farmers markets in 2009 and has since expanded to more than 150 sites across the state including farmers markets, mobile markets, food share programs, and grocery stores. These field reports look at program evaluation data through a variety of lenses and discuss their policy implications.

Reports from the Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) and the National Commission on Hunger confirm that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) does an excellent job of averting deep and widespread hunger but also that it cannot ensure participants’ optimal nutrition.^{1,2}

Fair Food Network’s Double Up Food Bucks healthy food incentive program provides low-income shoppers an additional \$20 per day incentive to buy produce when they use their SNAP benefits on locally grown fruits and vegetables at participating farmers markets and grocery stores. At the most basic level such healthy food incentive efforts are anti-hunger programs because they increase the food buying power of low-income individuals who might otherwise be hungry.

Preliminary results from a study analyzing transaction data of Double Up participants in Detroit in 2012 and 2013 found that the program reached the poorest SNAP shoppers.³ We believe that this is a crucial finding as we understand more about the connection between hunger and diet-related illness and the destructive cycles of hunger and poor health that can trap people in poverty.

Many factors influence food consumption decisions, but Fair Food Network’s experience with the Double Up Food Bucks healthy food incentive program and similar efforts around the country indicate that produce incentives can successfully enhance the benefit of the SNAP program by reducing hunger while also improving nutrition.⁴

Kate Fitzgerald for Fair Food Network

“(Double Up Food Bucks) just stretches my food budget so much more. I find myself eating a lot more fruits and vegetables than I might have...”

– Double Up Focus Group Participant, Detroit

THE ECONOMICS OF WHY HUNGER MATTERS

The challenges of hunger and food insecurity are complicated in the United States with the seeming paradox of millions of families that are overfed but undernourished. Even as the country pulls out of the Great Recession, more than 45 million people depended on monthly SNAP benefits in 2015. To provide some context, that is more than the entire population of California and about equal to the number of people who live in Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, and Pennsylvania combined. Less visible are the almost seven million Americans who do not have enough of any kind of food to eat. There are as many hungry people in the United States as the total population of Washington State.⁵

Poverty forces individuals to make tough choices that can have long-term effects on their individual futures and on our collective economic potential. Rates of chronic diseases associated with diet are exploding in the United States and the incidence of these are highest among poor Americans. According to Bread for the World, the immediate health-related cost of hunger and food insecurity in the United States exceeded \$160 billion in 2014.⁶

A key problem for low-income families is that even with SNAP benefits they do not always have enough money to buy food for the whole month. The average American spends about \$50 a week on food while the average SNAP benefit for an individual is \$29 a week.⁷ This leaves a \$20 per week food spending gap, which helps explain why roughly 80 percent of SNAP benefits are redeemed within two weeks of receiving them. Research shows that SNAP recipients consume between 10 to 25 percent fewer calories as the month progresses.⁸ In one California study, insufficient money to buy food was associated with a 27 percent increase in hospital admissions for low blood sugar among low-income adults.⁹

When families run out of food they turn to food pantries. According to a 2013 Feeding America survey, 84 percent of the low-income households with children that they served reported that they purchased junk food even though they knew it was not nutritious but because they had to provide enough calories to make their children feel full.¹⁰ Hungry and undernourished children do not learn, are more likely to get in trouble in school, and to develop diet-related diseases.¹¹ This is a cause for deep concern at a time when almost half of SNAP participants are children under the age of 18.¹²

Double Up produce incentives can help by filling SNAP families’ “hunger gap” while simultaneously increasing the consumption of nutritious produce and stimulating local economies by sparking demand for fruits and vegetables.

THE DOUBLE UP STORY IN DETROIT

University of Michigan researchers have been analyzing transaction data for almost 12,000 SNAP shoppers—almost five percent of all SNAP households in the region—who used Double Up Food Bucks at eight Detroit farmers markets in 2012 and 2013. The researchers led by Dr. Alicia Cohen also conducted seven focus groups with SNAP shoppers who had used the program with the goal to understand the challenges participants faced accessing food, the strategies they adopted to achieve the best nutrition with limited means, how they felt about the Double Up program, and what they thought could be done to improve it.¹³

Preliminary data show that 90 percent of Double Up participants in Detroit had annual household income of less than 100 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and were poorer than the area’s SNAP population as a whole. Among focus group participants, almost 40 percent usually or always worried about having enough money to buy food. Thirty percent reported that they were in fair or poor health, 41 percent were overweight, 27 percent had diabetes, and 27 percent

“I didn’t know what bok choy was...but once I started I got hooked.”

– Double Up Focus Group Participant, Detroit

had hypertension.¹⁴ These SNAP shoppers reported regularly having to make trade-offs between more expensive healthier foods and having enough to eat at all. They stretched their limited food dollars by shopping at sales, using coupons, buying in bulk, and preserving food.

These consumers were worried about their health and worked hard to ensure that their diets were as nutritious as possible. More than half had shopped at a participating farmers market six or more times during the season, which was impressive considering the transportation barriers some faced.

Studies consistently show that shoppers of all income levels are motivated by the same things: price, taste, quality, selection, environment, and convenience with low-income shoppers much more sensitive to price. Double Up program participants in Detroit talked about the importance of having additional food dollars to spend and also emphasized the benefits the farmers markets provided including high-quality fruits and vegetables, wide product selection that allowed them to try new foods, and a positive environment and shopping experience. They liked participating in market activities, sometimes with their children, and the opportunities to forge relationships with the vendors. They also talked about feeling good that the money they spent helped support the farmers and stayed in the local economy.

THE FOOD INSECURITY NUTRITION INCENTIVE GRANTS PROGRAM

Based on the positive results of pilot SNAP produce incentive programs around the country, the 2014 Farm Bill established the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) program at the USDA.¹⁵ This competitive grants program provides supports projects that incentivize SNAP shoppers to purchase fruits and vegetables. The goal is to allow existing projects to reach scale and to seed new work. The program allows practitioners to test different approaches to incentive delivery, to experiment with new technologies, to replicate proven models, and to study the impact incentives have on SNAP participants' consumption of healthy produce.

In April 2015, Fair Food Network received a five million dollar grant, which was matched with private funding. Fair Food Network used the feedback from the Detroit focus groups and years of participant surveys to guide the organization's plans for the \$10 million investment in Double Up in Michigan.

The funds will be used to better serve SNAP participants by expanding the program to more farmers markets and grocery store locations across Michigan so it's easier to use, and supporting new technology and other innovations.

In participating grocery stores, shoppers earn Double Up dollars when they use their SNAP benefits to purchase Michigan-grown fresh fruits and vegetables. The incentive dollars can be used for any kind of fresh produce. Requiring the initial SNAP purchase be used on Michigan produce maintains Double Up's strong connection to local agriculture and extending the program benefits year round as shoppers use their incentive dollars to purchase any fresh produce in the store.

Fair Food Network is testing various transaction technologies to ensure program integrity and minimize any stigma customers might feel using Double Up. The goal is to find approaches that are cost effective, secure, user-friendly for vendors and customers, and that can capture the information necessary to assess the program's impact on shopping behavior.

“Where I work, it’s 15 miles away and it takes about two and a half hours to get there on the bus and two and a half hours to get back on the bus... So I’m not only working my five or six hour shift but it literally takes five or six hours and by that time I’m ready to go to bed.”

– Double Up Focus Group Participant, Detroit



CONCLUSION

Reports from the Council of Economic Advisors and the National Hunger Commission reaffirm that the SNAP program is a strong and crucially important food safety net. They highlight the connections between poverty, hunger, and good nutrition, and encourage careful experimentation with new ideas to enhance its efficacy.

Fair Food Network's experience and careful external research indicates that the Double Up Food Bucks' approach incentivizing nutritious produce purchases among SNAP participants is an effective way to both reduce hunger and support healthy diets.

Low-income American families should not have to choose between being hungry and being healthy. Implemented well, SNAP local produce incentive programs are an effective way to ensure families do not have to make that choice. Creating a market connection between farmers to consumers deepens the impact by injecting food dollars into the local farm economy and fostering a strong and resilient local civic culture.

¹ Council of Economic Advisers report: https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/SNAP_report_final_nonembargo.pdf

² National Commission on Hunger report: http://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/hungercommission/20151216222324/https://hungercommission.rti.org/Portals/0/SiteHtml/Activities/FinalReport/Hunger_Commission_Final_Report.pdf

³ Cohen, AJ, Lachance L, Hesterman OB, Bair RC, Noonan G, Zick SM. "Utilization of a SNAP Incentive Program for the Purchase of Fruits and Vegetables at Detroit Farmers Markets." Conference presentation at the American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 2014.

⁴ Block, JP, Subramanian SV (2015) Moving Beyond "Food Deserts": Reorienting United States Policies to Reduce Disparities in Diet Quality. *PLoS Med* 12(12): e10001914. Doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001914

⁵ <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-security-and-nutrition-assistance.aspx>

In 2006 USDA started using new definitions to describe the range of levels of food insecurity in the U.S. Food insecurity is defined as lacking dependable and consistent access to food. Very low food security means that at least one member of a household missed meals as a result of insufficient resources for food. See more detailed descriptions here: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>

⁶ Bread for the World Institute 2015 Hunger Report. Estimating the Health-Related Costs of Food Insecurity and Hunger by John T Cook and Ana Paula Poblacion. Available here: <http://www.bread.org/about-bread-world-institute>

⁷ <http://hungerreport.org/2016/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/HR2016-Executive-Summary.pdf>

⁸ Seligman HK, Bolger AF, Guzman D, Lopez A, Bibbins-Domingo K (2015) Exhaustion of Food Budgets at Months End and Hospital Admissions for Hypoglycemia. *Health Affairs* doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.2013.0096Health Aff January 2014 vol. 33 no. 1116-123

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <http://www.feedingamerica.org/about-us/about-feeding-america/annual-report/2015-feeding-america-annual.pdf>

¹¹ Hickson M, deCuba SE, Weiss I, Donofrio G, Cook J. Too Hungry to Learn: Food Insecurity and School Readiness, Part I of II MA: Children's Health-Watch, Boston Medical Center; 2013

¹² Cohen, AJ, Lachance L, Hesterman OB, Bair RC, Zick SM. "Barriers and Facilitators to Use of a SNAP Incentive Program at Detroit Farmers Market: A Qualitative Evaluation." Conference presentation at the American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 2014.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <http://nifa.usda.gov/program/food-insecurity-nutrition-incentive-fini-grant-program>