

Policy 360-Episode 68-SNAP Benefits Study - Transcript

Kelly Brownell (KB): Hello and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. If you're a regular listener, you'll know that we are in the midst of a series of conversations on nutrition policy and childhood. Today we're talking about an intriguing new study that shows a connection between when low-income families receive supplemental nutrition, or SNAP assistance, and student test scores. The study is believed to be the first to show a connection between benefits of this sort and academic performance. The authors of the study are with me today. Anna Gassman-Pines is an Associate Professor of Public Policy, Psychology, and Neuroscience at Duke University. She's also an affiliate of the Center for Child and Family Policy here at Duke. Welcome, Anna.

Anna Gassman-Pines (AGP): Thank you very much for having me.

KB: And our other guest is Laura Bellows, who is a doctoral student at the Sanford School of Public Policy. Welcome, Laura.

Laura Bellows (LB): Thanks for having me.

KB: Anna, let's start with you. First, let's talk about SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. How big is the program and how many children use it?

AGP: The program serves 42 million low-income Americans. And about a third of the recipients are children. That's a huge reach. There are millions of children across the United States who are receiving SNAP benefits.

KB: Who gets the benefits?

AGP: So, SNAP benefits are available for low-income families. The easiest way to think about that is families whose income falls below the poverty line will be eligible for SNAP.

KB: Okay, and how much does the typical family get in benefits?

AGP: The typical household receives \$268 per month in benefits. SNAP benefits are hugely important for family wellbeing. They are an incredibly important source of economic support for families. So, there are estimates showing that they lift over a million children out of poverty every year. And, importantly, they're also a strong source of support for child health.

KB: And, I know from previous podcasts that we've recorded with other visitors that early childhood nutrition experiences are really an important predictor of a number of outcomes in children going forward. So, that makes it even more important. Not only in children getting fed, but it's- that the feeding is then supporting a number of their important, basic biological and cognitive systems.

AGP: That's right. So, access to nutrition early in life is important, not only for health at that time, but it can have effects later on as children age, even into adulthood.

KB: Yeah, I've heard it described as a "life sentence"- that malnourishment during critical periods of development, even pre-conception potentially creates deficits that are very hard to repair later in life. So, one of the important reasons why a study like this is really important for the world to know about. So, let's talk about the study itself. Laura, could you describe what the study was and how it worked?

LB: Sure. So, we were interested in how the timing of SNAP benefit receipt affect children's contemporaneous, academic outcomes. So, North Carolina has a very interesting benefit issuance schedule. So, in most states families receive SNAP once a month, and most families spend the majority of that benefit within 2 weeks, which is why we were interested in looking at this topic, because folks, unfortunately, exhaust their benefit very quickly. So, in North Carolina, the schedule is such that it happens on the 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th, 11th, 13th, 15th, 17th, 19th, and 21st of the month, so there's a nice spread. And then, also, the way that the day on which your SNAP is received by you is determined, the way that that day is determined, is based on the last digit of the head of household's social security number, which is, essentially, randomly-assigned. So, we don't think that people who receive on the 3rd of the month are any different, really, from folks who are receiving on the 21st of the month. The only difference is this, sort of, last digit of their social security number which, again, is not correlated with other characteristics about those people.

KB: How old were the children that you were studying?

LB: So, we were looking at test-score outcomes for children in grades 3 through 8. So, in North Carolina, as in all other states, children are required to take math and reading tests during 3rd through 8th grades.

KB: Okay, so these standardized tests are all through the state?

LB: M-hm.

KB: Alright. And, Anna, what were the results of the study?

AGP: So, what we found is that student test performance does vary as a function of how much time has elapsed since those students' families received SNAP. And, interestingly, students' test performance peaks about 2 weeks after SNAP transfers. SO, students perform the best when they sit down to take that test about 2 weeks after their families receive SNAP. And scores are lower at the end of the SNAP month when families are likely to have exhausted their SNAP benefits, but also lower right at the begging of the month just immediately following SNAP transfer.

KB: And how powerful were the results? What were the differences in test scores?

AGP: So, the results are fairly small. They're just about a point or two, but we think they are substantially important nonetheless for a couple of reasons. First of all, for kids who are potentially right at the border of being designated as proficient in that topic, a point or two could actually lead them to fall on either side of that proficiency line. And, in fact, we do find that kids are most likely to be found proficient when they take those tests about 2 weeks after SNAP transfer. So that's one reason why the results are substantively important. The other is, we think that this type of cyclical pattern is likely happening throughout the school year. So, it's not only showing up in these "end of grade" tests but is probably showing up repeatedly in performance on other types of school work throughout the year and that this could be, this cyclical pattern could be leading to disparities between low-income and higher-income students.

KB: As I could imagine, this could be a temporary effect, or it could be a more profound effect on learning that the children are doing. Is there any way of knowing that form the way you study this, or any way of guessing what might be happening here?

AGP: It's hard to say with the data that we have whether it is a temporary effect or has a more profound or lasting effect on the students. So, we can't say for sure, but one thing that we can say is that teachers and administrators are reacting to students' performance on these tests in ways that shape children's experiences through school moving forward, so it is certainly possible that even these small differences could end up having longer-lasting effects on how children perform in the educational system.

KB: Or I can imagine cumulative effects that if the children are learning at point A and the next time the SNAP benefits run out becomes point B and they're not able to learn as well then that they really could add up over time.

AGP: I think that's right.

KB: Did you find a difference between girls and boys?

AGP: We did find a difference between girls and boys where the effect seemed to be stronger for girls than boys. And, with the data that we have, we can't say exactly why, but we have a few hypotheses, one being that girls may be included in family meal preparation more than boys and so they may be more aware of when families are running out of food and the stress that accompanies that.

KB: Did you find any racial effects?

AGP: There's some evidence that the effect is stronger for African American students than Whites, but in general both White and Black students are affected by this cyclical pattern.

KB: So, let's talk about what might be done in these programs overall in terms of public policy. So, do you see that these results could help inform the ways that benefits are delivered? Laura, let's start with you.

LB: So, I guess I would say that as somebody that gets paid once a month, maybe it would be nice for me to have an option to get paid multiple times a month, but I also pay all my rent at the beginning of the month. And so, it's nice to have a bunch of money at the beginning of the month. So, what I'm trying to say is, like, sometimes it's nice to get a bunch of money at one time because there are some cost savings associated with that. And I think that's gonna vary based on family. So, there's been some talk about, like, do these results point to changing distribution schedules, or going from once a month to a couple of times a month? Well, I don't think that's gonna matter all that much. If, for people's budgeting, if you don't actually have enough money to budget with, and I think that's what we think the stronger policy recommendation is, is, if you just don't have enough money to stretch through the entire month and you're gonna run out within 2 weeks, it doesn't matter if you distribute 2 times a month or 3 times a month or once a month, you just don't have enough money. So, I think this points to us needing to raise the amount of money that we give people.

KB: So, Anna, beyond the fact that more benefits would be incredibly helpful and I think research shows that abundantly, are there any other changes you think might be recommended? I mean, do you think that changing the timing of the benefits would be of any use?

AGP: So, I think just to echo what Laura said, I think for some families, changing the timing of the benefits could be very helpful, and so there might be some households where, if they were given the option of choosing to have their benefits distributed twice a month rather than once a month, that could be helpful for some families. And now that all households receive their benefits on an electronic

benefit transfer card, which functions just like your debit card, it's really a matter of computer programming to make those changes, to have benefits or distributing them. And so, for families for whom that might be a really good fit, it seems like that is a reasonable thing to consider, not to make it mandatory for everyone, but to see if there's a fit for some households. but I do think that ultimately the real issue that this study highlights is that benefits are insufficient for many families and really shows that it's not only that families' food purchases and food consumption vary at different times of the month, but actually there's a much broader set of important outcomes for children that have this similar cyclical pattern. And so, we find these differences in test performance, there are other researchers who have found differences in school suspensions, for example, where kids are more likely to be suspended at the end of the benefit month. And so, it also leads us to think that when we're thinking about the kinds of supports that SNAP provides, it's not only food, which is crucially important, but also then has these spillover effects to other kinds of important outcomes for kids. And so, when we think about the benefit side of what SNAP is providing, it's providing both food directly, but also a broader set of support for families.

KB: Anna, you mentioned disciplinary outcomes for the children and not being in school as much at the end of the benefit period, and then of course you've studied these cognitive aspects and how children are doing on tests. It seems to me this method that you have could be very readily applied to lots of other outcomes like health outcomes, for example. It would be interesting to know if doctors visits spike during that time, or if specific health indicators like, you know, a child's blood pressure or whatever, could be studied during that time. You have a beautiful methodology for looking at those things, and I'm wondering if you thought about looking at other outcomes as well.

AGP; So, we have the opportunity here in North Carolina with the access to the education data to do some replication to look at suspension and disciplinary outcomes and there's also a possibility in collaboration with our colleagues in the medical center to think about some health outcomes as well.

KB: Right. It's just so ready-made to do that kind of thing. I'm very impressed with the methodology you have. Laura, before you came to graduate school you were a fourth-grade teacher in Houston. How does this study relate to what you saw in the classroom?

LB: Yeah. What a great question. So, what I was gonna say is, so this is, sort of, this form of expected instability in folks, in the resources that folks are going to receive. Like, you know that you're probably going to be running out of money through the month because you've experienced this every times and you know when you're going to get your next transfer. I think there are other situations in which people are unexpectedly cut off benefits, and I saw that when I was teaching. I saw- there's one specific example where I had a student who had been diagnosed with ADHD and received medication for this, and about a week before the Mandated Texas state math and reading test, his mother came in and explained to me that there had been some issues with his paperwork, I think related to the Children's Health Insurance Program, and he wasn't going to be able to get his medication. And this was a very good student, who I think would've scored in, sort of, the, like, very top level of the, certainly the math test and possibly also the reading test. And, you know, because he wasn't able to get this medication, he actually ended up failing those tests. So, that sort of convinced me that there are these out-of-school policies, particularly safety net policies that have major impacts for the ways that kids are doing in the classroom, and obviously that's different because his parents couldn't have anticipated that they weren't going to be able to get him this medication in a timely fashion. I know they didn't anticipate that

because they told me. But, so that's different in this particular situation, but I think it does point to how the, sort of, stability associated with these programs affects families' lives.

KB: Well, it's a heartbreaking anecdote, and it's so sad to see that happen to a child, but it also brings home the real-world meaning of all this. You know, you're finding statistics for large numbers of people, but that shows how it can affect that. I mean, this wasn't SNAP, but it's a really good example of the same thing happening. So, thank you both very much for joining me. It was a very interesting, creative study and has incredible potential [policy ramifications going forward. So, thank you very much for joining us today.

AGP: Thank you.

LB: Thank you.

KB: Okay, so thank you very much.

My guests have been Anna Gassman-Pines and Laura Bellows. Their paper is "Food Instability and Academic Achievement: A Quasi-Experiment Using SNAP Benefit Timing." It was recently published in the American Educational Research Journal. We'll have a link at our website, Policy-360-dot-or. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.