

University of Kentucky

Gatton College of Business and Economics

Institute for the Study of Free Enterprise



INSTITUTE FOR THE
STUDY OF
FREE
ENTERPRISE

Study finds policies designed to increase enrollment in SNAP are not effective at reaching seniors

- **Less than 50% of eligible seniors participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**
- **Policies that are designed to expand SNAP eligibility lead to larger increases among non-seniors than seniors**
- **Evidence is small that policies aimed at reducing transaction costs, stigma, and increasing outreach are effective**

It is well documented that seniors are not only particularly vulnerable to food insecurity but may experience more severe health consequences such as diabetes, depression, limitations in activities of daily living, high blood pressure and heart attack due to this insecurity than nonseniors. Additionally, a much lower proportion of eligible seniors participate in policies to decrease food insecurity such as SNAP than nonseniors. To address the question of whether current SNAP policies have been effective at addressing this, a research team consisting of Jordan Jones of the Economic Research Service, Augustine Denteh of the Department of Economics at Tulane University, James Marton of the Department of Economics at Georgia State University, Rusty Tchernis of the Department of Economics at Georgia State University, along with Charles Courtemanche, ISFE Director and member of the Department of Economics at University of Kentucky have analyzed whether current state level SNAP policies have increased program participation among seniors.

This study is the first of its kind to investigate the effect of several different state level SNAP policies on program participation among low income senior vs nonsenior households.

The team estimates the impact of 11 different policies on the probability that a household will enroll and receive SNAP benefits. Additionally, the team creates a “simulated eligibility” measure using restricted household data in order to identify and control for households that may have been eligible for SNAP but never enrolled in the program.

The team finds that policies expanding SNAP eligibility increases participation among both groups, however the impact is more than double for nonsenior households compared senior households. For each 10 percentage point increase in simulated eligibility, senior households increase their participation by 1.4 percentage points but nonsenior households increase their participation by 4.4 percentage points. They find that only one policy, streamlining the SNAP application process for social security recipients, results in a statistically significant impact that increases senior participation in SNAP. For both groups, they find little evidence that policies related to reducing transaction costs or increasing outreach have an impact on SNAP participation.

They note, “Our findings are of interest to policymakers and researchers interested in the factors explaining low senior SNAP participation relative to nonseniors. While some existing policy levers might modestly increase participation, there does not appear to be any feasible policy combination that would make meaningful progress toward closing this gap.”

Continuing, they add, “Given that many eligible seniors do not participate relative to nonseniors, it makes sense that eligibility expansions would not strongly increase senior participation. However, we do not find evidence that policies reducing transaction costs or stigma increase senior participation. This could indicate that it is not high participation costs driving lower senior participation, but lower benefits.”