

Food Assistance and Nutrition Programs



Research and
Evaluation from
Abt Associates





Supporting Strategies for Improved Food Security and Diet Quality

Abt Associates has pioneered rigorous research and evaluation in support of America's nutrition assistance programs. Our recent research focuses on several key policy questions: Do food assistance programs improve child food security and diet quality? Can incentives improve the dietary intake of families receiving nutrition assistance? How do economic conditions relate to the use of nutrition assistance programs? Abt's extensive portfolio of projects for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) shows our commitment to improving the food security and nutritional well-being of America's most vulnerable citizens.

Specialties

- Evaluating the implementation, costs, integrity, and impacts of initiatives that improve food security and promote nutrition education and healthy eating.
- Assessing the food security and government benefit use of at-risk populations.
- Assessing the nutritional status and dietary intake of infants, children, and adults.
- Developing new metrics and methods for assessing program performance and informing policy.
- Collecting nationally representative data on program operations and participants to support program management and oversight.



Can Food Assistance Programs Improve Child Food Security and Nutrition?

Studying Nutrition Programs in Day Care Settings

FNS has proposed major changes to nutritional standards for meals supported by the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). To provide a baseline for assessing the impacts of these changes, Abt is engaged in a five-year congressionally-mandated study of the CACFP. The study will document the quality and costs of meals and snacks offered, and the nutrition and wellness practices in a nationally representative sample of child care centers, family day care homes, and afterschool programs. The study will also document young children's food intake in and out of child care. These findings will provide insights into how nutritional quality and physical activity in child care might be improved.



Evaluating the Effectiveness of School Nutrition Programs

Recently, schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) implemented sweeping regulatory changes. The new requirements were designed to increase children's access to healthy foods at school and to promote adoption of healthy eating and physical activity habits. In partnership with Mathematica Policy Research, Abt is helping to evaluate these changes. The study will provide policymakers with nationally representative data about how federally-sponsored school meal programs are operating under the new regulations. It will also assess whether they have affected food service operations, the nutrient content of school meals offered and served, meal costs and revenues, and student participation and dietary intake. Further, it will be the first integrated study to examine the relationships among these outcomes, such as the key question of whether healthy school meals cost more.



Assessing the Impact of USDA's Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program

The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP), launched by USDA's FNS, provides fresh fruits and vegetables to low-income elementary school children in an effort to improve their diet and reduce their risk of obesity. To determine FFVP's impact on consumption and attitudes toward these two food groups, Abt conducted an evaluation using a regression discontinuity design involving 4,696 students. Abt's study revealed that: (1) FFVP helped increase the amount of fruit and vegetables that students ate by one-third of a cup on FFVP days; and (2) students in schools where the program is offered had more positive attitudes about these foods than students in non-participating schools.

Evaluating USDA's Summer Demonstration Program to Combat Child Hunger

To address the problem of childhood hunger during the summer, USDA's FNS funded the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (SEBTC) demonstration, providing aid to children who received free or reduced-price meals during the school year. The benefit was distributed either through a State's EBT system for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). To assess the program's implementation and impacts, Abt and its partners evaluated SEBTC over three summers. Findings revealed a 33 percent decrease in the rate of very low food security among children in the demonstration's second year.

Community Eligibility Provision Evaluation

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) provided schools and local educational agencies (LEAs) that serve predominately low-income children with a new option for meal certification. Under the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), schools do not collect or process meal applications for free and reduced-price meals served under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). Instead, schools serve all meals at no cost and are reimbursed based on the percentage of students identified as eligible for free meals. Abt examined the implementation and impacts of the CEP on students' access to meals and administrative costs. LEAs using the CEP had significantly higher student participation rates in the NSLP and SBP, compared with similar non-participating LEAs.

Can Financial Incentives Improve the Nutritional Impact of Food Assistance Programs?

Healthy Incentives for SNAP Recipients: An Impact Study

The Healthy Incentive Pilot (HIP) evaluation for USDA's FNS examined whether a rebate of 30 cents per dollar spent on fruits and vegetables would influence the purchase and consumption of these foods among Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants. Abt and its partners conducted a random assignment impact evaluation that collected detailed dietary intake for a 24-hour period (the "gold standard" method) and food expenditures. Transactions (Electronic Benefits Transfer data) were used to describe receipt of the HIP incentive and to compare shopping patterns of HIP participants with those of other SNAP households. HIP participants consumed almost a quarter cup more targeted fruits and vegetables than did non-HIP participants.

How do Economic Conditions Affect the Use of Food Assistance Programs?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has grown rapidly in recent years—by about 50% between 2000 and 2007, and by another 70% between 2007 and 2011—such that in 2011, SNAP served 14% of the U.S. population. In an article published in the 2015 online version of the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics**, an Abt researcher and a colleague from the Policy Institute of California explored whether changes and variations in state SNAP policy and sub-state economic conditions could explain the trends in SNAP caseloads. The researchers found that the economy can account for most of the 2007 to 2011 increase in the SNAP caseload, although relatively less of the 2000 to 2007 increase. Nonetheless, the role of the economy in driving caseloads appears to be substantial in both periods, while evidence of policy impacts on caseloads is mixed.

* Jacob Alex Klerman and Caroline Danielson 11(2015). *Can the Economy Explain the Explosion in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Caseload? An Assessment of the Local-level Approach*. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 2015 online.



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About Abt Associates

We are a mission-driven, global leader in research and program implementation in the fields of **health, social and environmental policy**, and **international development**. Known for its rigorous approach to solving complex challenges, Abt Associates is regularly ranked as one of the top 20 global research firms and one of the top 40 international development innovators. The company has multiple offices in the U.S. and program offices in more than 60 countries.

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