

The Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration Program: 2013 Results



Effective Approaches to Improving Summer Food Security of Low-Income Children

During the school year, low-income children are offered free or reduced-price breakfasts and lunches to ensure that each child has access to basic meals. Over 21 million children received a free or reduced-price lunch each school day in 2014. During the summer, when these programs do not operate, many low-income children do not have access to subsidized meals. Other food assistance programs attempt to reach needy families during the summer, but these programs are limited by budget constraints and operational challenges. In fact, the primary summer nutrition programs reach only 16 percent of children that receive food assistance during the regular school year.

To address this gap, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) piloted the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration. The goal of SEBTC was to improve the food security of low-income children during the summer. When regular school was not in session, SEBTC distributed assistance to households with eligible school-age children using electronic benefit systems (EBT) cards. (An EBT card is similar to a debit card).

Abt Associates and its partners, Mathematica Policy Research and MAXIMUS, conducted a random assignment evaluation of the SEBTC demonstration in 2011, 2012, and 2013. The 2012 evaluation found that a summer benefit of \$60 per child per month reduced the prevalence of very low food security among children (VLFS-C), the most severe form of food insecurity, by about one-third and improved children's nutritional intake.



Given SEBTC's success in reducing food insecurity among children, FNS extended the demonstration in 2013 to test the differential impact of a \$30 per child per month benefit compared to the impact of a \$60 per month benefit.

For the summer of 2013, FNS chose four SEBTC grantees to implement the demonstration in six sites. In each of the six sites, qualifying households were randomly assigned to:

- A group getting a **\$60 per child monthly benefit** or
- A group getting a **\$30 per child monthly benefit**.

The evaluation then measured the impact of a \$30 benefit relative to a \$60 benefit.

Significant Improvements in Summer Food Security

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). If distributed through WIC, participants could buy a subset of foods allowed under the WIC program. If distributed through SNAP, families could purchase the wider variety of foods that can be purchased with conventional SNAP benefits.

Compared to the \$30 benefit, the \$60 benefit:

- Reduced food insecurity among children by an additional 10%.
- Did not have a bigger effect on reducing very low food security among children.
- Increased the consumption of fruits, vegetables by 19 percent, and whole grains by 16 percent.

The study found that SEBTC reduced very low food security (VLFS-C)—the study's primary outcome and most severe form of food insecurity— from 9.5 percent for the non-benefit group to 6.4 percent in the benefit group.

Importantly, the evaluation found that the \$60 SEBTC benefit did not reduce VLFS-C more than did the \$30 benefit.¹ Specifically, the prevalence of VLFS-C among the \$60 benefit group was 5.7% in the summer of 2013 compared to 6.1% for the \$30 group – not a statistically significant difference.² This finding suggests that the same impact on VLFS-C may be achieved at a lower cost.³



The Evaluation of the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children Demonstration

The 2013 evaluation of the SEBTC demonstration had four goals:

1. To analyze the differential impact of a \$60 monthly SEBTC benefit amount and a \$30 monthly benefit amount on children and their families' food security, food expenditures, use of other nutrition programs, and children's nutritional status
2. To examine SEBTC implementation and lessons learned
3. To assess the feasibility of the three benefit delivery models
4. To describe benefit receipt and use

Because qualifying households were randomly assigned to a group getting the \$30 benefit or to a group getting the \$60 benefit, the difference in changes in food insecurity through the summer across the two groups can reasonably be interpreted as the difference in impacts of the two benefit sizes.

The study did find, however, that relative to the \$30 benefit, the \$60 SEBTC benefit reduced food insecurity among children (FI-C) by 3.7 additional percentage points. (FI-C includes both households with children experiencing VLFS-C and those with low food security among children, the latter a more moderate form of food insecurity.) FI-C was 32.6% for the \$60 group and 36.3% for the \$30 group; the FI-C rate was 10% higher in the \$30 group. The study also found differences in impacts on other outcomes. For example, relative to households receiving the \$30 benefit, those receiving the \$60 benefit spent \$29 more per month on food. Also, children in the \$60 benefit households ate slightly more fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

For More Information

- See: Collins et al. (2014). Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Evaluation Findings for the Third Implementation Year. Prepared by Abt Associates, Mathematica Policy Research, and Maximus. Alexandria, VA: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. Available online at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ops/research-and-analysis>.
- See: <http://www.abtassociates.com/Practice-Areas/Income-Security---Workforce/Food-Assistance-Programs---Nutrition.aspx>

1 Very low food security is measured on the basis of responses to a battery of questions about the incidence of skipped or partial meals for children over the previous month.

2 VLFS-C is the evaluation's "confirmatory outcome," or an outcome of primary interest and the major basis for judging whether a tested intervention is a success.

3 The grantees and sites were chosen purposively and were not a random sample of sites nationally, so the results do not necessarily predict the results of a full national implementation of SEBTC.