

The Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration Program: 2012 Results



SEBTC Substantially Improved 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 2012. During the summer, when these programs do not operate, many low-income children do not have access to subsidized meals. Other federal food assistance programs attempt to reach needy families during the summer, but these programs are limited by budget constraints and operational challenges. In fact, in 2012 the federal summer nutrition programs reached only 15 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. In 2011, the demonstration and evaluation took place in five sites, and after finding these grantees successfully implemented SEBTC, FNS expanded the intervention in 2012.



In summer 2012, FNS chose 10 grantees to implement the demonstration in 14 sites. Households participating in the study were randomly selected to either receive a \$60 per child per month benefit or no benefit. The evaluation was designed to answer two major policy questions:

- 1) Does SEBTC reduce or eliminate food insecurity and hunger of children?
- 2) Does SEBTC improve the nutritional status of children?

The evaluation measured the impact of a \$60 SEBTC benefit compared to no 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.

Households receiving the \$60 SEBTC benefit redeemed 77 percent of the benefits issued over the summer, totaling about \$150 over the course of the summer for each child issued benefits.

The study found that SEBTC reduced very low food insecurity (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. This is a reduction of 34 percent. The study also found that SEBTC reduced by one-fifth the level of food insecurity among children (FI-C), which includes children experiencing both VLFS-C and low food security. Children with low food security have reduced quality or variety of diet.

A \$60 SEBTC benefit:

- Reduced very low food security, the most severe form of food insecurity, among children by one-third
- Reduced food insecurity among children by about one-fifth
- Increased children's daily servings of fruits and vegetables by one-third, and dairy by one-fourth
- Did not have any impact on the use of the general SNAP program
- Produced a small reduction in the use of the Summer Food Service Program

In addition, SEBTC produced significant improvements in children's intake of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and dairy products. Although children in the \$60 group did not meet recommended dietary guidelines for daily consumption of fruits and vegetables and whole grains, the gains in consumption moved them substantially closer to meeting those goals. The SEBTC benefit had no impact on SNAP participation. The benefit slightly reduced children's participation in the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), with 7.2 percent attending an SFSP site in the \$60 group compared to 8.3 percent in the no-benefit group.



The Evaluation of the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children Demonstration

The 2012 evaluation of the SEBTC demonstration had five goals:

1. To assess the feasibility of implementing the SNAP and WIC models of SEBTC benefit delivery
2. To examine the implementation of SEBTC, including approaches used, and the challenges and lessons learned during the demonstrations
3. To describe receipt and use of SEBTC benefits
4. To examine the impact of SEBTC benefits on children and their families' food security, food expenditures, use of other nutrition programs, and children's nutritional status
5. To determine and document the total and component costs of implementing and operating the demonstrations

In 2012, 37,000 households located in 14 sites were randomly selected to either receive a \$60 per child per month benefit or no or benefit. Differences in changes in food security and nutrition across the two groups can be reasonably interpreted as the difference in impacts of the \$60 benefit versus no benefit. Currently, a final report summarizing all of the years of the SEBTC evaluation is under review by the USDA and is expected to be released in 2016.

For More Information

- See: Collins et al. (2013). Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Evaluation Findings for the Full Implementation Year 2012 Final Report. 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>