

**“More Food on the Table”: Participants’ Experiences With Higher SNAP Benefits in
California**

May Lynn Tan¹, Jocelyn Vilchez¹, Brittany Liu¹, Liz Kroboth¹, Stephanie Nishio¹, Lauren Lathan
Reid¹, and Becky Silva¹

¹California Association of Food Banks

Author Note

May Lynn Tan Orcid ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0731-5991>

Jocelyn Vilchez is now at the California Department of Health Services.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to May Lynn Tan, California
Association of Food Banks. Email: maylynn.tan@cafoodbanks.org

Abstract

Background: During the COVID-19 pandemic, households enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or CalFresh in California) began receiving emergency allotments (EAs), which boosted the value of their monthly benefits for food. This temporary but substantial increase in benefits presented a unique opportunity to qualitatively examine the impact of higher benefits on CalFresh participants' lives compared to when EAs ended and benefits returned to their regular levels. This research brief aims to share CalFresh participants' descriptions—in their own words—of what the experiences looked and felt like.

Methods: In the summer of 2023, as part of a more extensive, mixed-methods study, researchers at the California Association of Food Banks (CAFB) conducted in-depth interviews with 21 CalFresh recipients (12 in English, eight in Spanish and one in Chinese) to retrospectively document how they had used their higher benefits, and how EAs had affected their food intake, health, and overall well-being. We recorded, de-identified, and transcribed interviews, analyzed transcripts using an open coding process, and selected quotes representative of the main themes that emerged.

Results: Consistent with the literature on SNAP benefit adequacy, CalFresh recipients reported that having higher benefits improved their food and nutrition security, financial stability, and other markers of well-being. Specifically, CalFresh recipients used the higher benefits to purchase more food and more nutritious foods, maintain financial stability during income disruption, and reallocate resources toward other essential expenses to help improve their overall financial well-being.

Conclusion: Our research suggests that CalFresh recipients who received more benefits through EAs improved their health and financial stability. Participant experiences add to our understanding of how SNAP touches lives and strengthen the rationale for protecting, rather than restricting, access to SNAP for households in need.

Keywords: CalFresh, SNAP, emergency allotments, benefit adequacy, food security

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The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides monthly benefits to low-income households to purchase groceries. SNAP is a federal entitlement program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and implemented by states and counties. Benefits are electronically loaded to participants’ accounts monthly, and participants can spend them on food at authorized retailers using an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card. Typically, the value of SNAP benefits is determined based on a combination of household size and income (*SNAP Eligibility | Food and Nutrition Service, 2023*), with maximum benefit levels based on the cost of the USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan (TFP)—a very low-cost food plan that many experts agree does not adequately meet the practical and nutritional needs of most people (Davis et al., 2020; You et al., 2022).

The TFP is based on national averages and is not adjusted for state cost differences. Therefore, in states with a higher cost of living, even the maximum benefit falls well short of covering average food costs (Bronchetti et al., 2016). Moreover, less than half of all CalFresh (the name for SNAP in California) households receive the maximum benefit in California. On average, CalFresh issuances amount to about \$6 per person per day, compared to an estimated minimum daily food cost of more than \$11 (California Association of Food Banks, 2024).

Despite these limitations, CalFresh is the state’s most important food security safety net program, with more than 5.5 million Californians (14% of the population) participating (California Department of Social Services, 2025). Across the nation, the positive effects of SNAP participation have been well-documented. Participation is linked with improved health, lower healthcare costs (Carlson & Keith-Jennings, 2018), and increased food security,

particularly when benefit levels approach adequacy (Leung & Wolfson, 2023). While more than half of households use up their monthly benefits within the first two weeks of receipt, research indicates that the longer benefits last in a household, the less likely that household is to experience food insecurity (Calloway et al., 2015; Castner et al., 2020). A report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Ver Ploeg & Zhen, 2022) estimated that increases in SNAP benefit amounts would further boost food security and improve health and nutrition outcomes, as households would increase spending on food prepared at home and food of higher nutritional quality. SNAP has also been found to impact economic outcomes positively. Many SNAP participants are workers with low incomes who face numerous challenges to economic mobility (Carlson & Keith-Jennings, 2018). SNAP helps maintain stability during periods of joblessness or income loss (Cook & East, 2024). Keith-Jennings and Chaudhry (2018) found that nearly three-quarters of working-age SNAP recipients work either during the month(s) they participate or within a year of receiving SNAP.

Most studies on SNAP and CalFresh benefit adequacy have been quantitative (using survey or administrative data to establish relationships between benefits and outcomes). Comparatively, studies featuring participant voices about the impact of higher SNAP benefits are relatively rare, with some exceptions (Gosliner et al., 2020; Ruder et al., 2022; Savin et al., 2021). It is challenging to qualitatively assess the impacts of benefit adequacy when benefits have historically not reached the level that households require to thrive; participants would need to imagine and report on what impact a substantial increase in benefits *might* have rather than the impact they *actually* had.

The issuance of emergency allotments (EAs) in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency provided an opportunity to help fill this research gap. EAs were additional monthly

benefits issued to households to bring them up to the maximum for their household size, or, for households that were already at or near the maximum, at least an additional \$95 per month. To date, EAs represented the largest-ever increase in CalFresh benefit amounts (Malagon & Thorman, 2023). EAs ended in February 2023, but an analysis of administrative data from the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) determined that in the last month they were issued, CalFresh households had an average of \$305 a month in regular benefits and an additional monthly average EA of \$184 (Tan et al., 2024).

This temporary but substantial increase in benefits through EAs presented a unique opportunity to qualitatively examine the impact of higher benefits on CalFresh participants' lives compared to when EAs ended and benefits returned to their regular levels. In the summer of 2023, researchers at the CAFB conducted in-depth interviews with CalFresh recipients to retrospectively document how they had used their higher benefits and how EAs had affected their food intake, health, and overall well-being. The emerging themes mirror and provide greater insight into what has been uncovered through quantitative studies—that increased SNAP benefits improved participants' food security, enabled them to purchase more nutritious foods, and helped them achieve greater financial stability. This research brief aims to share CalFresh participants' descriptions—in their own words—of how these experiences looked and felt.

Method

These data come from a larger study on CalFresh EAs (Tan et al., 2024). In the summer of 2023, three months after EAs ended, CAFB conducted a mixed-method evaluation using a combination of administrative benefits data provided by CDSS, focus groups, and in-depth interviews to assess the impact of EAs and the importance of food banks to participants after EAs ended. We determined that the original study was not subject to Institutional Review Board

(IRB) approval after speaking with academic advisors and confirming that the nature and intent of the study were evaluative because it sought to determine the impact of a program and identify areas for improvement. Specifically, the study's primary aim was to assess how food assistance needs intensified after EAs ended and how food banks could better respond. The findings presented in this brief are drawn from the de-identified interview data collected from this evaluation.

For interview recruitment, an online interest form was created and contained screening questions about potential respondents' length of time using CalFresh, the benefits lost when EAs ended, age, household size, and enrollment in other public benefits programs. Social media and email messages invited CalFresh recipients to complete the form and volunteer for the study and were posted on CAFB's Facebook, LinkedIn, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram platforms. Materials were translated into Spanish and Chinese and shared with food banks and CalFresh outreach partners to hand out to their clients. Respondents were eligible if they lived in California, were over 18 years old, and were currently receiving or had recently received CalFresh benefits. More than 250 CalFresh recipients completed the interest form. This pool was sampled to achieve a diverse range of participants in terms of language, age, household size, area of residence, and length of time on CalFresh. Given resource restraints and the focus on including diverse viewpoints, we aimed for a sample of between 10 and 20 interviews with three to five respondents older than 60, and five to seven respondents with children in their household. In total, we invited 44 interested respondents for interviews.

The interview guide was developed after conducting a literature review about SNAP benefit adequacy, a series of focus groups with CalFresh outreach workers (not reported here), and conversations with people familiar with CalFresh implementation. The interview guide

contained questions about participants' household demographics, the impact of EAs on daily life, experiences specific to the end of EAs, use of food bank services, and recommendations about CalFresh or other aspects of food assistance. Interviews were semi-structured using the guide; interviewers probed for clarification as needed. We modified the guide between interviews to ensure question clarity for participants and build on previous responses.

All interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom by researchers trained in qualitative data collection methods. Participants had the option to use video or audio only. Before beginning the interview, interviewers read a statement informing participants that the purpose of the study was to understand how they had been impacted by CalFresh EAs ending, that their responses would be kept confidential, participation was voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw or stop being recorded at any time. We received participants' verbal consent before proceeding. In accordance with guidance from Feeding America (2022), a nationwide network of food banks, food pantries, and local meal programs, participants were sent a \$75 Visa gift card after completing the interview. We determined that IRB approval was not required for this compensation.

The interviewer de-identified, transcribed, and reviewed all audio files for accuracy and corrected transcripts as needed. Spanish and Chinese transcripts were translated into English via online translation services, labeled with only interview ID numbers (e.g., 1-21), and stored on a private server in a folder only interviewers could access. The project team members uploaded transcripts to Dedoose (2016), a qualitative data analysis software. Two researchers used an open coding process to identify major themes, sub-themes, and key findings, which were shared with research collaborators and advisors for refinement and finalization.

Results

Twenty-one participants accepted and completed interviews. Twelve interviews were in English, eight were in Spanish, and one was in Chinese. Participants’ demographics are reflected in Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of CalFresh interview participants

Characteristic	Number of Interviews	
Age		
18-39	13	62%
40-59	4	19%
60+	4	19%
Language of Interview		
English	12	57%
Spanish	8	38%
Chinese	1	5%
Years on CalFresh		
3 months to <1 year	4	19%
1 to 3 years	8	38%
More than 3 years	7	33%
Used to get CalFresh	1	5%
Does not know	1	5%
Household Size		
1	3	14%
2	4	19%
3	8	38%
4+	6	29%
Has Children in Household		
Yes	16	76%
No	5	24%
Has a Disability		
Yes	9	43%
No	12	57%

Characteristic	Number of Interviews	
Receiving Other Programs		
Medi-Cal (Medicaid)	15	71%
WIC ¹	5	24%
SSI/SSP ²	2	10%
CalWORKS (TANF ³)	3	14%
None	1	5%

¹Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

²Social Security Income / State Supplementary Payment

³Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

Interview participants reported a large range of experiences related to their receipt of EA benefits and overall experiences with CalFresh and food banks. For this brief, we focus on themes related to buying food, coping with financial stressors, and maintaining household stability before and after EAs ended. We excluded experiences that were outliers or unique to specific individuals. Due to the limited sample size, these findings cannot be generalized to all CalFresh or SNAP recipients; however, all quotes presented here were selected because they represent multiple participants’ experiences, not just one.

Higher Benefits Enabled CalFresh Recipients to Buy More and Healthier Food

Interview participants described that while receiving EAs, they spent more money on food, buying foods of higher quality and nutritional value—especially fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats or other proteins—and worrying less about affording enough food. With EAs, CalFresh benefits covered a substantial portion of the monthly household food budget and enabled households to purchase healthier foods they could prepare from scratch.

It was a tremendous, huge weight off my shoulder because I was actually getting groceries, and I was getting a healthy meal and stuff that I find difficult to get on a normal basis.

It helped me [be] more proactive with buying healthy foods, and not just quick foods that I can just make. Because usually, I buy stuff that's kind of like what I make, you know, something quick. But with the help [of EAs], I was more focused on getting like veggies and you know, more healthy stuff.

When they gave the extra money, we were able to buy a little bit more [food] for the children.

Conversely, after EAs ended, participants found it challenging to buy enough food to meet their household's nutrition needs. The quantity and quality of food they could afford declined significantly because meat and other proteins, fruits and vegetables, snacks, and staples for scratch cooking were costly. Many switched to cheaper products, most commonly fast food/ready-to-eat meals, to save money. Some went back to skipping meals or reducing portions.

What has changed is that I'm living on shelf-stable items, for the most part.

Fruits and vegetables, what I can get out of a food bank I use, but oftentimes at grocery stores, I can't afford say, a lot of the fruit options I'd like, even just of the

frozen variety . . . Frozen fruit is something that I'd have to buy out of pocket now without my benefits. And it's just not something I can afford without them.

When we went back to eating a lot more fast food, I noticed that we all feel just thicker in a way. The food feels different in your stomach with all the grease. You can definitely feel that in your body.

We . . . eat breakfast later in the morning. After that, we eat dinner at five or six o'clock in the evening. So we just eat two meals.

Higher Benefits Enabled Recipients to Weather Financial Setbacks

Due to the timing of our study, many participants had been impacted by pandemic closures and other disruptions to their employment, consistent with national trends (Mabli & Dotter, 2023). Some participants reported their jobs as seasonal or precarious, with unpredictable schedules and pay. Others lost income due to health conditions, caregiving, or other events, but many were making concerted efforts to regain income through skill development or working through disabilities. They described higher CalFresh benefits as critical to helping them endure these challenging periods and keep food on the table until they could work or regain their income.

During this time . . . it was really tough. And then I didn't even have stable work. I was learning web development back then. So it was really, really tough. Sometimes we ate once a day.

I'm working two jobs. . . . because my salary is still not the way it was before. I have to work two jobs, I have to stretch myself and dig deeper, to just to keep my family floating in this inflated economy.

Well, [getting EAs] was like, a blessing on my finances . . . a great relief for me. . . . You know, it was a dire moment, in the moment where I sought out ways to survive with my family. So it was a blessing on my finances to have that assistance coming in.

Higher Benefits Contributed to Overall Household Financial Stability

Interview participants described how they were able to use more of their limited income to make other essential payments, such as rent and bills.

That was a very good chance for me to take good care of my kids and myself too, and also be able to catch [up on] bills that I had to pay and . . . not worry about where to get rent or how to take care of the kids, and how to put up some small meals.

In my experience, this was a relief, a relief for my economy, for my family's economy; I imagine for many families as well. Because there was more, as they say, more food on the table, there was more tranquility, more respite on the food side, and obviously the funds that we save will help us to be economically well off in other things.

Well, let's say I was helping myself, at that time I was helping myself with what they gave me for food. So from there . . . I used what I saved on the food—it was enough to pay the electricity bill, the water bill, and so I tried to compensate some things for others.

After EAs ended, interview participants described a return to a state of precarity, in which unexpected or even typical expenses led to uncertainty about having enough food.

It depends on the budget for that month. If there is special need for that month, maybe the car broke down . . . or there is an extra expense, then the budget for food would have to shrink a little bit.

My biggest expenses right now is all my money goes to the utilities, gas and light. I don't have money to get school clothes for my kids, and school shoes. Like, everything is going to the utilities and not towards the day-to-day needs.

I definitely feel much more stressed. And I just feel constantly worried. Just because I don't know . . . how bad the changes are gonna hurt until, like, maybe next month. I mentioned like, my credit card debt . . . it's gone up, and I think right now I'm trying to ignore it. But obviously, I'm gonna have to start, like payment and maybe seeing that it's going up and I'm not able to keep up.

I'm not spending money on anything. I don't have it to spend right now. . . . because I have less money available for food, so that's definitely very real. So I just, you know, I put gas in my car to go [to work]. I don't go to other places.

Discussion

Consistent with the existing literature on SNAP benefit adequacy, interview participants reported that having higher benefits improved their food and nutrition security, financial stability, and other markers of well-being. For example, participants described a direct link between higher benefits and the ability to purchase more, fresher, and healthier foods, which is supported by quantitative studies showing that higher SNAP benefits are linked with improved food security (Keith-Jennings et al., 2019; Ratcliffe et al., 2011). Participants also described how receiving EAs helped them survive periods of reduced income, aligning with studies that found that SNAP can buffer negative impacts during temporary or extended periods of financial strain (Chang et al., 2018; Cox et al., 2024; Ratcliffe et al., 2016).

Benefit increases have also been shown to free up resources for SNAP households to spend on other essential expenses (Kim, 2016). Indeed, participants in our study confirmed that having more money for food helped them stay current on bills and rent. Conversely, after EAs ended, interview participants described having to make difficult tradeoffs due to budget constraints, consistent with survey data showing that SNAP households nationwide experienced greater food hardship and difficulties paying household expenses during this period (Wells et al., 2024).

Qualitative data can also help illuminate potential mechanisms through which higher benefits lead to better outcomes. For example, evidence links SNAP participation with better health outcomes, particularly at higher benefit amounts (Gregory & Deb, 2015; Schanzenbach,

2023). Our findings highlight ways in which EAs improved food security, which has well-documented linkages with both physical and mental health (Cain et al., 2022; Gundersen & Ziliak, 2015; Leung et al., 2015; Pai & Bahadur, 2020). CalFresh recipients reported that when receiving EAs, they could purchase fresher and higher quality food, were better able to afford essential expenses, such as clothing or medication, and experienced less anxiety (Tan et al., 2024). In contrast, once EAs ended, recipients reported shifting to processed and lower-quality food, reducing overall food intake, working through physical injuries to earn income, foregoing self-care to afford food, and feeling more stressed and worried about the uncertainty of their food access.

Notably, study participants consistently linked the nutritious foods they could afford when they had EAs with improved health and well-being. Moreover, participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire to continue purchasing these foods for themselves and their families but faced cost barriers after EAs ended. Making fresh, healthier foods more affordable and accessible is key to improving nutrition security (Thorndike et al., 2022). Findings from this study support higher SNAP benefits as a strategy to improve both affordability and access to nutritious foods for people with low incomes, as multiple participants indicated that they could make healthier choices while receiving EAs.

Conclusion

At a time when policymakers are considering cuts to SNAP benefits, time limits on eligibility, and restrictions on the foods people can purchase, our research suggests that objectives such as improvements in health and longer-term stability were partially achieved when participants were receiving *more*, not less, in SNAP benefits. Households used the additional funds to purchase healthier food and were better able to manage their lives; only after

a reduction in benefits did they resort to purchasing cheaper and less healthful foods. Similarly, recipients described the period of higher benefits as one in which they could focus on treating health conditions or developing skills—in other words, addressing the root causes of a lack of food security (Plata-Nino, 2025) that can set households up for longer-term success.

Reflection

We chose a mixed-methods approach for the main study because administrative and survey data alone (what was available about EAs through CDSS and/or national and state-level datasets) do not fully illustrate the lived experiences of CalFresh recipients, such as the context behind their use of CalFresh and the strategies and resources that help them navigate difficult circumstances. By collecting qualitative data from people experiencing challenges to food security, we aimed to illuminate how common and relatable many of the circumstances preceding these challenges were and to demonstrate the impacts of benefit sufficiency on various aspects of life.

As part of our trauma-informed approach, data collection began by conducting focus groups with outreach workers (as part of the larger study) to develop a baseline understanding of what people were facing, which informed our interview process and helped us avoid unnecessary or insensitive questions in our interviews with CalFresh recipients. A safe interview environment was created by providing participants with as much detail as possible about the process up front, not collecting personally identifiable information, and conducting interviews in the participants' preferred language. We also scheduled interviews at the participants' convenience and compensated them for their time.

This project helps advance equity by centering the voices of people directly impacted by SNAP policy and adding their lived experiences to the evidence base about SNAP. The project

could have been improved by including CalFresh recipients in the conception and design of the study to help ensure that their research priorities were incorporated. Since completing this study, CAFB has been working with a community advisory board that guides our research agenda and methods. There was no opportunity for this research team to interview participants while receiving EAs, which could have yielded examples of more proximal experiences. If opportunities arise to examine future boosts to SNAP benefits, qualitative methods would be particularly valuable for capturing real-time impacts; they could help surface key differences in experiences among subgroups.

These findings reflect a subset of SNAP participants in a single state and cannot be generalized across all CalFresh households or SNAP households nationally. However, the themes that emerged are consistent with patterns found in quantitative literature and help illustrate several aspects of the transformative impact that EAs had on CalFresh households—in particular, how participants' health and well-being improved when their benefits approached adequacy. Their experiences add to our understanding of how SNAP touches lives and strengthen the rationale for protecting, rather than restricting, access to SNAP for households in need.

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