

TITLE: SNAP and work-related policies: An in-depth analysis of low-wage worker perspectives and behaviors

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BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY: A variety of work related-policies have the potential to affect food assistance benefits for millions of low-wage workers. Such policies include a wave of recent local minimum wage increases and ongoing national discourse around work requirements for SNAP eligibility among able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs). The aims of the study were to: (1) understand perspectives about current and future eligibility for SNAP benefits in two policy contexts, and (2) explore how, if at all, these perspectives affect decisions regarding worker employment, financial planning and spending decisions.

The two policy contexts were Minneapolis, MN and Raleigh, NC. In Minneapolis, the City Council passed a Minimum Wage Ordinance in 2017 which incrementally increases the local minimum wage of to \$15 an hour. In Raleigh, state policies enacted in 2016 by the North Carolina General Assembly prohibited local municipalities from increasing their minimum wage, and ended waivers for ABAWD work requirements for SNAP recipients. Worker perceptions of these polices as well as real-world experiences of them could shape worker behaviors.

The study was embedded in an ongoing, federally-funded natural experiment conducted in these two cities. The larger study follows a cohort of 974 low-wage workers from 2018 to 2022 to evaluate the health effects of an increase in the minimum wage in Minneapolis. In the summer of 2019, a subsample of 112 participants in both cities completed semi-structured interviews. The subsample was comprised of those who were either currently participating in SNAP, or who were participating in SNAP a year prior, but were no longer participating at the time of the study.

The study interview guide was developed along with Community Advisory Boards in Minneapolis and Raleigh. Interview segments discussed: (1) changes in SNAP benefits, (2) household finances, and (3) local policy perceptions. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed by a professional transcription service, and coded in NVivo 12 using social constructionist grounded theory method. A codebook of major themes was created, with themes related to the specific research questions established through consensus-building.

FINDINGS: The sample was 72% Black and 17% White, 63% female, with an average age of 43.6 years and median SNAP monthly benefit range of \$151-\$250 among the 65% currently participating. Four major themes emerged from the interviews.

Theme 1: Participants experienced frequent changes to SNAP benefits, which were detrimental to financial stability. Fluctuations in SNAP eligibility and benefit amounts were extremely common among participants. The reasons for these changes included, but were not limited to, changes in wages and household income. Several participants described how they navigated complex tradeoffs related to their job earnings, benefits including SNAP, and other household expenses. Overall, the degree and frequency of SNAP benefit fluctuation was a barrier for people in planning their household finances and budgeting for the future.

Theme 2: SNAP is just one component of a web of necessary supports for participants. SNAP benefits were described as interconnected to other food assistance programs such as WIC and school meals, and also to other income-based program such as medical assistance, housing assistance, and disability insurance; many of these programs had an eligibility “cliff” that could be affected by employment changes. Participants also cited the importance of a network of non-governmental support, including family, social circles, churches, and community organizations.

Theme 3: The positive effects of a minimum wage increase were largely aspirational, rather than experienced. The Minneapolis Minimum Wage Ordinance had completed only the first phase of implementation at the time of the study. Perceptions of the policy were generally positive, but few people reported benefiting so far. Many participants thought the policy was going to take too long to be implemented, and would not increase wages enough to make a real difference due to cost of living increases. Aspirationally, participants described how a wage increase might allow them to do things like keep up with their bills, save money, or make purchases for their children.

Theme 4: A perceived unsupportive policy environment in Raleigh contributed to expressions of hopelessness. Raleigh participants more frequently noted features of the policy environment that made it difficult to get ahead. For example, participants discussed how SNAP work requirements could exacerbate a cycle of hardship. The perceived lack of support contributed to a diminished sense of agency in the ability to get ahead. While participants in both cities expressed difficulty in making ends meet, the language of hopelessness permeated the Raleigh interviews.

“I couldn’t even afford to save if I wanted to, because the cost of living goes up. Like every time they increase minimum wage, then the cost of living goes up. So it’s like, okay, you’re giving us more money, but now you’re charging us more money, too. And it’s never an even keel. It never is.” –Minneapolis participant

“You have a car payment of the same amount as you were getting food stamps. Now, that in essence is like a chain reaction. It causes you now to lose your car, then this, then that and so that could possibly lead to you losing your job because you don’t have transportation.” –Raleigh participant

Overall, policies such as SNAP work requirements and minimum wage policies are experienced through a lens of prevailing poverty. This means that single policies may factor into the decisions and behaviors of low-wage workers, but often not in a straightforward manner that quantitative policy evaluations are equipped to measure. Evaluating policies in combination with other policies (i.e., policy contexts), evaluating these contexts for a long period of time, and soliciting narratives from those likely to be affected by them are important for documenting policy effects.

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