

Influence of Food Stamps on the Nutritional Status of Inner-City Preschoolers from Hartford, CT, who Receive WIC Benefits

Executive Summary

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is being funded at a level of about \$22 billion per year. In spite of being the food assistance program that receives more funding from the Federal Government we know much less about its effectiveness at alleviating child hunger and malnutrition than about other food assistance programs such as WIC. Thus, the overall goal of this study is to examine the impact of FSP on the food security and nutritional status of low-income children from Hartford, CT, who are enrolled in WIC.

We compared the food and nutrition situation of low-income preschoolers who received food stamps (FS, N=59) with that of those who did not receive them (NFS, N=41). Children were on average 2.6 years old and recruited in the waiting areas of the two largest city hospitals, 50% were female, and 84% were Hispanic. According to their caretakers, all had been enrolled in WIC at some point in the preceding year, and 95% were receiving WIC benefits at the time of the study. Groups were comparable in demographic characteristics but the socio-economic status of FS was lower than that of NFS ($P < 0.05$). Among FS the average monthly FS allotment was \$260 which represented 96% of monthly food expenditures.

Almost 75% of the households were food insecure based on the Radimer/Cornell hunger scale. Among those with a monthly income $< \$1000$, FS caretakers (N=27) tended to be more food secure than NFS (N=11) (77.8% vs. 54.5%, $p=0.24$). Logistic regression results (N=52) indicated that >How long food stamps last each month= was positively associated with food security ($p=0.004$) even after controlling for: monthly income, monthly food stamp allotment, household size, maternal education, and car availability. Twenty-four hour recall data indicate that FS preschoolers tended to have higher intakes of iron than NFS (9.8 vs 8.1 mg/1000 kcal, $p=0.08$). Among those with a monthly income $< \$1000$, FS had a significantly higher intake than NFS ($p < 0.05$) of the following vitamins: riboflavin, niacin, pantothenic acid, B6 and D. After adjusting for energy intake and child's age, the positive association between FS and the intakes of niacin and vitamin B6 remained statistically significant ($P < 0.05$). Lower-income FS children consumed more Asodas/artificially flavored drinks@ and tended to have a higher caffeine intake ($p=0.08$) than NFS.

FS children were less likely to be obese (BMI>90th %ile; 3.0% vs. 17.4%, $p=0.06$) but more likely to be underweight (BMI<10th %ile; 15.2% vs. 0%, $p=0.05$) than NFS. This finding is likely to be confounded by socio-economic status (i.e. FS children were poorer).

These results suggest that: a) the monthly duration of food stamps is an independent determinant of food security, b) food shopping, budgeting and menu planning lessons may be important for food stamp recipients to maximize food stamps monthly duration and the nutritional value of foods purchased with them, c) food stamps provide children with higher intakes of essential nutrients.

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