

## How Nutrition Education Can Help Recipients of Food Stamps in Indiana and Beyond

**Heather A. Eicher-Miller**, Purdue University

In 2016, more than *one out of every nine* U.S. households, about 12 percent, had trouble putting food on the table – experts call that “food insecurity.” People in certain states, like Indiana, have faced increasing food insecurity since it was first tracked and measured in 2001. Lacking the money to keep enough food in the house leads to unhealthy diets, poor physical and mental health, and lagging performance in school for children.

A component of America’s Food Stamp program called the “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education” teaches individuals about nutrition and helps them plan healthy meals within a tight budget. This nutrition education is offered in all states and is free to individuals and households who qualify for food stamps. But the program has a very small budget and thus serves only a small proportion of food stamp beneficiaries.

### Effects of Nutrition Education

Nutrition education in the Food Stamp program involves at least four hour-long lessons where peer-educators give hands-on guidance to help participants select and prepare diets that follow the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The idea is to promote healthy diets and lifestyles as well as bolster the program’s efforts to alleviate hunger. Despite success stories reported by participants who have gained knowledge and changed meal plans, very few scientific evaluations of these nutrition education efforts are available.

In 2013, our research team at Purdue University studied the effectiveness of this educational program in Indiana. We gathered information from a control group of people who did not receive lessons and compared with information from members of an intervention group whose received lessons. For both groups, we measured household food security before the intervention period, or the time when those in the intervention group received the lessons, and again after the lessons were completed. A year later, we again measured household food security for members of both groups. To rule out other factors, we accounted for differences between participants in the two groups such as income, education, and participation.

Our study found important differences. Participants from both groups experienced food insecurity before the intervention period; and people in both groups experienced improvements in food security just after the lessons were completed. However, only the intervention group participants who received nutrition education enjoyed sustained and greater food security one year after they took the lessons. People who received nutrition education improved their household food security by approximately 25% – a significant change that could mean the difference between having enough to eat and going hungry.

### Urban and Rural Environments

A community’s resources, location, and culture may be important in the way Food Stamp nutrition education works. Food insecurity is higher in non-metropolitan areas than in cities. Urban environments often have more food pantries, stores accepting food stamps, community resources, transportation options, and recreational programs that support the goals of nutrition education program. For example, they may provide more places for participants to shop or otherwise get food, be physically active, and practice budgeting. Consequently, nutrition education could matter more in rural environments where Food Stamp beneficiaries have few other resources. However, our study found that participants in both rural and urban areas improved their food security as a result of receiving nutrition education.

## What Do These Findings Mean?

Our findings about Food Stamp nutrition education have several implications:

- Persisting household food insecurity is a problem for about 40% of eligible Indiana participants in food stamp nutrition education.
- Peer programs that teach individuals about healthy diet planning on a budget can be an important part of reducing overall food insecurity in the United States.
- Educating one adult can improve food security for an entire household.
- Nutrition education for Food Stamp beneficiaries works in both urban and rural counties.
- Expanding the reach and resources of nutrition education in rural counties could help reduce disparities in food security between urban compared with rural areas.
- The nutrition education component of the food stamp program is an important part of a multi-faceted approach to reducing the spread of household food insecurity in the United States.

## Future Goals

Despite our new research findings, questions remain and highlight a need for further investment in evaluations of the Food Stamps program for nutrition education. Further studies should aim to:

- Determine the impact of nutrition education through a large-scale randomized, controlled trial that includes diverse group of participants from a variety of regions and racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- Investigate of the impact of nutrition education on diet and physical activity.
- Investigate and develop best practices to enable nutrition education to work with the Food Stamp and other programs to improve food security and other beneficial outcomes. Nutrition education does not improve food security in isolation, and we need further evaluation of how it can bolster other efforts to help low-income Americans.

**Read more in Rebecca L. Rivera, Melissa K. Maulding, Angela R. Abbott, Bruce A. Craig, and Heather A. Eicher-Miller, "SNAP-Ed (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education) Increases Long-Term Food Security among Indiana Households with Children in a Randomized Controlled Study" *The Journal of Nutrition* 146, no. 11, (2016): 2375-2382.**