



How Problems with America's Food Stamps Program Affect Poor Children's Attainments at School

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At school the achievements of poor children lag behind those of their higher-income peers. Although many factors lead to such gaps seen in school achievement, life outside of school has an especially strong effect on how poor children fare at school. To give some examples, researchers have learned that poor children are exposed to more environmental toxins, family instability, and overcrowded or unsafe housing arrangements. Each of these kinds of problematic living conditions can hurt children's performance at school.

Social safety net programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – previously officially called Food Stamps and still widely known by that name – are meant to soften the effect of economic deprivations on low-income families and children. Once a month, Food Stamps allocations provide cash-like benefits that low-income individuals and families can use to purchase food. Although this program gives important support to low-income families, there is growing evidence that benefit levels are insufficient for many. As a result, poor beneficiaries may vary their food shopping and food and caloric intake throughout the month – tending to spend and eat more right after they get a new infusion of benefits, and spend and eat less when their allocations run low. My research takes account of this unevenness in food security to explore how the performance of poor children on the tests schools administer to measure achievements at the end of each grade year could be affected by the timing of their family's food benefits. Because both nutrition and the stress associated with economic instability are related to children's achievements at school, children in families that receive Food Stamps may fare differently depending on when their household has last received a new infusion of this benefit.

Research on the Impact of Benefit Timing on Test Performance

In fact, research shows that children's test performance varies depending on how recently their families received Food Stamps – with performance hitting peaks between two and three weeks after a new benefit transfer arrives. Imagine two children in the same school sitting down to take their end-of-grade tests on the same day. One child's family just received their Food Stamp benefits and the other received their benefits three weeks earlier. The second child, I find, tends to score slightly higher than the first on both reading and math tests. And even a small difference can matter, because the second child would be more likely to meet state standards for grade level proficiency. Meeting such grade level standards affects whether children can advance to the next grade.

This study took place in North Carolina, where the timing of Food Stamps transfers depends on the last digit of the household head's Social Security number. Those with numbers ending in "1" get benefits on the third of each month; those with numbers ending in "2" get benefits on the fifth of each month, and so on. This pattern helped my research, because on test day the only difference among children was the last digit of their parents' social security numbers. In a randomly determined way, some children were taking the test after a couple of weeks of healthy eating while others were taking the test after their family had very possibly recently had less food. This random pattern made me confident that differences in test scores were actually influenced by the timing of Food Stamp benefit transfers and not because of some other kind of systematic difference among parents or families, such as how close they lived to a grocery store. I could feel certain that when poor kids take tests two to three weeks after their families got a new infusion of Food Stamps they scored higher than kids who took tests right after their families got new infusions.

Various subsets of children had different experiences, I found. Girls seem to be more affected than boys, possibly because they spend more time preparing food in their households. And schoolchildren with much younger siblings were not affected by the timing of Food Stamps, perhaps because their families are likely to have additional benefits from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children

program. By contrast, I found strong effects on the test performance of schoolchildren without younger siblings, whose families do not have access to the additional food program.

My study focused only on end-of-grade achievement tests, but of course the Food Stamps benefit cycle occurs every month and thus may very well affect children's performance in everyday school activities across the entire year. During periods every month when their families have less access to food, poor children may be less able to learn because their capacities to do cognitive tasks or pay careful attention may be reduced by hunger or the reverberations of stressful family conditions. Even if such lowered learning days happen only for parts of each month, the detrimental effects could accumulate over the school year, contributing to gaps in school achievement between low-income and high-income children.

Reform that Could Boost School Performance

The fact that Food Stamps are currently insufficient to meet the needs of many poor families throughout the month has been well documented. My research provides further evidence that this insufficiency hurts poor children's school performance. Two reforms could make things better:

- If poor families were able to opt for more frequent Food Stamp increments, rather than take the full allotment at once, they might be able to buy food more evenly throughout the month. This would not help all families, but it could help some – without increasing costs.
- Larger Food Stamps benefits would likely also reduce economic instability. When the federal government temporarily expanded food benefits through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, families could more readily afford food. Such a change could be costly, but it would likely improve school performance and other outcomes for poor children.

Although the current incarnation of Food Stamps in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program is a critical part of the U.S. safety net, my findings contribute to a growing body of research showing that the lump-sum delivery of insufficient benefits leaves many poor families unable to provide adequate meals throughout the month, hurting the school performance of many children. Reforms could create greater security for poor families and boost their children's performance at school, reducing achievement gaps between low and higher income Americans.