

ECONOMIC FINDING

Take-up and Targeting: Experimental Evidence from SNAP

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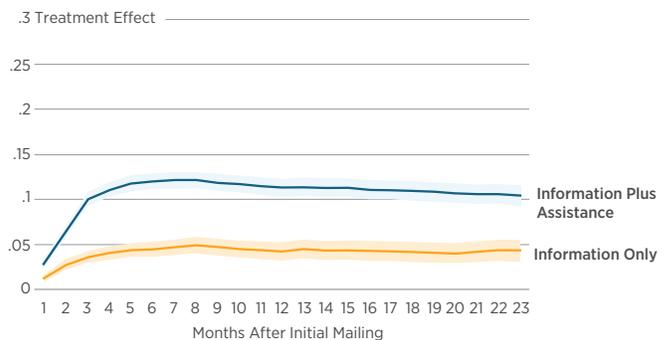
Providing information increases take-up of SNAP benefits among Pennsylvania elderly, but information plus application assistance is even more successful.

To address the questions of how to better inform potential aid recipients of program benefits, and whether assistance programs are effective, the authors examined the impact of various interventions on the number and type of eligible elderly Pennsylvania individuals who enroll in SNAP, the only social safety net program that is virtually universally available to low-income households.

The authors randomly placed 60,000 individuals aged 60 and over in three equally sized groups: an information only treatment, an information plus assistance treatment, and a status quo control group, to find the following:

1. Information alone increases enrollment, while information plus assistance is even more successful, but at a higher per enrollee cost. The information only group applied at a rate of 11 percentage points (at \$20 per enrollee), with the information plus assistance treatment at 18 percentage points (\$60), while the status quo control group was at just 6 percentage points.
2. Information decreases targeting. Marginal applicants and enrollees from either intervention are less needy than the average enrollees in the control group. The average monthly SNAP benefit (which declines with net income) is 20% to 30% lower among enrollees in either intervention arm relative to enrollees in the control group. Additionally, relative to the control group, applicants and enrollees in either intervention group are in better health, more likely white, and more likely have English as their primary language. Importantly, the 70 percent of individuals who did not respond to the interventions and remained largely unenrolled were likely more needy, suggesting the necessity for new and differently targeted interventions.

Figure 1 • Time Pattern of Enrollment Responses



Notes: The figure shows, by month, the (cumulative) estimated treatment effects on enrollment (relative to the control) for the Information Only arm and the Information Plus Assistance arm. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals on these estimates are shown in the shaded areas.

For policymakers, the main lesson is simple yet profound: information matters. Individuals' willingness to apply for benefit programs depends in large part on whether they have accurate beliefs about expected benefits; also, different types of people may have varying sets of misperceptions. Getting information to possible recipients increases program take-up significantly, but information plus assistance with applications is even more effective. While these results are reflective of intervention programs for SNAP recipients among elderly Pennsylvania, they likely hold for other programs and among other possible recipients throughout the country.