

RESEARCH REVIEW | ISSUE 258

Food Insecurity Among Veterans Examining the Discrepancy Between Veteran Food Insecurity and Use of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

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Nutrition, Poverty, Social Services and Welfare**SUMMARY:**

“Food insecurity is linked to poorer physical and mental health, including an increased risk of suicide. Therefore, addressing the needs of food-insecure veterans is a national priority. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs conducts routine screenings to identify veterans at risk of food insecurity and refer them to sources of support. Nonetheless, food-insecure veterans are consistently less likely than their nonveteran peers to be enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This research adds to the evidence base on food-insecure veterans who do and do not enroll in SNAP, as well as differences between food-insecure veterans’ and nonveterans’ reasons for starting and ending — or losing — SNAP benefits and patterns in these groups’ use of other safety-net programs. For example, veterans’ benefits could push their income above the eligibility threshold for SNAP. Although it is a federal program, SNAP is administered by the states, and the RAND analyses highlighted potential policy options to facilitate SNAP access for food-insecure veterans.

Two groups of food-insecure veterans were much less likely to participate in SNAP than their nonveteran peers: older veterans and those who were not in the workforce because of a disability. Increasing SNAP access for food-insecure veterans who are falling through the cracks is one immediate step toward eliminating food insecurity, but there is also a need for early interventions to identify and support service members who are at risk of becoming food insecure as veterans.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- This research employed three data sources to examine the participation of food-insecure veterans and nonveterans in SNAP.
- Findings showed that veterans are less likely than nonveterans to be food insecure. However, compared with similar nonveterans, veterans who are food insecure are consistently less likely to be enrolled in SNAP.
- The data also revealed that 7.5% of veterans, around 1.4 million individuals, experienced food insecurity, and 4.9% received SNAP benefits.
- Additionally, food-insecure veterans, especially those disabled and not in the labor force, exhibited lower SNAP participation rates than food-insecure nonveterans. Differences in SNAP enrollment were observed among older veterans and those receiving VA benefits. The primary reason for food-insecure veterans discontinuing or losing SNAP benefits was an increase in income.

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

Implications for practice include: (1) enhanced early intervention to raise awareness of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) among at-risk service members who may face food insecurity upon transitioning to civilian life, (2) expanded food insecurity screening efforts, with a particular emphasis on targeting disabled and older veterans to ensure timely assistance and education regarding SNAP eligibility, and (3) broadened screening efforts for hard to reach groups that target vulnerable veterans who are not under VA care, older veterans, and those with disabilities.

FOR POLICY

At the state and federal levels, reforms to SNAP that better support food-insecure veterans and address disparities compared to nonveteran counterparts are needed. Stronger federal guidance is recommended to ensure uniformity and consistency in SNAP eligibility criteria, especially for older and disabled veterans. Federal guidance can play a pivotal role in encouraging states to adopt policies that promote SNAP participation and foster a supportive environment for food insecure veterans nationwide. Interstate compacts that deconflict state-specific policies could foster a more streamlined, seamless, and equitable approach across regions. Broad-based categorical eligibility, which simplifies the application process and raises income eligibility thresholds, should also be among the policy considerations to improve equity and enhance the SNAP program's effectiveness. Specifically, policymakers should conduct a thorough review of SNAP eligibility criteria, with a focus on ensuring that policies adequately accommodate the unique circumstances of disabled veterans.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research includes leveraging the quasi-longitudinal nature of the Current Population Survey (CPS) data to explore the intricate relationship between SNAP and U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) disability benefits among food-insecure veterans. To enhance veterans' food access, subsequent research should focus on monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of initiatives that have proven successful as well as the social and economic precursors to food insecurity among veterans. This may be particularly important for those not under VA care and therefore not routinely screened. Further research is also encouraged reviewing collaborations between the U.S. Department of Defense and the VA to identify transitioning service members at risk of food insecurity. Addressing the lower SNAP enrollment rates among veterans necessitates research into the underlying factors, such as eligibility challenges, perceived ineligibility, social stigma associated with SNAP participation, and the influence of messaging on nutrition assistance. Additionally, longitudinal tracking of the implementation of these recommendations and their effectiveness in increasing veterans' utilization of nutrition assistance programs will provide insights into interventions that facilitate food-insecure veterans' access to essential support. Future research should also encompass investigating state-level variations in SNAP participation policies and assessing the influence of veterans' military service factors on their food security status. There is also a need for better understanding of how veterans' experiences as service members, such as their paygrade and years of service, affect their likelihood of becoming food insecure as veterans.

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