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Older Adults on SNAP Experience Gaps in Benefits

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KEY FINDINGS

- 1 in 4 older adults experiences a churn spell, resulting in an average of \$129 lost in monthly household Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
- About 80% of churn spells occur during or at the end of the SNAP certification period.
- Gaps in SNAP benefits may negatively impact the health and nutrition of older adult population.
- Our findings suggest policy and program changes could reduce the frequency and duration of churn among older adults.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest food and nutrition assistance program in the United States.^{1,2} As of 2018, one in four SNAP households contain an older adult and 14% of all SNAP participants are aged 60 or older.³ Administrative churn – which occurs when a household stops receiving SNAP benefits for up to 4 months, often during recertification, before returning to the program^{4,5} – reduces financial resources needed to purchase food.

This brief summarizes the results of our recent study that examined administrative churn among Missouri SNAP participants aged 60 years and older. Using administrative data from SNAP benefits receipts, we identified the risk of experiencing churn, the timing, frequency, duration, and benefits lost during churn spells and how these outcomes vary by demographic (sex, race, age, ethnicity), household (size, earned income) and geographic (urban, rural) factors.

Churn Frequency and Duration Affect 1 in 4 Older Adults

Based on our sample of older adults, 1 in 4 experienced a gap in SNAP receipt, termed administrative churn and among those who ever experienced churn (i.e., churners), most (73.5%) experienced one churn spell that lasted more than one month (36.22 days).

The minimum monthly benefit for churners is greater than for non-churners. Adjusting for household size, individual churners received \$86.99 per person per month – \$10.00 more than non-churners. Among churners, lost benefits are repaid in full or in part on regular payment dates or at different dates. This finding indicates that instability in receiving SNAP benefits could, at times, prevent the purchase of grocery items needed to maintain adequate household food consumption, resulting in negative health and nutritional outcomes for many older adults.



**Data Source: Missouri SNAP Benefits Receipts,
January 2006 – June 2014 (N = 141,584)**

Image data source: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/logo-guidance>

Churn Spells are Highest at Specific Points in the SNAP Certification Process

Among those who experience churn, churn spells may occur at the end of the certification period (60%), mid-point check-in (20%), or outside these two formal points of verification (20%). For older SNAP participants in Missouri, certification periods vary from 6, 12, to 24 months. To continue receiving benefits, program participants must submit documents to recertify or renew benefits before the end of the certification period. Longer certification periods reduce the occurrence of churn spells, and less frequent recertification periods may reduce the number and duration of churn spells without financially burdening the state. Administrative churn is tied to administrative burden (that is, the experiences individuals face when interacting with the government).⁶ When churn spells occur, the administrative costs are borne by the SNAP agency processing cases and the SNAP household that cannot use their SNAP benefits to purchase groceries.⁴

Changing the SNAP Recertification Process for Older Adults Could Reduce Churn

Older adults risk experiencing delays in SNAP benefits due to administrative barriers in the recertification process. Experiences of churn limit financial resources to purchase healthy foods and can affect the general health and nutrition of the older adult population. The findings from our study can help inform future policy and programmatic changes and target those at the greatest risk of administrative churn. Simplified Application Project (ESAP) – an initiative of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, aims to simplify the SNAP application and recertification processes.⁷ It uses concise application forms and data matches on eligibility information to reduce administrative burdens, waiving in-person recertification interviews and extending SNAP certification periods to 36 months.⁸ Our study's results, with other proposed recommendations like using telephonic signatures for confirmation and assigning an authorized agency representative to assist the older adult,⁹ are helpful tools to help

policymakers and program administrators improve and strengthen the SNAP application and recertification processes.

Data and Methods

Our sample included 141,584 adults aged 60 and older who participated in SNAP for three or more consecutive months between January 2006 and June 2014 in Missouri. We divided the sample into two groups based on SNAP participants who ever experienced a period of churn and those who did not. We observed whether churn spells occurred around periods of: mandatory certification, mid-certification or at some other point, and calculated the probability of experiencing churn, the number and duration of churn spells, and the loss of benefits. For further information on the methodology, the published study can be found at:

<https://doi.org/10.1002/aep.13288.10>

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