

RESEARCH BRIEF #112

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Waiving SNAP Interviews during the COVID-19 Pandemic Increased SNAP Caseloads

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KEY FINDINGS

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government allowed local SNAP agencies to waive certification interviews to reduce the administrative burden associated with the SNAP certification process.
- Only 27% of county-level SNAP agencies chose to implement the interview waiver.
- Counties that implemented the SNAP interview waiver experienced an estimated 5% increase in SNAP caseloads compared to counties that did not.
- State and county SNAP offices should opt into SNAP enrollment waivers when provided during economic downturn.

Food insecurity in the United States reached historically high rates during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, household demand for assistance provided by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) increased substantially.¹ To facilitate access to SNAP during a global pandemic and the coincident economic crisis, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) granted state SNAP offices the option to waive the interview requirement – a potential administrative burden associated with the SNAP certification process. Local SNAP agencies could choose whether to adopt the interview waiver in states that administer SNAP at the county level.

This brief summarizes findings from [a recent study](#)² that used data from SNAP offices across 10 U.S. states that administer SNAP at the county-level to examine the impact of SNAP interview waivers on SNAP caseloads from January 5th to April 30th of 2021. We also investigated what factors were associated with county adoption of SNAP interview waivers, including county economic conditions, the demographic composition of the county population, the level of COVID-19 outbreak, and the county’s partisan climate. Our analysis did not show clear support that any of these factors were systematically related to the adoption of SNAP interview waivers at the county level.

Nearly 75% of Local SNAP Offices Chose not to Implement Interview Waivers

We found a high level of local discretion in implementing the SNAP certification interview waiver. Only 27% of our sample county SNAP offices chose to implement the waiver. Most local SNAP agencies may have chosen not to implement the waiver because SNAP interviews are almost always conducted by telephone and therefore did not directly contribute to COVID-19 transmission.

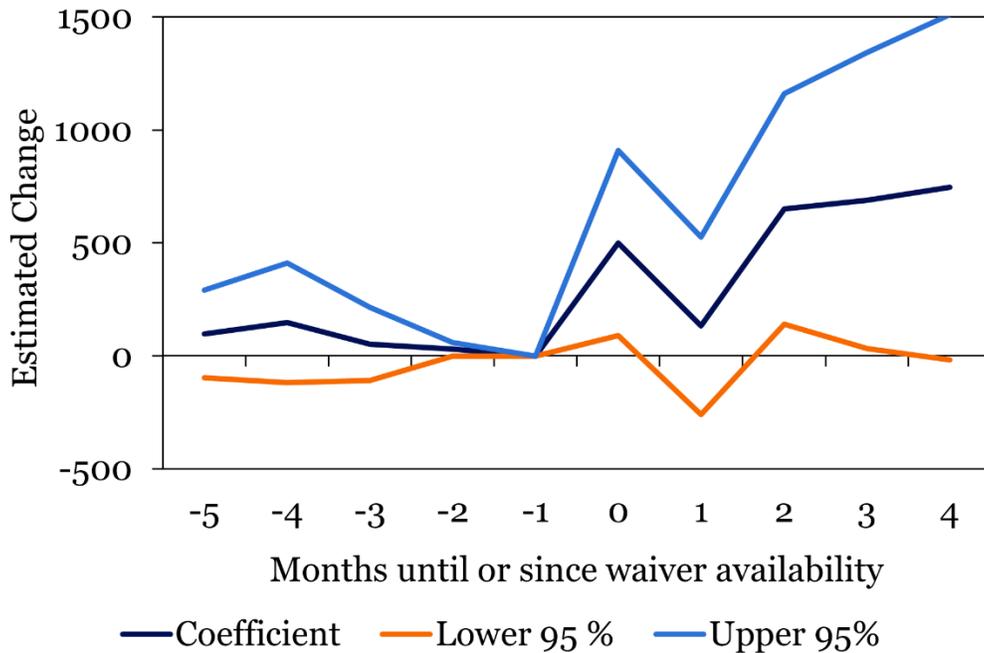


Figure Title: Event-Study Estimates of Impact of Interview Waiver on SNAP Caseloads (per 100,000).

Data Source: Heflin, C. Fannin, W. C., and Lopoo, L. (2023).²

Note: Figure plots coefficients and 95% confidence intervals on indicators for time until or since SNAP interview waiver availability. Model includes month-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the state level.

Eliminating SNAP Certification Interviews Increased SNAP Program Participation

To assess the consequences of interview waiver discretion on program participation, we compared changes in SNAP caseloads (per 100,000 persons) following waiver availability for counties that adopted the waiver relative to those that did not. Figure 1 presents our results graphically. We found that before waivers were available (left of the vertical line), SNAP caseloads followed similar trends for waiver and nonwaiver counties. After waivers became available (right of the vertical line), waiver counties experienced a persistent increase in SNAP caseloads relative to nonwaiver counties. These estimates imply that SNAP interview waivers increased SNAP caseloads by about 5%.

Local SNAP Agencies Should Turn to Interview Waivers for Improving SNAP Uptake Rates

We found that county agency use of SNAP interview waivers during the COVID-19 pandemic was low. We also found that waiver implementation varied within and across

states, indicating substantial local agency discretion in waiver utilization. Discretion had meaningful consequences, as waiver counties experienced about 5% more SNAP caseloads than nonwaiver counties.

Our results indicate that eliminating SNAP certification interviews can improve program uptake. The use of SNAP interview waivers during times of economic downturn such as COVID-19 can reduce barriers to SNAP enrollment. State and county-level SNAP offices should be encouraged to implement waiver policies when available.

Data and Methods

Data were collected from county-level SNAP programs across 10 U.S. states (sampling frame of n=738 counties). Trained interviewers used 626 SNAP information lines across the 10 states (California, Colorado, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin). Interview content was used to document SNAP application conditions across 647 counties from January 5th to April 30th of 2021. Our analysis of the impact of SNAP interview waivers on caseloads consists of descriptive findings on interview waiver data and hypothesis test results to predict county-level factors, including variations in public health conditions, political environments, and demographic composition. We used event-study and difference-in-differences designs to estimate the impact of interview waivers on SNAP caseloads. Full methodological details can be found in the [peer-reviewed publication](#).

References

1. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2020). *Tracking the COVID-19 recession's effects on food, housing, and employment hardships*. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and>
2. Heflin, C., Fannin, W. C., & Lopoo, L. (2023). Local Control, Discretion, and Administrative Burden: SNAP Interview Waivers and Caseloads During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 53(7-8), 334-346.

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