Caregiver Perspectives on Improving Government Nutrition Benefit Programs

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Objectives: The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provide essential nutrition support for low-income families. However, many eligible families do not receive or fully redeem these benefits. We aimed to understand current and former WIC and SNAP beneficiaries' perceptions of and suggestions for improving both programs.

Methods: We conducted semistructured phone interviews with caregivers of pediatric patients who were current or former WIC and SNAP beneficiaries at 2 academic pediatric primary care clinics. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded by 2 independent coders using thematic analysis, resolving discrepancies by consensus. Interviews continued until data saturation was reached.

Results: We interviewed 40 caregivers who were predominantly Black (88%) mothers (90%), with 53% and 83% currently using WIC and SNAP, respectively. We identified 4 themes related to participation barriers: (1) limited product variety available through WIC, (2) inconvenience and stigma associated with purchasing WIC products, (3) SNAP income-based eligibility criteria, and (4) burdensome SNAP enrollment and recertification processes. We identified 3 themes related to suggestions for improvement: (a) decreasing stigma associated with participation, (b) allowing online or phone-based enrollment, and (c) improving coordination with health care systems.

Conclusions: WIC and SNAP beneficiaries identified several modifiable barriers to enrollment and benefits redemption. Pediatric providers should advocate for programmatic improvements that make it easier for families to access and redeem benefits and should consider implementing innovative cross-sector interventions like medical-financial partnerships, direct WIC and SNAP referrals, and data sharing with government assistance offices.

Journal:

Pediatrics
Authors: Mishaal Yazdani, Chén Kenyon, Alexander Fiks, Aditi Vasan

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