



**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA**  
Agriculture and Natural Resources

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UC ANR Opportunity Grant Final Report

**Capturing Participants' Experiences of the 2019  
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program  
Food Assistance Benefit Disruption to Inform  
Future Policy**

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## Executive Summary

The federal government shutdown from December 22, 2018 – January 25, 2019 created an unprecedented disruption in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. The Nutrition Policy Institute in partnership with University of California Cooperative Extension Advisors sought and received an Opportunity Grant from the University of California, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, to conduct a cross-sectional qualitative study to capture California SNAP participants' experiences during the benefit disruption. The study aim was to ascertain how the disruption affected participants' food security, health, and wellbeing. We collected data from February 28, 2019 – March 15, 2019 in four focus groups (3 in English, 1 in Spanish) with low-income adults in Los Angeles, Tuolumne, San Mateo, and San Francisco.

Participants reported that:

- SNAP benefits generally are too low for participants to afford an adequate, healthy diet. Despite much effort to manage limited food budgets, participants routinely run out of money for food.
- Eligibility determinations for SNAP feel overly restrictive, especially in high cost-of-living areas, and the program is not adequately agile to respond in a timely way to frequent changes in participants' employment or other circumstances.
- Customer service and communications between SNAP offices and participants show room for improvement. The 2019 benefit disruption highlighted challenges in communications; few participants reported being informed about the disruption in a timely manner, if at all, and most reported confusion.
- Some participants described the 2019 benefit disruption as providing temporary relief from routine end-of-the-month scarcity; overall, the disruption caused a great deal of emotional stress, heightened food insecurity, and increased financial distress.
- The disruption resulted in many participants feeling more insecure about their SNAP benefits, and some losing faith in the government.

Participant recommendations for SNAP:

1. Improve benefit adequacy by increasing benefit levels.
2. Modify eligibility and benefit formulas to better address high costs-of-living as well as the expenses associated with working (e.g., transportation, childcare).
3. Improve customer service and communications.
4. Do not disrupt SNAP benefits in the future.

## **Background**

The federal government shutdown from December 22, 2018 – January 25, 2019, the longest in U.S. history, created an unprecedented disruption in issuance of SNAP benefits (also known as CalFresh in California, formerly known as Food Stamps). While the entire nation faced a SNAP benefit disruption, the timeline varied somewhat across states. In California, February benefits were issued between January 16 and 20, and all March benefits were issued on March 1, rather than the normal staggered issuance cycle (Wade 2019a; Wade 2019b). The shutdown also created an unprecedented and time-sensitive opportunity to gain an understanding of how the level of SNAP benefits available impacts nutrition and food security in low-income households. As such, the Nutrition Policy Institute in partnership with University of California Cooperative Extension Advisors in three California counties sought and received an Opportunity Grant from the University of California, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, to conduct focus groups with SNAP participants during the disruption in late February and early March. The aim of the study was to capture the ways in which the disruption affected the food security, health, and wellbeing of California's SNAP participants, an economically disadvantaged population that received limited media attention during the government shutdown despite being directly affected by it.

This report shares findings from the focus groups in which participants shared their experiences with obtaining adequate food to feed themselves and their families, the ways in which SNAP contributes, the challenges they experience with SNAP, and how the 2019 SNAP benefit disruption impacted their food security, stress, finances, health, their feelings about participating in SNAP and their general trust in government.

## **Methods**

We conducted a cross-sectional qualitative study designed to capture the experiences of SNAP participants during the benefit disruption that occurred between mid-January and March 2019, as a result of a federal government shutdown. We collected data in four focus groups, three in English and one in Spanish, with low-income adults in four counties in California that included large urban, suburban, and rural areas (Los Angeles, Tuolumne, San Mateo, and San Francisco) from February 28, 2019 – March 15, 2019 (Table 1). The Institutional Review Board of the University of California, Davis, approved the study.

UC Cooperative Extension Advisors collaborated with community partners, including two food banks, an elementary school, and a homeless shelter, to host focus groups. We asked participating community partners to recruit study participants based upon the clientele they serve. All focus group participants were at least 18 years old and were participating in SNAP or in the process of enrolling in the program. Focus group participants received a \$40 gift card in appreciation for their contributions.

### ***Focus groups***

Two researchers led focus groups: 1 conducted 3 groups in English and the second conducted 1 focus group in Spanish. In addition, the research team included three Cooperative Extension Advisors who co-facilitated the focus groups conducted in their counties of work. Focus group participants completed a demographic survey that included questions about gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, employment, income, marital status, food assistance program participation, and food security (Table 2). A semi-structured focus group interview guide was developed by the research team and reviewed by three external experts in the field. The interview guide asked about participants' usual food routines, the level of support SNAP provides, how they understood and experienced getting February's SNAP benefit in January, whether the disruption in their benefits impacted their family's health or stress levels, whether the experience changed the way they think about SNAP, and what they recommend decision makers do to better help them (Table 3). Focus groups lasted approximately an hour and a half and were audio recorded.

### ***Data analysis***

A commercial service was used to transcribe and translate focus group recordings. Four researchers, including one lead researcher and three co-facilitators, each of whom participated in at least 1 focus group, reviewed the transcripts. A codebook was developed based upon the main topics in the focus group guide and was reviewed and agreed upon by the research team. One lead researcher read and coded all four transcripts and created a summary table of the coding results. The co-facilitator of each focus group carefully reviewed the transcripts against the coding results to ensure consistency of interpretations. The researchers used memos to capture themes and emergent findings throughout the analysis process. Co-facilitators wrote brief reports of findings from the group(s) they attended to share with local partners and distributed them in June and July 2019. The research team met for 1-2 hours, 4 times from March through June 2019, to discuss and reach consensus on the findings.

### **Results**

A total of twenty-six adults participated in the study. Findings emerged in five main areas: (1) the usual struggles participants face in securing an adequate diet; (2) general challenges participants experience utilizing the SNAP program; (3) specific challenges participants experienced with SNAP during the 2019 benefit disruption; (4) the negative impact the disruption had on participants' food security, stress levels, finances, and perceptions of government support; and (5) participants' recommendations for SNAP moving forward.

#### **1. Participants report routinely struggling to secure an adequate, healthy diet.**

The challenges participants routinely confront in trying to feed themselves and their families were discussed multiple times in all focus groups. Participants described using numerous coping skills to ensure they don't go hungry, such as shopping at multiple retailers, coupon clipping, freezing food, and using food pantries. Despite their best efforts, most reported

routinely running out of money to buy food during the month, and some reported cutting the size of their/their children's food portions.

### ***Routine food insecurity is experienced in the context of high costs of living***

Participants reported that the high costs of living, inadequate or low-wage employment, and/or their limited fixed income from other public programs (Social Security, disability, unemployment) meant that they routinely faced food insecurity. As one participant said:

*You know, with our incomes, and especially with the rent is so high and our bills... it gets really stressful trying to be like, 'Okay, where's my next meal gonna come from? How am I going to feed my kids and, you know, husband...'*

Another talked about eating less at the end of the month, saying:

*It's like I shorten all the... meals... to last through. I make small meals. [If my kids say] 'I'm hungry.' 'okay, well, tomorrow. Just go to sleep or get water.'*

While many participants used the term “stretch” to talk about dollars available for food and/or food resources, one participant described stretching this way: “You’ll have to add more water to the beans, so that you can stretch the food.”

Another participant described how food insecurity presented challenges due to her struggles with a health condition:

*... I have to eat healthy with my- my GI problems that I have. I have to eat white plain chicken, you know, fresh vegetables, and they don't bother me so much... But ... you run out of the chicken, or whatever, you run out of vegetables. Then you've got a can of raviolis that the food bank gave you. Well, that's what you eat. And it tears you up. You know it makes you sick, but you gotta eat.*

### ***Food is too expensive, especially healthy food***

Participants in all focus groups repeatedly talked about how expensive food is. They described searching to find lower prices on food items, buying junk foods and other ‘cheap’ foods because they can get more for their money and the food lasts longer, and struggling to buy healthy foods, which they reported to be too expensive. As one said:

*Sodas and all that, it's easy to last longer, but it's like trying to do that, they last through the end of the month, and healthy food is hard ... you're trying to make your kids eat healthy, but it's really expensive at the same time... you're fighting to eat healthy, and it's expensive to get fresh food sometimes especially for our big family.*

Another participant talked about struggling to address her child's obesity, since she didn't feel able to afford the healthy foods recommended for him. She said:

*It's not the healthiest choice, and it's like, 'How am I going to fix my son's obesity when the prices of the food, the vegetables, what they're telling us we're supposed to eat is rocket high?' The processed food or the nasty foods is what we have to run for, because it's cheaper and just to have something in your kids' stomach.*

## **2. Participants reported feeling grateful for SNAP, but also felt that the benefits are inadequate. Many reported negative experiences with the program.**

Participants in each focus group expressed gratitude for the SNAP program; however, the sentiment expressed most frequently was that SNAP benefit levels are inadequate to meet participants' food needs. Additionally, many participants described negative experiences with SNAP, such as challenges with eligibility requirements or benefit formulas, and difficult communications with caseworkers.

### ***SNAP benefit levels are too low***

The most frequent issue raised about SNAP was that benefit levels are too low to provide food security and support an adequate, healthy diet. As one said, "It's just that no matter how hard you try to stretch the money, it's not enough."

Many of the adults who were currently raising children expressed the inadequacy in terms of providing for their children. As one said:

*... what they give us is not enough for one month, that they should try to help us a little more.... They should think about the children because more than anything else, the food you ask for is for them, they should think about what hurts our children.*

In one focus group, participants discussed a contrast they observed between the government's willingness to provide enough SNAP support to families to feed their children healthfully, and the government's perceived concern for their children's wellbeing when the parents are suspected of otherwise mistreating them:

*Participant 1: ...[If] they're thinking that you've been abusive to your child, she's right, they're quick to jump on that. But when it comes, like she's saying, to nutrition wise, it's like they want to deny us. But what else do we gotta do?*

*Participant 2: What if the kids are sick because they don't eat? Like, you know, whose fault is that? Like we're, literally, have nothing to feed them.*

Many participants felt that SNAP eligibility and benefit calculations did not adequately account for their high costs of living. While this topic arose in all focus groups, it was more prevalent in the groups conducted in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area. In these areas, the cost of housing was routinely discussed as a major challenge. Even in the group conducted in a homeless shelter, a participant talked about trying—and failing—to secure SNAP benefits:

*It's really hard out here... And like all of us here, you know, with our family... trying to make it work, trying to do everything within our ability to do. But then it's like, we know that there's help out there, but we're getting limited to the help... I'm pretty sure all of us pay our taxes, you know, we pay our dues. We do it, everything that we needed to be doing, but yet still we get slapped in the face like, 'No, you can't qualify for that because of this and that.' And that makes it even more stressful, you know?*

In rural areas, where the cost of housing is lower, but transportation options are limited and communities are geographically dispersed, participants raised the cost of gas as a major barrier to food security. As one rural participant said:

*You have to go back and forth and be able to get to different stores and then maybe be able to go back to a different store in order to get the best prices and everything, but then of course, [gasps] 'That costs gas.'*

Additionally, participants felt that SNAP cost of living increases don't adequately account for the increasing costs of food and other expenses locally. One participant talked about the adjustments provided to account for cost of living increases this way:

*... the cost of living continues to rise --things continue to rise, vegetables, everything in the grocery store continues to increase. Let them be aware when they give us an increase, let them really think about how much more that can help. It's nothing. The increase they give us, let them be aware ... why we are really asking for [it], is to feed our children better, who are the future, the tomorrow of this country.*

### ***Participants described challenges with SNAP administration***

Participants raised a number of challenges related to SNAP administration—both with program rules and with customer service and communications. Many described these experiences as leaving them feeling undignified, disrespected, or not cared about. For example, participants felt disrespected by receiving low benefit levels. Some participants referred to the perceived inadequacy of the minimum \$15 SNAP benefit this way:

Participant 1: *I think giving \$15 a month to anyone is ludicrous. It's like an insult.*

Participant 2: *It's a slap in the face.*

Participant 1: *I mean, it's a slap.*

Participant 3: *It's a slap in the face...*

Participant 2: *Yeah. It's disrespectful is what it is.*

In two of the groups, participants talked about feeling as though people who 'follow the rules' have to pay for the bad behavior of people who don't. One person expressed both gratitude for the program and her frustration with it this way:

*... I'm grateful for the help, but I know that sometimes the restrictions and all the obstacles they put in our way are because there are people who abuse, who sell the stamps, who do not use them as they should be. It is true that sometimes the innocents pay for others' sins...*

A number of participants reported challenging experiences related to SNAP customer service when dealing with issues of eligibility, enrollment, and participation. One participant said:

*There are times when you are disappointed when you go to ask for help, because some workers make you feel that the help you are going to ask for is coming out of their paycheck.*

Another said:

*But the communications for this welfare office... I have called them and called them and called them and you know, they won't return any phone calls... they don't want to talk to me. I don't know why, but maybe it's just the way they treat everybody.*

Finally, a number of participants described confusion and lag time related to frequent changes in their household circumstances that impact their benefits. These changes included things like adding family members, children leaving the household, changes in employment or eligibility for other public programs, and missing a SNAP administrative deadline. Lag time refers to delays in budget adjustments when participants with hourly jobs, for example, follow stringent rules about reporting income fluctuations and experience a delayed response in adjusting their benefit that does not align with their needs. Participants generally reported that these situations were confusing, that they struggled to reach caseworkers to get their questions answered, and that the result was uncertainty about the level of benefit they would be receiving in any given month. One participant said:

*...I applied for unemployment, but I was never granted, but I applied. Somewhere in the system... it told them that I-I was receiving benefits from unemployment, which I wasn't... But CalFresh cut it, like majorly, like 90%...*

One focus group participant called the lead researcher a few days after the focus group, to ask that the report highlight the challenge presented when SNAP benefits are reduced due to a Social Security cost-of-living increase, as it limits the relief the cost-of-living increase provides. Participants in two of the four groups discussed challenges related to benefit levels declining when their earned income increases. One said:

*... when you go to work and make your check and then they cut your food stamp down and now, you've got to spend your cash now. It's supposed to be for the bills and you ain't got cash for the bills and it's just a vicious circle.*

Another participant said that the lag time in response to situational changes meant that needs and benefit levels weren't always aligned:

*When it goes down, they decrease it in so many days, or weeks, or months after you make the amount. So then you go down again in the amount that you're making and so then it isn't working out. You don't have crap when you need it and you have more when you don't.*

These changes in benefit levels due to program administrative policies create further volatility and uncertainty in SNAP recipients' finances. In order to achieve food security, one has to be able to assume a baseline financial stability - and the complexity of social safety net program administration makes it challenging for its intended beneficiaries to achieve the elusive sense of financial stability and household food security.

### **3. Participants reported confusion related to the 2019 benefit disruption and unique challenges with SNAP as a result.**

In California, SNAP benefits are distributed by county Social Services Agencies. As such, participants in the four focus group counties reported slightly different experiences with official communications related to the 2019 benefit disruption.

#### ***Inadequate communications***

In every group, participants reported receiving the additional benefits prior to receiving formal communication from the SNAP administrative agency. In two of the counties, participants said they never received communication from the Agency regarding the benefit disruption, but some called to find out why they had the extra money. In one of these counties, one participant said that she used a mobile App, available through the county welfare office, and that the App provided information about the disruption. But another participant in that county hadn't gotten the information, saying:

*Like, I would have rather have them communicate clearly about what they were doing that month, um, because I never got the message... So I didn't know.*

In the other two counties, at least some participants reported getting a phone call from the SNAP Agency. These calls reportedly came at least a day or two after the benefits were distributed, and in some cases participants had spent the benefits before receiving the official notification. In some groups, participants reported learning about the disruption from news stories or from social media or word-of-mouth. One said, "I was hearing stuff about, um, government and stuff like that and everything. So I guess that's why it was getting messed with, federal stuff."

#### ***Confusion***

Across all groups, confusion about the benefit disruption was discussed repeatedly. In some cases, the disruption occurred while participants were seeking benefit adjustments for other reasons. As one participant said:

*And so I was saying, you know, I turned in my thing and told them, 'Hey, I only got this. I think I should get an increase from my 15.' And... so I didn't know about any of this other stuff going on and them doing their added thing for the government. And so I was confused. I was like, 'Okay is that my-- is that how much they increased it? They just gave me an extra \$15. [laughs] What's going on?' And then I called and I heard that thing and they explained it, but yeah, that was very confusing to me...*

Although it was the exception rather than the rule, in every county, at least one participant reported spending the February benefit before understanding why they had received the additional funds. A variety of reasons were provided to explain this. For example, in two of the groups, at least one participant reported worrying that the extra benefits received in January would disappear if they were not spent before the end of that month. As one group discussed:

*Participant 1: I have also heard that about the food stamps um, um, if you don't use em, you lose 'em.... So you be afraid to-- and you can't get anybody to answer the question.*

Participant 2: *She's right. They just send you letters threatening you that, but they never do, do it.*

Another participant described the impetus for spending the unexpected benefit quickly this way:

*I was worried that I needed to spend it because with the wacky, screwy way everything is going, I didn't know if they would take it away with the government shut down, so I had to spend the whole thing. But I got stuff that I could freeze...*

In three of the groups, participants reported thinking that the additional benefits received in January were an administrative mistake. Participants expressed various, and sometimes mixed emotional responses to this 'mistake.' One said, "We thought we had won the lottery." Another said:

*I was scared. I said, 'The government made a mistake... I got scared, but I was happy, I thought they were wrong, it scared me but made me happy at the same time.*

In every group, at least one participant thought that the national SNAP program was ending, and that the extra benefits they received were being provided as a final 'bonus' to participants. In one county, this feeling was related to a message the Agency circulated to participants, expressing uncertainty about the March benefit distribution. In other cases, the idea that the program was ending came from word-of-mouth or other sources. As one participant said:

*The news I heard said maybe there were going to be changes, that they were not going to give benefits anymore, and that was why they paid the month in advance... I thought that there was not going to be any help anymore... the help is over.*

Another said:

*I thought that maybe they were going to take it away, because I heard rumors that they were about to take the aid away. So, I said, 'Maybe they gave us the last month because they want to say that there is not going to be more money.' ... I imagined it this way, but many people were saying that they were going to remove the stamps and that they were not giving them anymore.*

In each group, at least one participant talked about splurging in January or treating themselves or their children to something a little bit extra or special. In 3 of the 4 groups, this topic was raised multiple times. In some cases, the extra spending was due to confusion or incorrect information about the reason for the additional money in their account. As one said:

*We splurged in January, so, um, and not realizing that we were not gonna get benefits in...February ... You know, in February, um, we just ate less.*

Some participants talked about sharing what they thought were extra benefits with family and/or friends. One said:

*I'm going to eat, I'm going to eat well, healthy and well. First, I bought meat, to make roast meat for my children that day, and I invited my siblings who live opposite my house. I told them 'Let's eat roast meat. Help me.'*

Another said:

*So then when they doubled it, I was like, like I said, we took a bunch of friends to take them to Safeway to get them food and we ate good. Um, we ate things that we couldn't eat, like a steak, you know, where we can eat minimal steak..*

In other cases, participants knew that the extra funds were for February's benefits, but they still changed their behavior in January. One said:

*I did hear in the news, but I'm like, 'Let me go get what we need.' But when you go to the market, you grab more to eat, especially when the kids are there, and you have young kids.... and I know it's bad, but sometimes as mothers, you don't know how to say 'no.' ... Especially you grew up with parents that struggled too... So, for my kids, I try to give them what I didn't have. And even though I get help, I try to please my kids... But yes, that month it was like, 'What am I doing?' But just to please my kids, sometimes-- It was a struggle, that month.*

#### **4. Some participants reported feeling relieved or happy when they received the February benefit in January, but the overall impact of the disruption was increased stress levels, poorer food security, disrupted finances, and increased negative perceptions of government support.**

Across all groups, the overwhelming sentiment was that the disruption in SNAP benefits had a negative impact. Some people referred to this in a general way, saying things like, "I think we pretty much all agree it kind of screwed us" or "it messed people up." One said, "It was a 180... going from having extra to having too little." Only a couple of participants, at least one of whom received the minimum \$15 monthly distribution, reported that the disruption had little or no impact.

##### ***Emotional stress***

The most discussed impact was stress, which was raised repeatedly in 3 of the 4 groups. For many participants, the stress was related to uncertainty—uncertainty about how to make their benefits last for longer than usual, uncertainty about whether the program was ending, and uncertainty about why they received the additional funds on their cards. As one said, "I was stressed because I didn't know what's going on."

Another said:

*When we were already in a state of chaos and concern and worry, do not make it worse by doing things that we don't know about, don't understand, don't get information on.*

Although parents of younger children didn't indicate that their children were aware of the disruption, one parent of a teen said:

*In my case, my daughter, the oldest, already notices more or sees things. She said, 'Mom, did they advance you the money because they're going to take away your help?' Because medical help is also included, she said, 'Mommy, are you not going to be able to take me to the doctor, to the dentist anymore?'... She was worried.*

### ***Initial relief... followed by more stress***

In every group, at least one participant talked about receiving February's benefit in January as an initial relief. Receiving the benefit during a time of the month when participants' money available to spend on food generally has been exhausted meant some people experienced temporary relief from the usual cycle of scarcity, meaning that they could delay the use of emergency food assistance or asking for help elsewhere. One participant described the relief this way:

*You don't even think about it, it's just a big stress relief... That's a big burden off your back kinda type of thing, how you gonna survive this month literally by eating is, yeah, that's-that's something you don't have to worry about at that point...*

Another said, "I was happy because I had a lot of money [laughs] for food." A few participants talked about being able to eat healthier in January. One said, "I ate a lot better in January, because I had more. I've been able to go more to get more fresh vegetables...."

However, the relief quickly turned to stress. One participant described it this way:

*'It's nice to have more benefits, but if you think about it, you're going to spend them, and you still have the whole month of February, and say, 'Okay, I spent them. But what about February? What am I going to do? What's going to happen then?'*

Another described the combined relief and concern this way:

*I was able to get a little bit more with that double benefit. Um, I wasn't limited to and trying to make it stretch for that month. I was able to, like, buy stuff to make a complete meal, you know what I mean? And so it was good. You know, it was good and bad...*

### ***Increased food insecurity and negative financial impacts***

Across all groups, participants talked about negative food security impacts of the benefit disruption, and some talked about negative financial and health impacts as well.

Some participants experienced food insecurity in February because they did not realize that they received early issuance of SNAP benefits in January. Even for those who tried to stretch their benefits through the end of February, there were simply more days in the month than what the SNAP benefits could cover. One mother talked about utilizing a new charitable food program in February, after she'd run out of money to buy food for her family. She said:

*The food boxes definitely came in handy, um, um, very appreciative for those. Um, different pantries*

*that give out the eggs, rice and things like that because that's what they [the kids] love. They're like, Mom, can you just make eggs and rice for dinner?' We had eggs and rice, and they were happy. They were full.*

Another said:

*Well, my daughter [also a SNAP participant]... feeds five people and, um, she said it was really hard for her, because she got all that money in January and... she bought a lot of extra stuff, and she just didn't have anything much for February.... She stocked up the best she could, but feeding five people and a teenager was very difficult.*

In addition to preventing hunger, SNAP is often described as the nation's largest anti-poverty program that prevent families from falling into deep poverty when other sources of income fail to meet basic needs. SNAP benefits help recipients feel like they are able to stay on track to financial self-sufficiency. However, the disruption highlighted the economic uncertainty that SNAP recipients live with. One participant described the impact this way: "I felt the impact and it just took me back to feeling poor."

Participants described challenges related to financial impacts of the disruption, because most reported spending their SNAP benefits earlier in the month and running out of money to buy food in February in a way that was different from usual. One said:

*That's what changed this month. In these last two weeks, I had to take from the money we were saving to pay the rent, which had never happened.*

For many participants, the disruption to their SNAP benefits led them to have to adjust their finances in ways that meant they continued to have to deal with the after-effects even after the shutdown itself had passed:

*She [speaker's daughter] had to use her gas money for food, because she's still kind of playing catch up.... it had a huge impact on my daughter and her family. And uh, she called me several times crying, 'Ma, I don't- we don't have enough food. What am I going to do...? You know, I can't afford to this and this and this.' And I can't help her. So there was a lot of times that all she had was like crackers and whatever. So it was very difficult for them. And I can imagine people with families have the same problem.*

Another said:

*It's a huge domino effect, really. It really, really is, 'cause when you-- You're just trying to catch up from... February, and here's March and you just have to get extra stuff that you couldn't buy in February, you know, and it's this big old domino effect.*

A couple of participants talked about going into debt in February in order to have money to buy food. One said:

*Right now, the only difficult decision we have is the stress of paying off what we are borrowing with interest... Having to use it to pay off the rent. You have to do one thing and fail at another. You*

*get into debt with the cards and then it's a mess.*

### ***Reduced security about safety net support and overall faith in government***

Participants reported that the 2019 SNAP benefit disruption impacted their perceptions of the government and overall feelings of security related to government programs. As one said, “You cannot always depend on it [SNAP]. ‘Cause, like he said, we didn't expect nothing like this happened. So you can kind of, like, never know.”

Another said:

*I mean, I'm grateful for the government, you know, for it to help me with the food stamps or whatever. But at the same time, I feel like it's just like they can-- all of a sudden within a blink of an eye, they can take it all away. And then what are we going to do?*

In another group, a pair discussed the new uncertainty:

Participant 1: *And it's still stressful, because I'm thinking in my head, you know, like, ‘Okay, this is three months solid now that you've been playing around with the money for these people. What is it going to be? What is-- is April going to be nothing?’*

Participant 2: *Yeah, that was my major concern. And that- that is very stressful.*

One participant characterized the increased insecurity of public assistance and the stress it caused this way:

*Cause' the government shutdown... it makes even more things harder and it makes us to think like, ‘Okay, if they did that, you know, what if they do- what if they decide to do that again?’ And then what? Thousands of families going to be left with, you know, with nothing. What are we going to do to scrap up to get food, you know, or whatever the um, necessities that they need... it just makes us even more and more like what else is... going to happen? ... it's basically, we just feel like it's a waiting game....That's just gonna make us worry.*

Additionally, in three of the four focus groups, the sentiment that the benefit disruption shook participants' overall faith in government was raised multiple times. This topic was not discussed in the focus group conducted in Spanish in LA. It was discussed more frequently and with more emotion in the focus group conducted in the rural northern CA county. One participant said:

*It's obviously caused a lot of... confusion to people and-and the mass hysteria is pointing to, you know, that our government in America can't get your blank together, to where we're all being in confusion and craziness like this. It's not healthy for us, period. And they just kind of like-like it's nothing on us, like a game or something to them. This isn't a game. This is reality.*

In another exchange, participants said:

Participant 1: *It's just disgusting to think that the gover- you know, the government or the powers that be like to have their reason to want that to happen to their people. I mean, I don't understand what the point of doing that to people is. To see if they can take it or not or what, what's the deal*

*here?*

Participant 2: *They don't care, they're getting their paycheck. They don't need food stamps. They get paid whether they work or not...*

## **5. Participants' recommendations for SNAP**

Participants expressed a number of ways in which they felt the SNAP program could be improved to better meet their needs and support their families. The recommendations focused on four main issues:

1. Improve benefit adequacy by increasing benefit levels.
2. Modify eligibility and benefit formulas to better address high costs-of-living as well as the expenses associated with working (e.g., transportation, child care).
3. Improve customer service and communications.
4. Do not disrupt SNAP benefits in the future.

The most salient recommendation was to increase the SNAP benefit level. There was strong agreement across participants in all groups that they would benefit from increased SNAP benefits. When asked how much more benefits would meet their needs, responses varied. Generally, participants receiving lower benefit levels suggested at least doubling their monthly allotment, such that some participants said an extra \$30/month would really help. Participants receiving higher benefit levels suggested larger increases, generally ranging between \$100 - \$200/month. In two of the groups, the recommendation that SNAP benefits be allowed to be spent on hot foods and/or household items, like cleaning products and toiletries was raised multiple times. Sometimes participants suggested providing this in the context of increasing their unrestricted cash benefits. One participant said:

*I would, um, actually ask for more cash too, like she was saying. Um, if we could, um, be able to use that EBT money for toiletries, that would, you know, it would just help me a lot.*

Participants recommended that SNAP could improve both eligibility determinations and benefit calculations by altering the formulas to better account for costs of living and working. In the three groups conducted in urban or suburban settings, changing the eligibility and benefit formulas to better account for high rents was a priority. In the rural setting, participants recommended more effectively considering transportation costs, as they reported high gas expenses for getting to work, school, grocery stores, and charitable food sites. Further, participants working in jobs with fluctuating hours recommended that the program develop more responsive mechanisms for adjusting to these changes. Participants experiencing changes in family composition, access to public welfare programs, and other changes also recommended that the program become more agile in order to provide the needed support during the timeframe it would be most beneficial.

In the rural focus group, participants agreed that they would prefer SNAP benefits to always be distributed to all participants on the first of the month, as they were in March 2019. Participants said that because they receive cash on the first of the month—either through paid employment, disability, or social security—it is challenging not to receive SNAP benefits at that time. As one said:

*... when I get my [non-SNAP] money, I go to Walmart and buy the stuff I need that I have to pay for and I like to buy some of the food there, but then I have to go back out when I get it [SNAP benefits] on the sixth and go to Grocery Outlet and then back to Walmart to buy the less expensive stuff. So it's-it's a matter of convenience, but also the cost of gas, time, energy...*

Participants in some of the focus groups specifically talked about improving SNAP customer service, especially improving communications with participants. In one group, participants recommended improved communications if a government shutdown or other disruption were to happen again, saying, “I would like to see more literature if that happens again, so that people don't go overspending and they have enough.” Participants in another group recommended that more communications channels get utilized in the event of a future disruption, like US mail, phone, email, social media, etc.

## **Discussion**

Participants’ stories highlighted their experiences of routine deprivation and struggle, experiences that for some were initially relieved by the 2019 SNAP benefit disruption resulting from the government shutdown, but for nearly all were ultimately exacerbated by it. The most salient themes to emerge were related to routine food insecurity, challenges of affording an adequate and healthy diet, and the inadequacy of SNAP benefits to meet participants’ food needs. Despite sharing multiple stories of acting with human agency to cope with difficult life circumstances, as has been reported in earlier studies (Gosliner, 2019; Rose, 2011), many participants described experiences of feeling vulnerable and barely making ends meet. Participants repeatedly expressed that the SNAP benefits they receive are not enough to provide food security or to enable them to eat an adequate healthy diet throughout the month. Participants described eating cheap foods, foods they don’t like but can afford, and not eating meats, vegetables, and other foods because they are too expensive. Prior qualitative studies also have reported that SNAP participants routinely are unable to meet their food needs with the resources available to them, and that participants perceive healthy foods to be unaffordable (Edin, 2013; Gosliner, 2019).

Participants’ reported relief upon receiving additional SNAP benefits in their accounts in the end of January provides insights into the strain people routinely are under and the value that SNAP benefits provide. In some cases, participants described feeling relief prior to realizing the additional benefit money was early payment of February’s benefit. Interestingly, some participants said that even though they knew the additional benefits were for February, having extra money for food in their accounts at the end of the month—when they are accustomed to being unable to buy food—provided temporary relief despite knowing it could cause future hardship. Some participants said they were able to eat healthier; parents reported feeling that they could treat their children to favorite foods; others invited friends to share a meal. These stories highlight the basic social feeding experiences that SNAP participants are denied on a regular basis. Having what felt like extra money in January enabled participants to do what many Americans likely take for granted: treating themselves or their children, sharing food with friends, or eating the whole, healthy foods that allow them to feel well.

The challenge the government shutdown presented to social services agencies was not part of the focus group discussions but should be acknowledged. The fact that participants received any SNAP benefits for February can, in many ways, be seen as a tremendous success. However, it is critical for decision makers, service providers, and the public to understand that the 2019 federal government shutdown and subsequent SNAP benefit disruption felt devastating to many SNAP participants. The disruption in SNAP benefits broke many participants' fragile routines and caused stress and challenge for people already in a precarious life situation. Some participants described cascading negative effects caused by spending the extra benefits early—either due to fear that they would be taken away, concerns that they were required to be spent by the end of January, or simply challenges budgeting the unexpected change—and subsequently using money dedicated for rent, gas, or other bills, using credit cards, or otherwise going into debt to buy food in February. Participants who used unplanned resources to buy food in February talked about it taking months to catch up from the disruption.

Many participants described financial circumstances that change regularly and felt that SNAP benefits are not able to keep pace with the changes. Studies have found that income volatility is widespread, with more than a third of American households facing annual income spikes and dips (Maag, Peters, Hannagan, Lou, & Siwicki, 2017). Considering fluctuations in income when creating administrative policies related to budget adjustments for SNAP would help to meet participants' needs.

While some social services agencies communicated with participants via mobile apps, email, or phone messages, many of the participants did not receive any communication about the benefit disruption from the social services agency. Even those who did report receiving Agency communications said they came well after the benefits appeared in their EBT accounts. Most participants talked about this period being very confusing. They experienced confusion, fear, anxiety, and stress due to unexpected changes and real uncertainty about whether they would receive future SNAP benefits. Participants talked about knowing it would be difficult not to spend the benefits too early and feeling worried about how they could 'stretch' their money to make it last. The stories of some initial relief and subsequent hardship highlight the precarious nature of SNAP participants' finances.

Many participants reported feeling like they are at the mercy of the government support, for some because they are disabled, others retired or lack access to more stable/better paying work opportunities. These participants expressed a new stress and worry about having safety net support when they need it in the future. The confusion, stress, and ongoing uncertainty that resulted from the shutdown was discussed in all focus groups, and in some there was a lot of emotion attached to this.

Participants reported that the disruption led them to adapt their food shopping behaviors and the way they think about their food budgets, and caused many participants to run out of money for food earlier than usual in the month of February. Many described having to rely on new sources of support to get through the month. Some talked about simply eating less. A few shared heartbreaking stories of going without food or trying to comfort children crying about having no food.

A recurring theme in all four focus groups was the desire for the safety net system to treat SNAP recipients with more respect and protect their sense of dignity. An example frequently cited by participants was the desire to be treated with dignity and respect by frontline social service staff and caseworkers when they apply for benefits. Another way to demonstrate respect is to improve the communication to recipients and explain program changes or administrative procedures in a more timely manner. As SNAP benefits are the only source of safety net support for many participants in the focus groups, another recommendation was for the program to include a small cash allowance for personal hygiene products and toiletries such as toothpaste, soap, deodorant, laundry detergent, and toilet paper. Respect for SNAP participants can also be demonstrated by increasing benefit levels. While SNAP is intended to supplement a family's food budget, SNAP is the only way many families are able to receive minimum levels of nutrition and reduce food insecurity (Waxman, Gundersen, & Thompson, 2018). There is agreement among many, including an expert committee at the Institute of Medicine, that the benefit design is not adequate (Caswell & Yaktine, 2013). Many participants also expressed increased or newfound distrust of the government and insecurity of the safety net as a result of the government shutdown and SNAP benefit disruption.

While most of the findings reported were similar across the four focus groups, a couple of differences stood out. For example, the group in rural northern California reported routine use of charitable organizations and positive experiences with them, while they reported more negative feelings about the government. In contrast, the Latina mothers in Los Angeles reported lacking access to charitable food, but feeling more appreciative of the government support. Similarly, challenges related to high costs of housing were raised routinely in Los Angeles and the two San Francisco Bay Area focus groups, but housing costs were not discussed in the rural northern California group. There, high costs related to vehicle access and buying gas were discussed frequently, yet these costs were not raised in other groups.

Prior research has demonstrated that SNAP participants do not completely understand the way in which the SNAP program calculates benefits (Edin, 2013; Gosliner, 2019). The benefit disruption and the way in which participants talked about how they budget and spend their benefits also suggests that participants need more support to help them understand the household food budget assumptions behind the SNAP program structure - assumptions that do not reflect participants' economic realities. While participants clearly express—and research supports—the need to simply have higher SNAP benefits (Caswell & Yaktine, 2013; Waxman, Gundersen, & Thompson, 2018), participants may also benefit from additional information related to financial literacy and SNAP benefit utilization. SNAP-Ed offers food resource management education to a small fraction of SNAP participants each year. Better access to financial literacy education could help some participants better understand how SNAP benefits are calculated, how benefits are supposed to work, and how they can utilize benefits optimally. While participants report engaging in a variety of coping behaviors to fend off scarcity, many strategies require tradeoffs that often compromise health and may have long-term negative financial repercussions (Kinsey, Oberle, Dupuis, Cannuscio, & Hillier, 2019). Although financial literacy would not be expected to fix this challenge completely, given the known inadequacy of available support, it may help some participants minimize the harms. Additionally, participants may be spending substantially less on food than the SNAP benefit calculation assumes since they are unlikely to spend 30% of

earned income on food. Thus, their feelings about relying on cheap food are real, even if SNAP benefit calculations assume that eating a balanced and healthy diet is ‘do-able.’ Participants don’t seem to have the resources to do this.

This study was conducted in response to an unexpected disruption in SNAP benefits caused by a sudden and prolonged government shutdown. As such, the research was conducted quickly in order to capture participants’ experiences during the shutdown disruption. We used a convenience sample of counties and participants in California. While we represented different parts of the state and included different population groups, we missed many others. Many of the findings were consistent across groups, but some experiences or concerns that were raised in only one group would have benefitted from testing among additional participants. All researchers reviewed at least two transcripts, but not every researcher on the team reviewed all four transcripts. We met regularly to discuss findings, but because all members of the research team are involved in public health nutrition work, it is possible that our shared training and biases have influenced the results. However, we are not aware of any other research project that captured the experiences of the millions of SNAP participants who were impacted by the 2019 government shutdown and subsequent benefit disruption. Their voices and experiences deserve to be heard and known by all stakeholders involved in serving SNAP participants.

**Table 1:** Description of focus groups conducted with SNAP participants in California to understand their experiences of the 2019 SNAP benefit disruption

County	Region/ urbanicity	Date	Time of day	# of participants	Language	Location/population
Los Angeles	Southern CA/ Urban	2/28/19	Morning	9	Spanish	Middle school/mothers of school-age children
Tuolumne	Northern CA/ Rural	3/1/19	Midday	8	English	Food bank/adults
San Mateo	SF Bay Area/ Suburban	3/13/19	Evening	5	English	Homeless family shelter/parents raising children
San Francisco	SF Bay Area/ Urban	3/15/19	Afternoon	4	English	American Red Cross facility/adults

**Table 2:** Demographic characteristics of SNAP participants in California participating in the focus groups (n = 26)

Characteristic	n (%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	4 (15)
Female	22 (85)
<b>Age</b>	
18-30	1 (4)
31-50	16 (62)
51-70	8 (31)
70 or older	1 (4)
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	
White	11 (42)
Latinx	10 (38)
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2 (8)
African American	1 (4)
Asian	1 (4)
Other	1 (4)
<b>Highest Education Level Completed</b>	
Grade 1-12 (no diploma)	9 (35)
High school diploma (or equivalent)	9 (35)
Vocational certificate	3 (12)
Associate's degree	1 (4)
Professional degree	1 (4)
Other	3 (12)
<b>Employment*</b>	
Stay at home providing unpaid care	13 (52)
Work part-time	3 (12)
Student	1 (4)
Retired/Disabled	6 (24)
Unemployed/Laid off	2 (8)

Table 2, continued

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>n (%)</b>
<b>Income</b>	
Less than US\$16,000	15 (58)
US\$16,000–29,000	5 (19)
US\$29,001–37,000	2 (8)
More than US\$37,000	1 (4)
Don't know	3 (12)
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Married	6 (23)
Widowed	2 (8)
Divorced or Separated	11 (42)
Never Married	4 (15)
Living with a partner	3 (12)
<b>Current SNAP Participant</b>	21 (81)
<b>Food Program participation in the past 6 months</b>	
WIC	6 (23)
Free or reduced-price lunch or breakfast at school	8 (31)
School food backpack program	3 (12)
Food pantry/food bank	15 (58)
<b>Food Security</b> (Ran out of food and did not have money to buy more in the past year)	
Often	10 (38)
Sometimes true	15 (58)
Never true	1 (4)

\*n = 26 instead of 25 for this item.

\*\*Due to rounding, some percentages do not add up to 100.

**Table 3:** Focus group questions asked of SNAP participants in California during 2019 SNAP benefit disruption

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1. Thinking about **what** you and your family **eat** in a **usual month**, can you think of **any things you are doing that work especially well or any ways** that you would like to **change** what you eat? **What would help you meet your goals?**
2. In a **typical month**, **how much** of your family's **food needs** would you say are **met** by your **CalFresh/EBT** benefit? Where does the **rest** come from?
3. In a **typical month**, do you find yourself **worrying about running out of food** because you don't have enough EBT benefits or other resources? **What do you do** if this happens?
4. What did you think about getting a **second benefit payment** in **January**?
5. **Why** do you think you got this benefit?
6. Can you think of any ways in which **getting the February benefits** in January **changed** how you **shopped** for **food** or what you **ate** in January?
7. Can you think of **any ways** that your **family's health** was **different** in January because of this change in how you got CalFresh/EBT?
8. Thinking about **stress**, how would you say the **payment of February CalFresh/EBT benefits** in January **impacted** your **stress** level? Have any **changes in stress** affected how well you **feel**? What about your **family** members?
9. *Now think about major health, job, or educational issues.* Did you have **any days that you missed work or school due to health issues** in **January**? Any **hospitalizations**? Did your **children** have any changes in their **school** attendance, behavior, or achievement during January?
10. Can you think of any **ways** in which the **longer** period between receiving CalFresh/EBT benefits has **changed** how you **shopped** for or **got food** or what you **ate** in February?
11. Can you think of any ways that your **family's health** was **different** in February?
12. Thinking about your **stress** level, how has **increased time** between CalFresh benefits **impacted** your **stress** level?
13. What do you want decision makers to know about your experience with this change in CalFresh/EBT payments?
14. Has this change in payments led you to **think about any ways you'd like to see CalFresh/EBT change**? Has this given you any **new ideas** about your **usual** CalFresh/EBT benefit levels?
15. How can **CalFresh/EBT better help you and your family**? If your CalFresh benefits could be **increased, how much more per week** do you think it would take for you to be able to feed yourself/your family?

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