

Timing of SNAP benefits can reduce childhood injuries

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A new study published recently in *BMC Pediatrics* shows a connection between the time of the month when low-income families receive their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and the number of emergency room visits due to injuries to children from those families.

Childhood injuries are the leading cause of illness and death in the United States, resulting in an estimated 9.2 million emergency department visits and \$17 billion in medical costs annually. For preschoolers, it is the leading cause of disability.

Researchers linked administrative data for SNAP and Medicaid in the state of Missouri from January 2010 to December 2013. They explored monthly patterns in the association between SNAP receipt and ER claims due to childhood [injury](#) for children age 0-5 and examined if these patterns are sensitive to the timing of SNAP benefits.

The result: Families that receive benefits later in the month have fewer ER visits, likely because they can afford to feed their families at the end of the calendar month when other resources run low.

The study, "Childhood injuries and food stamp benefits: an examination of administrative data in one US state," was published June 17 by *BMC Pediatrics*. Colleen Heflin, professor of public administration and [international affairs](#) at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and senior research associate in its Center for Policy Research, is author of the study.

"Our study suggests that childhood injuries, the leading cause of

mortality and morbidity in the United States, can be reduced by disbursing SNAP benefits later in the month instead of at the beginning of the calendar month," Heflin said. "Previous work suggests that childhood injuries are associated with parenting practices and child behavior problems, which are also correlated with maternal stress and income.

"Simply put, low-income households may find it harder to avoid childhood injuries while coping with food insecurity," Heflin said. "This work provides one more to a long list of reasons it is important to support federal food assistance programs such as SNAP."

The researchers chose Missouri because unlike most states that disburse SNAP benefits within the first 10 days of the calendar month, Missouri pays SNAP benefits between the first 22 days of the month, based on the recipient's birthdate and last name.

The researchers said there is no evidence that [childhood](#) injuries connected to the timing of SNAP benefits are caused by parents.

"I think that food insecure parents are probably distracted by worrying about how to feed their families and not able to fully focus on their children who may be acting out because they are hungry," Heflin said. "It's more about how many things parents can juggle at one time in a home with food insecurity."

During March 2020, 27.3 million individuals in 19 million households received SNAP benefits. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act allowed states greater flexibility in administering the program, the ability to provide an emergency supplement to benefits, and school meal replacement benefits to households with children. Many states were approved for these changes to their SNAP program through the end of June.

More information: Colleen M. Heflin et al. Childhood injuries and food stamp benefits: an examination of administrative data in one US state, *BMC Pediatrics* (2020). [DOI: 10.1186/s12887-020-02084-y](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-020-02084-y)

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