

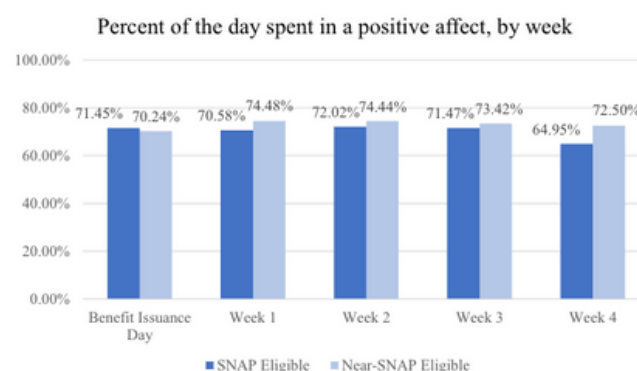
# RIDGE PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

## Research Investigates Consequences of the Monthly SNAP Benefit Issuance Schedule for Participant Well-Being



The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the primary safety net program that aims to reduce food insecurity. States are federally required to issue the totality of monthly benefits to every participating household on a single day each month, creating a full month between each benefit issuance day. Participants generally do not smoothly use their benefits throughout the month, but instead tend to use them all at the beginning of the month. This pattern may compound resource volatility for low-income households. Indeed, previous studies have found that emergency room visits, test scores, and domestic violence all fluctuate throughout month as people receive and use up their SNAP benefits.

In new research, Dr. Katherine Engel, a 2023 RIDGE dissertation grantee, found evidence that this cycle may affect subjective well-being, a global measure of participant welfare and utility. The research used the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) Well-being Module and state SNAP benefit issuance schedules from 2012 and 2013. Dr. Engel compared reported well-being between SNAP-eligible respondents (those at or below the SNAP income limit) and near-eligible respondents (those above the income limit but below 250% of the Federal Poverty Level) throughout the benefit month. By identifying differences in trends in well-being between these groups, she determined that the depletion of benefits throughout the month resulted in a decline in daily happiness. There was also less expected evidence of elevated daily stress and pain on the day benefits are received.



The findings indicated that benefit depletion throughout the month negatively impacted well-being, but participants were not necessarily better off on days that benefits were issued. Declines in happiness are consistent with prior research indicating that welfare decreases as household resources become more constrained, possibly because of increased food insecurity and financial stress. Although more surprising, higher stress and pain scores on issuance days may be explained by greater household conflict over how to use constrained resources or increases in risky behaviors due to the influx of household resources on these days.

The identified trends in well-being are relevant to policy debates about SNAP benefit issuance. It's possible that increasing the number of issuance days each month would induce more household conflict or risky behaviors by increasing the number of positive income shocks that participants experience each month. However, because increasing the frequency of benefit issuance would also mean decreasing the amount of benefits participants receive at one time, it is possible that changing the issuance schedule would facilitate household consumption smoothing while also mitigating the harms of relatively large resource shocks. More research is needed to understand the potential intended or unintended consequences of changing this aspect of SNAP implementation.

Dr. Engel says, "Support from the RIDGE program allowed me to build on past research examining the effects of the SNAP benefit issuance cycle, exploring a new outcome using a unique dataset and empirical approach. It was invaluable to receive feedback from multiple experts that have laid the foundation of this evidence base."

Engel, K. (2025). The effect of SNAP benefit distribution on subjective well-being. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 1-36.  
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