

Social Service Providers' Perceptions of Older Adults' Food Access During COVID-19: A Qualitative Examination

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Introduction

- Older adults have been particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 Pandemic; 70% of all US COVID deaths occurred among those 70+ (Goldstein & Lee, 2020). To mitigate risk, the CDC recommended social distancing measures, with seniors especially urged to shelter in place and avoid visitors (Courtemanche et al., 2020).
- Food insecurity rates rose among older adults prior to the pandemic; rates held steady during the beginning of the pandemic, possibly in-part because of increased access to and allotments for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) put in place in response to COVID. With SNAP allotment expansion, a senior person living alone would see their monthly benefits increase, on average, from \$44/month to \$234/month (USDA, 2021).
- The pandemic likely altered older adults' access to food and other resources through changes to personal, interpersonal, and service landscapes.
- Social service providers serving older adults have a unique perspective on older adult's food and resource access during COVID-19 as they witnessed a broad range of older adults' experiences and have intimate knowledge of social service systems and the ways in which they function for and impact older adults.
- Research Question:** What are social service providers' perspectives about how older adults' access to food and related resources changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methods

- Data Collection:** In-depth, semi-structured Zoom interviews were conducted from February to May 2021. Questions assessed the pandemic's impact on social service agencies and their clients, how SNAP and other programs can be improved for older adults, and older adults' food security and SNAP participation.
- Sample:** Participants included 21 professionals from 13 public & private social service agencies across Oregon serving in program coordination, case management, client services, outreach, and community health worker roles.
- Analysis:** Qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Authors identified data relevant to the research question, coded social service providers' perceptions of the specific ways in which older adults' access to food and services changed during the pandemic, and organized codes into themes.

Conclusions and Implications

- Increased SNAP allotments appeared to be beneficial for older adults' food access and wellbeing.
- Changes in response to COVID prompted program innovation and a more robust safety net, with some barriers removed or reduced. However, existing disparities may be exacerbated by 1) barriers to safety net access for some groups (e.g., persons who are undocumented) and 2) use of technology-mediated services, which not every can access.
- Results emphasize the importance of studying older adults as a unique population, as social distancing had increased significance for this group.
- Reluctance to use SNAP by some older adults, even during the pandemic, underscores the importance of combating program stigma.
- Results can inform quantitative analyses of the impact of COVID-19 on older adult's food access. Stigma, documentation status, social support, technological literacy, and technology access should be considered as moderators.

Results

During the pandemic, changes to older adults' access to food and related resources stemmed from 1) increases in public assistance benefit amounts, particularly SNAP benefits, and 2) social distancing guidelines, which were especially salient for older adults.

1. Increase in SNAP Benefits

According to interviewees, increases in the SNAP allotment had several benefits for older adults, including greater food security.

Benefits of Increased SNAP Allotment for Older Adults

Enhanced food security	"I've had a lot of people say that right now is one of the best times because they've gotten extra SNAP benefits and so, you know, they weren't as food insecure as any other time."
Purchased healthier and/or preferred foods	"A couple of weeks ago I spoke to this woman who - she said, 'Thank God COVID is happening; I've been able to buy vegetables.'"
Developed a reserve of food and SNAP benefits	"[I hear clients say,] 'I can like save up my benefits a little bit more now' or 'I'm not cutting it close every single month.'"
Offset other expenses	"Because they're getting those maximum benefits that they can finally eat and take their meds at the same time." "They can have some breathing room. They could actually pay their rent and pay their power bill and be okay."
Reduced stress and worry	"I think it gives them a little bit of financial freedom because now they get to keep the money that they have in their pocket...They're stockpiling and it really is helping their food insecurity because now they're not so stressed."

Participants identified one drawback to increased SNAP benefits as concern among older adults about when the increases would end. Additionally, not everyone was able to take advantage of the expanded benefits during COVID. Some chose not to because of stigma associated with benefit receipt and others were prohibited from receiving benefits because of documentation or immigration status.

2. Social Distancing

Abiding by the recommendation that older adults socially distance to mitigate the risk of contracting COVID-19 shaped 1) how they accessed food and 2) how programs provided services that supported older adult food access.

Social Distancing and How Older Adults Accessed Food

Staying home	"There's so many avenues that have increased food insecurity for our seniors, umm because of the pandemic, because you really aren't supposed to be interacting with anyone outside of your household and a lot of our clients live alone so they were reliant on neighbors and friends and family to really help them prior."
Keeping others out of their homes	"Our client-base actually went down. People were scared. They're like, 'I don't want anybody to come into my house. I'm gonna quarantine. I don't want Meals-on-Wheels anymore.' And then as we learned a little bit more about how to prevent the spread of [COVID-19]...then we got a huge influx of people calling."

Social Distancing and How Programs Provided Services

Discontinuation of in-person programs	"We've closed all of our dining sites during this time because older adults congregating is not a safe idea so that's been a big thing."
Contactless/limited contact service delivery	"We had to switch to leaving [meals] in a cooler, knocking on the door, stepping way back, with our gloves and masks and waiting for them to answer and then wave and off we go. So there's no more handing it off. Sometimes these drivers would give these people hugs."
Virtual/over the phone service delivery	"We're helping folks with the SNAP application via phone... we'll go ahead and do that appointment by phone...that's been somewhat of a challenge with some populations because of technology."

Several factors may impact the experiences of older adults' food and resource access within the context of social distancing, particularly 1) the presence and degree of social support and 2) technology knowledge and access.

Other Factors to Consider

Social support	"We do have...older adult[s] that have adult children that will be able to help...but a lot of times there's some social complexity to it. Maybe the relationship isn't intact...Maybe the family members around have a lot of their own stuff happening and so they can't help out the older adult as much. Or they don't live close, or they had to move, or maybe they're in a kind of a worse spot than the older adult is."
Technology knowledge and access	"A lot of folks don't have access to Internet to be able to apply [for SNAP] online or don't have a phone, so they can't connect to resources through their phones to be able to call, like the self-sufficiency office. COVID currently also still adds another barrier." "They also really like things on paper or on the phone, not so much on the computer...Many times, they just don't even have [the technology]."

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