Food Security and Food Assistance Use Dynamics

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Background: Food insecurity in the United States

- We are economists with interests in understanding the causes of hunger and food insecurity and interventions that can ameliorate these
- Much of our work has been done in low- and middle-income countries
- A global commonality of the experience of food insecurity is that it lies along a continuum, for example, from:
  - Being worried about not having enough food to eat b/c of a lack of money ... TO
  - Eating only a few kinds of foods b/cof a lack of money or other resources ... TO
  - Being hungry but not eating b/c there was not enough money or other resources for food.

Background: Food insecurity in the United States

- A second commonality we observe in low- and middle-income countries is that while some households are chronically food insecure others move in and out of food insecurity
- Until recently, USDA collected data on the prevalence of food insecurity, ranging from 10.2% (2021) to 14.7% (2009) and 13.5% (2023) between 2001 and 2023.
- However, the extent to which food insecurity in the United States is chronic or transitory is not known
- Working with one of our graduate students (Seungmin Lee) and applying ideas we have developed from our global experience has allowed us to fill this knowledge gap
- Specifically, we develop a measure called the probability of being food insecure (PFS) and apply it to nationally representative data

Background: Food insecurity in the United States

- We find the following:
  - Between 1979-2019, the mean probability of food security is 0.81. Put differently, the likelihood that the average American household is food secure is 81%
  - During a given year, roughly half the households who were food insecure were households that had been food insecure 1-2 years earlier ("chronically food insecure"); the other half were households that had entered into food insecurity ("transitory food insecurity")
  - When recessions occur, more households enter into food insecurity and those who are food insecure find it harder to escape food insecurity
  - Households that are chronically food insecure are more likely to be households that have low levels of formal schooling (only high school or less than high school) and non-white
- The implication of all this is that to address food insecurity in the United States, we need a system that addresses both chronic and transitory food insecurity

Data and Basic Descriptives

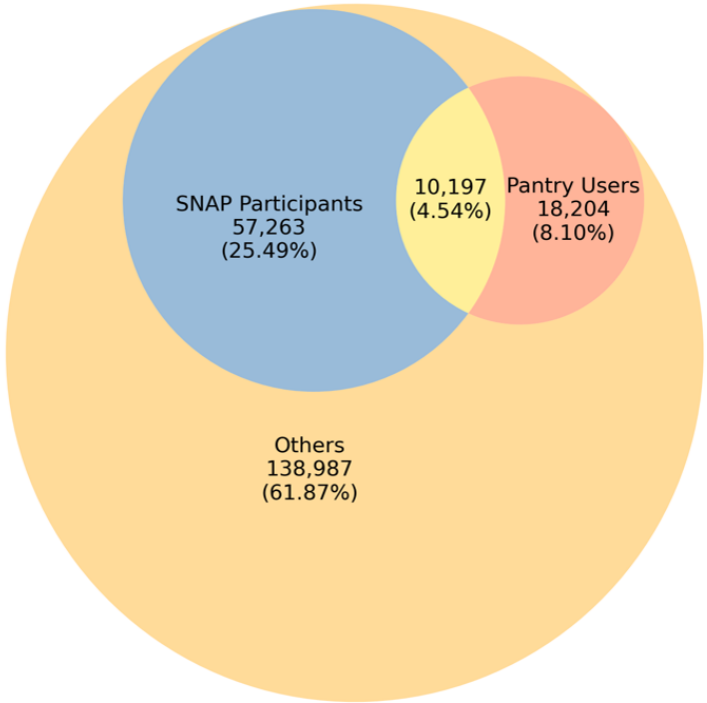
2018-21 admin data from 6-county Southern Tier region
All SNAP and 128 FBST-affiliated food pantries transactions

Key findings:

- At least 38% of population (of $\sim$ 225K hhs) received FA at least once 2018-21

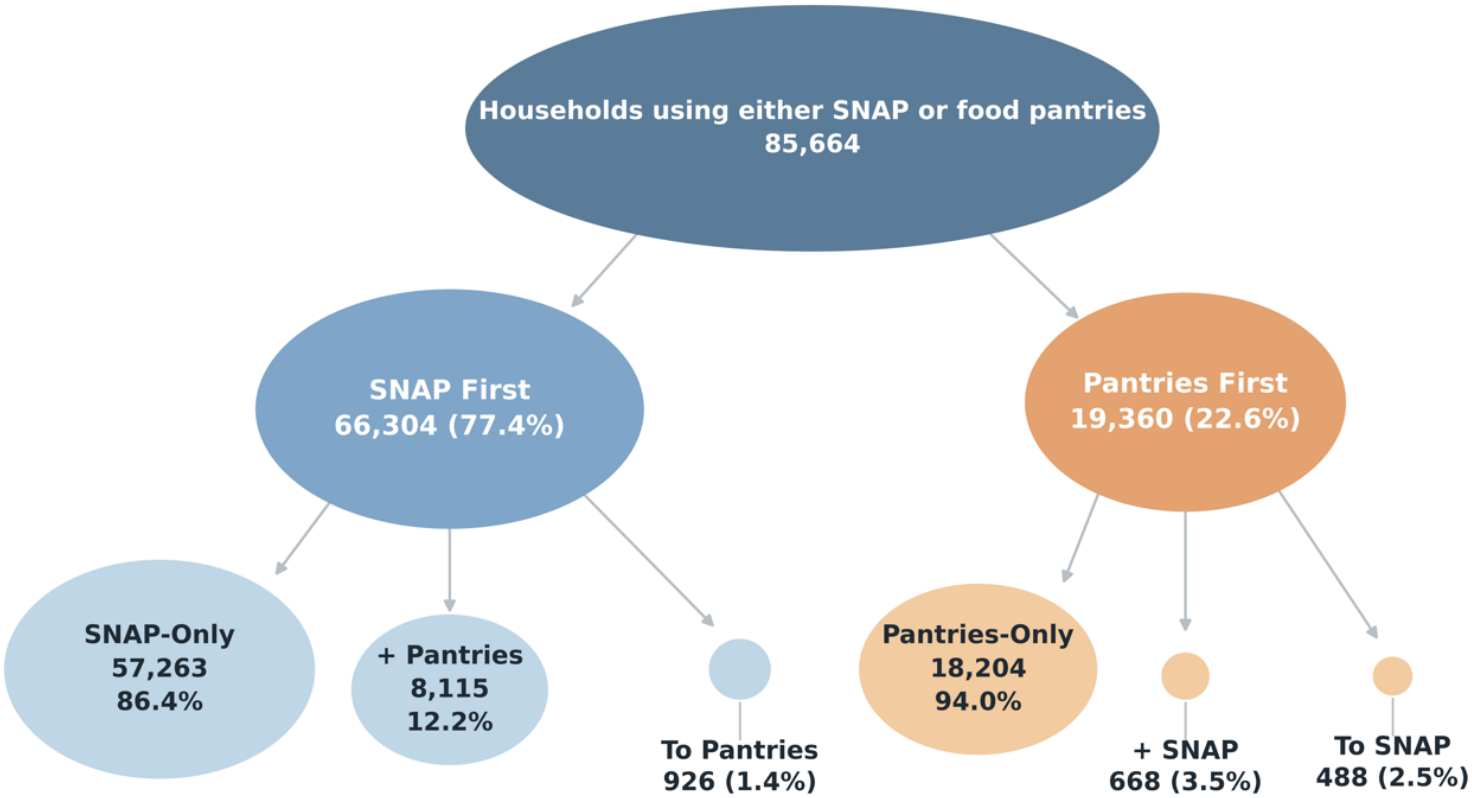
Of those receiving FA:

- $\sim$80% use SNAP; $<$12% use both
- More female, rural, and single adult than overall pop
- Pantry-only are older, less likely single mom w/child than are SNAP users
- $\sim 1/3$ have a child



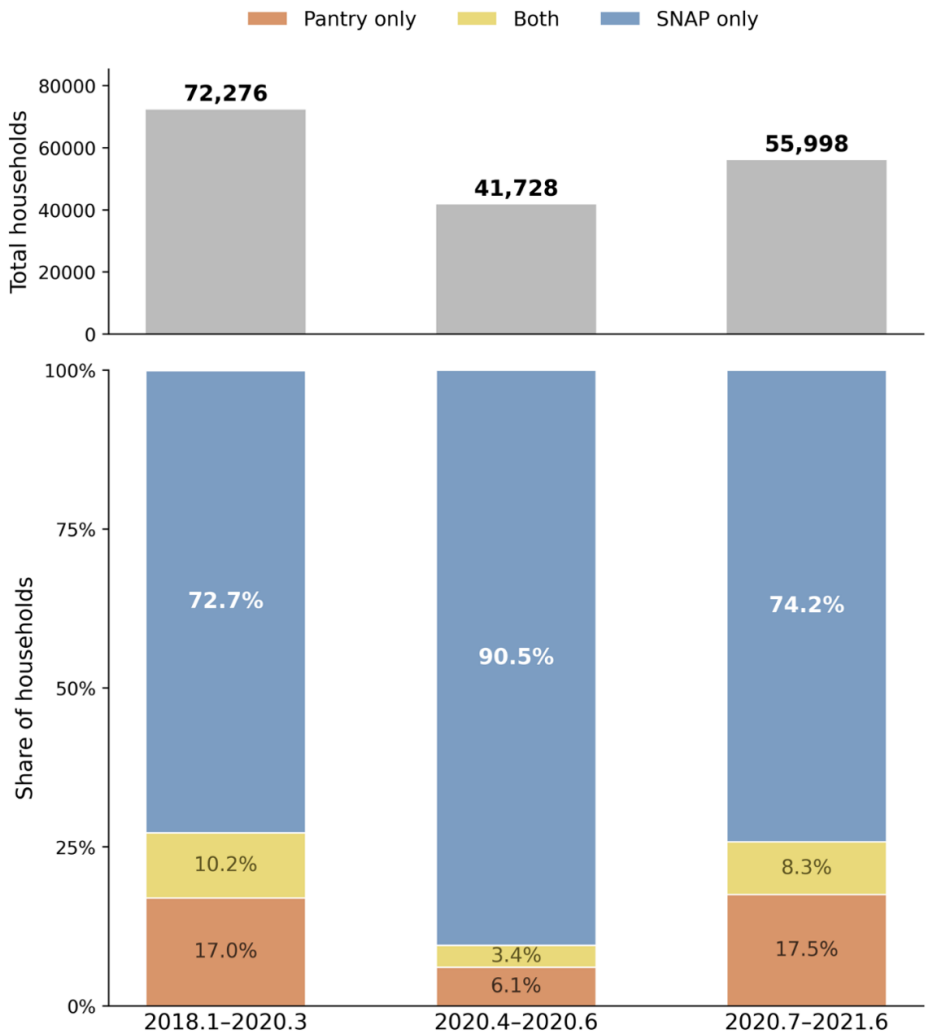
Little joint use of CFA and SNAP

- 77% 1st observed receiving SNAP
- 86% of SNAP participants never use a pantry
- 94% of pantry-1st never use SNAP.
- 8x more people SNAP $\rightarrow$ pantry than pantry $\rightarrow$ SNAP



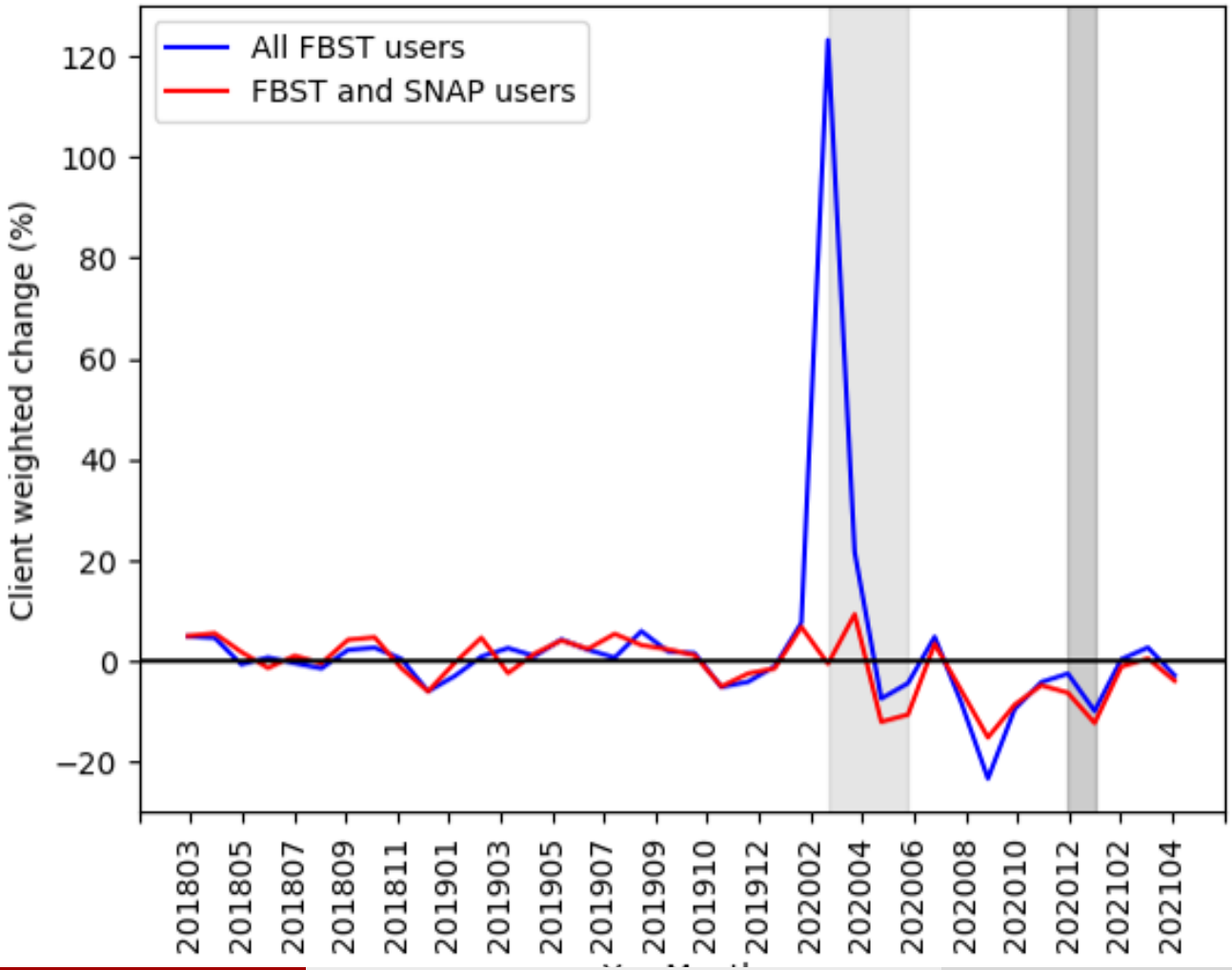
During COVID ...

Food assistance use temporarily shifted toward SNAP



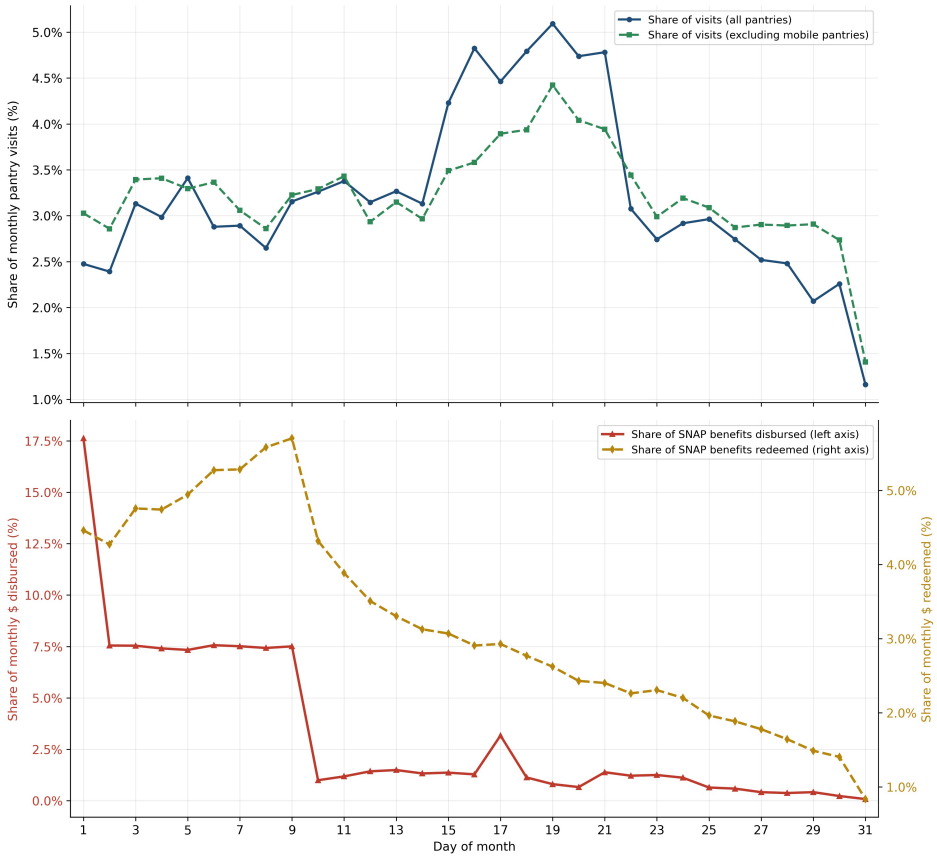
During COVID ...

SNAP was a major shock absorber during COVID. Jump in pantry use overwhelmingly among those *NOT* on SNAP.



During any given month ...

SNAP disbursements run out by mid-month, on average. Food pantry use rises to fill in the gap. Thus 83% of those who use both CFA and SNAP do some within the same month; CFA covers SNAP shortfalls.



As SNAP benefits and food prices change ...

As SNAP benefits rose w/emergency allotments and COLA, pantry use by joint users fell. Hhs w/children make biggest adjustments.

As food prices rise, food pantry and SNAP use both increase very slightly. Food assistance use far more strongly associated with unemployment than with food prices.

Implications

- **Joint use is (surprisingly?) limited.** Could more be done to encourage dual use among the SNAP eligible?
- **CFA/SNAP buffer each other.** SNAP serves (2.4x) more people, more frequently, for a longer period. But benefits exhausted quickly (most within 11 days). Pantries crucial for handling SNAP-ineligibles and for absorbing shocks.
- **Can't manage what's unmeasured.** Might there be value to near-real time admin data integration, not just in Southern Tier but statewide, to improve monitoring and response?

Thanks to USDA/CUAES for Hatch grant support for this project and to FBST and OTDA for providing data and invaluable guidance. Thank you for your interest and your time.

Lots more detail in our various papers available at

`https://barrett.dyson.cornell.edu/research/workingpapers.html`
or
`https://barrett.dyson.cornell.edu/research/publishedpapers.html`

Please reach out with questions/comments to:

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