Removing Barriers to Program Enrollment: Experimental Evidence from SNAP*

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Government programs are often marred by administrative burden and incomplete take-up (Currie, 2006, Bettinger et al., 2012, Bhargava and Manoli, 2015, Deshpande and Li, 2019, Finkelstein and Notowidigdo, 2019). Many safety net programs entail a lengthy enrollment process involving complex applications and demonstration of program eligibility. Additionally, applicants for many programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Disability Insurance (DI), are required to complete an interview with a caseworker—even if their application is otherwise complete. These interviews often present a barrier to program access with many apparently eligible cases denied solely due to missed interviews.

Take the case of SNAP: in order to successfully enroll in the program, all applicants must complete a caseworker interview in-person or over the phone within 30 days of applying for the program. These interviews are typically scheduled by the SNAP offices without consideration of the applicant's availability, resulting in high proportions of missed interviews and, in turn, application denials. For example, in Los Angeles County, over one-third of all applications are denied due to a missed interview, highlighting how inflexible interview requirements can impede take-up—for comparison, only 6 percent of applications were denied for ineligibility.

In this paper, we study the effect of an alternative SNAP application process designed to alleviate barriers to program access associated with the intake interview. Specifically, our intervention provided access to flexible, on-demand interviews to a randomly selected set of SNAP applicants in

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Los Angeles County. Through this alternative interview process called "end-to-end," an applicant could place a call at their convenience, connect to a caseworker, complete an interview, and receive a determination (i.e., approval or denial) within a single call.

To evaluate the effect of this alternative interview process, we conducted a large-scale field experiment which involved over 63,000 Los Angeles County residents who applied to the program through GetCalFresh.org, California's online application system for SNAP. All applicants, regardless of experimental group, were assigned an interview date and sent an appointment letter to the address on file through the standard process. However, in addition, applicants who were randomly assigned to the treatment group received a text or email communication informing them of the availability of on-demand interviews and provided a number for the end-to-end line.[1] Applicants in the treatment group who did not call the end-to-end line were defaulted to the standard interview process. Control group members received the standard electronic communications from the county instructing them to look out for a call from the county in the next 10 days.[2]

To analyze the impact of providing access to this alternative interview process, we use daily administrative data which allows to estimate the effect of the intervention on both approval rates and time to case determination. Our data also contain detailed information about case characteristics, household composition, and reapplications six months post intervention. Additionally, each treatment message contained a unique phone number allowing us to track calls to the end-to-end line. We find that 54 percent of applicants in the treatment group call the end-to-end line, most within three days of message receipt. This allows us to calculate both intent-to-treat as well as treatment-on-the-treated estimates in which we instrument for calling with treatment status.

We find that access to the flexible interview process significantly increased application approval rates by 3.3 percentage points—an increase of 5.7 percent off the control mean of 58 percent (see Table 1). Turning to the treatment-on-the treated estimates, this implies that cases who were induced to call as a result of the intervention were 6.2 percentage points more likely to be approved. Additionally, applicants in the treatment group had their cases processed an average of four days earlier—or seven days faster for those who were induced to call—suggesting that the intervention not only increased approval rates, but allowed applicants to receive their benefits sooner (see Table

[1]Treatment message: [Name], the county has received your application! You can complete your interview by calling xxx-xxx-xxxx. Hours: M-F 7:30am-7:30pm, Sat 8:00am-4:30pm. The sooner you complete your interview, the sooner you may get your benefits.

[2]Control message: Hi [Name], We sent your CalFresh application to Los Angeles County! Your county should call you within 10 days for your interview. The call may come from a blocked/unlisted phone number. Make sure to pick up ALL calls.

2).

We find no evidence that interview flexibility leads to decreases in program integrity; our results are driven solely by an increase in take-up among apparently eligible cases. We also find no evidence that interview flexibility worsens targeting; if anything, the increases in approval rates that we observe are largest among the lowest income applicants who qualify for expedited (emergency) benefits (see Table 3). Finally, we document substantial heterogeneity across SNAP offices: offices with lower approval rates see the largest increases in enrollment while offices with higher approval rates see small or null effects. Our results have implications for the design of means-tested programs and highlight the distributional consequences of administrative burdens.

References

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Table 1: The Effect of the Intervention on Approval Rate

	Outcome: Initial Approval			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Panel A: Intention to Treat			
Treatment	3.17***	3.17***	3.25***	3.27***
	(0.45)	(0.45)	(0.44)	(0.44)
	Panel B: Treatment on the Treated			
Called E2E	5.97***	5.97***	6.10***	6.16***
	(0.85)	(0.85)	(0.82)	(0.82)
Week and Day FEs	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Case Controls	No	No	Yes	Yes
Office FEs	No	No	No	Yes
Outcome Mean	57.8	57.8	58.0	58.0
Observations	63,015	63,015	62,368	62,368

Table 2: The Effect of the Intervention on Days to Determination

	Outcome: Days to Determination			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Panel A: Intention to Treat			
Treatment	-3.56^{***}	-3.57^{***}	-3.62^{***}	-3.69^{***}
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.10)
	Panel B: Treatment on the Treated			
Called E2E	-6.69^{***}	-6.71^{***}	-6.81^{***}	-6.94^{***}
	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.19)
Week and Day FEs	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Case Controls	No	No	Yes	Yes
Office FEs	No	No	No	Yes
Outcome Mean	18.7	18.7	18.7	18.7
Observations	63,015	63,015	62,368	62,368

Table 3: Treatment Effect Heterogeneity

Outcome:	Approved		Days to Determination	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment	2.33***	0.38	−3.75***	−3.93***
	(0.63)	(1.41)	(0.15)	(0.35)
Treatment × Expedited	1.79*		0.12	
	(0.86)		(0.21)	
Treatment × Eligible		3.20*		0.26
		(1.48)		(0.36)
Week and Day FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Case Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Office FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	58.0	58.0	18.7	18.7
Observations	62,368	62,368	62,368	62,368