



# BACKPACK PROGRAM EVALUATION

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of an evaluation conducted in 2011-2012, with support from Morgan Stanley, for the Backpack Program at Feeding America, a weekend feeding program administered by local food banks to reduce childhood hunger. The Eastern Illinois Food Bank, located in Urbana, Illinois, was the Feeding America partner selected for the evaluation. Three key areas were examined during the evaluation:

First, close to three hundred families, drawn from sixteen schools in six counties served by the Eastern Illinois Food Bank, were surveyed on a quarterly basis from October 2011 to June 2012 about their experiences in coping with food insecurity (64% had children in the Backpack Program, 36% of families did not). Responses from surveys by families with children in the Backpack Program were compared to families who had children that may have been eligible for the program, but did not participate due to limited program resources (comparison group).

Second, seventy-six parents were interviewed about their experiences in coping with food insecurity and in participating in the program (54 parents had children who participated in the Backpack program and 22 parents had children who did not).

Third, school attendance was compared for those children participating in the Backpack Program with those potentially eligible for the program, but not receiving backpacks.

### **Glossary – Food Security Status**

*Food Secure - Access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.*

*Low Food Security - Reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet; little or no indication of reduced food intake.*

*Very Low Food Security - Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.*

## Evaluation Findings

### **IS THE PROGRAM SUCCESSFUL IN IDENTIFYING CHILDREN MOST LIKELY TO GO HUNGRY OVER THE WEEKEND?**

- 73% of the households served by the Backpack Program were food insecure at the beginning of the school year.

- 77.9% of the households served by the Backpack Program reported using SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) in the last 30 days, at the beginning of the school year. Additionally, 45.3% of households also used food pantries and 35.2% of households used both SNAP and food pantries. Therefore, at least half of households participating in the Backpack program utilized multiple interventions to address food insecurity.

#### **DOES THE BACKPACK PROGRAM HAVE AN APPRECIABLE EFFECT ON SCHOOL ATTENDANCE?**

- Controlling for differences between program participants and the non-participant group, the Backpack Program has a small but significant effect on increasing attendance on Fridays, the day backpacks are delivered to children.
- Overall, children who participated in the Backpack Program missed more school than those in the comparison group. This is not a reflection of the Backpack Program; however, it does reflect the importance of considering selection effects when examining program impact. Also, further analysis shows that children in the Backpack program were more vulnerable than the comparison group on a few measures.

#### **DOES THE BACKPACK PROGRAM HAVE AN APPRECIABLE EFFECT ON HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD RESOURCES?**

- There was a statistically significant increase in the percent of families in the Backpack Program (13%) who moved from low food insecure to food secure between October and December in comparison to the families not receiving the Backpack (5%). However, over 50% of the families in the Backpack Program remained food insecure throughout the school year.

#### **HOW IS THE BACKPACK FOOD USED IN THE HOUSEHOLD?**

- Although the Backpack program was originally conceived for child food insecurity, most families shared the food and used it in preparation for family meals. The length of time that food lasted in households varied based on a few key factors, but it was found that food lasted just through the weekend for families with very low food security.

#### **WHAT WAS THE EFFECT OF BACKPACKS ON HOUSEHOLD BUDGETS?**

- For very low food secure households, participation in the Backpack Program was perceived to have a big effect on their household budget. Twenty percent of the very low food secure parents interviewed described the program as having a big effect on their budgets whereas 9% of low food secure parents described the program as having a big effect on their budgets.

## **FURTHER EVALUATION FINDINGS ABOUT HOUSEHOLD FOOD INSECURITY**

- Unreliable and poor access to transportation is a major challenge for many of these families. Insufficient means of transportation affects food shopping habits which may prevent food insecure families from buying in bulk and taking advantage of lower cost food outlets. Thus, the Backpack program is viewed as advantageous since the children bring the food directly home.
- Parents mentioned summer time as a stressful period for allocating food. Parents noted that having the children home from school, without access to the Backpack Program, and feeding other children in the household, such as hungry teenagers, as real challenges.
- Many of the parents' experienced poor physical health and this varied by food security status. Forty-eight percent of parents reporting very low food security also reported fair or poor health compared to 23% of low food secure parents and 15% of food secure parents. The number of very low food secure parents reporting poor health was significantly greater than the number of parents reporting low food security and the number of parents reporting that they were food secure. Interview responses suggested that poor health has consequences for meal planning and being able to plan ahead for shopping and budgeting. Parents reported being too tired to plan for meals or to cook and on occasion, turned these responsibilities over to older children.
- There is no universal experience in ways that families work to manage food insecurity and parents identified different coping strategies during interviews. However, many families expressed that the ability to plan ahead and budget time and money was an important coping strategy.
- For some families living in more affluent communities, food insecurity and child hunger was perceived as stigmatizing and there were limited available community resources. In these instances, the Backpack Program was considered very beneficial.

### **Program Recommendations**

- Although schools are doing a good job in selecting children likely at risk for weekend hunger, additional training for school personnel about reliable indicators of food insecurity may be helpful. For instance, with training, staff may be able to identify very low food insecure children and households who may need additional resources and interventions beyond the Backpack program, such as the National School Breakfast (NSB), SNAP, SNAP-Ed, and Summer Food Service Programs (SFSP). Also, programs might want to

consider including brief measures such as two-item screens to identify families at risk for food insecurity.

- Children whose families are at the margins of food insecurity may not qualify for public programs but still benefit from weekend feeding programs. Therefore, it is recommended that program selection should not be based entirely on free and reduced lunch participation because it may miss hungry children who live in more affluent communities.
- Based on findings, most children shared items in their backpack with other family members so food banks may want to consider targeting foods that can be incorporated into family meals.
- Based on the in-depth interviews, many families indicated a need for assistance in meal planning and more efficient ways to budget for food. The Backpack Program may offer an opportunity to provide educational information about shopping and meal preparation.

### Future Research Questions

- If the Backpack Program was paired with consistent use of National School Breakfast, SNAP, Summer Food Service Programs, or regular school food pantry distributions would circumstances improve for those who experience very low food security?
- What is the role of the parents' or guardians' physical health in sustaining food insecurity with school age children?
- Many of the families in this evaluation had children under the age of five. Because we know early nutrition can play a pivotal role in later development, would there be positive benefits to weekend feeding programs delivered in other settings such as child care centers, Head Start, and WIC?
- What are the dosage effects of the Backpack Program? Would very low food secure households benefit more if a Backpack was sent home for every child in the household or with greater frequency?
- Would a larger national survey allowing for examination of unobserved factors such as changes in employment status, income, and number of people in the household, replicate findings that the Backpack program may affect food security status?

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