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Assessment of SNAP Utilization and Accessibility in Vermont

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INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity exemplifies one of the many public health crises that the COVID19 pandemic both exposed and amplified. In 2019 an estimated 10.5% of households (13.7 million households) were food insecure as determined by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) including 5.3 million children [1]. In 2020 this number increased to 15.6% of households, including 17.0 million children as projected by Feeding America [2]. Food insecurity in children, especially in infancy, is associated with the development of obesity and hyperlipidemia [3], highlighting the necessity of federal and state food assistance programs.

Historically known as the Food Stamp Program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federally funded food assistance program administered by state agencies. Eligibility for households is set by the federal government as a monthly gross income below 130% of the poverty line adjusted for family size and income [4]. Additionally, SNAP incentive programs exist in Vermont to encourage SNAP recipients to purchase local produce. Incentive programs increase individual purchasing power whereby benefitting individuals and farmers.

SNAP recipients may receive their benefits via an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card. However, our preliminary investigation revealed the inability to directly use EBT cards at farm stands and markets as a barrier for SNAP recipients to purchase local produce. Wireless EBT machine start up cost can range from ~\$370 to \$1000 with monthly fees ranging from ~ \$20 to \$100 a month per dcf.Vermont.gov.

We believe that increased funding for SNAP incentive programs and wireless EBT devices for Farmers will result in a longitudinal and sustainable increase in produce consumption among low income individuals in VT. We hypothesize such changes will ultimately result in improved health outcomes and decreased burden on Vermont Medicaid systems.

METHODS

➤ **Survey Creation and Distribution:** SNAP recipient and farmer surveys were created in REDcap and distributed using email lists from community partners to relevant populations and via social media. The SNAP recipient survey was modeled after the 2018 USDA inventory on food insecurity.

➤ **Data Analysis :** Survey responses were extracted from REDcap and analyzed using SPSS. Of the 107 SNAP recipient survey participants, 45 self-identified as SNAP participants, 28 of which utilized a SNAP incentive program in the past year. An additional 17 participants were determined to be SNAP eligible in the past year. A total of 49 participants responded to the farmer survey, of which, 13 already participate in at least one SNAP incentive program.

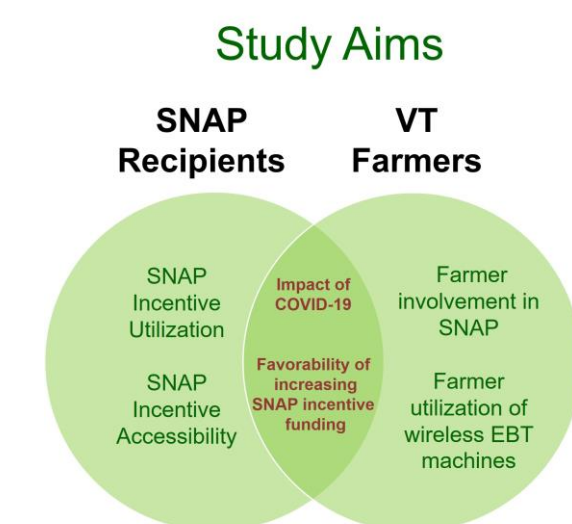


Figure 1 Study aims for SNAP recipients and VT farmers.

Distribution of Survey Respondents

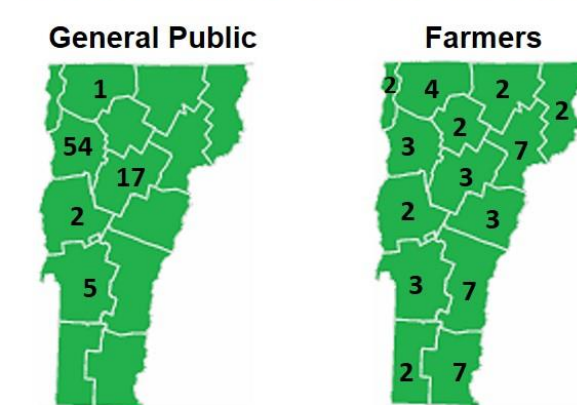


Figure 2 Distribution of SNAP (79) and farmer (49) survey respondents who provided their city of residence. Of the 107 unique responses received to the SNAP survey, 42.1% (45) participated in SNAP in the past year.

RESULTS

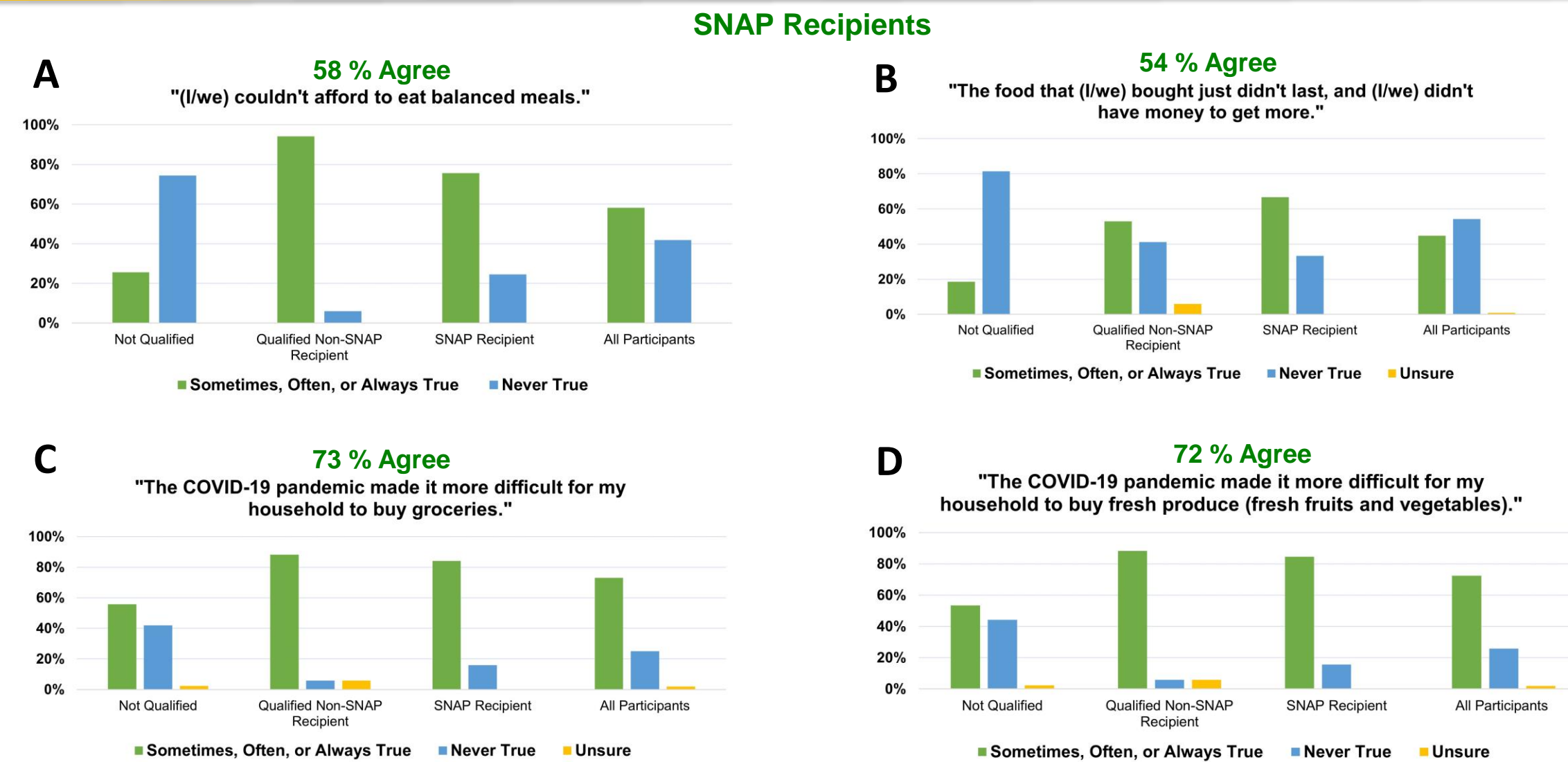


Figure 3 Summary of responses to food insecurity questions based on SNAP recipient or eligibility status. A) 11 individuals who do not qualify for SNAP, 16 qualified but not enrolled and 34 SNAP recipients responded as having difficulty with affording balanced meals, totaling 58% of survey participants having difficulties. B) 8 individuals who do not qualify for SNAP, 9 qualified but not enrolled and 30 SNAP recipients responded as having trouble with food lasting, totaling 54% of respondents. C) 24 individuals who do not qualify for SNAP, 15 qualified but not enrolled, and 37 SNAP recipients agreed that the COVID19 pandemic has made it more difficult to buy food, a total of 73% of surveyed. D) 23 individuals who do not qualify for SNAP, 15 qualified but not enrolled, and 38 SNAP recipients found that COVID19 made it more difficult to buy fresh fruits and vegetables, a total of 72% of respondents.

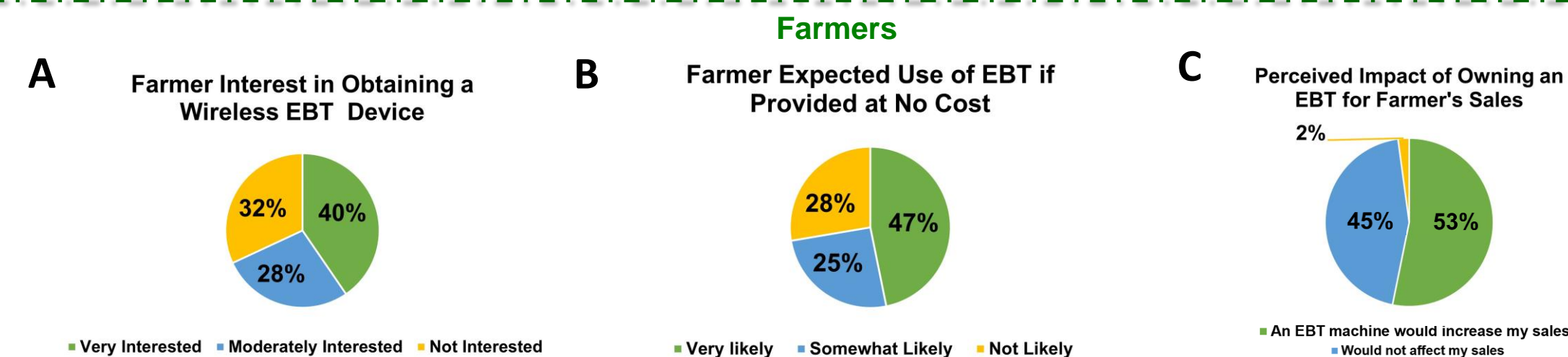


Figure 4 Summary of responses to the farmers survey assessing interest in, expected use of, and perceived impact of owning a wireless EBT device. A) 32 Farmers responded they had an interest in obtaining a wireless EBT machine to be able to service SNAP recipients. 15 farmers reported they were not interested in using them. B) 34 Farmers reported they would be likely to use wireless EBT devices if they were provided to them at no cost. 13 Farmers reported they were not likely to use it. C) 25 farmers reported that an EBT machine would increase their sales while 21 reported that it would not affect their sales. 1 reported a hypothesized decrease in sales.

Reported Barriers

SNAP recipients' responses to the question : " If you do not feel comfortable using your SNAP benefits at farmer's markets or farm stands, please explain why"

"I don't want others seeing we need help" – Resident from South Burlington

"Hard to get to. Over priced. Feel out of place using SNAP in a place like this. Too crowded" – Resident from Colchester

"They make you go to a separate booth and get wooden coins which scream "Food Stamps" recipient here!"

Farmers' responses to the question: "If you do not already have a wireless EBT machine, what prevents you from incorporating them into your business?"

Cost. I don't have money to be giving discounts for EBT or paying for expenses to run an EBT system. – Farmer from Caledonia County

I don't know how to get one. – Farmer from Irasburg

"I looked into it last year for my farmstand, but I didn't follow through because the process seemed complicated" – Farmer from St.Johnsbury

CONCLUSIONS

- Over 70% of respondents to the SNAP Recipient survey experienced difficulty in purchasing healthy foods and produce in the past year.
- SNAP recipients and those that would have qualified for SNAP but were not enrolled in the past year experienced a greater degree of food insecurity when compared to survey respondents who did not qualify.
- SNAP Recipients cited perceived social stigmas as the most common reason for not feeling comfortable using SNAP incentive program benefits at a farmers market.
- 68% of farmers surveyed are interested in having wireless EBT machines and 53% of farmers who do not already have a wireless EBT believe owning one would increase their sales.
- The most frequently cited barrier in obtaining a wireless EBT device included confusion with the process, technology barriers, and gaps in SNAP knowledge.
- 72% of farmers would use a wireless EBT machine if they were free.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase availability of healthy fruits and vegetables through increased SNAP incentive program funding.
- Consider modifying how SNAP benefits are accepted at farmers markets to increase comfort and reduce stigma.
- Increase accessibility of wireless EBT machines for local farmers to increase access of local produce to SNAP recipients.

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