

Evaluation of the USDA FINI Program Finds Benefits for Consumers, Farmers and Retailers, and Local Economies

Healthy Eating
Research

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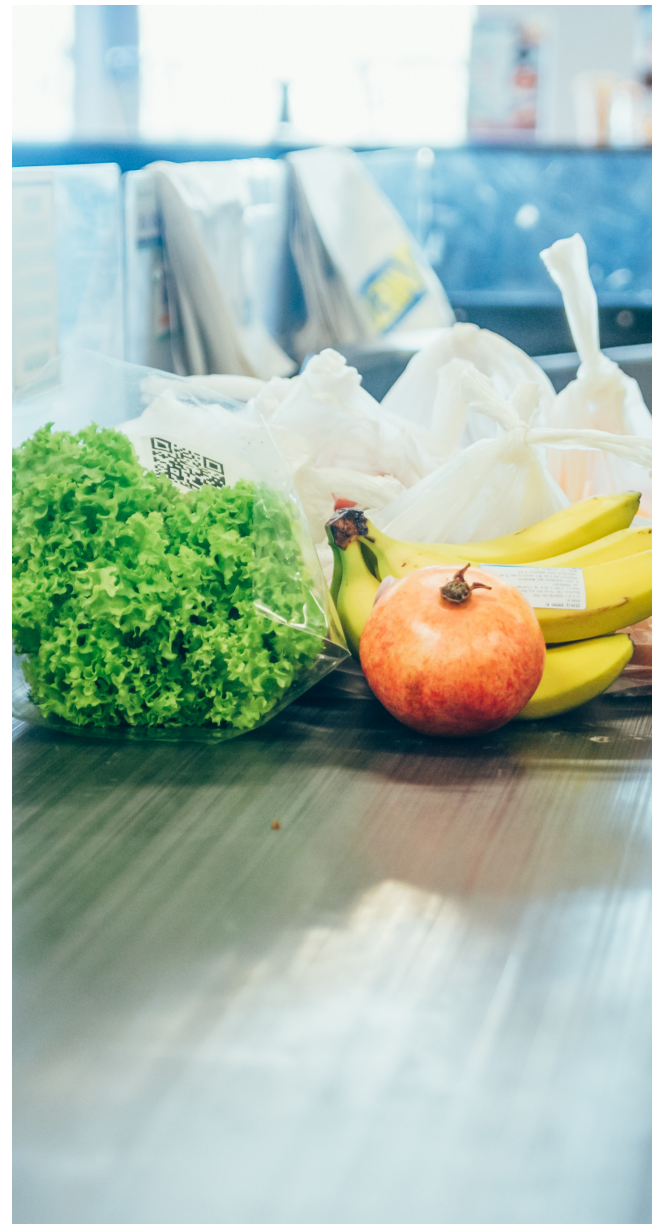
In December 2018, Congress passed a new farm bill which included a reauthorization of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) Grant Program. This brief summarizes the findings of a recent qualitative evaluation of FINI, which concludes that the program has benefits for consumers, farmers and retailers, and local economies.

Introduction

Low-income families are less likely to consume federally recommended levels of fruits and vegetables, which likely contributes to increased rates of diet-related chronic diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes among this population.^{1,2} One reason is that low-income neighborhoods across the United States have limited access to food retailers that offer affordable fruits and vegetables.³

The goal of the *USDA's FINI Program* is to increase healthy food purchasing power and access to fresh fruits and vegetables. FINI offers grants to nonprofit organizations and government agencies for projects that provide cash incentives to consumers for purchasing fruits and vegetables. These incentives are used by low-income individuals and families who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the largest program in the domestic hunger safety net. Incentives are redeemed through mechanisms such as retailer loyalty cards, automatic discounts, and paper coupons. FINI-funded projects are implemented at a variety of venues, including farmers' markets, farm stands, community supported agriculture programs, mobile markets, grocery stores, corner stores, and co-ops.

A recent qualitative evaluation was conducted to better understand the impact of FINI-funded projects to inform future policy. This brief summarizes key findings from interviews conducted with FINI grantees and other stakeholders who could speak to FINI on a broader level (i.e., more national or cross-project perspectives such as policy advocates, federal employees, academicians, and technical assistance providers). The study examined both the impact of FINI-funded projects as well as grantee and stakeholder insights regarding potential future program refinements.



This brief is based on a commissioned report prepared by the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition. The report, which includes the study methods and full results, is available at: <http://www.centerfornutrition.org/ber-fini>.

Findings

These findings illustrate common themes from interviews with FINI grantees and stakeholders. Overall, grantees reported numerous positive impacts of FINI projects:

- The program provides a trifecta of benefits for consumers, farmers and retailers, and local economies:
 - SNAP participants experienced numerous benefits including increased fruit and vegetable purchasing and consumption; opportunities to try new fruits and vegetables; and improvements to health such as weight loss and chronic disease management.
 - Local farmers and retailers benefited from increased SNAP spending, as projects helped to increase SNAP spending overall, and ensured spending benefited local farmers and retailers.
 - Local economies overall benefited from increased sales, as businesses invested in additional staffing or infrastructure to meet the demands from increased SNAP spending on produce.
- The program led to the development of partnerships and relationships between grantees and organizations that could reach SNAP participants and help disseminate information about FINI including local food banks, schools, healthcare organizations, nonprofits, and social service agencies.
- Consumers increased their purchases of fruits and vegetables, though redemption rates of incentives tended to vary by the type of site. For example, farmers' markets tended to have higher rates of incentive redemption than other types of sites. Redemption at mobile markets and community-supported agriculture projects tended to be lower, but were important sites because they provided unique food access to underserved rural and low-income populations. Grocery stores had lower redemption rates than farmers' markets, but consumers were more likely to redeem the FINI incentives at grocery stores than other types of coupons or incentives.

Findings from the interviews with stakeholders mirrored those of grantees, with additional recommendations for future evaluation, technical assistance needs, and program and application refinements.

Figure 1: Word Cloud of FINI Grantee Interview Findings

Shows the words used most frequently by grantees when asked what they would like to relay to policymakers about the reach and impact of their projects.



Conclusion and Implications

This evaluation indicates FINI projects can have a variety of benefits, including:

- increased access to and consumption of affordable fruits and vegetables among low-income populations;
- health improvements;
- economic growth; and
- strengthened communities.

FINI projects have resulted in a trifecta of benefits for consumers, farmers and retailers, and local economies.

To date, FINI has succeeded in its charge to increase SNAP participants' fruit and vegetables purchases through point-of-sale incentive projects. As FINI moves forward with continued funding, future research on the program should consider:

- identifying and sharing best practices and impact across FINI-supported projects, particularly in rural communities;
- examining the role of technology, such as online grocery services, in the delivery and administration of projects; and
- gathering and disseminating data on program activities and impacts at the local level for policymakers and advocates.

The findings in this research summary are based on the results of a study commissioned by Healthy Eating Research (HER) and funded through a rapid-response grant. This round of HER's rapid-response funding is focused on addressing research gaps related to nutrition and physical activity policy priority areas as identified by the American Heart Association's Voices for Healthy Kids (VFHK) initiative staff and partners.

References

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About Healthy Eating Research

Healthy Eating Research (HER) is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Technical assistance and direction are provided by Duke University under the direction of Mary Story PhD, RD, program director, and Megan Lott, MPH, RDN, deputy director. HER supports research to identify, analyze, and evaluate environmental and policy strategies that can promote healthy eating among children and prevent childhood obesity. Special emphasis is given to research projects that benefit children and adolescents and their families, especially in lower-income and racial and ethnic populations at highest risk for obesity. For more information, visit www.healthyeatingresearch.org or follow HER on Twitter at [@HERResearch](https://twitter.com/HERResearch).

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