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Emailing eligible college students resulted in more than 7,000 students applying for CalFresh benefits

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SUMMARY

CalFresh benefits can help college students make ends meet while attending college, but not all eligible students apply. One contributing factor may be that students are not aware they are eligible. Therefore, outreach efforts informing them of their eligibility could help increase take-up rates. To test this, we designed and conducted two experiments that leveraged an expansion in CalFresh eligibility for students that went into effect in early 2021.

In response to the pandemic, Congress permitted a temporary expansion to college student eligibility for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), or CalFresh as it is known in California. The expansion went into effect in January 2021 and will last through the end of the federal public health emergency. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) partnered with The People Lab (TPL) and the California Policy Lab (CPL) on two randomized experiments to evaluate whether outreach about this policy change could increase the number of students who applied for and eventually enrolled in CalFresh. One experiment, conducted in February and March 2021, tested the impact of email outreach. The second, conducted in June 2021, tested the relative effectiveness of different messages and modes of communication on the same group of students who were newly eligible. This brief reports the results of the first experiment.¹

In a randomized experiment with 285,731 California college students who were eligible under the temporary expansion and were not already receiving CalFresh in January 2021, we found that an email from CSAC led roughly 2–3% of recipients to apply for benefits through GetCalFresh.org within a week of receiving the email. The increase in applications translated into an increase in CalFresh enrollment of 1.5 to 2.5 percentage points. Effects were even larger for students who received a second follow-up email.

THE CHALLENGE

In 2021, California expanded eligibility for CalFresh to offset the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, enrolled college students who had previously filed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and had zero expected family contribution (EFC) or who qualified for work study became newly eligible for CalFresh under the expanded criteria, so long as they met the program's citizenship and income requirements. As of October 2021, qualifying students who applied for CalFresh could receive up to \$234 per month to spend on groceries.

This eligibility expansion meant a substantial number of college students across the state may have become eligible for CalFresh for the first time. In Spring 2021, CSAC and CDSS conducted a statewide outreach campaign to inform students with zero EFC that they may be newly eligible for CalFresh benefits.

Individuals face numerous informational, logistical, and psychological barriers to accessing and participating in government programs like CalFresh, and understanding the eligibility rules for college students can be especially challenging. College students may lack awareness about their eligibility, especially given the pandemic-related eligibility expansion. They also must navigate particularly complicated eligibility criteria, as well as the stigma that is associated with participation.

Although the barriers to participation in programs like CalFresh are relatively well-documented, evidence on the efficacy of information-based interventions aimed at increasing take-up of benefit programs is mixed.^{2,3,4,5} This study tested the impact of email messages on applications for and enrollment in CalFresh among a population of likely-eligible college students in California. We measured applications through [GetCalFresh.org](https://getcalfresh.org), a simplified application portal for California's CalFresh program. Although a majority of CalFresh applicants apply through [GetCalFresh.org](https://getcalfresh.org), which is run by the nonprofit Code for America, individuals can also apply directly through their county social services agencies. Applications submitted directly through county agencies were not captured as part of this study, though we would observe any resulting enrollment.

INTERVENTION

CSAC sent emails to all students with EFCs of \$0 to alert them of their potential eligibility for benefits and to encourage them to apply (see [Appendix](#) for email text). Although all eligible college students received emails, we were able to use variation in the timing of the emails to identify the effect of receiving an email relative to not yet having received one.⁶ Students in most of California were randomly assigned to receive the email notification on one of ten business days starting on February 8th. In Los Angeles, to avoid congestion, notifications were spread over 30 business days. Other than the timing, there was no variation in the language or method of delivery of the notification. The variation in when emails were sent allowed us to compare CalFresh application rates in mid-February between students who had already received an email and other, similar students who had not yet received their email.

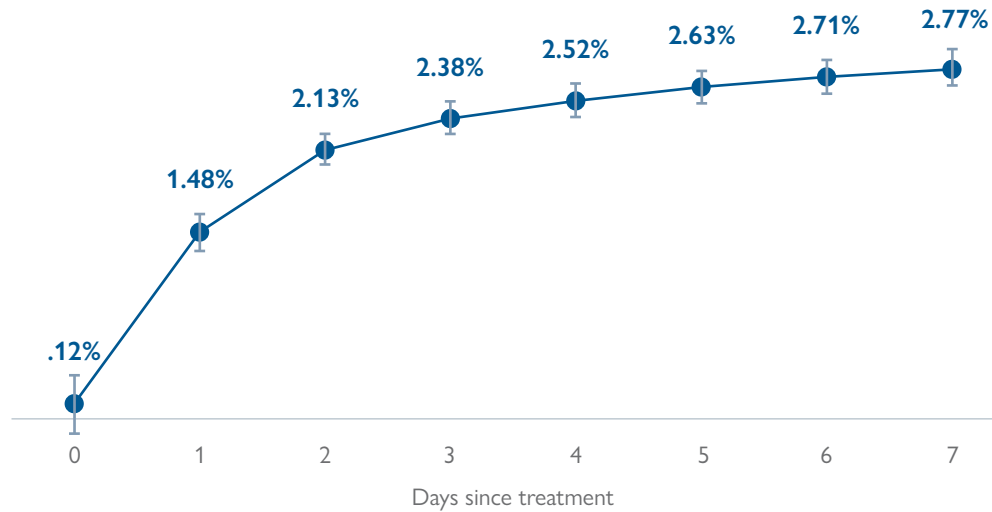
Due to an implementation error, students assigned to receive emails on day two did not receive an email, while students assigned to day one received two identical emails, about one day apart. Thus, we can use comparisons among day one, day two, and other students to identify the effects of zero, one, or two emails on applications and eventual enrollment.

RESULTS

Emailed notifications increased CalFresh applications via [GetCalFresh.org](https://getcalfresh.org)

To measure impact, we compared the number of CalFresh applications between students who received an email and others who were scheduled to receive one later. CalFresh applications quickly increased among the students sent notification emails in the days following receipt compared to students who had not yet received an email. We find that applications increase by 2.77 percentage points (standard error .06) within one week of being sent an email ([Figure 1](#)). The effect on applications within one month of the email is even larger, 3.25 percentage points (standard error .14). This suggests that emails did not simply bring forward applications that would have happened anyway, but induced students to apply who would not have otherwise.

FIGURE 1: Cumulative effect of receiving the treatment on the probability of having applied for CalFresh



Notes: The figure shows the impact of an email on the share of students who submitted CalFresh applications within 7 days of receipt, relative to students who had not yet received emails. Whiskers show 95% confidence intervals for the effects.

Emailed notifications increased CalFresh take-up

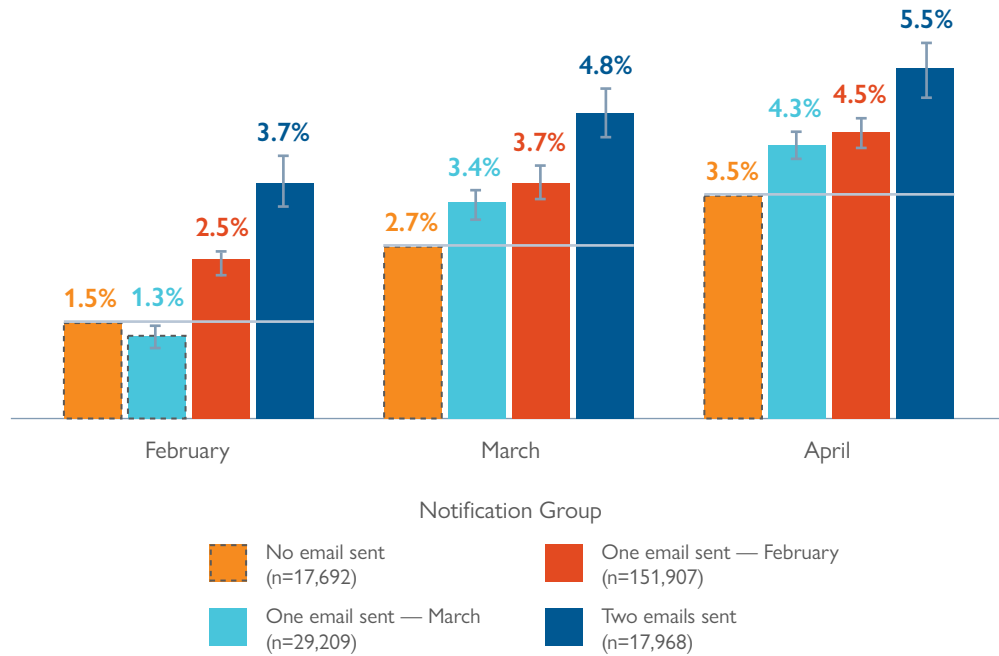
The increase in applications induced by the email notification also led to an increase in CalFresh enrollment among treated students. CalFresh enrollments are recorded monthly. If the emails were successful, we would expect to see more enrollments relatively soon after receiving the email, for example, in the same month that students received the email alerting them of their eligibility. Indeed, we find that students notified in February were more likely to be enrolled in CalFresh in February than students who were not notified until March, while the March students' enrollment largely caught up by April (Figure 2).

As mentioned previously, an unintentional issue in the treatment delivery offered us the opportunity to examine the effects of receiving double the treatment (two emails) or not getting any treatment (no emails). Figure 2 also shows enrollment rates for these two groups. Among treated students who received two emails, 3.7% were enrolled in CalFresh in February; this is 1.3 percentage points higher than

students who received only one notification in February, and 2.2 percentage points higher than students who were not treated at all. Students who were treated in March and had not received an email notification in February had a similar enrollment rate in February to students who were not treated at all, essentially serving as an additional control group in that month. Differences among these are all statistically significant, except for the contrast between the never-notified and not-yet-notified groups, which we would expect.

The effect of the notifications is consistent among those notified later, in March. Students notified in March caught up to those notified in February, and both groups had notably higher enrollment rates in April than students who did not receive notifications. As earlier, the doubly-notified group's enrollment rate was substantially higher still. It is also worth noting that enrollment in CalFresh increased among all groups in this three-month period, including those never notified by CSAC. This is likely due to additional email outreach conducted by some college financial aid offices, or other means by which students learned of their new eligibility.

FIGURE 2: CalFresh enrollment by month and notification group



Note. The figure shows cumulative enrollment in CalFresh among the experimental sample. Control groups have a dashed outline. 95% confidence intervals are shown for the contrasts of each of the notification groups relative to the “no email sent” group (yellow bar).

CONCLUSION

Simplifications to CalFresh eligibility rules made hundreds of thousands of students newly eligible for benefits in 2021, but students needed to apply to receive them. Email notifications to raise student awareness of their CalFresh eligibility are a simple and cost-effective approach to increase take-up of benefits. Repeated email notifications result in larger application and enrollment responses, suggesting that multiple emails are more effective than a single notification.

Based on the results from this experiment and the other experiment mentioned at the beginning of this brief (which suggests that multimodal notifications increase CalFresh

applications among college students)⁷ CSAC and CDSS could further refine notification strategies to increase application and enrollment response.

It is important to note that light-touch notifications cannot help students fully overcome all of the hurdles they may face to enrolling in benefits, including understanding other eligibility requirements, completing the application, securing the proper paperwork, and once enrolled, meeting recertification requirements.^{8,9} A comprehensive approach to increasing access to and take-up of social safety-net benefits will require innovation at each of these stages.

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This research publication reflects the views of the authors and not necessarily the views of our funders, our staff, our advisory board, the Regents of the University of California, the California Department of Social Services, or the California Student Aid Commission.

Endnotes

- 1 The brief summarizing the results of the second experiment can be found [here](#).
- 2 Lasky-Fink, J., & Linos, E. (2022). It's not your fault: Reducing stigma increases take-up of government programs. SSRN Working Paper. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4040234
- 3 Linos, E., Prohofsky, A., Ramesh, A., Rothstein, J., & Unrath, M. (Forthcoming). Can Nudges Increase Take-up of the EITC?: Evidence from Multiple Field Experiments. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*. <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pol.20200603&&from=f>
- 4 Finkelstein, A., & Notowidigdo, M. (2019). Take-up and targeting: Experimental evidence from SNAP. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 134(4), 1505–1556. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjz013>
- 5 Linos, K., Carlson, M., Jakli, L., Dalma, N., Cohen, I., Veloudaki, A., & Spyrellis, S. N. (2021). How do disadvantaged groups seek information about public services? A randomized controlled trial of communication technologies. *Public Administration Review*, 00(00), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13437>
- 6 Emails were sent to all 285,731 students with \$0 EFC. The lower sample size used in our analysis results from excluding students who were already enrolled in CalFresh as of January 2021.
- 7 Lasky-Fink, J. Li, Jessica, Doherty, Anna. (2022) **Reminder postcards and simpler emails encouraged more college students to apply for CalFresh.**
- 8 Homonoff, T., & Somerville, J. (2021). Program recertification costs: Evidence from SNAP. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 13(4), 271–98.
- 9 Unrath, M. (2021). Targeting, Screening, and Retention: Evidence from California's Food Stamps Program. url: https://mattunrath.github.io/files/research/Unrath_SNAP.pdf.

APPENDIX

Figure A. Email notification text

----- Forwarded message -----
From: **California Student Aid Commission** <studentsupport@csac.ca.gov>
Date: Tue, Jun 1, 2021 at 9:29 AM
Subject: You may be eligible for expanded CalFresh benefits for students
To:



Provide a copy of this entire letter to your County Social Services Provider as proof that you meet one of the temporary CalFresh eligibility requirements.

Dear

The California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) want to share an important update for the 2020-21 academic year. CalFresh student eligibility has been temporarily expanded to provide emergency relief due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on your application for college financial aid and zero dollar Expected Family Contribution (EFC) determination, you may be temporarily eligible for CalFresh food benefits without meeting the student work rule if you also meet the CalFresh income limits.

CalFresh can help you cover your food expenses while you are in college. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, **eligible Californians could get \$234 on their EBT card each month** to help pay for groceries, so we encourage you to apply to receive this valuable benefit.

To apply:

- Go to [Get CalFresh](#) to submit an application
- Upload a copy of this letter with your application as proof of your temporary eligibility for CalFresh
- To learn more about CalFresh, including income and eligibility requirements, go to [Department of Social Services CalFresh Program Requirements](#)

Please keep a copy of this letter as proof of your temporary eligibility for CalFresh.

Have questions related to the CalFresh or Cal Grant Programs?

- CalFresh - 1-877-847-3663 (FOOD)
- Cal Grant Student Support Center - 1-888-224-7268 (M-F 8:00 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.)

Attention County Social Services Provider: This letter confirms that the student listed above applied for federal and/or state college financial aid for the 2020-21 academic year and was determined to have a zero dollar Expected Family Contribution (EFC). This letter serves as verification of an exemption from the student eligibility rule.