



**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA**  
Agriculture and Natural Resources

Nutrition Policy Institute

## **Qualitative Findings from the California Nutrition Incentive Program Evaluation 2020-2022: CNIP participants report positive experiences with the program and support its continuation and expansion**

**Prepared by:**

Celeste Felix  
Sridharshi C. Hewawitharana  
Ron Stochlic  
Samantha Sam-Chen  
Wendi Gosliner

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# **ABSTRACT**

## **Introduction**

The California Nutrition Incentive Program (CNIP) provides Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/CalFresh) shoppers with a dollar-for-dollar match when using their EBT card to purchase California-grown fruits and vegetables (FV) at participating farmers' markets and other retail outlets, such as grocery stores. The University of California Nutrition Policy Institute evaluated CNIP's impacts on FV intake and household food security among shoppers at farmers' markets and other retail outlets implementing the program for the first time between 2020 and 2022. This report summarizes findings from open-ended questions eliciting shoppers' self-reported changes in food purchasing behaviors, experiences with and perceptions of CNIP, and general feelings about the program.

## **Methods**

We conducted baseline and follow-up surveys with a convenience sample of CalFresh shoppers from nine farmers' markets and three other retail outlets in California between July 2020 and March 2022 (n=149). The follow-up questionnaire included 5 or 12 open-ended questions depending on the year it was completed. Responses to open-ended questions were audio recorded. A third of the total sample was randomly sampled for analysis and saturation was reached with 43 transcripts, 29% of the total sample. English language responses were transcribed using Zoom. Spanish language responses were translated and transcribed by a professional service. Responses were coded and analyzed in Excel using an inductive coding approach.

## **Results**

Five key findings and one sub-finding emerged from the data: 1) participants reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with CNIP; 2) participants reported buying more FV because of CNIP; 3) participants reported purchasing more CA-grown and organic FV, and a greater variety of produce; 4) virtually all participants would like CNIP to continue; 5) participants would like CNIP to expand to grocery stores. A sub-finding was that participants were satisfied with their method of receiving the CNIP incentive, which varied between farmers' markets and other retail outlets as well as between the other retail outlets. The positive experience with CNIP was consistent across market types, and there were no notable differences by language, age, or gender identity.

## **Conclusion**

CalFresh shoppers that used CNIP reported positive experiences with the program. They attributed eating more and different kinds of FV to CNIP. In addition, participants were supportive of CNIP expanding to other retail outlets.

# INTRODUCTION

The California Nutrition Incentive Program (CNIP) provides Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/CalFresh) shoppers with a dollar-for-dollar match when using their EBT card to purchase California-grown fruits and vegetables (FV) at participating farmers' markets and other retail outlets. CNIP is intended to increase the purchase and consumption of California-grown produce<sup>1</sup>. Similar incentive programs have been implemented across the United States to encourage CalFresh participants to increase their purchase and consumption of FV. In a systematic review of 19 studies among SNAP participants nationwide, all but one study reported positive impacts of incentive programs on FV purchases and/or consumption<sup>2</sup>. Some other studies have not found significant associations between incentive programs and FV intake, although participants self-reported perceived increases in FV consumption, which they attributed to the SNAP program<sup>3-5</sup>. In addition, a prior qualitative evaluation found that CalFresh participants appreciate CNIP and attribute being able to buy more FV to the program<sup>6</sup>.

CNIP was exclusively offered at farmers' markets in the past but is now also offered in select retail outlets in California. The University of California Nutrition Policy Institute conducted an evaluation to examine the impacts of CNIP among CalFresh shoppers. This report presents findings from the qualitative component of the evaluation, which explored CalFresh shoppers' experiences using CNIP; CNIP's impact on CalFresh shoppers' food purchasing decisions; and CalFresh shoppers' general feelings about the program.

# METHODS

A convenience sample of nine farmers' markets and three other retail outlets newly implementing CNIP in 2020 was drawn based on the markets having high volumes of CalFresh transactions. The farmers' markets were located across California, but the three retail outlets were all located in Northern California. The retail outlets included two small- to mid-sized markets and one large, independent grocery store. Farmers' markets and other retail outlets used different methods to provide participants with the dollar-for-dollar CNIP match incentive. Farmers' markets used wooden tokens that can be used like cash to purchase FV from vendors. Two retail outlets provided the incentive by printing coupons on participants' receipts that could be redeemed during future purchases. The third retail outlet automatically discounted the matched dollar amount at the point of purchase.

After the recruited farmers' markets and other retail outlets implemented CNIP for a minimum of three months, surveys were conducted with a convenience sample of 149 CalFresh shoppers, from July 2020 to March 2022 (n = 48 farmers' market shoppers, 101 other retail outlet shoppers). These interviewer-administered telephone surveys included open-ended questions designed to understand shoppers' experiences using CNIP, how CNIP affected their food purchasing decisions, and their general feelings about the program. A five-question interview guide was administered in 2020-2021 to 48 farmers' markets and 36 other retail outlet shoppers. Seven additional open-ended questions were added to surveys administered in 2022; these questions sought more detail on how shoppers used and understood the program. The 12-question interview guide was administered to 65 other retail outlet shoppers [interview questions can be found in the Appendix].

Responses to open-ended questions were audio recorded with the participant's permission. English language responses were transcribed using Zoom. Since Zoom does not transcribe Spanish audio, data collectors marked whether the recording should be transcribed and translated (yes, no, maybe) and their reasoning for that recommendation after each Spanish language interview. Recordings were marked 'Yes' if the participant shared their opinion descriptively despite having a good or bad experience with the program. Only 'Yes' recordings were transcribed and translated using a professional service. After

transcription via Zoom for English and the professional service for Spanish interviews, data collectors reviewed each transcript and made corrections as needed.

A random sample of 43 transcripts, stratified by participant language and use of CNIP, was identified for use in qualitative analysis. Based on the Immersion Crystallization qualitative analysis method, one research team member listened to all of the sampled recordings and read all transcripts<sup>7</sup>. Then a codebook was created using an inductive coding approach. The research team reviewed the codebook along with the coded transcripts and discussed differences during weekly meetings. After coding was finalized, a data reduction method was used to generate themes, key findings, and sub-findings by grouping similar reoccurring codes that appeared in the transcripts<sup>8</sup>. Coding and analysis of responses were conducted in Microsoft Excel.

## RESULTS

### Participant characteristics

The average age of the sampled respondents was 37.8 (range: 20-75), with an average of 2.0 (range: 0-5) children per household (Table 2). Most (91%) of the coded transcripts were from female respondents. Over half (56%) of respondents identified as Latino/a, and 30% identified as white. Regarding educational status, 21% of participants reported some college education, 23% completed high school, and 21% reported less than a high school education. Almost half (47%) of the coded transcripts were translated from Spanish. Nearly all respondents (88%) used CNIP at follow-up.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Characteristics	Other retail outlet shoppers (n = 32)	Farmers' market shoppers (n = 11)	Total (n = 43)
	Mean (SE) <sup>1</sup>	Mean (SE) <sup>1</sup>	Mean (SE) <sup>1</sup>
Age	37.5 (0.5)	38.9 (2.7)	37.8 (0.7)
Number of children per household <sup>2</sup>	1.9 (0.7)	2.0 (0.5)	2.0 (0.6)
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Gender			
Male	4 (12.5)	0 (0.0)	4 (9.3)
Female	28 (87.5)	11 (100.0)	39 (90.7)
Race/Ethnicity			
Black or African American	1 (3.1)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.3)
White	7 (21.9)	6 (54.5)	13 (30.2)
Latino/Latina	21 (65.6)	3 (27.3)	24 (55.8)
Other	0 (0.0)	1 (9.1)	1 (2.3)
Mixed	2 (6.3)	1 (9.1)	3 (7.0)
Missing	1 (3.1)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.3)
Education			
Less than high school	9 (28.1)	0 (0.0)	9 (20.9)
High school graduate	7 (21.9)	3 (27.3)	10 (23.3)
Some college	7 (21.9)	2 (18.2)	9 (20.9)
Vocational training certificate or license	1 (3.1)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.3)

Associate's degree	5 (15.6)	1 (9.1)	6 (14.0)
Bachelor's degree	3 (9.4)	4 (36.4)	7 (16.3)
Master's degree	1 (3.1)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.3)
Survey language			
English	12 (37.5)	11 (100.0)	23 (53.5)
Spanish	20 (62.5)	0 (0.0)	20 (46.5)
CNIP use at follow up			
Used CNIP	28 (87.5)	10 (90.9)	38 (88.4)
Did not use CNIP	4 (12.5)	1 (9.1)	5 (11.6)

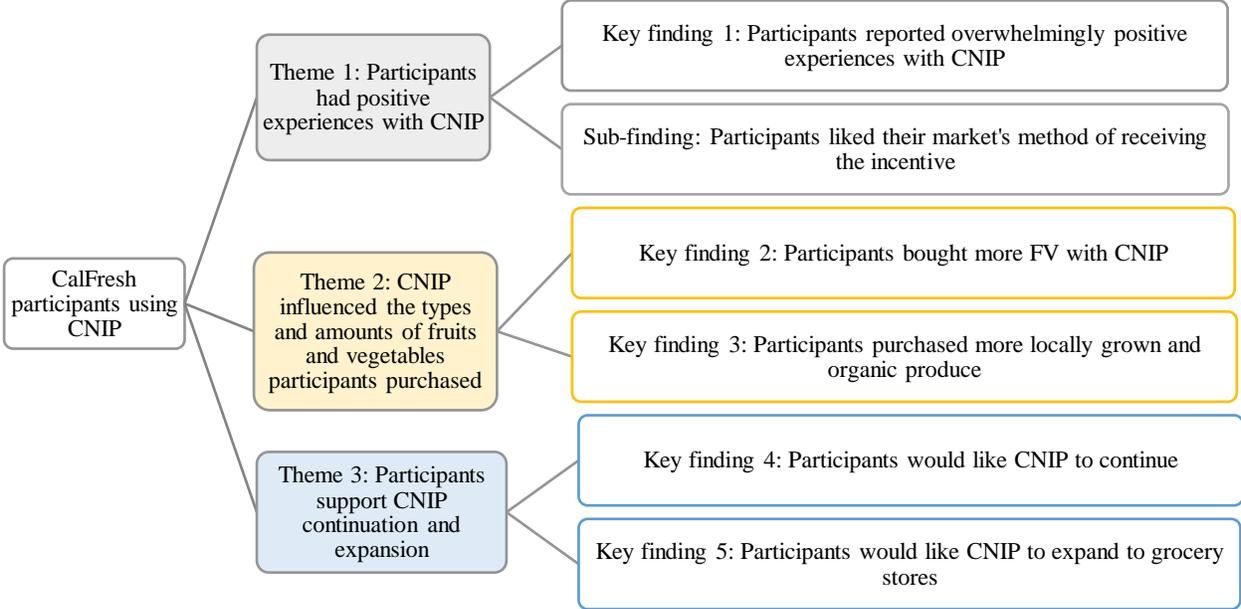
<sup>1</sup>Standard errors adjusted for clustering by market.

<sup>2</sup>Data on number of children in household missing for one farmers' market shopper – results displayed here are for 32 other retail outlet shoppers, 10 farmers' market shoppers, and 42 shoppers overall.

### Key Findings and Supporting Quotes

Three principal themes, five key findings, and one sub-finding emerged from participants' responses (Figure 1). The first theme concerned participants' experiences using CNIP. Respondents reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with CNIP in general and high levels of satisfaction with the method of receiving the incentive at their store or market. The second theme was related to CNIP's impact on FV purchases. Respondents reported that CNIP allowed them to buy more FV and a greater variety of FV. The third theme was about support for CNIP. Respondents reported a desire for CNIP to continue, and shoppers at farmers' markets reported a desire to see CNIP expand to other retail outlets.

Figure 1. Principal themes based on open-ended responses



## Theme 1: Participant reported positive experiences with CNIP

### Key finding 1. Participants reported overwhelmingly positive experience with CNIP.

Most CalFresh shoppers positively described the experience of shopping with CNIP. As one participant shared:

*... I love it because I am getting more for my money. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, Latina woman]*

Someone else shared:

*I would say that this is probably one of the most important things that [policy makers] can do as far as helping to bring access to lower income people to fresh fruits and vegetables. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, white man]*

A farmers' market shopper shared:

*I think it's had a good impact because we're trying more things, and we're getting more of the things that the kids do like... [The kids] always have fun getting to pick out whichever fruit they want, or which type of lettuce or carrots. It makes it interesting, it's a good family activity for us to share. [Farmers' market shopper, 30s, white woman]*

A retail outlet shopper described their experience with CNIP as:

*[I felt] very good, calmer, because I knew I could buy more vegetables at a more affordable price. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, Latina woman]*

Another participant said:

*I think it's [CNIP] definitely made it a lot easier for me to get vegetables, especially living, a block away from the co-op, it is the closest grocery store, and I was never able to utilize it prior to that, because of how expensive it is. So now having, a grocery store that I have access to, that is less than a block away, has definitely made it easier for my family to get vegetables and just eat healthier... [Retail outlet shopper, 20s, Latino man]*

### Sub-finding. Participants liked their method of receiving the incentive.

Most participants reported liking their market's method of providing the incentive, regardless of whether it was providing tokens, an immediate discount at the register, or a redeemable coupon printed on their receipt. One farmer's market shopper said:

*I think the tokens are actually pretty cool. It's a good place for the kids to be involved because you can give them the 10 tokens and they can participate in shopping. [Farmers' market shopper, 30s, white woman]*

A shopper from a retail outlet said:

*I always check my receipts and I'm always happy to see the discount on there. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, white]*

Most participants did not report negative experiences with receiving the incentive in the form of tokens or immediate discounts; however, a few participants reported forgetting to take their past

receipts with the redeemable coupon back to the store to receive the incentive or losing their receipt entirely. A retail outlet shopper said:

*Sometimes I forget the coupons. They're very good but sometimes we forget to take them out of the purse or we forget them in the car. I don't know if there could be a different way to use them. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, Latina woman]*

## **Theme 2: CNIP influenced the types and amounts of fruits and vegetables participants purchased**

### **Key finding 2. Participants bought more FV with CNIP.**

Many participants reported being able to buy more FV due to CNIP. For example, one shopper said:

*It's enabled me to double my purchases. Not only can I get my regular staples, but I can also try new products or new fruits or vegetables that I never thought to use in my everyday cooking. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, white man]*

Someone else shared:

*It [CNIP] has meant a lot because my daughter is ill right now and I've had to buy a lot of...fruits and vegetables now. And that's the way I can afford to buy more things...It's of great help to me. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, Latina woman]*

Another participant said:

*Sometimes I don't need [particular produce items] but I know that I can benefit from them. For example, if I go to the store and I see that mangos have the "Grown in California" label, even when I didn't originally set out to buy any mangos, we love mangos, so I would get some. So, there are things that I benefit from even when they're not on my list. So, yes, it [CNIP] has benefited me. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, Latina woman]*

### **Key finding 3. Participants reported purchasing more locally grown and organic produce, as well as items they previously perceived as too expensive.**

As a result of CNIP, participants described being able to incorporate FV they previously could not afford into their diets. One shopper said:

*...with these coupons I can buy the fruits that I thought were expensive. I can buy fruit that I couldn't afford before. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, Latina woman]*

Another participant said:

*I feel like the...program has incentivized us to buy locally grown produce. I also feel like the...program has made locally grown produce more affordable. And I most likely wouldn't have made the effort to choose those products before. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, white man]*

A retail outlet shopper shared:

*Because of the price, I never really got organic food, so it's been nice because of the price difference I have been able to enjoy organic fruits and vegetables, that's something I am not used to. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, woman]*

### **Theme 3: Participants supported CNIP continuation and expansion.**

#### **Key finding 4. Participants would like CNIP to continue.**

All participants shared that they would like CNIP to continue, noting that the program increases access to fresh FV and is a great help for families with low-incomes. One participant said:

*I really hope that they keep it going. I think it's going to incentivize families that are low on funds or are low on food stamps or have limited resources to get those fresh foods...I think they have to keep it. It's freaking awesome! [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, white woman]*

Another participant had a similar opinion about the program, saying:

*I think it's crucial that you continue this program. Without this program, people have less access to these fruits and vegetables...So giving folks access to those fruits and vegetables definitely makes a difference to families that don't typically buy at markets like this, or eat fruits and vegetables, for that matter. [Retail outlet shopper, 20s, Latino man]*

Another shopper shared:

*Well, I would tell them to continue with the program because it does help many families. It helps them feed their children with fruits and vegetables. Because to be honest, it does help us a lot. [Retail outlet shopper, 40s, white woman]*

#### **Key finding 5. Participants would like CNIP to expand to grocery stores.**

When farmers' market and retail outlet shoppers were asked how they felt about CNIP expanding to grocery stores, they were supportive of the expansion. One retail outlet shopper said:

*Well, it's a bit more beneficial for us, because sometimes the places that – well, I don't drive, so it's harder for me to get to the places where they had the participating locations. And the market is closer to my house here. It's better for me that the program is being offered at the stores. [Retail outlet shopper, 40s, Latina woman]*

A farmers' market shopper said:

*Good, because not everybody has the time or opportunity to get to a farmers' market. [Farmers' market shopper, 20s, white woman]*

A retail outlet shopper shared:

*I love that it's expanding. And I hope that it keeps expanding and that more stores— you know, I'm hoping more stores that, let's say, lower income people go to, will start taking on more local California fruits and vegetables and provide the... program to them. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, white man]*

Another shopper shared:

*Yes, it's better because we usually shop in larger stores. We always go there. You're not just going to just buy food. You're going to purchase toilet paper, soap, and things like that. And it's easier to just make one trip and find everything there instead of going to different places to buy things. [Retail outlet shopper, 30s, Latina woman]*

## CONCLUSIONS

This evaluation finds that CalFresh shoppers who used CNIP had a positive experience across different market types (farmers' markets and other retail outlets) and incentive methods (tokens, coupons, or discount). Participants described the program as helpful, noting that CNIP allowed them to buy more FV, purchase more CA-grown and organic FV and widen their selection of fresh produce. Participants from all market types were supportive of the program continuing and expanding to grocery stores as a means of increasing access to FV for CalFresh participants.

## APPENDIX

### CNIP customer survey 2021-2022, open-ended survey questions

#### 5-Question Interview Guide Used in 2020-2021

The final set of questions ask about what you think of the [MARKET NAME FOR PROGRAM] at [MARKET] and the California Nutrition Incentive Program overall.

1. In what ways would you say that having the [MARKET NAME FOR PROGRAM] available at [MARKET] has affected you/you and your family? <sup>1</sup>
  - a. Probe: How has this affected the way you and your family eat?
  - b. Probe: What impact would you say this program has had on the kinds of foods you buy?
2. How has the [MARKET NAME FOR PROGRAM], affected the way you make decisions about what to buy while you are shopping in the [MARKET]? <sup>1</sup>
3. The California Nutrition Incentive Program also known as [MARKET NAME FOR PROGRAM] at [MARKET] is now available at certain markets in California. What would you say to a state legislator deciding whether or not to continue the California Nutrition Incentive Program? <sup>1</sup>
  - a. Probe: (if they say continue) What would you say to convince them to continue the program?
  - b. Probe: (if they say stop) What would you say to convince them to stop the program?
4. In the past, the California Nutrition Incentive Program was only offered at farmers' markets. As you know, it is now being offered at other grocery stores as well. How do you feel about the program expanding in this way? <sup>1</sup>
5. **(If used program)** How do you feel about getting the incentive as a discount/coupon/token at [MARKET]?

#### 7 Additional Interview Questions Added in 2022

The California Nutrition Incentive Program, also known at [MARKET PARTICIPANT WAS RECRUITED FROM] as [MARKET NAME FOR PROGRAM] provides CalFresh shoppers with matching funds for the purchase of California-grown fruits and vegetables.

6. **(If used program)** Can you please describe your experience using the program?
  - a. How did you receive the match incentive?

- a. **Probe:** Did you have to let the cashier know you would be using the [MARKET NAME FOR PROGRAM]?
  - b. **Probe:** How did that experience influence your feelings about using the [MARKET NAME FOR PROGRAM] while shopping at [MARKET NAME]?
- b. Did you know how much you were saving from the program match while you were shopping?
  - a. **If yes:** How did you use those savings?
  - b. **If no:** How did you find out the savings were being applied to your total?
- 7. Different match programs provide CalFresh shoppers with incentive money for CA-grown fruits and vegetables in different ways. For example, most farmers' markets provide the match in the form of tokens that can be used like cash to buy produce, while some stores provide the match as a discount that shoppers get at the register when checking out. Some stores require CalFresh shoppers to show their receipt at the register from their previous shopping trip to receive the match dollars.  
 What do you think is the best way to provide shoppers with these extra match benefits for fruits and vegetables?<sup>1</sup>
  - a. **Probe:** Why do you think this is the best way to provide shoppers with extra match benefits?
- 8. **(If used program)** Do you use the [MARKET NAME FOR PROGRAM] as often as you would like to?
  - a. **If yes:** What characteristics of the program make you able to use it as often as you would like to?
  - b. **If no:** What stops you from using the program as often as you would like?
- 9. Have you experienced any barriers that you think may prevent other CalFresh shoppers from using the program?<sup>1</sup>
  - a. **If yes:** What do you think would help people overcome this barrier?
- 10. **(If used program)** When you shop for fruits and vegetables at [MARKET NAME], what are the things you consider when choosing which fruits and vegetables you are going to buy?
  - a. **Probe:** Has being able to use [MARKET NAME FOR PROGRAM] at [MARKET NAME] changed what you think about when choosing which fruits and vegetables you are going to buy?
- 11. **(If didn't use program)** Why have you not used [MARKET NAME FOR PROGRAM] when you shop at [MARKET NAME]?
  - a. **Probe:** Were you aware of the program when you shopped at [MARKET NAME]?
  - b. **Probe:** Are there any ways the program can change that would make it more likely for you to use it?
- 12. What do think is the best way to promote the match incentive program to CalFresh shoppers?<sup>1</sup>
  - a. **Probe:** Why would you promote the match incentive this way?

<sup>1</sup>Question is asked of everyone, independent of program usage

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