

**The Supplemental Nutrition  
and Assistance Program Food  
Security Survey**

**Final In-Depth Interviewer  
Training Manual**

June 21, 2011

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**MATHEMATICA**  
Policy Research, Inc.

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## INTRODUCTION

### A. Background of Study

Welcome to the in-depth interviewer training for the Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program Food Security study, also known as the SNAP project. You are being trained to conduct in-depth interviews (IDIs) for this important study, and this manual is your primary reference for that task. The manual contains the background information you need to understand the project and details of the procedures you will use to conduct the interviews. This chapter gives a brief overview of the study components, as well as broad answers to some questions you may have about the SNAP project. The knowledge you gain from this manual and the training session will help increase your confidence and competence as you interact with the study population.

The larger study you are contributing to intends to assess the effect of SNAP participation on food security—having access to adequate food. Identifying the impact of SNAP participation on food security has proved difficult. One might expect that SNAP benefits lessen the severity of food insecurity for participants. However, in cross-sectional surveys, food insecurity has sometimes been found to be more prevalent among SNAP participants than among similarly low-income nonparticipants, even controlling as completely as the data allow for income, employment, household composition, and other household characteristics.

Our in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a subsample of households completing a baseline telephone interview will last 90 minutes, on average,

for which they will receive compensation in the form of a \$30 gift card. In general the interview resemble a “conversation” than the question-and-answer format typical of closed-ended surveys. This manual will describe how to conduct successful interviews with study participants that result in usable information for our subsequent data analysis. Before we review the actual interview process, the following sections present more information on the overall study, the SNAP program, timing of IDIs, key study staff, and an overview of the training schedule. Chapter 2 provides an overview of in-depth interviews while Chapter 3 concentrates on interviewing guidelines. The appendix includes commentary on questions in the in-depth interview.

## **B. Sponsorship of Study**

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the United States Department of Agriculture has contracted with Mathematica Policy Research to conduct this study.

## **C. Background on SNAP**

The FNS administers the food and nutrition assistance programs in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the federal food stamp program, is the largest of the 15 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs administered by USDA’s FNS and is a central component of our nation’s nutrition assistance safety net. SNAP provides nutrition assistance benefits and nutrition education services to low-income individuals and families, in an effort to reduce hunger and improve the health and well-being of low-income populations nationwide. However, despite the importance of SNAP and other

government programs, a recently released annual report on household food insecurity (Nord et al. 2010) states that the prevalence of food insecurity is currently at a record high level—14.6 percent. This is believed to reflect, at least in part, the continuing slow rate of economic growth.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) legislation increased the maximum program benefit levels of SNAP participants, made it easier for childless adults without jobs to be considered eligible, and provided additional funding to state agencies responsible for administering the program. SNAP will use an estimated \$53 billion of Recovery Act funds in the coming years to increase benefits and provide additional administrative funds to states to help them serve the growing number of families seeking assistance. Over the past few years, SNAP participation has increased over 26 percent, and is now at record high levels with over 15.2 million households across the nation enrolled in the program (USDA 2010).

#### **D. Purpose of SNAP Food Security Study**

The current SNAP project is intended to assess the effect of SNAP participation on food security in the era since the enactment of the ARRA legislation. The project has three research objectives:

1. To determine how, if at all, the prevalence of household food insecurity and amount of food expenditures vary with SNAP participation.
2. To determine how, if at all, the observed results vary by key household characteristics and circumstances.
3. To determine what factors distinguish between food-secure and food-insecure SNAP households with children.

Mathematica and USDA will use data collected in this study to respond to these research questions, and to evaluate the extent to which the increased ARRA funding is accomplishing its intended goal of reaching the target population and reducing the prevalence of food insecurity among SNAP participants.

To meet the first two study objectives, Mathematica will conduct a 30-minute telephone interview with two samples, one representative of newly certified SNAP households, and the other representative of SNAP households that have participated in the program for six to seven months. By surveying new SNAP participant households within the first month of certification, we will obtain information with which to assess food expenditures and food security before benefits become part of the normal family resources. This is a critical component of the project and will be discussed in more detail during your training.

We will use the results of two separate comparisons to measure the effectiveness of SNAP. First, we will look at the same calendar period, to compare the food security status of new entrant SNAP households and households that have participated for six to seven months; then we will examine the change in the new-entrant households' food security between the baseline and follow-up interviews.

In addition to collecting these new data, the study will conduct analysis comparing two sets of food-security data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS)—December 2008 (pre-ARRA) with data from December 2009 and 2010 (post-ARRA). This comparison will provide

information on changes in numbers and types of food-insecure households since the ARRA-related benefit increase was implemented.

The third objective will be met by obtaining qualitative data through the in-depth interviews you are currently being trained to conduct. In-depth interviewers will collect unstructured in-depth, in-person 90- minute interviews with a subsample of current and newly certified SNAP households that have children and have completed a baseline interview. The subsample will include households that are **food secure, have low food security, or have very low food security**.

Why are in-depth interviews a part of our study? In-depth interviews will allow us to examine the detailed circumstances underlying a measure of well-being as complex as household food security. The in-depth interviews will provide more than powerful anecdotal stories. They can also offer richly detailed information to help us interpret survey data and better explain the lives and experiences of SNAP clients. All households selected for in-depth interviews will have already completed a baseline telephone interview. From the telephone interview, we will have detailed contact information that we can use to reach selected households. We will also have begun to establish a rapport with the households. Requests to participate in the in-depth interview will not be totally unexpected because we will inform households during the baseline interview that they may be contacted for a follow-up survey.

We seek to address the following research questions in our in-depth interviews:



- How do household demographics and circumstances affect the food security of SNAP households with children?
- What are the dynamics of changes in household economic and demographic circumstances that lead to changes in food security?
- How do these households use food resources, including non-SNAP food assistance?
- What strategies do households use to meet family food needs?
- What challenges do families face that limit their ability to maintain food security?

Data from these in-depth interviews will help explain the lives and experiences of SNAP participant households and provide important insights into the challenges low-income families face and the coping strategies they use in their efforts to maintain food security. Respondents will receive a \$30 post-pay incentive for completing the in-depth interview.

#### **E. Timing of In-Depth Interviews**

We anticipate that the CATI (computer-assisted telephone interviewing) interviewing will take place between August and early November, 2011, with new states being brought into the survey periodically during much of that period. The training of in-depth interviewers will likely occur in early October 2011, and will be immediately followed by interviewing in the field. The interviewing will continue through early November depending on the timing of the CATI interviews for the states selected for the in-depth interviewing.

#### **F. Study Activities Prior to In-Depth Interviews**

Several important activities will be completed before the in-depth interviews begin. First we used carefully crafted letters and telephone calls to contact and recruit 30 states to participate in the study. State

participation is critical in obtaining a nationally representative sample of SNAP households.

Next, the project team developed a telephone survey instrument in order to conduct a baseline interview of study participants. Once the survey content was finalized, it was translated into Spanish using bilingual staff members. Next, both the English and Spanish survey instruments were pretested in February and early March. Pre-test respondents said that they considered most questions clear, appropriate, and not burdensome. The OMB clearance package was created and delivered to the FNS in early March. The OMB approved the project on **DATE** and assigned the following approval number **XXXXXXXX**; which is displayed in the advance letter and in the FAQs found in Appendix **XX**.

## G. Key Study Staff

The table below lists the names and responsibilities of key SNAP project staff. While there are additional staff members who will be assisting in the in-depth interview process, the team members listed below are the main contacts for the project. We look forward to working with you to make the interviews a success.

Name	Role/Responsibilities
Jim Ohls	Project Director
James Mabli	Deputy Project Director
Dawn Nelson	Survey Director
Betsy Santos	Deputy Survey Director
Barbara Kolln	IS Lead
TBD	Interview Coordinator
Lisa Dragoset	Researcher; State Sample Liasion

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Kathy Edin

Consultants, In-Depth Interview Experts

Sara Greene

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Mathematica has contracted with Dr. Kathryn Edin and Ms. Sarah Greene of Harvard University, who will work with the Mathematica project team and provide expert input on qualitative in-depth interview methods.

#### **H. Training Schedule**

In general, the staff selected to conduct the in-depth interviews will be full-time Mathematica professional staff, with Masters' degrees in a related subject area, such as public policy or sociology. They will be selected to have had previous experience in qualitative assessment of policy-related issues during their prior work at Mathematica. They will be identified through discussions between senior Project staff and staff supervisory personnel in Mathematica's Survey and Research divisions. We anticipate that approximately four staff members will be recruited for this purpose, including at least one bi-lingual staff member. The participation of these staff in the project will be coordinated by Nick Redel, an analyst in Mathematica's Survey Division, who will communicate with the IDI interviewers on a daily basis and be available to consult with interviewers by telephone on issues that arise during the fieldwork.

The section below discusses how these interviewing staff will be trained for this activity and the schedule for the training. While this schedule is based on a three-day training activity, it is possible that the training may be compressed to two days. We currently anticipate that several of the

interviewers will be recruited from Mathematica's Cambridge, Massachusetts office. If this proves to be the case, the training will probably take place at that location, which will also facilitate the participation of Kathy Edin and Sara Greene.

### **Day 1**

- Morning. The project goals and the interview guide are introduced, with a focus on the interview guide. The intent of each question is discussed.
- Afternoon. Primary Investigators and interviewers take turns role playing the interviewer/respondent interaction in the group, deploying the interview guide. PIs also take part in the role playing in order to demonstrate the conversational style of the interview, as well as the specific techniques reviewed. The exact working and order of questions in interview guide may be modified somewhat as a result of this process.

### **Day 2**

- Morning. We begin by discussing issues related to fieldwork, including how to build rapport (both during initial contact and during the interviews), how to deploy the consent form and other paperwork, how to handle interruptions and minimize background noise (especially air conditioners, fans, and televisions), and specific techniques for drawing out narrative details and approaching sensitive topics.
- Afternoon. PIs and interviewers then continue to take turns role playing in a group, specifically practicing the techniques reviewed above.

### **Day 3**

- Morning. The logistics of the interview process are discussed: recorders, consent forms, receipts, and so on. Plans for coding and analyzing the data are summarized. This sensitizes interviewers to how important it is to solicit clear, detailed answers from respondents. Following the coding exercise, specific techniques for ensuring that consistent, sufficiently detailed data are collected across cases is discussed.
- We then pair each novice interviewer with one more experienced interviewer (trained directly by the PIs). The two attend a practice interview, with the more experienced interviewer taking the lead,

and the novice interviewer offering feedback. For the next interview, the novice interviewer takes the lead, with the more experienced interviewer offering feedback. The novice interviewer then listens to that interview tape, and annotates the text with self reflections on what worked well and what did not. Novice interviewers discuss these self-reflections with a project PI. When this process is complete, all interviewers are fully trained and ready to conduct interviews independently.

## **I. Overview of In-Depth Interviews**

We believe that the in-depth interviews (IDIs) of the 90 SNAP households will generate important insights into the challenges low-income families face and the coping strategies they use to maintain food security. But the interviews can contribute much more to our overall understanding of food security if we use the insights generated from them to inform other aspects of the research study. For example, the interviews may indicate important paths of subgroup analysis for the quantitative analysis of the survey data. They may also suggest some response categories that should be added to existing closed-ended questions in the follow-up survey.

### **1. Sample of IDI Respondents**

We expect that the IDIs will take place in four different metropolitan areas in four different regions of the country. At the conclusion of the CATI interviews for each of the states sampled for the IDI work, we will draw on the CATI database to make two lists of respondents with children (one list from the Newcomer Survey and one list for the 6-7 Month survey). Each list will be further divided by level of food security as revealed in the interview. John Hall, the Mathematica statistician in charge of sampling, will draw three samples from each list to meet our sampling targets. Survey information

systems staff will then prepare background information summaries for each of the sampled cases, including contact information and key socio-economic variables for use by interviewers in preparation for and during the conduct of the IDIs.

## **2. Your Role as an Interviewer**

Interviewers play a vital role in the research process. You are responsible for collecting the information used by research analysts to draw conclusions and make policy recommendations. Appropriate public policy can best be made from accurately collected information. The research staff specifies the data requirements; researchers design interviewing guides to yield accurate and precise information; and interviewers collect the data after being trained in interviewing procedures, the guide, and specific study issues. Using your skills and training, you will convince people to respond and to give you high quality data.

How you interact with respondents is very important to the success of this SNAP Food Security study. If you are interested in the study, are enthusiastic about your work, and like to communicate, these feelings will be transmitted to the respondent with positive effects. Ultimately, the success of the project is determined by the quality of the data that interviewers gather from sample members.

As a trained in-depth interviewer you come to the interview situation with knowledge of the study, your role in it, and expectations about how the respondent will behave. The respondent knows none of this. It is up to you to

train the respondent and to define the kind of appropriate interviewer-respondent interaction that will take place by providing cues.

The role of the SNAP Food Security in-depth interviewer is particularly important. Our survey population consists of families with children enrolled in SNAP. It is important to always be sensitive to the cultural, physical, and emotional circumstances of our respondents, but avoid sounding patronizing or condescending. Please respond to any issues with maturity and tact to ensure the interview is a positive experience for all involved. Accurate and complete information must be collected while also maintaining objectivity to avoid bias.

We developed the questionnaire guide to consist of neutral, accurate, and understandable questions. The tone of the interview should be conversational but interviewers should not introduce information that may change the meaning of a question or bias a response. Always remain in control of the interviewing situation. Tactfully guide respondents who stray from the subject back to the questions being asked. Any deviation from the interview protocol could lead to the collection of less accurate information. Despite the strict guidelines, we hope you do not think of yourself as a cold-hearted, data-gathering machine; on the contrary, we hope you will approach respondents with understanding, respect, and an open mind.

The integrity of this study rests primarily on the quality of the data that interviewers collect. Your ability to obtain accurate data directly affects the credibility of the study. Your main objective is to convince respondents that

the interview will be a worthwhile experience, and that they will be helping provide answers relevant to improving the SNAP program. .

During the entire interviewing process, the research team meets several times weekly to discuss challenges in the field and share problem solving techniques. Once interviews are completed, the recordings are then sent to trained transcribers, who transcribe the interviews verbatim, and the analysis phase begins. The analysis phase will likely include you, the interviewer, in that we will hold a meeting with interviewers to gain a deeper understanding of any themes or commonalities you noticed in your interviews.

### **3 Privacy Issues**

One of the most important duties of project staff is to protect the privacy of the data gathered during surveys. The responsibility starts with interviewers, but project directors, principal investigators, and senior company officials are just as involved. Like others in the research community, Mathematica has a legal and moral obligation to keep private all information provided by respondents. For example, all employees at Mathematica are required to sign a privacy pledge as a condition of employment. In-depth interviewers should familiarize themselves with the Mathematica's privacy procedures for assuring and maintaining the privacy of all data collected, and should always have an answer readily available if questions about privacy arise.

We assure respondents that the names and any information gathered about individuals will be kept strictly private, will be used only for the



purposes of this study, and will never be released in a form where individuals could be identified. Our respondents must not only be convinced of the legitimacy and value of our studies, but they must trust that their responses will be treated with respect and kept strictly private. You are obligated to keep the names of sample members and the information you collect from them private. That means you should never leave any paper or document with a sample member's name or address anywhere that another individual can see it or take it. Moreover, when speaking with a sample member's friend or family, it is important that you give a straightforward reason for doing so. However, do not elaborate by mentioning that the respondent is on SNAP, as this might violate our pledge of privacy. Simply state that he or she is a participant in a study and needs to be interviewed.

While we anticipate that most interviews will take place in respondents' homes, the interviews can take place in a neutral setting should the respondent feel more comfortable with this option. A neutral setting could include a library, fast food restaurant, or community center. The intention behind allowing the interview to take place in a neutral setting is to create an atmosphere in which the respondent will feel at ease and willing to respond openly to our questions. In an effort to capture all the respondents' responses, an audio recording can be made of the interview should the respondent agree to being recorded.

We want respondents to answer freely and to feel confident that no one outside the project will see or hear about their responses. For this reason security of the audio recordings and any paper documents with respondent

information or responses is of paramount importance. Proper handling and storage of these materials are critical for ensuring against loss, breach of security or respondent privacy, and other hazards. You must be careful not to discuss any aspects of the data gathered, the sample members, or their children while in the home or any public location (such as restaurants or stores) where you might be overheard. Take all materials with you wherever you go, or cover them or lock them up if you cannot take them with you.

#### **4. Interviewing Principles**

The following principles of interviewing are intended to assist you in conducting the most productive interview possible. While some of these principles may be familiar to you, it is important to remember them as you converse with a respondent.

During the interview, remember to maintain eye contact. This will help establish a rapport with the respondent and create a feeling of openness. It also adds a feeling of honesty during the conversation. Also, remember to ask “how” and not “why” questions. For instance, in asking about the effects of a change in the household’s SNAP benefits, you might ask “how” this affected their actions, and not “why” it did, since the latter requires analysis that the respondent may not be used to doing. Asking “how” questions instead of “why” questions will encourage more detail in the respondents’ answers and assist us in gaining as much information from the respondent as possible.

Along the same lines as asking “how” questions, try to refrain from asking questions that can be answered with a single word. For example, it is

better to ask how a reported change in benefits affected food shopping behavior, rather than just asking “did it?” If you do not ask questions that require elaboration, you are missing the opportunity to explore the nuance of the respondent’s answer fully. While asking questions that elicit detailed response is critical, it is also important to ask answerable questions.

Be clear in your questions and take care to ensure that the question you are asking is understood by the respondent and can be responded to easily and without confusion. One way of ensuring that you do not confuse the respondent is to ask one question at a time. It may seem easier to ask multiple questions in an attempt to have a respondent discuss a topic. However, instead such questions may confuse the respondent by trying to get her or him to remember whole series of questions posed at the same time. Instead, pay close attention to the content of your question and ensure that you ask your questions one at a time. If additional information appears to be needed, it should be obtained in follow-up probes.

It is also important to ask the right levels of detail. For instance, we are interested in household’s access to adequate food, which helps determine food security. Therefore, knowing something about how their SNAP experiences affect the **generic types** of food the household buys, such as fresh fruit versus diet soda, may be of interest. But knowing the **specific** types of fruits they are buying or the specific brands of diet soda is not likely to be useful and takes interview time. Focusing on a rich level of detail is very important and indeed one of the key advantages of the in-depth

approach is to allow this. But it is important to focus on the **right** level of detail that appears salient to our research questions.

Another important technique is to avoid questions involving “hypotheticals” as much as possible. Similarly, avoid questions that essentially put the respondent in the role of “analyst.” It is our job to do the ultimate analysis, using data we obtain from the totality of the IDIs, along with other study findings. What the respondent has is a unique advantage in supplying the **actual\_information** about how she/he and their household responded to various programs and various factors in the environment. This is what we want to focus on in the interviews.

The self-confidence of the interviewer is also important in making the interviews successful. Interviewers should be comfortable with their questions, and they should maintain a posture of competent self-confidence. Closely related, interviewers should not apologize for their questions. They have a job to do, and they need to be doing it. The respondent always has the right to refuse to answer, if they choose not to.

We have included the interview principles as a list of “Ten Commandments” below (also included in your packet). We hope you will refer to this list as you prepare for each interview. These principles have been carefully crafted by our consultant Dr. Kathy Edin. They draw on her 20 years of experience in qualitative research, during which Professor Edin has been a widely-recognized pioneer in the-depth interviewing technique as it relates to studying public policy toward low income households.

- 
1. Make Eye Contact at All Times
  2. Train Respondent in Right Level of Detail
  3. Ask How, not Why Questions
  4. Don't ask Questions Answerable with a Single Word
  5. Don't Apologize, Ask for What you Want
  6. Ask One Question at a Time
  7. Ask Answerable Questions
  8. Beware of Hypotheticals
  9. Don't Ask Respondents to Be Analysts
  10. Get the Detail in the Probes
- 

## **J. General Interviewing Guidelines**

### **1. Preparing for an Interview**

As noted, we anticipate doing the IDIs in four metropolitan areas. In order to meet our target of 90 interviews, we will need about 22 or 23 completions per site. Our plans assume that two-person teams will go together to each site. Except in special circumstances, the two interviewers at a site will conduct interviews separately and each will conduct two interviews per day. This means that over the course of five days approximately 20 interviews should be conducted. One or both team members will likely need to conduct two or three extra interviews during the five days or during an additional one or two days, so the total interviews for each team reaches 22 or 23 interviews.

Before going to a state, the interviewers should also review the geography of the sampled cases within the area they are traveling to and attempt to set up appointments ahead of time in as efficient a pattern as

possible. Prior to meeting with the respondent, the interviewers should carefully read the information summary sheets to become familiar with the respondent households.

We recognize that some appointments may be cancelled or may need to be rescheduled due to unforeseen circumstances but hope that the overall goal of approximately 23 interviews per team will be achieved. Additional samples will be available for each area to replace cases that choose to refuse the interviews. This additional sample should only be used with the authorization of the Princeton supervisor.

## **2. Establishing Rapport**

Key components of a successful in-depth interview are gaining cooperation from the respondent and properly handling different types of situations that may occur. Not only will you have to communicate with the sample member, but you may also have to talk to relatives and other contact persons. You may have to persuade these people to provide you with information that will make it possible for you to contact the sample member. Once you have contacted the sample member, you may have to persuade him or her to agree to be interviewed by answering all of his/her questions fully, explaining the importance of the study, and assuring privacy.

Good data collector/respondent rapport is essential for obtaining accurate and valid data. The sample member must feel that you are a capable, interested, and informed data collector who is able to answer his or her questions about the study. You must also be able to convince the sample member that you respect him or her and will keep private his or her answers

to our questions. The following are some suggestions to help you develop good rapport with the respondent and his or her family members:

- Be friendly and relaxed but professional
- Understand and be able to convey in a few sentences the purpose of the study
- Be confident of your ability to conduct an accurate and valid interview
- Be a good listener
  - Maintain a neutral attitude

Establishing rapport means making the respondent feel at ease during the first few minutes of your interaction. It may help to exchange some noncommittal “small talk” about topics that seem of interest to the respondent. This should help to ease any suspicion that the respondent might have about whether the interview will be unpleasant. Proper data collector behavior requires striking a balance between being too cold and professional and getting too involved with the sample member and/or his or her family.

As representatives of Mathematica, interviewers should conduct themselves in a responsible, self-assured, and professional manner. A respondent’s desire to cooperate and the amount of effort that he or she is willing to devote to the interview is based not only on his or her interest in the topic, but also on the interviewer’s style, manner, language, knowledge of the subject material, and sensitivity to the respondent’s situation or point of view.

Present the interview in such a way that the respondent is interested and wants to participate. If you can communicate interest and enthusiasm about

the study and the interview, the sample member will view it as a pleasant and worthwhile experience, and the answers will come more easily. Make the sample member feel that his or her experiences and opinions are very important.

In trying to reach a sample member, we often have to speak with not only the sample members themselves but also with their family members and/or friends. Family members will be curious about you and will naturally ask you questions, such as why you wish to interview the sample member. It is important that you respect the natural desire of families to protect their own. Some families may be from cultures where formality between strangers is very important. Thus, always use titles of respect when speaking with family members (such as Sir, Madam, Mr., or Mrs.). If you have trouble speaking to a sample member, you may find that family members can become your allies in your attempts to complete an interview.

To establish rapport, you should begin by building a harmonious relationship with the respondent and maintain rapport throughout the interview to ensure his or her cooperation for full and valid information. Through a sincere interest in the respondent's answers, you provide a cordial atmosphere in which the respondent can speak truthfully to you. During an interview, if rapport is broken because the respondent finds a particular question "too personal," reassure the respondent of the privacy of his or her responses. Restating the survey objectives and emphasizing the privacy of the information collected will enable you to explain that one respondent's answers are grouped with answers from other respondents to produce



statistical reports, which do not identify an individual. If the respondent is still reluctant, say that he or she can choose not to answer any questions he or she feels are too personal.

### **3. Recording Interviews**

All interviews should be recorded for later transcription. We will issue appropriate audio equipment at the training session, provide training on its use, and discuss the consent process associated with the use of recording equipment.

### **4. Interviewer Safety**

The safety of project staff involved in this study is of the utmost importance. As an interviewer, you will be traveling to areas with which you may not be very familiar. It is entirely acceptable to travel in pairs when you are en route to an interview should you feel it is necessary for safety reasons.

Visiting families in their homes and traveling around with expensive equipment requires some special consideration. It is important to use the same sound judgment in your job as you would under any other circumstance. Keep in mind that most people living in the neighborhoods you will visit present no reason for concern, and pose no real threat to your safety. Incidents in which interviewers have been threatened or attacked are extremely rare. Nevertheless, here are some tips on how to conduct yourself while you are working in unfamiliar neighborhoods.

## Preparing for your interview

- **Enlisting the Support of Respondents** - Respondents usually will feel protective of you. When you have an appointment in an area you do not know very well, ask the respondent for directions. The respondent will usually make you aware of any precautions you should take and where you can find a safe place to park your car.
- **Keeping People Informed** - Regardless of the neighborhood you are planning to visit, you should always let someone at home or at the office know where you are going and when you expect to return. Also, give this person the name and telephone number of your supervisor. If this person has not heard from you within a reasonable amount of time, this person then could contact your supervisor who can call the respondent's home to check if you have already left.
- **Presenting a Confident Manner** - In general, people who present themselves in a confident manner and give the impression that they know where they are going are left alone. They are usually perceived by people in the street as nonthreatening and non-offensive. If you appear frightened, you are more likely to be noticed.
- **Dressing for Safety** - Do not wear flashy clothing or jewelry. Wear clothing and accessories that are neutral. Avoid tight-fitting clothing or brand-name clothing that is much in demand. Wear sensible shoes. You should carry a minimal amount of cash and perhaps one credit card for emergencies, preferable not in a purse.
- **Being Vigilant** - Be vigilant and aware of your surroundings. Try to avoid areas where people are loitering, where drugs or alcohol are suspected, or where gambling appears to be taking place. Be alert for groups of young people hanging around.
- **Traveling to the Interview**
- **Private Cars** - Always keep your doors locked and have handbags, briefcases, etc., out of sight. Always know where you are going and check out the neighborhood before parking your car. Cars should be parked in well-lighted areas that are easy to reach, not in dead end streets or alleys. If possible, cars should be parked near streetlights and close to the respondent's home. You can ask the respondent when you are setting up the appointment where the best place is to park. Keep a full tank of gas so that you do not have to refuel in an unfamiliar neighborhood or search for a gas station. Make sure you have a functional spare tire.
- **Elevators** - If the elevator door opens and you are not comfortable with the occupants, pass on that ride. If you are in an elevator and someone who makes you uncomfortable enters the elevator, wait

until he or she steps inside and then get out. If you cannot get out and the person appears threatening, press the button for the next floor and exit the elevator.

- **Stairs** - Avoid dark or dimly lit staircases.
- **Walking** - Walk on the sidewalk as close as possible to the middle of the street where the traffic passes: avoid dark alleys, storefronts, or piles of boxes or debris.
- **Directions** - You should have point-to-point directions before departing for the home visit. If you are using public transportation but are not familiar with the public transportation system, you may want to do a run-through the day before to avoid becoming lost the day of the visit. Keep a copy of the public transportation system map with you at all times.
- **Public Transportation Schedules** - It is important for you to have a copy of the schedule with you at all times. If the need for you to leave the home visit early arises, it will be important for you to know the next scheduled pick up time for your location. Allow yourself enough time on the public transportation system to arrive at the home for the visit. If you are using several modes of transportation, have a clear understanding of drop-off and pick-up times.

### During the Interview

- **If You Become Uncomfortable in the Household** - Sometimes being in a household will make you feel uncomfortable. This may be because of activities you observed, the people in the household, the condition of the house, or the approach of darkness outside. If you do feel anxious, try to understand why you feel that way. Is the situation such that you need to excuse yourself? Will things be better another day? Can you enlist the respondent's help to make you feel more comfortable helping you to address your concern(s)? Can someone escort you to your car? These are questions that only you can answer and you will have to make a decision whether to stay or not.
- **Avoiding uncomfortable situations** - First of all, try to schedule appointments during the day. If you must be in a questionable neighborhood at night, flag down a police car and ask the officer to keep an eye on you as you walk to the building. Ask the respondent to give you clear directions and ask her or him where is the best place to park. If the building is a high-rise or has dark hallways, ask if the respondent or a member of his or her family could meet you at the building entrance.

**APPENDIX A**

**DISCUSSION OF QUESTIONS**

This appendix discusses the objectives and meaning of the questions in the interview guide. In reviewing this material, it should be emphasized that certain questions have been included as “ice breakers” or to otherwise facilitate the overall flow of the interview. This is particularly true for the first ten questions, which are designed to help the respondent become comfortable with discussing their circumstances, prior to beginning to talk about the sensitive issues related directly to food security. In training, we will emphasize that these issues should be covered relatively quickly, in order to leave time for the key substantive questions to come. While these ten questions could easily take an hour, our intention is that the time for them not exceed about 15 minutes. We will also formulate the final version of the discussion questions to remind the interviewers of the priorities, in terms of which questions warrant the most attention and time.

Within this overall context, the following material discusses the questions, in order. For each set of questions, we begin by describing the intent of the questions. Next we reproduce the questions themselves.

First I would like to thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I really appreciate it.

[GIVE CONSENT FORM TO RESPONDENT]

As you just read in the consent form, I would like to ask some additional questions related to some of the issues covered in the earlier survey we did with you. Like the earlier survey, this one is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture which funds the SNAP program. The interview will take about 90 minutes, and your cooperation is completely voluntary. As a

token of appreciation, we will be giving you \$\$\$ when the interview is complete. Do you have any questions about the study or your participation in the study before we get started?

**Commentary on Qs. 1-18:** *The purpose of the set of questions below is twofold. First, they serve to “break the ice” between the interviewer and respondent. They are questions that will allow the respondent to talk about his or her current economic struggles, thus setting the stage for later and perhaps more personal questions about food insecurity. They also provide the interviewer with important background about the respondent’s financial affairs that may help focus food security questions. Questions 11-14, which are specific to food expenses, are meant to provide an overview about how much money the respondent spends on food. They also serve to give the interviewer some background about where the respondent shops for food, which is important to help understand the larger picture of the respondent’s food habits and security.*

1. These days, a lot of people are struggling to make ends meet each month. Tell me, how is your family doing these days?
2. Let’s talk specifically about your big monthly expenses. Let’s take last month, for example. What were your five biggest expenses? (\$\$)

Now I’m going to ask you about bills a lot of ordinary Americans struggle with from time to time. (INTERVIEWER NOTE: You do not need to get specific dollar amounts for the items listed below, unless they are offered).

3. (Probe as to whether they have a housing subsidy, and what kind, or whether they are doubled up and paying less as a result). Tell me about the last time you had a hard time paying your rent/mortgage. (IF IN LAST 12 MONTHS) How did you cope?
4. How about utilities—heat, light, water and sewer? Tell me about the last time you struggled to pay your any of these bills. (IF IN LAST 12 MONTHS) How did you cope?
5. What about your cell phone/land line/cable/internet? Tell me about the last time you struggled to pay any of these bills. (IF IN LAST 12 MONTHS) How did you cope?
6. What about your credit card(?) payments? Tell me about the last time you struggled to meet these payments. (IF IN LAST 12 MONTHS) How did you cope?
7. What about other debts, like education loans or medical debt? Tell me about the last time you fell behind on these payments. (IF IN LAST 12 MONTHS) How did you cope?

8. What about child care? Tell me about the last time you struggle to meet those expenses? (IF IN LAST 12 MONTHS) How did you cope?
9. How about transportation? Tell me the last time paying for transportation was a challenge? (IF IN LAST 12 MONTHS) How did you cope?
10. What about medical insurance? (Probe for Medicaid, Medicare or SCHIP coverage) In your household, who is covered and who isn't? Tell me about the last time you struggled with how to pay for medical insurance? (IF IN LAST 12 MONTHS) How did you cope?
11. What about food? How much do you get from SNAP right now? How about over the last year? Are you receiving anything from WIC right now? How about over the last year?
12. Let's talk more about what you spend on food. Let's start with last month (NAME MONTH). Take me through that month, starting with your biggest grocery shopping and what you spent. (\$\$)
13. Now let's talk about the other shopping trips you made last month. Let's talk about each of those. (\$\$)
14. What about each of the visits to the corner store to buy food last month. Let's talk about each of these. (\$\$)
15. So adding it all together, you spent about \$XX on food shopping last month. Is that about right?
16. Okay, so adding it all together, your major expenses totaled about \$XX last month, is that about right?
17. So tell me, how do you cover all these expenses? (GET \$\$ HERE WHEN POSSIBLE.)
18. A lot of people say there is a lot of month left at the end of the money.<sup>1</sup> How about for you? Over the last year, how have you coped during time where money was tight? Tell me all about the last time that happened? What about the time before that? How do you typically cope when the money gets tight?

**Commentary on Qs 19-27:** *The group of questions below includes some of the most important questions to aid us in understanding the overall food security of respondents. They seek to understand how often the respondent has been hungry or very short of food, and how the respondent has coped and gotten through such situations. Additionally, they attempt to understand whether there are specific circumstances that make food insecurity more likely for respondents.*

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<sup>1</sup> This question is posed in an apparently leading way. This is intentional; families feel great stigma in admitting they can't meet all of their expenses. In the pilot test, families who could cover their bills with their expenses didn't seem hesitant to respond that that wasn't a problem for them.

(INTERVIEWER NOTE: Questions below about food hardship are especially sensitive to struggling families, who feel stigma in admitting that their children might have experienced food hardship. Thus, additional gentle probing might be necessary.)

- 19.**We're especially interested in food. Tell me about the last time you ran short of what you needed to pay for food. How did you cope? How about the time before that? What do you typically do when the food budget gets tight?
- 20.**People have all kinds of ways to make do when the food budget gets tight. Some skip meals. Others eat at a relative's house. Others go to food pantries or soup kitchens, that kind of thing. How about for you? (FOR EACH STRATEGY: Tell me all about that last time that happened.)
- 21.**Some times of the year are easier on the food budget than others. For example, some families tell us it's a lot easier in months when their kids are getting free breakfast and lunch at school. Others say it's easier during the summer, when kids are off visiting relatives. How about for you?
- 22.**For you, what are the toughest times to get by food-wise? How do you cope then? Tell me all about the last time that happened.
- 23.**Other people say that the food budget gets tight when there are more mouths to feed than you thought there would be—relatives stopping by, or visiting for an extended period of time. How about for you? Tell me about the last time that happened? How did you cope? How do you typically cope with this kind of situation?
- 24.**Sometimes, our strategies just aren't enough. Tell me all about the last time you ran out of food. How did you cope? Tell me the whole story from start to finish. What about the time before that? How did you cope? Tell me the whole story from start to finish.
- 25.**Tell me about the last time you or someone in your household had to skip a meal because there wasn't enough food. Tell me the whole story from start to finish. What about the time before that? Tell me the whole story from start to finish.
- 26.**Tell me about the last time you or someone in your household actually went hungry. Tell me the whole story from start to finish. What about the time before that?
- 27.**Sometimes unexpected events can make it difficult to make ends meet and provide food for your family—an eviction or foreclosure, a job loss, a new baby, a divorce...even something small like a bunch of bank overdraft fees. Has something like that ever happened to you in the last few years? How did you cope? Tell me the whole story from start to finish.



**Commentary on Qs. 28-34.** *The questions below are intended to help us understand the eating and food dynamics of the respondent's daily life. How many people does respondent have to feed in any given day? Is food security a problem partly because SNAP benefits are being used to feed more people than the benefit officially covers? We need to understand these dynamics to also understand how families and extended networks work together to aid each other in maintaining food security and avoiding hunger. By asking respondents very specific questions about each meal, we hope to uncover who is eating with the respondent and when.*

- 28.** So let's get even more specific. Think back to yesterday morning. Who ate breakfast at your house? What did they have? Tell me about anyone who had breakfast somewhere else, at school, ate out, etc.
- 29.** Now what about lunch? Who ate lunch at your house? What did they have? Tell me about anyone who had lunch somewhere else, at school, ate out, packed a lunch, etc.
- 30.** Who ate dinner at your house? What did they have? Tell me about anyone who had dinner somewhere else, ate out, etc.
- 31.** Who cooked yesterday? Who was responsible for getting the food from the grocery store and planning the meals? Who paid for the groceries?
- 32.** So how typical is yesterday of other days during the week/on the weekend (depending on whether yesterday was a weekday or a weekend). Tell me more about that (TMMAT).
- 33.** Now let's talk about a typical day during the week/on the weekend. REPEAT QUESTIONS 29-33 ABOVE).
- 34.** Now think back to all the special occasions you've celebrated over the last year....holidays, birthdays, etc. Who has hosted these celebrations? Who has cooked? Who has paid for the food? When you've had to cook or pay, how have you coped?

**Commentary on Qs. 35-42:** *In gaining an overall picture of the role of SNAP in the food security of the respondent, we have to understand, in as much detail as possible, how the respondent uses SNAP and how and what the respondent's food needs are. By asking the respondent to imagine going to a supermarket, we are trying to truly capture the food needs and habits of the respondent. We want to understand how the respondent thinks about buying food and the types of questions and thoughts that play a role in determining what the respondent actually buys.*

- 35.** Now I'm going to use your imagination. Okay, typically you do your big shopping at what store? Alright, we've just arrived at that store. You are going to shop just the way you always shop—nothing fancy. We take a grocery cart and enter. Where do you head first? What do

you buy? Where do you head after that? What's next? What's after that?

Let's make sure we didn't miss anything.

Fruits and Vegetables?

Meats/Fish?

Dairy?

Cereals, pasta, beans, rice, other dry goods?

The frozen section?

Canned goods?

Chips and soda?

Other snacks?

**36.** On this imaginary trip, where you are shopping just like you usually shop, is there anything you want to buy that you just can't afford?

**37.** What do you buy that you think you shouldn't be buying?

**38.** In general, how do you decide what to buy and what not to buy?

**39.** What do you put in your cart that you find yourself taking out and putting back later? Tell me all about the last time that happened.

Since food prices vary so much among different types of stores, it is important for us to understand where the respondent buys her or his food. Knowing where respondents shop and why may be important in developing food security policy, and the questions below aid in helping us understand this.

**40.** Where else besides Big Store X do you shop? What do you buy there? Take me through that store, and tell me what you usually buy and what you usually don't buy and why.

**41.** Do you shop anywhere else? Take me through that other store, and tell me what you usually buy and what you usually don't buy and why.

**42.** Any other stores I've missed? Food you buy at the drug store, the dollar store, the farmer's market, and so on?

**Commentary on Qs 43-45:** *The questions below are aimed at helping us understand the role of eating out and take-out in the overall picture of the respondent's eating and food buying habits. We want to know not only where respondents eat out, but also how much money they typically spend doing so, and why they eat out.*

**43.** Families eat out or get carry out for all kinds of reasons—sometimes they need a break from cooking or have no time to cook, sometimes it's just a treat for the kids, sometimes there's no place to store your food or to cook, and sometimes it's just too hot to turn on the stove. What about for you?

- 44.** Tell me about the last time anyone in your household ate out. What about the time before that?
- 45.** Let's think back over last month, XX (NAME MONTH). Tell me about all of the times each member of your household ate out? Who paid each time? When you paid, what did you spend? So adding it all up, you spent about XX eating out last month. Is that about right?

**Commentary on Qs. 46:-51:** *We are specifically interested in the role of SNAP and other food programs in aiding in food security for respondents. The questions below are aimed at helping us understand the role of SNAP and other food programs in the respondent's life from the start of their involvement in the program to the present. We want to know whether the respondent believes SNAP is crucial to her or his food security and how SNAP interacts with other food programs the respondent may be receiving. The questions below may help us uncover difficulties in obtaining SNAP, maintaining eligibility, and other unknown complications with the program.*

- 46.** Tell me how you first learned about SNAP? TMMAT. When did you first apply? Tell me the whole story of that experience from start to finish. What has been your experience with the program since then? Tell me the whole story from start to finish. What do you like best about SNAP? What do you like least?
- 47.** Now think back to when you didn't get SNAP. Was your budget situation the same, better, worse? TMMAT. Was your food situation the same, better, worse? TMMAT.
- 48.** What about WIC? Tell me how you first learned about WIC. TMMAT. When did you first apply? Tell me the whole story of that experience from start to finish. What has been your experience with the program since then? Tell me the whole story from start to finish. What do you like best about WIC? What do you like least?
- 49.** What about other food programs you are part of. Tell me now you first learned about XX. When did you first start getting food from that program? What has been your experience with the program since then? What do you like best about that program? What do you like the least?
- 50.** What do they tell you at the SNAP office about what foods to eat and so on? What do they tell you at the WIC office? What other places tell you about food and nutrition (ex. Head Start, a pediatrician). TMMAT.
- 51.** How do you pay for food when you don't/can't use SNAP or WIC. TMMAT
- 52.** A lot of families these days are coping by doubling up. A lot of other families are helping out by offering struggling friends and families a place to stay for a while. Sometimes people just stay for a few nights, sometimes it's a permanent thing, and sometimes it's somewhere in between. What about for you?

- 53.** When people come in and out of the household, it can pose real challenges. Who pays what bills, who cooks, who eats what food, and so on. Issues around food can be particularly challenging. How about for you?
- For example, sometimes people stay in the household, but eat elsewhere. How about for you? Tell me about the last time you faced challenges over who would eat where.
  - Other times, people stay in the household, but pay for and keep their food separately. How about for you? Tell me about the last time you faced challenges in this area.
  - Other times, people stay in the household, and everyone eats together. How about for you? In this situation, who pays for what? Tell me about the last time you faced challenges over who would eat where.
  - And other times, people eat in the household but don't stay there. How about for you? In this situation, who pays for what? Tell me about the last time you faced challenges in this area.
- 54.** Sometimes within a household, some people are eligible for SNAP, WIC, other programs, while others are not. How about for you? How does that affect how your household handles food?

**Commentary on Qs 55-63:** *We are interested in how families think about health and healthy eating, and the questions below allow us to explore the relationship between their health, food, and their knowledge of healthy eating. We want to know where they get their information about food, and whether food security issues have affected their health.*

- 55.** Some households face special issues related to food: food related allergies, for example. How about for you? Tell me more about that (TMMAT). How does that affect your monthly food budget?
- 56.** How would you describe your health? TMMAT. What about the other members of the household? TMMAT.
- 57.** Describe the most recent health problem you've faced. TMMAT. What about other members of the household? TMMAT.
- 58.** When was the last time you went to the doctor. TMMAT. What about other members of the household? TMMAT.
- 59.** Which of your health problems are related to diet? TMMAT. What about other members of the household? TMMAT.
- 60.** People have a lot of different ideas about what healthy eating means for them. What about for you?
- 61.** Most families have both healthy and unhealthy habits. What are your family's healthiest habits? What are your family's most unhealthy habits? What prevents you from having more healthy habits? TMMAT.

- 62.** If you could afford to purchase the food you really wanted, how would your eating habits change? TMMAT.
- 63.** Some parents tell us that they want to feed their kids healthier foods, but their kids refuse what's given to them. How about for you? TMMAT.

**Commentary on Qs 64-71:** *The questions below, which come at the end of the interview but are similar to the questions that were asked at the beginning of the interview, are a second attempt to understand the respondent's financial circumstances. They ask similar questions in a different way, which may capture more information. Additionally, their placement at the end of the interview may encourage the respondent to be more forthcoming than she or he was at the beginning of the interview since a rapport between interviewer and respondent has developed over the course of the interview. Additionally, because they come after all the questions about food security, they allow the respondent to think about her or his general financial circumstances in the context of food, which may elicit important details about food security that otherwise could be missed.*

- 64.** Now let's talk more generally about your expenses. Expenses vary a lot from month to month. It's spring/summer/winter/fall right now. What bills go up and down depending on the season? (Probe for specific amounts. Probe for increases during the winter due to Christmas shopping and heating bills (if cold climate) and increases in food expenses during the summer due to kids being out of school.)
- 65.** Now let's talk about how you cover these expenses. Tell me about all the resources—big and small—that came into the household last month. (Probe for exact MONTHLY amounts. A month=4.33 weeks. Probe not only for formal income, but also financial help from family and friends and “under the table” jobs. Probe also for contributions from others such as teenage children, fathers of children, etc.)
- 66.** Income varies a lot from month to month too. Tell me all of the ways your household income has varied over the past year.
- Some people are only able to work some months during the year. How about you?
  - Some people say some months their baby's fathers help them out, while other months the well is dry. How about you?
  - Some people say their household income varies a lot month to month because different family members move in and out of the household. Did this happen to you?
  - Some people say they experience some kind of event that affects their household income. Has this ever happened to you? Something like divorce, a medical issue, that kind of thing?

- 67.** These days, some people find they have to survive without any income from a job. How about for you? (IF YES) TMMAT. When was the last time that happened? How did you cope? Tell me the whole story from start to finish. What about the time before that? How did you cope? Tell me the whole story from start to finish. In the past year, how have you usually coped with this situation?
- 68.** When your income falls short of your expenses, what do you do? Tell me more about that. Tell us all about the last time that happened. Tell me the whole story from start to finish. Tell me about the time before that. Tell me the whole story from start to finish.
- 69.** When your income falls short of your expenses, how do you prioritize things and how do you decide what to pay first, second, and so on? Think about the following expenses and tell me how you prioritize them:
- 70.** In the last year, what hardships has your household faced as you've struggled to make ends meet? Tell me about how you coped with these hardships.
- 71.** For some people, there is a big windfall at tax time, because they get lots of tax credits. How about for you? TMMAT. How did you spend the money and how did you decide what to spend it on?

**Commentary on Qs 72-73:** *The questions below have several purposes. First, they serve to wind-down the interview. They provide some closure for the respondent and allow the respondent to reflect on the interview as a whole and what he or she may need to better make ends meet and eat. Second, it is useful to know what types of policies respondents think will help, and these questions are meant to help respondents articulate their needs.*

- 72.** What do you think can/should be done to help your family makes ends meet in these tough economic times?
- 73.** What do you think can/should be done to help families struggling to feed their families?

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